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OD: Dancing in the Global Context¹

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The purpose of this article is to challenge those of us who are Western OD consultants to increase our understanding of global cultural differences. We need to recognize that OD is a discipline rooted in Western values. As OD practitioners, we need to learn to dance with the differences between our Western values and the values in different global cultures in order to bring OD to the global marketplace. It is not always easy to know when or whether to alter the steps we have learned for the dance of OD. In what global contexts will participative interventions not be effective? In which contexts will the needs of individuals vs. the needs of organizations not be appropriate to discuss? In what contexts will transparency not be acceptable or expected? These values of participation, individuality, and transparency are central to Western-based OD (Fagenson-Elan, Ensher, et al., 2004, p. 461), but sometimes antithetical to the values of other cultures. Where are we willing, as individual OD practitioners, to learn new steps in our OD approach in order to be effective? In this article I will share an existing framework on national cultural differences that has been very

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helpful to me, and I will share experiences from my practice as examples of how this model can help OD practitioners dance with global cultures.

According to Fagenson-Eland and Ensher, OD is now practiced in every region of the world as the global expansion of many organizations has generated complex and rapid growth. Issues of global cultural differences are not new to the OD field; OD has its roots in diversity and globalization for more than 25 years. Given the complexity and rapid growth brought about by globalization, it has become even more important for us to examine our assumptions, frameworks, and biases. As an Organization Development consultant who has worked in many different organizational and country cultures, I have always known that I have to adjust my way of working to be effective in different cultures. Anyone who has worked in a new organizational culture knows that feeling of swimming in confusion about how to make meaning of the reactions and interactions around you. This challenge intensifies in global companies where the intersection of local cultures and company cultures creates added complexity for the consultant. A recent study by Fagenson-Eland, et al. provides a useful framework for understanding how practitioners can avoid some of this confusion and find a starting place for designing OD interventions in different national cultures. This study compares OD change interventions in 7 different countries using Hofstede's (1980) framework on dimensions of national cultural differences. It shows how differences in national cultures can predict which interventions will be effective.

Hofstede first developed his framework when his research on IBM employees in 40 different countries showed how differences in national cultures impact management practices. He and his son have continued to expand this research (Hofstede 1991; 2001; Hofstede and Hofstede 2005) and other researchers have replicated and expanded Hofstede's work and found support for his dimensions of national culture.ⁱ The four key dimensions of culture originally identified by Hofstede and replicated in other studies – power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity – were found by Fagenson-Elan, et al., (2004) to be good predictors of the usage of

different OD interventions in different national cultures. A fifth dimension of culture, long-term/short-term orientation, has been added by Hofstede and Bond (1988) and is included in this analysis. I will describe each dimension, the findings from the research on differences in use of OD interventions, as well as examples from my own practice about how these differences manifest.

Power Distance and OD Interventions

Hofstede (1980, 1991; Hofstede and Hofstede 2005) defined the Power Distance dimension as the extent to which individuals who are less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally. Some nations with high Power Distance are the Philippines, Russia, Venezuela, the People's Republic of China, India, and Malaysia. Examples of those with low Power Distance are New Zealand, the United States, Britain, and Costa Rica.

Fagenson-Elan, et al.(2004) note that OD interventions, such as team building, may be appropriate in both high and low Power Distance countries, but the approach to each must be quite different to be effective. When doing team building in China, a high power distance culture, I found that I needed to acknowledge to the workers of low status that asking for their participation was a change. I then needed to ask these workers to express their opinions first, before hearing from people in positions of higher power, and wait patiently (sometimes for a long time). The workers would wait to see if it was really all right to give their opinions, and would eventually give them, first with caution, and then with enthusiasm.

Power distance is also often a significant factor in virtual teams when Western managers want and need team members in different parts of the globe to contribute to decisions from their regional perspectives and experiences, but hear little or nothing from these employees. One thing that is going on in these situations is that in High Power Distance cultures, employees have deeply held

believes that the boss *should* have the answers and that it is not appropriate for them to give their opinions. Employees in these cultures may even feel it is deeply disrespectful to give their opinions. Getting higher participation from these team members requires a Western boss to understand this dynamic, acknowledge it, explain why she needs their input, and be patient while reassuring them that she will not feel disrespected. This change can be highly satisfying for all involved and essential for global teamwork, but can represent a significant change.

Bringing together teams of both low and high power cultures is now a constant challenge both inside the U.S. and outside. One way that I have found to help teams build a bridge across these differences is to have them identify, in culture-similar groups, their most important values regarding work and relationships. They present their most important values to each other, and develop team norms that incorporate as many of these values as possible. For example, a team with Thai, Chinese, European, and American members was able to incorporate the value of humility into the following ground rule:

“We value humility, therefore, even though we may think our idea is the best, we encourage other people to share their ideas and we are open to understand and incorporate them.”

This team was able to develop ground rules based on the values of respect, humility, freedom, loyalty, trust, integrity, friendship, honesty, gratefulness, and honor. In the process, they came to understand a great deal about their commonalities, as well as find creative ways to name and bridge their differences which enabled them to become a high performing team.

Uncertainty Avoidance and OD Interventions

This dimension of difference in national cultures was described by Hofstede (1980) as the extent to which organizational members do not tolerate unpredictability and ambiguity. Fagenson-Elan, et al. (2004) found that in countries high in Uncertainty Avoidance, such as Russia, France, and Japan, there is less likelihood that OD efforts that require long periods of ambiguity, such

as culture change efforts, will be implemented. The researchers note that high Uncertainty Avoidance countries, as in high Power Distance countries, hierarchy is respected and decision-making is expected to be top-down. Risk-taking behavior is discouraged and having clear and stable rules is important. (p. 437)

It is not that culture change interventions aren't possible in both high Power Distance and high Uncertainty Avoidance cultures. Culture change interventions can be successful, but must be approached with the recognition that resistance to change may be subtle but even more deeply entrenched than in other types of cultures. One colleagueⁱⁱ recently related an experience of being tasked by his US-based company to impose a new set of procedures developed by the US corporate office on an offshore manufacturing facility. This colleague knew from past experience that the leaders of the offshore site would pretend to agree to the change, but would not implement them because of, among other factors, their aversion to change and the risk they would perceive to be associated with deviating from proven ways of doing things. Instead of telling the offshore group, "you have to do this because corporate says so", this colleague gave the site a choice and supported them in exploring the benefits of the new process in their own way. In their own time, they agreed to the changes and implemented them. By respecting the values of this high Uncertainty Avoidance culture, he found a strategy that was successful in bringing about change.

Individualism/Collectivism and OD Interventions

Hofstede (1980; Hofstede and Hofstede 2005) described this dimension of national culture as the extent to which people believe they should be primarily responsible for themselves as opposed to the collective. Countries with high Individualism cultures, such as the U.S. and Britain, look to OD for interventions that will promote personal initiative, such as executive coaching and the development of performance appraisal and reward systems to promote individual productivity (Fagenson-Eland, et al., 2004). There has been an explosion of executive coaching services in these countries in recent years,ⁱⁱⁱ and this trend is likely to continue.

Countries with high Collectivism cultures value allegiance to one's own group or family rather than individual achievement. I had a chance to learn the hard way that a direct focus on career development is not very effective in high Collectivism culture, unless put in the context of the family or group, when I was hired to be an executive coach to a Thai man who was identified for the "fast track" by the American company for which he worked. After some initial relationship building with him, I began our coaching work the way I usually do by asking about his career goals. I hit an unfamiliar brick wall when he would not discuss his career goals with me, and realized I needed to suspend my cultural assumptions. When I explored his cultural and religious beliefs, he explained that he felt it would be disrespectful to his family to selfishly focus on career goals for himself. When I asked him what he thought his family would like, he was able to say that he thought his family would be proud if he was acknowledged by his company for his talents. By learning to dance with his cultural context, I was able to help him identify some ways to ensure that his talents were noticed in a U.S. company. He felt comfortable with this approach, as long as the focus was on having his talents acknowledged for his family's sake, and not for pursuing individual gain and material success.

Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) note that most of the world's cultures are collectivist, and individualist cultures are the exception (p. 79). In collectivist cultures, motivating and developing employees is best done in groups with a team-based focus and rewards, unlike in individualist cultures where individual coaching may be the intervention of choice. Interventions such as team building should also be approached differently in collectivist and individualist cultures. An example of a collectivist approach was a team building project that I conducted in Tanzania for the Catholic Church for groups of Western and Tanzanian nuns who were not working well together because of their cultural differences. The team building approach that I used was sub-group based. I did not ask individuals to express any opinions, other than to report out the work of their small groups as a representative. Grounding the work in their oral tradition, the African nuns developed dances and songs to describe their values and goals for serving their

communities, and the Western nuns did the same. Then they talked about what they had learned about each other. Mixed groups of African and Western nuns then developed dances and songs and other representations of shared visions about how they would work together in the future. Strong relationship bonds and shared visions were developed that greatly improved their collaborations after the workshops. In an Individualist culture, as in low Power Distance cultures, I would ask individuals to speak for themselves during team building, using individualist group work techniques such as round robins and straw polling. This is one example of the dance for practitioners where modification of OD practices that reflect the culture can make the difference in whether or not the intervention is successful.

Masculinity/Femininity and OD Interventions

The fourth dimension of national difference identified by Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) is the Masculinity/Femininity dimension. They explain that, “a society is called *masculine* when emotional gender roles are clearly distinct. Men are supposed to be tough and women are supposed to be tender. A society is called *feminine* when emotional gender roles overlap: both men and women are supposed to be modest, tender, and concerned with quality of life” (p. 120). This was the only one of the four original dimensions where Hofstede (1991) found a systematic difference in the answers between women and men (p. 82). While he agrees that gender is socially constructed, he notes that, “the effects of both nationality and gender cultures on our mental programming is largely unconscious...(and) we learn their consequences so early that we never knew anything else, and we are usually unaware of other possibilities” (p. 85).

Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) note that cultures high on Masculinity value overall achievement, rapid advancement, and high earnings. Work is central in these cultures and people live to work. Fagenson-Elan, et al., (2004) found that coaching and career development are OD interventions that work well in both high Masculinity and high Femininity cultures, but the focus is different. In high Femininity cultures, people work to live, rather than living to work.

Masculinity/Femininity cultures differ in their values around achievement versus work/life balance. People in Femininity cultures believe they can have successful careers and have a life. Examples of high Masculinity cultures are Italy, Japan, the United States, and Mexico. Sweden, Norway, and Thailand are examples of high Femininity cultures.

With the entry of large numbers of women into the workforce and into the ranks of management in the U.S. over the last 30 years, pressure has mounted to change organizational cultures in the U.S., which are traditionally high Masculinity cultures, to reflect higher Femininity values. OD consultants have been involved with major culture change interventions to help make organizations more inclusive of these, and other minority values. Various structural interventions have been introduced that reflect Femininity values, according to Hofstede's definition. Work/Life balance programs that allow for flexible work hours, job sharing, and family leave programs have been created, but have not been fully embraced.

I frequently hear a lament from women clients in Masculinity cultures about the lack of work/life balance in their organizations. I have had women clients from the US, Mexico, Columbia, and India complain bitterly about wanting both a career and a family, but being forced to choose one or the other by the policies and practices of their organizations. By contrast, these problems don't exist for my women clients in Sweden and Thailand. In a recent leadership workshop with young women MBA's in India, a medium-high Masculinity culture, I found myself challenged when the women pleaded with me for answers about how to have both careers and families when they were expected to work 60 hour weeks. I know that these values are deeply entrenched in Masculinity cultures, and that change will not occur from individual solutions. I encouraged these young women to join together in their organizations to create enough voice and presence to raise issues and propose solutions to create more family-friendly work environments. I also strongly encouraged them to support the advancement of women leaders who could leverage their positions to bring about change for other women. These changes, like all culture change efforts, require systemic

analysis, long term vision, and persistence (Litwin and O'Brien Hallstein 2007). Western OD practitioners can also help give voice to these issues where they have not been considered. As a Western woman, I always listen for all of the minority voices in an organization, including the women, and try to represent them to the parent company. I also know that because I am an American woman, I am often dismissed as “one of those American feminists” who are seen as “creating problems” when I report on the complaints of female employees. Nonetheless, I feel it is important to use my position as an external consultant to amplify the subordinated voices.

Long-Term/Short-Term Orientation and OD Interventions

The fifth dimension of national culture, identified by Hofstede and Bond (1988), is Long-Term versus Short-Term Orientation. Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) explain that the Long-Term Orientation (LTO), “stands for the fostering of virtues oriented toward future rewards – in particular, perseverance and thrift” (p. 210). Some other characteristics of LTO cultures are that work and family life are not separated, personal connections in business are essential, long term gains are the focus, the good of the whole is important (p. 225). The Short-Term Orientation (STO) is defined by Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) as, “the fostering of virtues related to the past and present” (p. 210). Some characteristics of STO cultures are that work and family life are separate, personal loyalties vary with business needs, short-term profits are the focus. The six strongest LTO cultures are identified by Hofstede as China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, Vietnam, and Korea (South). Brazil and India follow close behind. European countries fall in the mid range, and the U.S., Britain, and other Anglo countries score on the short-term side.

LTO cultures are ideally suited for culture change efforts because these interventions require patience and long periods of ambiguity. I remember a Chinese colleague explaining to me about the silliness of the U.S. position on Taiwan, relative to the view of the situation from China. He explained to me that there was only one China, and that Taiwan would eventually return to the fold.

His exact statement stays with me as an example of LTO thinking. He said, “it may take another 100 years for Taiwan to return, but in the context of our 5000 year history, 100 years is nothing. We can wait”. By contrast, I refer back to the culture change effort that I described as underway in the U.S. around the Masculinity/Femininity dimension. Because the U.S. is a STO culture, the persistence is lacking that is required for sustainable culture change.

Other Findings on OD Interventions

Of course, there are examples of OD interventions that do not fit neatly into Hofstede’s five dimensions. Yang (2002) notes that currently popular OD interventions such as 360 Feedback, or multi-rater feedback, is not used in countries such as Taiwan, where “saving face” is valued more highly than receiving feedback to correct performance. Burke (2002) also found that conflict resolution, as practiced in the U.S. with direct confrontation, does not translate to Japan, where third-party go-betweens are used to resolve conflicts. Chin (1997) reports on the effectiveness of using Appreciative Inquiry in Asian countries, such as China and Japan where, again, “saving face” is very important.

The study authors (Fagenson-Eland, Ensher et al. 2004) also found that interventions such as team building, which reflect the values of a high Masculinity culture, were not highly utilized in countries such as South Africa, Ireland, and New Zealand where protracted internal conflicts have existed between specific groups. Even though the study authors predicted that team building would be commonly used in these three countries with high Masculinity cultures, the entrenched conflicts made the use of team building unsafe, pointing out why the political context must be considered in designing interventions (p. 459).

The Role of Values for the OD Practitioner and the Client in the Global Context

As can be seen from the discussion of Hofstede's (1980; Hofstede and Hofstede 2005) dimensions of culture and the application of OD interventions, it is values and the way they are held that define culture, and differences in values that determine when and what type of OD intervention is or is not appropriate. In addition, the field of OD itself is values-based, and originated in the West. OD practitioners must continue to ask the question noted by Fagenson-Elan, et al. (2004) as posed by Harzing and Hofstede, "...how much do OD values reflect U.S. values... and how transcultural are they" (p. 461)? What is the dance we must do around values to leverage OD's strengths in the global context and help develop healthy and thriving organizations? As we have seen, people in high Power Distance cultures expect leaders to know what's best and do not expect openness or transparency, and people in high Uncertainty Avoidance cultures do not feel comfortable with confrontation and tension. Collectivist cultures focus on the needs of families and groups, not on the needs or rights of individuals. Cultural values need to be respected and acknowledged if OD is to add value in these cultures.

A strength of OD has always been that it is values-based. As practitioners we must be sensitive to the cultural context we are working in while grounding our work in values that can guide us to make honorable and ethical decisions that help create healthy organizations. As in any dance, there are many possible configurations of dancers. In this case, the partners are the OD practitioner and the national/organizational client cultures. You may each have learned different rhythms regarding values that have taught you different steps. It can be very helpful to partner with an in-country colleague who can be a cultural guide and can show you the steps and interpret the rhythms of the culture you are in. We must also each figure out how far we are willing to go in changing our own dance in order to be effective.

While there are many factors to consider, Hofstede's (1980; Hofstede and Hofstede 2005) framework can provide a useful starting point for cultural sensitivity in determining appropriate use of OD interventions in a global context. Key things to keep in mind are:

- Most of the world's cultures are Collectivist, not Individualist as in the U.S.
- Each practitioner needs to start with understanding of her own cultural beliefs and how they differ from those of other cultures.
- Inquire constantly about what things mean. Don't assume you understand what is going on when working in other cultures.
- Partner with an in-country colleague who can be a cultural guide.

OD continues to have a great deal to offer in the global context, and Western OD consultants can contribute to the global marketplace. The art, however, is in the dance.

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End Notes

ⁱ Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) are careful to note that, “strictly speaking, the concept of a common culture applies to societies, not to nations”, which are historically recent creations (p. 19). Yet they also note that “nation” is often the only feasible criterion for the purposes of classifying and comparing. He cautions that we maintain awareness of the differences that can exist within a national boundary. For example, India contains groups speaking fourteen major and three hundred minor languages as well as multiple religious and ethnic groups. Generalizations are, obviously, difficult to make, but have some utility at the same time if mindfully done.

ⁱⁱ Personal communication with David Green.

ⁱⁱⁱ Based on membership in the two largest professional coaching organizations, International Coaching Federation and Coachville, the number of executive coaches globally was well over 50,000 in 2005.