



**Organizational Learning and Knowledge**

*5<sup>th</sup> International Conference*

Friday, 30<sup>th</sup> May – Monday, 2<sup>nd</sup> June, 2003

***“LEARNING ORGANIZATION” MEETS “SINGAPORE  
CULTURE”***

**Theme:** Learning Across Boundaries

**Retna, Kala S.**

Victoria University of Wellington

**Dr Jones, Deborah**

Victoria University of Wellington

**Contact author:** Retna, Kala S

Victoria Management School, Victoria University of Wellington  
RH 930 Rutherford House, 23 Lambton Quay  
P.O.Box 600, Wellington, New Zealand

---

**Telephone:** 64-4-463 5722

**E-mail:** Kala.retna@vuw.ac.nz

## Abstract

*In this paper, we consider the cross-cultural validity of the key propositions of learning organisation theory (LO). Using a Singapore-based case study, we argue that the LO theory as promoted by Senge and his colleagues, cannot be culturally neutral nor universally applicable. Rather, it includes a number of assumptions about both 'learning' and 'organisation' that are specific to western cultural contexts. The research suggests that the critical dialogues, non-hierarchical structures and open public communication that are hallmarks of the LO idea are not seen as desirable and would render a thorough-going adoption of LO principles in Singapore organisations to be impossible.*

## Introduction

In this paper we present and comment on a Singaporean study of the Learning Organization (LO). We describe the ways that LO principles are both embraced and resisted in two government organisations. Peter Senge launched *The Fifth Discipline* in 1990, and since then the idea has gained wide currency around the world.

We argue that LO theory as promoted by Senge and his colleagues (Senge, 1990; Senge et al., 1994; 1999), cannot be culturally neutral or universally applicable. Rather, it includes a number of assumptions about both 'learning and organization' that are embedded in certain specific western cultural contexts. Even though the literature on LO is vast, there is no in-depth studies of LO and the ways that national cultures influence, impede or facilitate LO practices in organizations. Management concepts or tools that are successful in a particular national culture may be inappropriate in another, as different cultures and political contexts shape people's values and behaviours differently. This study calls for further empirical research on situating the LO concept within an understanding of the national cultural framework which organisations are embedded. After presenting the case and key findings, we then analyse it in two different commentaries: one from the point of view of an 'insider', a Singaporean practitioner (who is the researcher), and one from the point of view of an 'outsider' - a non-Singaporean (New Zealand) academic.

## Case Summary

This case addresses a number of questions about the relationship between the concept of LO and issues of national culture. Is the LO concept independent of culture? Does it have cross-cultural validity? In particular, is it compatible with Singapore culture that is characterized as being hierarchical, authoritarian and disciplined? To answer these questions a qualitative case study was carried out in Singapore with two contrasting public sector organizations. In Singapore the government uses the public bureaucracy as the major vehicle for formulating and effecting social and developmental changes. Thus, the implementation of new policies or management concepts can be best studied in public sectors that are bureaucratically instituted. The two case organizations involved in this research are a school and a large regulatory agency that are referred to respectively as New Millennium School (NMS) and Super Security Agency (SSA).

NMS is a new school that commenced with its first intake of students in the year 2000. The Principal is one of the pioneer participants in the Group on Organizational Learning Education (GOLE) that was initiated by the Ministry of Education in 1999. GOLE consists of selected schools that underwent training on organizational learning principles and tools.

Prior to taking over the school the principal has also undergone extensive training in LO concepts and is known to be an advocate of LO disciplines. NMS began its journey to be an LO right from its inception.

SSA is a traditional and bureaucratic organization that has been entrenched with a line and staff structure and culture. In 1997, the Head of the Civil Service announced that the public service ‘must be a thinking, trying and learning public service’ to cope with Singapore’s fast paced complex environment. As a result various government departments, including SSA, were involved in policymaking and strategies to meet the challenges of human development in terms of learning, creativity and innovation. All the departments involved in this project were trained in LO approaches by consultants from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Being highly impressed and convinced with the LO concept and tools, SSA spearheaded the implementation of LO in Singapore.

## **Singapore Culture**

This study has been carried out from a Singaporean perspective, and its design has questioned whether the LO concept can be considered applicable without reference to local national culture. Singapore is the epitome of the disciplined country. Its impressive progress and achievements are credited to its government for its sound policies in managing and bringing Singapore to what it is today (Cunningham & Gerrard, 2000). Singaporeans pride in its authoritarianism and hierarchical structure and attribute its success to its one party strong political leadership that has been in power since independence. Characteristics such as control, discipline, repression, compliance, inequality, competitiveness and capitalism are now internalized as ‘Singapore culture’. This study was based on the proposition that the cultural values of Singapore can be seen as antithetical to the LO concept. The study inquires into what the public servants in the case organisations saw ‘Singapore culture’ as consisting of, and how it related to LO ideas.

## **The Learning Organization**

The learning organization concept has received much attention from both scholars and management of organisations. *The Fifth Discipline*, by American management guru Peter Senge which launched the Learning Organisation (LO) concept in 1990 could be regarded as an important milestone. Senge sees learning organisations as those where people ‘continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together’ (Senge, 1990, p3). Senge identified five disciplines that underpin learning organisation: systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, team learning and shared vision.

## **Method**

The researcher is Singaporean and inquired into how participants made sense of the concept of “Learning Organization”, as well as exploring their perceptions of Singapore culture, and the relationships between the two. A particular focus was the extent to which prevailing conceptions and practices of traditional Singapore culture hinder, facilitate or amend the implementation of LO principles. An ethnographic-style fieldwork was carried out in the two

organizations, with a period of six weeks in each. The in-depth interviews were supplemented with participant observations and analysis of company documents. The findings of this ethnographic analysis follow:

## **Findings**

### ***Unpacking the Learning Organization Concept***

The findings show a common understanding by all participants that the LO is not a traditional authoritarian and controlling organization. The majority of the participants' responses indicated that they were receptive towards the LO concept, as it promotes an egalitarian environment and focuses not only on efficiency but also encourages people to realise their learning potential. In spite of the positive feelings about LO a number of participants expressed their concern about pursuing the LO principles as it undermines the discipline and control that is necessary to run organisations in Singapore. This is strongly voiced by a participant:

We are Singaporeans. We need discipline and order at work. LO is good but letting people talk too much or treating our bosses on equal grounds will not work for us.

Other responses from both organisations such as 'not so practical', 'top management cannot lose authority', 'being a discipline organization' shows the tensions between Singapore's high power distance with its culturally inherent authoritative style.

### ***Learning versus Training***

Both organisations were strongly drawn to the notion of 'learning to learn' and a shift in emphasis from training to learning. This is evident from the efforts put in to encourage people to share their learning with others in the organisation after a training programme/course. Findings show that training is viewed not only as an important factor in improving individual effectiveness but also from a broader perspective as a key lever for improving organizational performance through sharing knowledge with members.

Contrary to the positive learning experiences of most members, a few participants in the sample hinted that the traditional way of training is still highly preferred because:

When we come from training we have so much to catch up with our work. We have no time to share what we learn from the course or training session. Even if I have the time, other people will not have time for me. This is our working style. Learning is good but training is still the best for fast moving people like us.

The participants and my experience confirm that training is considered more important than learning as it primarily helps to performing one's job more effectively and allows opportunity to make visible incremental improvements in work performance. In general, training is linked to career advancement and this is probably the reason for organisational members' emphasis on training.

## ***Leadership: Traditional versus Facilitator Style***

The findings strongly suggest that leaders from both organisations have adopted a facilitative leadership style and most of the respondents appreciated the move away from the conventional type. While they welcomed the idea of LO leadership style, majority of them also offered a very different view. To some of them the current type of 'leadership' is considered 'unreal' and the 'authoritarian style' as real as it fits the 'Singapore style'. A participant exhorts this concern:

Respect and reverence are important and bosses always expect people to look up to him for he has the final say in everything. LO says everyone must be treated with respect but he (boss) wants to feel that he is the man here {in command}.

Participants are well aware of the expectations of the traditional style of leadership and appear to be appreciative of its bureaucratic efficacy. But at the same time they are conscious of the conflict between this and the LO style.

## ***Experimentation - 'Gain or Pain'***

The findings show that the idea of experimentation has been widely encouraged and accepted as an important factor to organisational effectiveness. Comments such as 'I can try new things', 'now we can experiment and show our thinking and talents' are indicative of the emphasis placed on experimentation in both organizations. On the other hand, almost all the participants, including those who were receptive towards experimentation expressed their fears of exposing their vulnerabilities. For example:

Experimentation is good but mistakes are very costly in our culture. It is not good to let your boss or colleagues know about your mistakes.

This quote highlights that failure is associated with embarrassment and low self-esteem. While they say they like experimentation, in practice it is not so.

## ***Dialogue – Danger Zone***

The practice of dialogue in both the organizations was supported by the research findings. Nevertheless, the findings also show contradictory factors. Firstly, the participants resisted this technique as they found the process too slow for people who are used to quick solutions. Secondly, there is some indication from some participants that dialogue is not used in the same meaning or intention as advocated by LO principles. Many examples in the data show that it is regarded more as an opportunity or channel to express their dissatisfaction to the higher authority. A participant summarised:

Dialogue is good but very long-winded. We don't have time to sit around in circles and think through like red Indians. Sometimes it is still dangerous to speak what is in your mind. Also some people use the session or opportunity to express their dissatisfaction to the higher authority.

With such assumptions and mental models, it is not clear as to how a non-threatening environment could be created to facilitate the use of dialogue in both organisations?

### ***Can we trust each other?***

Interestingly the notion of trust reveals several findings. Firstly, the leaders demonstrate significant trust and respect for employees that endorse and encourage open communication and trusting relations. Secondly, in spite of creating a trusting environment, the leaders are aware that there is no mutual trust as expected and desired. Thirdly, there seems to be processes and structure that foster a trusting and trustworthy relationship among staff. Fourthly, participants do acknowledge that it is difficult for them to trust their bosses or people. A significant number of respondents gave a similar comment such as:

We are Singaporeans. And we don't trust people that easily.

This and other similar descriptions support the findings that there is a low level of trust in the organisations. How can Singaporean organisations implement LO with such a low level of trust?

### ***Good but a soft approach***

Although the findings on the question of the applicability and usefulness of LO concept in Singapore organisations was overwhelmingly positive, all the participants claimed that it is a 'soft approach' for a 'tough country' like Singapore. Such responses appear to emanate from unequal structural relationships between people in society. On this basis, majority of the participants doubted the application within Singapore organisational context as argued:

LO is a soft approach and Singaporeans are not used to soft and open style of managing their people. We cannot be like the westerners, all the time nice to people. We are Singaporeans.

This and other responses appear to be an expression of Singaporeans characteristics and could be considered as the product of a hierarchical beliefs embedded in the wider culture. Taken together, it could be argued that organisational members automatically discourage learning and adaptation using the cultural attributes in order to encourage the status quo.

### **First Commentary**

I spent a good part of my work life trying to understand why organisations could not provide an environment where meaningful learning and work can be simultaneously achieved. Now I can see the connection between why employees and employers do what they do. I also wonder now if I am given a chance to do things again as a practitioner in Singapore, would I subscribe to LO prescriptions? The answer is 'I don't think so'. I am only being fair to myself. How much could I do things differently in a culture that is deeply entrenched in its beliefs of hierarchy, authoritarianism and discipline? Yes, the findings of the research have validated my assumptions that impact the practice of the LO concept.

Singapore's high power distance culture, with its inherently authoritative style, is in direct contrast to the concept of the LO. There is a widespread critique of the traditional authoritarian approach and its impact on people and their practices. Seniority and status are seen as important for organisational effectiveness and respect for people in authority has produced an attitude of official subordination. The evidence shows that in spite of some

efforts put in to minimise the effects of authoritative style of management, the difficulty of changing the behaviour of people is a tall order. This is owing to the strength of the inherited compliant mentality that is highly displayed in the day-to-day life of the participants. The change intended is not simply a matter of changes in management practices, but entails fundamental changes in how both the leaders and followers view power inequalities. Would the practice of servant leadership undermine the smooth efficiency of organisations? This question has profound implications for practitioners who want to create a learning environment through a facilitative leadership style.

The organisations' effort in creating an environment for experimentation is also largely congruent with the nation's intention of encouraging creativity and innovation. Again, this is a new kind of practice that is in sharp contrast to conventional practices. Tensions between experimentation and the fear of mistakes are evident. This is the outcome of a culture that promotes a type of psychological make-up that rationalises mistakes as a negative aspect in organisational life. Also there is a misconstrued notion that experimentation must result in big changes or innovation in the organisations and the consequences of failure may affect career advancements of employees. This is further compounded by the Singaporean concern for 'face' that limits the opportunities of developing the spirit of experimentation. For organisations to resonate with experimentation, it must transcend attitudes and beliefs that employees will not be penalised for anything less than perfection. The question to be asked is, can organisations move beyond a superficial endorsement of experimentation to one that truly demonstrate the learning from failures and successes? An alignment is needed between experimentation and cultural behaviour; otherwise experimentation will not achieve the desired outcome.

While systemic perspectives of LO are appreciated, there is a strong perception that 'systemic thinking' is for top management, as decision-making has been from the 'top management'. This attitude is the result of the cultural obedience to organisational and political authority that undermines the idea that employees should also be involved. The assumption that 'superiors know best' would probably continue to be unchallenged as people are imbued into believing they are more 'doers' than 'thinkers'. The critical issue then is not whether organisations are willing to involve employees in decision making, but whether employees are ready for such a conceptual change? Also, how far can government negotiate cultural values?

Although the LO practices introduced to the organisation can be conducive to developing one's personal mastery, the cultural background of Singapore inhibits its development, as employees still adopt a performance rather than a mastery goal. This attitude undermines the intrinsic value of learning. For Singaporeans learning is never a joy, it is for survival and is linked to a meritocracy system for individual rewards. This thinking is pervasive right up from the nursery to organisational level. Even the emphasis and call for lifelong learning is sadly mistaken as a route for only career advancement, and not an attempt to build the capacity to learn. This raises an important point. Is this the result of organisational or political insensitivity towards the learning needs of people? Intriguing, yet logical to question because the change is one of a fundamental shift, not a 'today's special'. How could a synergistic alignment of personal and organisational goals be achieved when the learning and thinking of political leaders who shape the beliefs of the people remain unchanged?

In sum, my stance in these positions is to bring to the fore the anxieties and concerns that were evident, supported and validated by my research. I am not against the implementation of the LO concept, but concerned about the way it gets implemented and the superficial changes in organisations that takes place. The LO journey is impeded by the cultural traits and it is important to acknowledge that these cultural attitudes constitute a systemic barrier to effective learning and adaptation. In making this commentary, I agree that theoretically, the LO concept is compatible with human rights but incongruent culturally in a country that prides over its hierarchy and showcases as an epitome of a disciplined society. So, is LO a tool to bring about a cultural shift in Singapore? The question has practical importance to individuals, organisations and society.

## Second Commentary

In this section I present a commentary from an ‘outsider’ and theoretical perspective. I am an academic from outside Singapore, yet, as New Zealander, also ‘outside’ the dominant northern centres of management knowledge and practice. I propose to present a kind of reverse image of Kala’s commentary, by asking what her story about the Singapore experience tells us about the theory of the Learning Organization. There are also broader implications for Organisational Learning theory and practice.

I use the framework of the developing post-colonial critique of management knowledge . I use the term ‘post-colonial’ because it draws attention to the specific historical and geopolitical circumstances of a given organisational context and of the management practices that are used there. It also implies that knowledges and ways of thinking about a topic – such as management or learning –are based on these circumstances. For instance, the Singapore cases here make explicit the ways that Senge’s work implicitly locates systemic learning within an ethos of western democracy. Cross-cultural examples frequently bring cultural assumptions into clear definition, and like this case, are valuable for this reason alone. But while the post-colonial viewpoint intersects in this respect with broader cross-cultural work in management, it also distinctively highlights the political consequences of such differences, both for practitioners and for scholars.

It should be freely acknowledged that the term ‘post-colonial’ is an ambiguous and often difficult one. It implies that the era of colonisation has ended with the emergence of ‘new’ nations in Asia, Africa and South America - such as Singapore (Banerjee, 2000). It is useful to look back at the cultural and political residues of colonisation that often lay the ground work for the determined nation-building of the present – such as we find in Singapore. For instance, it is within this focussed process of nation building in Singapore that the LO concept takes its place as part of a planned and very explicit vision of modernisation, as this case shows. However the idea of the ‘post-colonial’ does not need to imply that colonisation is ‘over’: it also refers to the complex ongoing process of colonisation as it takes new forms – that is, as certain nations or groups of nations continue to achieve or maintain economic and/or cultural dominance.

One form of this domination can be clearly seen to be written into the literature of management and organisation. Overwhelmingly, the ‘official’ management knowledge of scholarly and pop management publications is ‘western’ based – more precisely, it is based mainly on the experiences and beliefs of scholars and practitioners in the US, then British and



(to a lesser extent) European and other English-speaking nations (Baruch , 2001). North American theories of management are likewise assumed to be universal in their applications. Even in the literature of cross-cultural management, western theories dominate almost totally. The concerns of North American managers about ‘how can *we* more effectively manage *them*’ set the agenda , so that ‘existing published literature is heavily biased towards comparisons between North America on the one hand and Japan, Korea, China and Hong Kong on the other’ (Smith, 2001, p. 21).

Management theory tends to marginalise or ignore ethnic and cultural difference, except as problematic in implementing western management knowledge, which is seen as some kind of universal ‘best practice’. International management consultants and practitioners tend to assume that they are bringing the light of modern management knowledge to the ‘others’, and tend not to see (or care?) how their own beliefs are the limited and potentially limiting products of their own national environments. As a result we management scholars do not know a lot about how North American theories play in local contexts, especially from the point of view of the ‘locals’. We also tend to assume that any mismatch between ‘global’ management theory and ‘local’ practice is a question of, as Roy Jacques put it, “why don’t they get it”? (Jacques, 1996, p. xiv). Jacques argues that this ethnocentrism tends to prevent the development of what he calls ‘indigenous management knowledges’ (ibid) which could be valued equally with the Anglo American brand - and perhaps even more valuable in specific local context. Which brings us to this case.

It is clear from this case that neither ‘learning’ nor ‘organising’ nor ‘leadership’ can be seen independently of national cultural values. In his analysis of post-colonialism, Banerjee points out that the ‘traces of colonialism in present “postcolonial” histories of new nation states are often obliterated or retraced in terms of *progress* and *development*’ (Banerjee, 2000, p. 5; author’s italics). It is clear that it is in the name of ‘progress and development’ that the Singapore government, via the Singapore Civil service, have fixed on the concept of the LO to take the nation forward. This choice represents what Jacques calls the tendency of post-colonial nations to ‘accept western technologies and knowledge as representative of “development” or “progress” (Jacques, 1996, p. xv). Jacques argues that “until management texts come with a product warning ‘caution: contents are historically and culturally specific’, let the buyer beware” (Jacques, 1996 p. xiv).

## **Conclusions and questions**

How might we interpret the ‘resistance’ of the Singaporeans in this case to the thorough implementation of LO principles? There is a tremendous ambivalence threading through the discourse of the research subjects here. On the one hand, an attraction to the ideas of dialogue, experimentation and facilitative leadership is evident. At the same time, appeals to Singapore identity are set up in opposition to these desired processes. It is clear that the legacy of the highly competitive Singaporean education system has left traces deep inside the Singaporean worker. They are also very tuned into what they see as the ultimately unchanging (unchangeable?) power relationships in Singaporean society.

Singaporean leadership models or ideas about learning are not necessarily dysfunctional, just because they may be hard to fully match up to LO principles. Singapore has after all been economically successful for many decades under what can be seen as an authoritarian

government. If economic success is seen as the critical goal, then the current Singapore experiment with LO is based on the premise that a new kind of knowledge-based culture is essential to the continued economic development of Singapore, and to its continued modernisation. This premise remains to be demonstrated to be true.

One possible interpretation of this case could be that the Singapore authorities have ‘bought’ a product with political implications that are unintended and in practice unwanted. The LO concept could be seen as a kind of Trojan horse for western-style democracy. It could be argued that if, as intended by government planners, the culture of the Learning Organisation begins to diffuse through national culture, then would transform the political culture of Singapore. Currently the critical dialogues, non-hierarchical structures and open public communication that are hallmarks of the LO idea are not seen as desirable. In this sense it is tempting to see LO as a vector of democratisation. Alternatively, it could be argued that any such pervasive influence would be rapidly opposed, and in fact that the kinds of cultural values and assumptions that we see operating in this case will gradually render any thorough-going adoption of LO principles to be impossible.

Perhaps it is important here to give local practitioners credit for understanding their situation, and for the ability to take what works in their situation from LO and leave the rest.

## Bibliography

Banerjee, S. B. (2000) Whose land is it anyway? *Organization & Environment*, 13 (91), 3-38.

Baruch, Y. (2001) Global or North American? *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*, 1 (1), 109-126.

Chew, I. K, & Putti, J. (1995) Relationship on work-related values of Singaporean and Japanese Managers in Singapore, *Human Relations*, 48(10).

De Geus, A. (1988) Planning as Learning, *Harvard Business Review*, (2), 70-74.

Fernandez, D. R, Carlson, D.S, Stepina, L.P, Nicholson, J.D. (1999) Hofstede’s Country Classification 25 years later, *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 1997, 137(1), 43-54.

Jacques, R. (1996) **Manufacturing the employee: Management knowledge from the 19<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> centuries**. London: Sage.

Marquardt, J, M (2002) **Building the Learning Organization- Mastering the 5 Elements for Corporate Learning**, Davie-Black Publishing, CA.

Schein, E. (1993) On dialogue, culture, and organizational learning. *Organizational Dynamics*, 40-51.

Senge, P. (1990) *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization* . New York, N.Y.: Doubleday.

Senge, P., Kleiner, A., Roberts, C., Ross R., & Smith B. (1994) *The fifth discipline fieldbook: strategies and tools for building a learning organization*. London: Doubleday/Currency.

Senge, P., Kleiner, A., Roberts, C., Ross R., Roth G., & Smith B. (1999) *The Dance of Change*. New York, N.Y

Smith, P. (2001) The end of the beginning? *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*, 1 (1), 1-30.