

CROSS-CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN DECISION-MAKING STYLES OF THAI AND FOREIGN PRINCIPALS IN THAI AND INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS IN BANGKOK

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Abstract: Multiculturalism in schools in Thailand is a new and rapidly expanding phenomenon. Both foreign and Thai school administrators are challenged by leading and managing cultural and linguistic diversities of teachers and students. They need to be aware of and prepared for dealing with the cultural differences through understanding behavior in other cultures and basing their decisions not only upon their professional knowledge and experience but upon cultural competence as well. This study has attempted to reveal the relation between decision-making styles of Thai and foreign principals in Thai and international schools in Bangkok and their cultural characteristics. A sample of 25 Thai and 25 foreign (North American, British, Australian and New Zealand) principals and heads was selected from the total population of 127 Thai and international schools in Bangkok. A Likert-scale questionnaire was adopted as the instrument of the study which measured three groups of variables: demographic profile, cultural dimensions (adapted from Schwartz's (1995) value orientations and Trompenaars (1998) cultural dimensions) and decision-making styles (adapted from Vroom-Yetton (1973) decision-making styles model). The findings of the study will (1) increase awareness among present and future school administrators and teachers of the importance of cultural differences; (2) reveal the effects of national culture on decision-making styles of educational administrators; (3) reveal relationship between established cultural dimensions and decision-making styles of principals from different cultures; (4) provide the ground for and encourage further research on cultural differences in the field of educational administration.

Introduction

If one has ever lived, and especially worked abroad, one is familiar with the "strangeness" that can be sensed as soon as one finds oneself in a foreign country which can't be clearly defined, but brings one out of one's own comfort zones. When someone analyzes the other's behavior and thinks that it was misinterpreted and when one's decision is not carried out the way one expected, the mind begins to adapt and generate a list of strategies like "What to say to the waiter to obtain the food that one can actually eat" or "How to give instructions to my assistant". Slowly, a person becomes so good at it that one does not even notice how one's own mind is occupied with a cultural "translation".

Globalization resulted from technologies and communication development which opened many cultural borders and is not limited to the sphere of economics and politics, but is rapidly penetrating environmental, cultural and social levels of society. South Asian countries, such as China, Japan, Taiwan, Vietnam, Thailand and Hong Kong, have been striving to increase their standard of living and be competitive with other countries, and to achieve this, turned to other countries' experiences to improve their standards of education by implementing foreign curricula and employing foreign educators. This caused a tremendous influx of foreign educators to Asia, for which the host countries were not quite prepared because teachers and administrators recruited from abroad "imported" not only their knowledge, philosophy and methods of teaching but also their cultural traditions, values, norms and interpersonal skills to the workplace. As a result, misunderstanding, tensions and even conflicts, as well as other organizational pitfalls are common among foreign teachers and local administrators, or foreign administrators and local staffs. Generally, a culture-based tension seems to be inevitable, as traditions are so deeply rooted in the human subconscious, but is possible to smoothen if one understands that a person from another culture thinks in slightly different ways, and that the values that person's decisions and judgments are based on are also different.

Cultural factors have been long observed and studied in organizational context of business enterprises. Large and well-developed organizations recognized the importance of cultural competence and conduct staff training before overseas assignments. For instance, the US government provides their out of the country officers with intensive language courses which help them to adjust to a new environment easier. However, education is falling behind in acknowledging and tackling the cultural issues. Does it mean that the same rules of global exchange do not apply to the sphere of educational administration, or that the scale of cross-cultural problems in education has not yet reached a sufficient level of significance? The researcher believes that people's behavior from different cultures is anchored to different values and manifests itself in all spheres of human activity, especially in such extremely social units as schools. It means that cross-cultural differences in education and in educational administration, in particular, are inevitable, substantial, significant, and should not be underestimated or ignored.

Perhaps, cross-cultural differences are not the most crucial factor of organizational behavior, yet they are not the least important ones. Multiculturalism in students and staff in Thai schools is a new and rapidly expanding phenomenon. Consequently, both foreign and Thai school administrators are challenged by leading and managing cultural and linguistic diversity of teachers and students and need to be aware of the cultural differences in order to

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base their decisions not only upon their professional knowledge and experience but upon cultural competence as well.

This research is concerned with cross-cultural differences in principals' decision-making styles of Thai and foreign principals in Thai and international schools in Bangkok. There is a substantial body of research on decision making process, models and situational decision making. Decision making is believed to be the most important administrative function of school leaders, which "pervades the entire administrative organization" according to Simon (in Hoy and Miskel, 1991). Hoy and Miskel (1991) suggested that school is a decision-making structure, and Griffiths put forward the idea that administration *was* decision making (in Owens 2001). It is worth noting that the term "decision making style" has been used to describe decision models as well as cognitive and behavioral approaches of leaders towards making decisions, which confuses a reader. This study will consider decision making style as *a relatively consistent pattern of attitude and behavior with which a problem is approached*.

Situational theories of leadership by Tannenbaum and Schmidt (1957, 1973), Blake and Mouton (1964), Hersey and Blanchard (1969), House (1971), Vroom and Yetton (1973) explain the fact that decision making styles vary depending on age, sex, education, socioeconomic status, industry and nationality, and followers. Decision making style is not a completely rigid, permanent program. Although at the core it is relatively stable for a certain person, it is also adjustable. Decision making is a learned behavior, which can transform in response to psychological and social conditions and create various combinations with situational variables.

It was found that decision making style had a significant relationship with number of variables, such as values system, attitude towards risk, and organizational culture by Basi (1998); level of technology and organizational culture by Yousef (1998); country, sector of enterprise, type of industry, age of manager, field of education, region of childhood, social class, and management function by Ali (1989); and information and focus by Driver (1993). Bass (1979), Hofstede (1984) and Tayeb (1988) believe that cultural background influences decision styles. However, the above mentioned studies are bound to the fields of industrial and business management. Strikingly, there is no evidence of similar studies in educational administration and this research aims to fill this gap.

Decision-making is based on a leader's personal values which "serve as guides to action" as cited in Kouzes and Pozner (2002). On the other hand, values comprise the least explicit layer of national culture according to Schein (1992), Trompenaars (1998), and Triandis (1994), followed by more explicit layers, such as norms and products. Depending on the context, culture can be interpreted as an individual's manners and level of education, organizational culture at group level or national

culture in a global sense. Triandis (1994) differentiates between subjective and objective culture. Schein (1992) identifies three levels of culture, with artifacts at the surface, followed by espoused values and basic assumptions at the bottom. Trompenaars (1998) operates with similar concepts but joins them in circular layers from the most to the least explicit, with products in the outer layer, norms and values in the middle layer, and basic assumptions at the core. Hofstede (1984) argues that people carry many levels of culture at the same time, including national, ethnic, gender, generation, social class and organizational levels. Matsumoto (2000) found that culture relates to so many aspects of life, including material things, physical appearance, social and community structure, survival and reproduction, that it cannot be entirely and clearly separated into a distinct subject of study.

This study deals with culture at its national level, that is with differences between nations. Cultures are shared, learned, developed from common ways of dealing with social problems, and exist outside individuals' awareness. According to Schein (1992), culture is a dynamic process, group learning, that is passed over generations and goes on both at conscious and sub-conscious levels, with its largest share of abstract concepts, defining the core of cultural characteristics, outside of human awareness. It brings in stability, social order, and ensures a group's survival. According to Matsumoto (2000), the understanding of the word "culture" itself is also culture-specific because one's perceptions are unconsciously affected by one's culture. As Triandis (1997) puts it, "culture imposes a set of lenses for seeing the world".

National culture first drew attention of scholars in the later 20th century, but still remains one of the most ambiguous fields. Various frameworks of cultural dimensions were developed by Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961), Hall (1967) (in Samovar and Potter, 2001), Hofstede (1984, 2005), Trompenaars (1998), Triandis (1994), and Schwartz (1987, 1990, 1992, 1995). House (2001) and his team suggest that certain aspects of culture can be measured and compared. The underlying fundamental assumption the frameworks share is that all societies face universal problems but develop unique ways of solving them. The frameworks differ from each other in the way researchers identify and group those worldwide problems into measurable dimensions. According to Tayeb (1997), "cultures are normally different from one another in the *degree* to which they generally hold certain values and attitudes, and not in the *kind* of these values and attitudes."

Scientific literature neither completely confirms, nor rejects the influence of culture on leadership behavior in general and decision-making in particular. The interplay of culture and organizational behavior has been investigated through employee's work-related values (Hofstede 1984, 2005). Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998) also focus on cultural differences and how they affect business and management; Schwartz (1992) and

colleagues categorized ten types of motivational values which have been derived from the universal requirements of human existence; and Ronen and Shenkar (1985) identified eight country clusters based on patterns of similarity in employees' attitudes toward work and how well it met their needs. Cultures shape different values related to work, which comprise individual orientations, attitudes toward work and the organization, company loyalty, relationships with co-workers and others. Although countries were found to differ from each other along cultural dimensions, it is still unclear where the impact of organizational culture on work-related values ends and the influence of national culture begins (Tayeb, 1997).

In their study of management behavior of Vietnamese and Australian managers, Berrel, Wright and Van Hoa (1991) found that Australian managers' decision making was participatory-inclusive, while Vietnamese managers practiced participatory-exclusive style.

Swierczek (1991) points out that East Asian, South Asian and South East Asian leaders demonstrated different decision making styles. In East Asia (Japan, Korea, China) there was a split between participative and directive styles, depending on task complexity. In South Asia (India) the autocratic style was superior in all its aspects to performance. In South East region (ASEAN countries) leadership tends to the autocratic, reflecting the fact that managers favor conformity and orderliness.

Ali, *et al.* (1995) examined the decision styles of expatriate and indigenous managers in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and established that national managers preferred participative and pseudo-consultative styles, while expatriates demonstrated consultative style (in Yousef, 1998).

Petzall and Willis (1996) conducted a study among Australian and international managers based on Reddin's managerial styles classification. In relation to Thailand, they found that 75% of Thai respondents preferred a missionary style, which avoids conflict, is outwardly pleasant, seeks acceptance, but is passive and heavily over-rejected executive and developer styles. Conversely, Australian respondents scored the highest on executive style (95.1%) among all ethnic-cultural groups of the survey.

However, Pascale (1978), and Smith (1992) found substantial cultural similarities in decision making and other leadership behaviors. Negandhi (1983) claims that managerial behaviors are contingent to organizational size, location and market complexity to a much greater degree than to national culture, and sees danger in assuming that culture is the most important factor (in Ali, *et al.*, 1995).

Mitsumi (1985) suggests that such contradictory findings are due to the fact that "management involves general and universal functions that all effective leaders must carry out, but that the specific ways in which they are carried out may differ" (in Matsumoto, 2000). This research supports this point of view; what is more, is the

contention that leaders across various cultures and industries are challenged with similar organizational goals and types of decisions that need to be made to sustain successful functioning of the organization. It is the context of leader's decision making, conditioned by national culture, which causes the leaders different ways and specific means to reach similar ends.

The research on cultural contingency of school administration is extremely scarce. According to Dimmock (1998 in Foskett, 2003), education is an essentially human activity and is "culture bound". Hallinger (1996) proposed that national culture is the background of a school's institutional structure and culture, principal leadership, community and student outcomes, or goals of schooling. Hallinger and Kantamara examined the implementation of school-based management in Thailand and found that it was hindered by the cultural constraints, such as traditional deference (*greng jai*), that run counter to the underlying principals of the modern educational management system. (in Foskett and Lumby, 2003, p.12)

The researcher believes that culture has an implicit impact on leader decision making style and assumes that dimensions of national culture may have different degrees of effect on decision-making style, but they may not be the major factor.

The Purpose of Study and the Instrument

The researcher conducted this study with the following purposes: (1) to draw attention of present and future school administrators and teachers who work in a multinational environment to the importance of cultural differences; (2) to study the effects of culture in the sphere of education by learning whether decision-making styles of Thai school principals differ from the ones of their foreign colleagues; (3) to find a relationship between established cultural dimensions and decision-making styles of principals from different cultures; (4) to provide the ground for and encourage further research on this topic in the field of educational administration.

This study is concerned with cultural differences based on the adapted and combined cultural dimension models of Schwartz and Trompenaars which were derived from analyses of basic human values resulting from the set of individual biological needs, a need for coordinated social interaction, and group's requirement for survival and support. The following dimensions were measured: autonomy/embeddedness, hierarchy/egalitarianism, harmony/mastery, synchronic/sequential time orientation. Vroom and Yetton's model of decision making styles was used for describing decision making styles of the principals. This model essentially represents a continuum from the most to least autocratic decision making style. The two pairs of styles presented in the original model (autocratic I and autocratic II; consultative I and consultative II) are very close to each other if placed on such an imaginary continuum and therefore were combined and are referred to as autocratic and consultative style.

The population is Thai and foreign principals working in Thai and international schools in Bangkok. The sample comprised 25 Thai and 25 foreign (Anglo-Saxon origin: North American, British, Australian, New Zealand) principals from Thai and international elementary, middle and high schools in Bangkok. The instrument was a questionnaire which included demographic data items and Likert-scale questions to measure cultural dimensions and self-reported decision-making styles. The questionnaire was translated into Thai for Thai principals. The data was collected and analyzed using descriptive statistics for demographic data of the participants, computation of the means of the cultural dimensions and decision making styles, and inferential statistics to test the hypothesis concerning the correlation of independent of demographic and cultural variables and decision-making styles, and preferred decision-making styles of the compared groups of principals.

Outcomes

The research demonstrates the following outcomes: (1) foreign principals prefer a consultative decision-making style. Based on the findings of previous studies by Hofstede (1984, 2005) and Schwartz (1992), it is assumed that principals from North America, UK, Australia and New Zealand will score higher on such cultural dimensions as autonomy and egalitarianism, which imply smaller distance between leaders and followers, and therefore create more opportunities for participation of the latter in decision-making; (2) Thai principals prefer an authoritative style. Following the same studies, we presume that Thai principals will score higher on hierarchy and embeddedness, which mean that leaders retain authority over decision-making; (3) there is a significant relationship between hierarchy/egalitarianism and authoritative decision-making styles, for example, respondents who scored high on hierarchy also score high on authoritative style; (4) there is a significant relationship between autonomy/embeddedness and consultative decision-making style, for example, respondents who scored high on embeddedness also score high on authoritative style; (5) there is a relationship between such demographic factors as country of schooling and international exposure and decision-making styles which may be caused by acculturation.

This study attempted to approach cultural dimensions from the point of practical application of cultural dimensions in a concrete professional and cultural setting, that is, among educational administrators working in Thailand. It is the hope that the outcomes of the study shed some light on the significance of culture in the everyday work of contemporary school leaders, particularly, in such a fundamental leader's behavior as decision-making style.

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