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**AN INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON OF
ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT
PRACTICES: THE UNITED STATES AND
HONG KONG**

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An International Comparison of Organization Development Practices:
The United States and Hong Kong

ABSTRACT

This study explored culture-bound issues in OD. The results of surveys among major firms in the United States and Hong Kong indicated few major differences in their OD practices, though the usage of specific OD interventions varied. Implications for OD research and practice are discussed.

An International Comparison of Organization Development Practices: The United States and Hong Kong

As businesses become more globalized, the transfer of management technologies across cultures has received increased attention. Management research, likewise, is also subject to increased scrutiny from this global perspective. A major concern among many academics is the development of an internationally relevant organizational science (Boyacigiller & Adler, 1991). A common criticism is that management research and theories have been developed primarily in North America, and are therefore framed by cultural values specific to that context (e.g. Hofstede, 1993). However, as Western-based management practices are used in many parts of the world, whether a theory is culture-bound or culture-free is an important issue to both academics and practitioners.

One possible avenue to better understand the applicability of theories across cultures is to examine management systems in different cultures (Boyacigiller & Adler, 1991). This paper focuses on an area of management which is very much value-based, organization development (OD). We report data comparing OD practices in the United States and Hong Kong. Through examining current practices in two cultures, the applicability of Western OD concepts in an Asian context can be understood. This not only enhances our knowledge of OD practice in another culture, but may also provide clues to develop internationally relevant theories.

Organization Development and Culture

Organization development is a systematic application of behavioral science knowledge to improve organizational effectiveness through changing an organization's strategies, structure, culture, and processes (Cummings & Worley, 1993). A major characteristic of OD is its focus on organizational renewal -- making an organization more flexible and adaptable to the changing environment. McMahan and Woodman (1992) reported that most of Fortune 500 firms are actively

practicing OD. Thus, managing planned change through the application of OD can be described as a standard practice in many U.S. organizations.

Woodman (1989) stated optimistically that OD is moving into exciting new directions instead of becoming stagnant in the U.S. One trend identified is that the field of OD is now moving into the international arena. However, is this extensive use of OD to manage change in U.S. also well received by other countries? Jaeger (1986) argued that cultural and value differences are constraints in the use of intervention technologies. Evans (1989) stated that OD is culture bound. In addition, Kirkbride, Tang, and Shae (1989) argued from a theoretical point of view that culture is a barrier to introducing western management training and development techniques into the Chinese community. Thus, conventional wisdom suggests that national cultures have a strong impact on the effectiveness of a particular OD technology. The applicability of OD may depend on the congruence of national cultural values and OD values. However, this assertion is based largely on research done on specific managerial techniques such as MBO (Hofstede, 1980) and feedback (Cox & Cooper, 1977). Thus, there is a need for empirical research which focuses on more comprehensive OD interventions.

OD in Hong Kong

As one of the newly industrialized countries (NICs) in Asia, Hong Kong has enjoyed tremendous economic growth and investments in the past. Recently, due to the brain-drain problem associated with political uncertainty surrounding the 1997 issue, the business environment has become more turbulent than ever. In addition, the global economy is in a recession. In order to remain competitive firms have to devise new strategies and introduce new technologies or products. Internally, many firms have to downsize or restructure in order to streamline their operations and cut costs. Training is also provided to employees to increase their commitment so as to reduce turnover. All these changes fall into the domain of OD and hence OD interventions could be important tools to revitalize a firm's competitiveness in Hong Kong.

Nyaw and Wan (1991) reported, in a survey among major Hong Kong firms, that only 14% of sampled firms had used outside consultants to run OD projects. Consulting services were used mostly in the human resources area (such as executive search and compensation) and investment projects. This figure is surprisingly low given the favorable attitude toward new management techniques in Hong Kong and the obvious benefits of OD interventions. It can be argued that many large firms (especially multinational corporations) possess internal capabilities in OD and thus do not utilize many outside consultants. Another explanation, though less optimistic, is that not many firms understand and accept OD concepts and hence OD is not widely employed or practiced in Hong Kong. This explanation is supported by the findings of Lau (1993) who suggested that the concept of OD has not yet matured in Hong Kong. There are a lot of misperceptions about the nature and usefulness of OD among many Hong Kong managers. For example, technical training was regarded as OD by many functional managers (such as marketing and finance managers).

OD and Cultural Values

Jaeger (1986) argued that the congruence of national cultural values and OD values determines the selection of intervention techniques. Thus, the issue of OD applicability may lie in the understanding of both cultural and OD values.

French and Bell (1990) pointed out three basic OD values: a) collaborative effort and welfare of all system members; b) people as individuals worthy of respect and development; and c) change agents should have a commitment to action and research and democratization of organizations. The core of these values is a humanistic orientation. Church, Hurley, and Burke (1992) further suggested that "people emphasis" is also a driving force for the future of OD. Thus, OD should be most applicable when a society has a humanistic orientation defined by an emphasis on human dignity, equity, collaboration, and individual growth.

Jaeger (1986) adopted the Hofstede (1984) cultural framework to analyze the relationship between OD values and national values. Only two Scandinavian countries were found to be in total congruence with OD values. The values of the United States did not agree with general OD

values. Hong Kong was even further away from OD values. The Jaeger study used a rather general value framework to examine OD's applicability in a society. The wide spread use of OD in the U.S. clearly indicates a possible deficiency in the Jaeger analysis. It is also possible that OD values and national values have changed since the study.

Additionally, OD is not a single technique but a collection of techniques designed to help organizations to be more effective and remain competitive in the marketplace. These techniques may vary in their emphases and approaches. Some may be in direct conflict with national values, but some may not. Thus, the culture-bound perspective (e.g., Jaeger, 1986; Kirkbride et al., 1989) may be too general. A more reasonable argument is that some OD interventions could find little acceptance in a particular culture while others are easily accepted by the same culture, provided the culture has a humanistic orientation.

Since Hong Kong is a "westernized" city in the sense that most managers are either trained in or influenced by western management thought, the acceptance of OD in general should not be very dissimilar from the U.S. However, for certain interventions which may have direct conflict with traditional Chinese values (e.g., values of face and harmony), then the interventions may not be well received. Further, since Hong Kong has a number of MNCs, an analysis of the differences or similarities of OD practices among these firms can reveal whether OD is really culture-bound or culture-free.

Method

This paper compares the findings of two surveys conducted of large firms in the United States and Hong Kong. The details of the U.S. survey are reported in McMahan and Woodman (1992) and will not be repeated here. The survey was mailed to Fortune 500 firms with a response rate of 29.4%. Of these respondents, 110 firms provided completed questionnaires. The Hong Kong data was from a larger survey sent to about 750 major firms with some items extracted

from the McMahan and Woodman (1992) study. Only items common to these two surveys are used in the following comparison.

The Hong Kong sample was comprised of local and foreign capital firms of over 100 employees selected randomly from trade directories. A total of 108 responses were received. Out of these responses, 38 called or wrote the researcher and indicated that they were not able to return the questionnaires. Several explanations were given for not filling out the questionnaire. Besides the common non-disclosure policy, "OD is not practiced" is the most frequently mentioned reason (nearly half of the responses). In addition, some firms expressed no interest in responding to mail surveys because they believed that organizational surveys do not make a contribution to their business. A couple of firms also commented that OD practices are being decentralized to the operational department or subsidiaries and hence the central human resource department could not meaningfully complete the questionnaire. Thus, the relatively lower response rate is primarily due to the content area of the questionnaire. Since OD is probably a novel concept in Hong Kong, the low response rate is understandable. Nevertheless, a total of 70 valid responses were used in the following analyses.

The two surveys focused mainly on the relative effort organizations put into different OD activities. In order to ensure consistency and avoid confusion, all OD terms were qualified with explanatory statements and examples. The current state of OD in the firm and the roles of the internal OD function and professionals were also examined. Data was also collected regarding the size of the OD staff and the extent of outside services used.

Results

Table 1 presents a comparison of time spent on different OD activities in U.S. and Hong Kong firms. The focus of intervention activities among different management levels is also presented. OD activities are classified into four different categories: human processual, technostructural, strategic planning, and system-wide interventions. Human processual activities are all interventions that emphasize human relationships, team building, work team interaction,

conflict resolution, and process consulting. Technostructural activities are related to socio-technical change, task and work designs, and organization structure. Strategic planning activities are primarily strategic planning processes, strategic change and visioning at the top management level. The last category, system-wide activities have an emphasis on organization-wide changes, such as leadership, culture, and quality improvement.

When the relative time spent on the four OD activities in each location was examined, data revealed that Hong Kong firms spent more time on human processual interventions and strategic planning activities, but less time on technostructural and system-wide activities. In the case of U.S. firms, more time was spent on human processual and system-wide activities. When the two countries were compared, an obvious difference is in strategic planning and system-wide activities as evidenced by the t-tests (differences between Hong Kong and U.S. firms were significant in these two activities, but human-processual and technostructural were not statistically different). Hong Kong firms spent one-fourth of their time on strategic planning whereas U.S. firms spent only 15.7%. This difference is not surprising since most OD interventions in Hong Kong firms occurred at the top management level (41%) while U.S. OD activities are more concentrated at middle-level management. T-tests results also indicated the differences between the management level emphases of the two places were significant. The relative percentage of services provided to front-line supervisors were very similar in both countries.

The second set of questions is related to the role of the OD function inside the firm and the role of OD professionals. Table 2 presents these results. All firms were asked to describe their current state of OD in terms of five adjectives arrayed along a continuum. A review of the relative frequency of distribution of the descriptions indicated that Hong Kong and the U.S. had similar patterns, though the actual weights differed. Hong Kong and the U.S. have a similar percentage of firms describing themselves as a "real player" in the organization. "Real player" means that the OD activity is alive and well, and the OD staff are really contributing. There are less Hong Kong firms (44%) who regarded themselves as "established" (OD staff are recognized and accepted as

providing necessary services to other departments) than U.S. firms (49%). Moreover, although there are less firms in Hong Kong who described OD activities as "effective but struggling" than U.S. firms (21.4% vs. 28%), many more firms described OD as "worried" (15.7% vs. 5%). This implies that less Hong Kong firms regarded OD as a luxury and have to prove their value to the organization, but more OD groups had to work hard to sell their services within the firm. To further understand the situation, the descriptions were converted to a 5-point Likert scale with 1 representing "real player" and 5 representing "finished." The mean of the Hong Kong firms do not significantly differ from U.S. firms (2.51 vs. 2.32, $t = 1.24$, $p > .05$). Overall, the state of OD in the two samples are not that different, though more Hong Kong firms are in the more negative categories.

In the U.S. survey, responding firms were asked to describe the role of the leading OD professional. Responses indicated that thirty-seven percent of the lead OD professionals are active consultants providing direct client services. Only 14% are supervisors of OD professionals. The remaining are both supervisors and active consultants. The Hong Kong survey used a different approach to investigate the role of OD professionals. The Hong Kong firms were asked to describe the primary function of OD staff as a whole in their firms, not just one single individual. Most of the firms (61.5%) reported that they provided necessary interventions under management's directives. Only a small percentage of firms are providing OD services directly to clients, both actively (active consultant, 10.8%) or at a client's request (passive consultant, 10.8%). About 17% played both the consultant and liaison role by providing some interventions and serving as a bridge between outside consultants and internal clients. Although complete comparisons cannot be made, differences in the percentage of employees providing direct consulting suggests that the OD function inside Hong Kong firms does not have the stature enjoyed by U.S. firms.

Table 3 shows the comparison of the size of the OD staff and use of outside resources. Respondents were asked to provide the size of the organization-wide full-time OD professional

staff (or the full-time equivalent employees devoted to OD activities). Although Hong Kong firms have a relatively larger percentage in the 6-10 OD staff category, the average number of OD staff in each country is a different picture. The U.S. firms have an average of 8.5 individuals whereas Hong Kong firms have a mean number of 7.8 and a median of 5 individuals specializing in OD activities. A smaller average number of OD staff is also consistent with the fact that most Hong Kong firms are smaller than the U.S. firms in these two samples.

About twenty-five percent of U.S. firms received outside OD assistance. This percentage is similar in Hong Kong with about 21% of Hong Kong firms using outside OD consultants. This number is different from the figure (14%) reported by Nyaw and Wan (1991) earlier, nevertheless, both figures reflect the situation that not many firms are utilizing outside OD help to improve their organizations. It is also worth noting that about one-third of Hong Kong firms had never used external OD help. This reinforces the above finding that the use of outside resources is very limited in Hong Kong.

Regarding the type of OD services, more Hong Kong firms responded similarly with the U.S. firms that they would likely contract outside consultants to run one-time only interventions. The Hong Kong survey also asked respondents to indicate the nature of activities for which they need outside help. The responding firms indicated that technostructural interventions are the most likely contracted intervention, followed by human processual, system-wide activities, and lastly strategic planning.

Lastly, as many Hong Kong firms are the subsidiaries of large multi-national corporations, some may suspect that the national culture of the MNCs may have some effects on local OD practices. The Hong Kong sample was further analyzed by grouping them under different categories according to source of capital. The firms were grouped under Asian capital (35 firms, mostly local Chinese), European capital (16 firms, including United Kingdom and continental Europe), and American capital (13 U.S. firms). The one-way ANOVA was used to determine

whether there are any significant differences in the practice and role of OD among Asian, European, and American firms in the Hong Kong sample (see Table 4).

The ANOVA results indicated that there were no significant differences in the percentage of time spent on the four types of OD activities among the three country groups. In addition, no differences were found in how they described the current state of OD. The only significantly different item was how they perceived the primary function of OD staff in their organizations.

DISCUSSION

Generally speaking, the above data indicated that the differences between Hong Kong and U.S. firms with regard to OD practices are not as great as the culture-bound theorists would think. OD in general is accepted by the responding Hong Kong firms. However, the data also revealed several interesting issues. First, the types of interventions that received priority are different. Besides the traditional human processual intervention which has the largest percentage of time spent in both countries, strategic planning is relatively more important in Hong Kong. In contrast, U.S. firms spent less time on strategic planning, but more time on system-wide interventions. The level of management to which OD services were provided is one explanation of these differences as mentioned above. Another explanation perhaps is the size of the organizations. In the Hong Kong sample, the mean number of employees is around 900, with a median of 540, and about one-third of the firms employ less than 300 personnel. In the case of the U.S., though the average number of employees is not known, about 44% of the responding firms were from the largest Fortune 100 firms. Thus, the U.S. sample obviously has a larger average number of employees. Therefore, it is not surprising that most OD services in the U.S. occurred at the middle management level instead of the top management level. Since Hong Kong firms are smaller, spending more OD time at the top management level may be seen as more practical and urgent.

If we examine the type of interventions from an individual/group level versus organizational level of analysis. The individual/group level interventions would be the sum of human processual and technostructural activities, and the organizational level interventions would

be the combined percentages of the strategic planning and system-wide activities. Of all OD interventions in U.S. firms, 51.4% were individual/group level interventions and 44.4% were organizational level. The Hong Kong firms had a very similar percentage with 51.5% individual/group interventions and 46.7% organizational level interventions. McMahan and Woodman (1992) noted that U.S. firms reported considerably more system-wide activity than was reported in earlier studies (e.g., Golembiewski, Proehl, & Sink, 1982). This observation is also true in the case of Hong Kong firms.

Secondly, the relatively higher percentage of Hong Kong firms in the worried and finished categories of the description on "the current state of OD services" is also revealing. It may reflect the maturity of OD in the two countries. There are three times as many Hong Kong firms describing their OD function as "worried" compared to U.S. firms (16% vs. 5%), although a similar percentage selected the of "finished" response category (4.3% vs. 3%). This implies that, from the stand point of a human resources director or chief executive, OD is not understood by many Hong Kong firms. There were very few OD activities being practiced and OD staff had to sell their services to internal clients. Bearing in mind that those Hong Kong firms responded to this survey had some concept of OD and that OD activities are occurring, it is not beyond the imagination that OD has a difficult time in other non-responding firms. Out of the 38 responding Hong Kong firms which did not complete the questionnaire (this represented 35% of the total responses), eighteen firms said that they did not practice OD at all. When compared with the U.S. survey (McMahan & Woodman, 1992), the number of firms that had no corporate OD function and did not complete the questionnaire was relatively smaller (15 out of 147 respondents). In addition, those who do not have a centralized corporate OD function may still practice OD at the divisional level. Thus, it can be concluded from the above numbers that the concept of OD is not well understood and received by the business community of Hong Kong. However, the respective percentages of firms selecting "real player" and "established" are quite similar, totaling 59% in the Hong Kong sample and 64% in the U.S. sample. For those firms practicing OD, OD is seen as

effective. Thus, the acceptance and practice of OD in Hong Kong is somewhat bi-polarized, with less firms in the middle of the road. In the case of U.S. firms, the practice of OD is more established with fewer reports of "worried" and "finished."

From the ANOVA results of firms inside Hong Kong, Asian firms generally perceived the internal OD role as providing necessary interventions under management's directives more than soliciting OD or providing OD at client's requests. The OD practices, however, were not different. The relative time spent on each type of activities are about the same among Asian, European, and American firms. This provides some additional evidence for the culture-free proposition.

CONCLUSION

The assertion that OD practice is culture bound does not seem to be supported by the data of the two surveys. The pattern of OD usage in Hong Kong and the U.S. does not differ a great deal. Further analysis of the Hong Kong sample also indicated that there was no significant difference on the time spent on each type of intervention associated with capital source.

Westwood, Tang and Kirkbride (1992) examined Chinese conflict behavior and suggested that open disclosures and critical reflection might be perceived as a threat to authority and hierarchy relations and therefore are not accepted in Chinese-dominant communities. They concluded that confrontation meeting, role negotiation, third-party interventions and other approaches that call for an open critiquing of others would prove highly problematic. It should also be noted that certain Chinese values are in line with the basic OD philosophy, such as system-orientation and the use of cultural norms (French & Bell, 1990; Westwood et al., 1992). Therefore, interventions that are impersonal and aim at the whole organization may be better received by Hong Kong firms. This may also explain why the percentages of technostructural and strategic planning activities are higher in Hong Kong than in U.S. In addition, a collaborative type of team building is acceptable. However, human processual activities should be modified in order to not have direct conflicts with traditional ethnic values. For example, team building which is

initially task-oriented may be more effective than the traditional relationship-oriented team building. When people in Hong Kong have a deeper understanding of OD concepts, then, more relationship-oriented interventions can be introduced.

The current study indicated that not all OD interventions are given the same weight in spite of some similarities. On the one hand, this provides some warnings to OD practitioners that they should be careful in choosing appropriate interventions. On the other hand, in order to understand the effect of culture on OD practice, it is valuable to look at specific interventions carefully. Why firms in a specific culture use or do not use a particular type of intervention and how interventions are adapted to fit local needs would be valuable questions to answer.

The current study, like other organizational level surveys, suffered from the self-selection bias of the responding firms. Those responding to the two surveys have some interests in OD, though some may not practice it at all. The analysis presented above was based on completed questionnaires, which is to say only those practicing OD were analyzed. This obviously is not the true OD practice picture in either Hong Kong or the U.S. Further research into the non-responding or responded-but-no-OD firms should complement the present results. In addition, both surveys were sent to large firms which we believed had a higher probability of practicing OD. This large-firm sample may not represent the OD practice of small firms. Smaller firms may practice OD with managers as change agents involving no OD professionals or outside consultants. Thus, future research should also include firms of smaller size in order to obtain more representative data.

Finally, few systematic investigations of management practices (OD in this case) have been conducted in Asian countries. The current study serves as a starting point to collect information to form a database for international or cross-cultural comparisons. As the world economy is now more globalized than ever, MNCs dominate most of the industrial operations in many NICs. How MNCs manage diversity and practice their OD activities in other countries are major issues (Evans, 1989; Woodman, 1989). McMahan and Woodman (1992) noted only 43% of

those firms with international operations in their sample had an OD effort outside the U.S. and Canada. Many firms expressed a concern about the limited supply of qualified OD professionals who understand the different societal and business cultures. This reinforces the need for more non-U.S. OD data, especially from the Asia-Pacific region because it is a current emphasis of the global economy. A new dimension of OD, transnational OD, could become an important area for both practice and research very soon.

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TABLE 1
Time Spent on OD Practices

	Hong Kong	US	t-value
Number of firms:	70	110	N/A
Percentage of time spent on:			
Human processual	31.0%	34.5%	1.26
Technostructural	20.5%	17.2%	1.64
Strategic planning	25.0%	16.3%	3.73*
System-wide	21.7%	27.0%	2.18*
Percentage of OD services in:			
Top management	41.0%	28.8%	3.49*
Middle management	31.2%	39.7%	3.52*
Front line supervisors	18.6%	19.4%	0.33

* $p < .01$

Table 2
Current State of OD and Role of OD Professionals

	Hong Kong	U.S.
Current state of OD:		
Real player	14.3%	15%
Established	44.3%	49%
Effective but struggling	21.4%	28%
Worried	15.7%	5%
Finished	4.3%	3%
in Likert-scale	2.51	2.32
(t = 1.24)		
Role of OD function/lead professional:		
Active consultant	10.8%	37%
Passive consultant	10.8%	-
Under management's directives	61.5%	-
Consulting & liaison	16.9%	-
Supervisor & active consultant	-	49%
Supervisor	-	14%

Table 3
Size of OD and Use of Outside Resources

	Hong Kong	U.S.
Size of OD professional staff:		
1- 5	47.5%	62%
6-10	21.3%	14%
11-20	14.8%	10%
Use of outside OD services:		
Percentage of outside help	21%	25.8%

Table 4
ANOVA Results of Hong Kong Sample

	<u>Firms</u>			
<u>Dependent variable</u>	<u>Asian</u>¹	<u>Europe</u>¹	<u>American</u>¹	<u>F value</u>
Time spent on				
human processual	33.6	27.7	24.1	1.55
technostructural	21.4	18.0	21.0	0.43
strategic planning	23.4	32.8	22.1	2.03
system-wide	19.7	22.2	27.8	1.87
Current state of OD	2.67	2.56	2.30	0.54
Primary function of OD	3.06	2.43	2.75	3.28*

* p < .05

¹ Primary firm capitalization