

# Cross-Cultural Adaptability of Organizational Change Interventions

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## ABSTARCT

*This article discusses the ability of the change agent, or OD practitioner to use intervention techniques across different cultures. It is proposed that a contingency approach must be employed in prescribing the appropriate technique, and that certain cultural typologies are helpful in deciding which intervention is most appropriate. In particular, the article uses the provided by Hofstede, Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck, and Trompenaars, to show how change management must be adapted to various cultural parameters.*

In the early days of the organizational development movement, standard interventions and recommendations were provided as solutions for all organizations. Early recommendations such as T- groups, encounter groups, process consultation and others were based on the assumption that one technique would be effective across all organizations. This universalistic approach did not give much consideration to the needs of particular organizations. Consultants often developed a favorite OD intervention and attempted to apply that technique in all organizational setting, suffering from what Kaplan (1964) called the “law of the instrument.” The law of the instrument states that if you give a five year old a hammer, you will find that everything needs pounding. In many ways the early practitioners and theorists as well, suffered from this problem. They found a need for their favored technique regardless of any situational contingencies. All organizations needed sensitivity training, or survey feedback, for example. Over time it was found that one technique did not fit all organizational needs and a more contingency-based approach was employed. Most change management practitioners now realize the usefulness of a needs assessment before recommending an intervention, and prescribe a solution contingent on the needs of the organization.

Even a contingency-based approach utilizing a needs assessment may not be sufficient in a cross-cultural setting. It can be argued that many change management interventions are culturally-bound and not appropriate across cultures. Such an assertion challenges some of the basic values of the behavioral change management movement, calling into question the desirability of concepts such as power sharing, collaboration, teamwork, and autonomy. Since change agents cannot change cultures, it is important that their recommendations be consistent with the prevailing values of the culture in which the organization operates.

Culture can be described as “the set of values, attitudes, and beliefs shared by a group which sets the standards of behavior required for acceptance and participation in the group” (Scarborough 2000). A number of authors (Adler 1997; Chang 2002; Hall 1960; Hofstede 1980; Hofstede 1993; Schneider & Barsoux 2003) have articulated well the need to take culture into consideration when deciding on the appropriate management practice. Few have explored a similar need in assessing the potential effectiveness of a change management intervention. Wellman (2007), however, has argued that corporate culture can be a moderating variable in organizational learning and change. Change agents, now operating more than ever across national boundaries must study and incorporate national culture into their change management strategies. The first step in designing a culturally compatible change effort is to have a good understanding of how cultures vary. A number of cross-cultural models have been developed, however, the three which are discussed below are especially important to consider when designing a change management intervention. Each model views different aspects of culture, however, when used in total; a comprehensive composite can be created. While it is recognized that issues such as crossvergence, or the fusing of values into a culture, and multiculturalism (Jacob 2005) make any cultural model incomplete, the following frameworks provide a good starting point for planning a change strategy.

## **THE HOFSTEDE MODEL**

Geert Hofstede (1983) classified cultures based on four dimensions: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity/femininity, and individualist/collectivist. Hofstede’s conclusions were drawn from very extensive empirical evidence and represent the best overall classification scheme for cross-cultural comparison. Each element in the Hofstede model has a significant impact upon the success of a change management effort.

### **Power Distance**

Cultures vary in the desirability of power differences among societal members. Countries with a large power distance typically do not allow for much power sharing in the organization. Decisions are made at the top of the organization and individuals at the lower levels are expected to carry them out, without question. In high power distance cultures, both those with power, and those without power generally accept the view that superiors make decisions without input from lower level organizational members. Many behavioral interventions, which involve power sharing, may be viewed with suspicion by existing managers in these cultures. The power sharing approaches were generally developed in low power distance cultures and were compatible with the values of those cultures. While a power sharing technique may work well in the United States, it may find resistance in Mexico. This may be due to the lower power distance in the United States as compared to Mexico. In certain Asian cultures attempts at power sharing may simply result in confusion, as Asian management and its cultural origins have some unique qualities (Hofstede 2007). Differences in power distance may also influence the degree of decentralization which is possible in a given culture.

### **Uncertainty Avoidance**

Uncertainty avoidance is a collective tolerance for ambiguity. Cultures with low uncertainty avoidance welcome change and uncertainty. Cultures with high uncertainty avoidance are fearful of change and uncertainty and attempt to avoid it through rules and

regulations. The entire basis of the organizational development movement, which champions change in the organization, may be viewed with suspicion in cultures that are high in uncertainty avoidance. While resistance to change may be found in all organizations in all countries, change agents would expect to find much greater resistance in Turkey than in Denmark, for example due to significant differences in the avoidance of uncertainty. This may influence structure and authority relations. It may also determine whether it is more advisable to have a mechanistic or organic structure. Societies which have high uncertainty avoidance may prefer the structure of a mechanistic approach.

### **Masculinity/Femininity**

Using stereotypical traits of males and females, Hofstede classified cultures as masculine or feminine. Masculine cultures are materialistic, aggressive, competitive, and achievement oriented. Feminine cultures value cooperation, collaboration, and human development. As conceived by Hofstede, feminine cultures would be more receptive to organizational development. The values and beliefs of organizational development integrate better into cultures high in femininity, than cultures that are masculine. It would be expected, therefore, that in general, change management efforts would receive a warmer welcome in Sweden than in Venezuela for example. Very masculine cultures may have difficulty seeing women in positions of authority. These beliefs and values do not always apply to all women in the culture, especially foreign women. In Japan, for example, a foreign woman may be accepted in a position of authority, whereas a Japanese woman may not. This is because “foreignness” is a more important factor than gender.

### **Individualism/Collectivism**

Hofstede discovered that some cultures place a great emphasis on the individual, while others feel that the group has primary importance. Highly individualistic societies focus performance on each person, and generally have more difficulty with teamwork, and sometimes trust issues arise (Costigan, et al 2007). Collectivist societies de-emphasize the individual and value the contributions of the group. These cultural differences influence the appropriateness of recommendations in reward systems, performance appraisal, teamwork and collaboration, organizational structure, as well as leadership style (Walumbwa, Lawler, and Avolio 2007). Efforts aimed at more collaborative/team-oriented change would be easier to introduce in the Philippines than in Argentina, for example. This is true because Argentines are more individualistic than are Filipinos and Filipinos may find it easier to work in groups. Many change management interventions were developed in individualistic cultures and may not be sensitive to the strong collectivist nature of the client population.

## **VALUE ORIENTATIONS OF KLUCKHOHN AND STRODTBECK**

Anthropologists Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) viewed cultures as collections of “value orientations”. The value orientations identified include: relationship to the environment, belief about human nature, activity orientation, relationship among people, and space and time orientation. Like Hofstede, the work of Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck indicates cultural factors that directly impact the success of any proposed change management program.

### **Relationship With Environment**

According to Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck, cultures vary on their viewpoints about people's ability to control their environments. In some cultures, a more fatalistic approach prevails. People in these cultures feel that they are subjugated to environmental forces. In other cultures, a general feeling prevails that people can control their environment and that destiny is not preordained. The organizational development movement was born in societies that maintained a belief in the ability of people to control their own destinies. In fatalistic cultures, organizational development may be viewed as useless. The overall desirability of change may be challenged and the failure to achieve results blamed on outside forces. India is sometimes seen as an example of this fatalistic perspective. Change management strategies make the cultural assumption that people in the targeted group have an internal locus of control, and therefore, when presented with the opportunity to change their situation will act on that opportunity. Change agents may find difficulty in fatalistic cultures.

### **Belief About Human Nature**

Cultures differ in their views concerning the goodness of humankind. Some cultures view humans as essentially evil, or at least vulnerable to negative influences. Other cultures believe in the inherent goodness of people. Different management systems have been developed in these different types of cultures based on these beliefs. In cultures that view humankind as good, management systems tend to be less rigid and emphasize collaboration. In a culture that believes in the evil nature of humankind, autocratic management and close supervision prevail. Many behavioral change management techniques require a more positive view of human nature. The change agent may have to devote greater effort in designing and educating client populations in cultures which have a suspicious view of human nature. A negative view of human nature may also predispose organizations in those cultures towards centralized structures.

### **Activity Orientation**

The concept of activity orientation relates to the balance between work and play. Some cultures are "doing cultures" in which work becomes a central focus of life. Other cultures are "being cultures" in which "a person works to live, not lives to work." Doing cultures are more results-oriented, rational, and pragmatic. Being cultures tend to be more emotional and relaxed about accomplishments. These different values will influence the perceived importance of change strategies and their ultimate success. These value distinctions may also influence organizational structure in the degree of centralization and the optimal span of control. In turn, span of control may be influenced by the need to individually motivate employees. Change management strategies directed towards efficiency and productivity may be less effective in being cultures.

### **Relationship Among People**

Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck, like Hofstede and many others, noticed that cultures differ on the importance they place on the individual. This relationship value orientation classifies cultures into either individualistic or collectivist. This orientation addresses the duty societal members have towards each other. As mentioned before when discussing Hofstede, collectivist cultures require a different change management approach than a culture that is individualistic. Collectivist cultures may require a greater degree of centralization than individualistic cultures,

as employees will look to management for direction. On the other hand collectivist societies do well when working in teams.

### **Space and Time Orientation**

Cultures differ with regards to personal space and time orientation. In some cultures personal or private space is small. Organizations are designed in a more open fashion and communication tends to be conducted face-to-face. In cultures which desire a larger private space, organizations are designed to be more personally exclusive, and less informal communication exists. Space orientations can influence process designs and coordination of task activities. Time orientation is also an important aspect of understanding culture. Some cultures have a more relaxed view of time, while others place great importance on time. Some cultures are oriented towards the past, while others focus on the present or future. Time orientation can affect the success of a change strategy, especially when it requires greater deference to time. The desirability of change in general is lower in cultures rooted in the past, and significant resistance to change may be experienced in these cultures. One of the key variables identified by the GLOBE project was “future orientation,” or the extent to which a culture encourages and rewards thinking and behaving with an eye towards the future. Singapore scores high on future orientation, while Russia scores low on this dimension (Javidan 2007). Change management strategies for these two countries would have to be adapted to reflect these different orientations.

### **TROMPENAARS' TYPOLOGY**

While some overlap occurs among the various cultural comparison models, each perspective offers a somewhat different view of culture. Fons Trompenaars (1994) offers the additional cultural aspects of specific and diffuse cultures, ascribed and achievement status, and universal versus particular ethical orientation.

#### **Specific and Diffuse**

In a specific culture, life tends to be compartmentalized. Work activity and leisure do not overlap. In a diffuse culture, work and personal life have less rigid boundaries. In such cultures a more holistic approach towards the individual can develop in the organization. The traditional approaches to change management were developed in specific cultures, yet at the same time, most approaches are very conducive to a diffuse cultural. It could be proposed that change management efforts could have an even greater impact in diffuse cultures by capitalizing on the holistic perspective. Change interventions in diffuse cultures may tend to spill over into employee's private lives. In cultures with a strong clan orientation and a diffuse nature, the change management approach may achieve extraordinary results. Such was the case in Japan when the statistician, W. Edwards Deming taught the Japanese statistical process control. The Japanese used their clan or group focus, and integration of work and play to achieve remarkable gains in quality improvement.

#### **Status Attainment**

Trompenaars also discusses the differences in cultures where status is assigned to the individual based either on ascription or achievement. In ascribed status cultures, status is given based upon group identity such as family heritage, social class, age, or educational affiliations. In societies where status comes with achievement or performance, higher status individuals earn

their status in endeavors such as business, education, sports, and other performance-based pursuits. Once again, the effectiveness of a change intervention will be influenced by this cultural dimension. Since organizational development has a value orientation towards organizational achievement, recognition and rewards are given to highly performing groups or individuals. It may not be possible in an ascribed culture, for example, to promote the highest performing individual, if this adversely affects an employee who has gained his/her position due to ascription. Other methods of reward may need to be engineered to recognize high performing individuals.

### **Ethical Orientation**

Although most change management interventions do not directly address the issue of organizational ethics, this aspect of Trompenaars' typology can, nevertheless, indirectly influence the change plan. In universal cultures, ethical standards are seen as inflexible and applicable regardless of setting. In a particular society, ethical guidelines are seen as more flexible, and the proper application of the standard depends upon the situation. Accommodations are made for particular situations. In a particularistic culture, the rational model of organizational change may be usurped if the change recommendations impact certain organizational members. For example, in cultures where extended families and family businesses are common, there may be little debate on the legitimacy of firing a single mother who is the most productive organizational members over a very unproductive family member. While the decision-makers would agree in general on the need for productivity and the difficulties the single mother would face without employment, they would argue that this is a special situation and requires a different solution. Many organizational development recommendations may not be considered acceptable in a particularistic culture and care must be taken in the recommendations. More time may have to be taken in explaining the rationale for change in these cultures.

### **CONCLUSION**

As the discipline of organizational development continues to evolve, it is necessary to continue to refine its methods and application. As the practice of organizational development grows internationally it is increasingly important to consider the cultural qualifiers when prescribing an appropriate intervention. This paper proposes that cultures, which are high in power distance, masculine, individualistic, and strong in uncertainty avoidance, become challenging environments for change management efforts. Likewise, it is proposed that cultures that maintain a more fatalistic nature, a negative view of humankind, and are particularistic also present a set of challenges for the change agent. Additional research is needed to support these propositions.

Those involved in organizational change efforts are encouraged to study the three models found in this paper in greater detail and to examine the cultural parameters of the countries in which they operate. Like the early days of the OD movement, it is tempting to use the same intervention regardless of the cultural setting. This approach will not be effective, and could be quite dysfunctional when the setting involves cultural variables different from the values and beliefs of the change agent's culture or model.

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