The Practice of Co-commitment in Organisational Learning:

--- A Chinese interpretation

By

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper tries to contribute to the current debate on the nature of organisational learning and its susceptibility to cultural variations as a strategic approach for organisational revival or survival. Through introducing some literature on Chinese management thinking and practices, it explores alternative interpretations on organisational learning and the implications for management and organisation development. This paper contends that learning in and for business organisations can be interpreted better by focusing on individuals' co-commitment in a wider social and business context, as showcased increasingly by the dominant Chinese approach to business management and development.

Organisational learning (OL) is widely attributed for sustaining a firm's competitiveness in the management and organisation development studies (Easterby-Smith, 1997; Dixon, 1999; Senge *et al.*, 1999; Tsui-Auch, 2001; Ellis and Spielberg, 2003). Easterby-Smith and Lyles (2003) have proposed that contemporary discussion has been mostly influenced and shaped by two contrasting theoretical perspectives on learning. One places, at its centre, the *process* of learning within organisational contexts, and draws resources and references from theories of cognition development or meaning-based social construction theories (Elkjaer, 2003). The other perspective focuses more on the developments, dissemination and utilisation of knowledge *outcomes* as assets within business organisations (Nonoka and Takeuchi, 1995; Nonaka and Konno, 1998). Although individual learning has been examined for their cognitive contributions to organisational learning practices in general (Fiol and Lyles, 1985; Kim, 1993; Senge, 1997), Huysman and Elkjaer (2006) pointed out that these called process- or practice-based perspectives of OL should look beyond the joint efforts of individuals concerned, social cohesion and mutual identity visible within communities of practice, and adopt theories recognising that learning can be generated from tension and negotiation, competition and conflict, and as a result of individuals' varying "commitment to organisational actions, activities and values" (Wenger, 1998: 4).

In an empirical study of OL, employees in a Chinese case organisation were reportedly encouraged to "perceive the meaning of life from their own daily work" (Kolb and Jiang, 2005: 23), and view their learning within the organisation as essentially arising from four situational sources: learning from their own practice, learning by pooling together the wisdom and efforts of other people, learning through gradual improvement and learning through benchmarking. As such, organisational learning in Chinese business firms focuses not only on the work itself in business or technological terms, but on a "serious and dedicated attitude in developing (one's) competences" (*ibid,* p. 25). Kolb and Jiang (2005) explained that the goal of co-commitment (to business and individuals) in organisational learning, as illustrated in the experiences of these Chinese firms, stems from the heart of those individuals, not from any imposed task arising from external sources. This arguably leads to a mentality amongst Chinese business people that "the more you want, the more you will learn" (Kolb and Jiang, 2005: 26).

It is acknowledged that understanding and characterising practice of learning by and in Chinese organisations (contending aspects of OL) needs to consider the very nature of Chinese business systems, as well as certain dimensions of Chinese culture (Whitley, 1992; Hofstede and Bond, 1998; Boist and Child, 1999; Berthoin Antal and Wang, 2006). Writers such as Ong (1997), Keister (2002) and Wank (1999) start their research into organisational learning with groups of Chinese firms that are interrelated in one way or another inside China, or a Chinese business network whereby members are linked together at a global level. They represent a unique frontline for the discourse of OL and play a significant role in shaping the outcomes and processes of any organisation learning venture in a Chinese context.

Characterising OL in these firms or groups of firms operating inside China, Zhou *et al.* (1997) argue that they are mostly people-oriented, value-oriented, practice-oriented and whole-oriented. More specifically, it is suggested that OL in Chinese firms emphasises the preservation of natural and neutral harmony (within a team, group or network, by and large) and views individuals' learning efforts, within or between firms, as an integral part of developing a broader relationship network for both the organisations and individuals concerned. Chinese firms and individual employees have in this regard embraced "all-around learning at personal, organisational and societal levels" in the pursuit of "all-around development" (Kolb and Jiang, 2005:19). In essence, organisational learning in Chinese business communities is about weaving and weighing up a variety of relationships implicated in an individual's *guanxi* (Choi, 1994; Davies *et al*., 1995), and displaying the commitment to relevant activities and values aligned to each kind of relationship. In a Chinese business context, individuals are expected to be committed to all aspects of business life, rather than concentrating on one area, for example, securing business deals, at the expense of others. OL is accordingly conceived as developing individuals, with or without organisational support, to be excellent performers and sustain such excellence in the longer term for their respective business firms and communities. Therefore, OL in this context may be characterised as a self-driven process whereby various individuals who, out of their awareness of their preferred positioning in a business, co-commit to a variety of pragmatic interests within wider social or business networks. In this sense, organisational learning in Chinese firms follows a different route from that in the Western or Japanese organisations, whereby attention centres on the knowledge outcome or the process of learning by/amongst individuals in particular organisational contexts (Senge, 1990; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Schwandt and Marquardt, 2000).

It would be misleading though to suggest that the Chinese interpretation signals a dramatic shift away from the established management concepts and practices originating in the West. In effect, the arguments outlined in this paper chart the same water as explored by many Western scholars (for example, Gherardi and Nicolini, 2002; Huysman and Elkjaer, 2006; James and Denyer, 2006), but from a different angle, at a

time when the Chinese are showcasing a different view of management practices and system of business arrangement.

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