<u>**Towards redefining cross-cultural management as knowledge management**</u>

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Introduction

There is growing dissatisfaction with the concept of culture that has traditional pervaded management thinking and writing. But it is one thing to express reservations; and quite another to replace this concept of culture with an alternative approach which does not deny culture as an inalienable and highly variegated facet of human existence, but one which resonates more closely with the workings of the modern globalised – or at least globalised – economy with its emphases on such practices as organisational learning, knowledge sharing, networking and diversity management. This contribution will begin by citing various scholars' criticism of the pervading culture concept. It will then suggest that culture can be viewed as an object of organisational knowledge and therefore as a resource which can be managed: that is to say, harnessed in ways which add value to firms' international operations. This will prepare the ground for the key proposition: that culture and its management – the nominal province of cross-cultural management – can be productively seen *as a facet of knowledge management.*

Scholarly reservations about the 'traditional' culture concept

The culture concept, which is derived from 19th century cultural anthropology (Eagleton, 2000) and emphasises on culture-as-difference and culture-as-essence has been perpetuated by generations of management writers, including very influential ones such as Hofstede and Trompenaars (Holden, 2001). It is this concept of culture which has come under attack from a few management scholars, but it is still largely uncontestable to judge from (a) the uncritical way Hofstede's dimensions are served up in textbook after textbook; (b) the emphasis on more knowledge about culture to combat the assumed deleterious consequences of cultural difference (eg Ferraro, 1994; Harris and Moran, 1996; Mead, 1994; Dupriez and Solange, 2000; and (c) and the way in which culture is presented as a problem, which can variously ruin business relationships (eg Frost, 2000; Hall, 1995; Seelye and Seelye-James, 1995)

One scholar who has expressed unambiguous reservation is Schneider (1988), who notes:

'The construct of culture has caused much confusion. While there are multiple definitions, they tend to be vague and overly general. This confusion is added to by the multiple disciplines interested in this topic, which while increasing richness, does not necessarily bring clarity. Anthropologists, psychologists, and others bring with them their specific paradigms and research methodologies. This creates difficulties in reaching consensus on construct definitions as well as their measurement or operationalization' .

Bartholomew and Adler (1996), for their part, have noted that 'the academic community, by itself, has remained primarily dedicated to single culture and comparative research which, while

still necessary, is no longer sufficient - and therefore no longer as relevant – for the competitive environment of today's transnational firm.' Cavusgil and Das (1997), in a study of 'problems of comparative research design, sampling, instrumentation, and data collection and analysis', conclude that many problems, after thirty years of discussion, 'still remain largely intractable or often ignored'. For their part, scholars Osland and Bird (2000) 'feel increasingly frustrated with the accepted conceptualisations of culture', adding that one consequence is that 'business schools tend to teach culture in simple-minded terms, glossing over nuances and ignoring complexities.'

'The cross-cultural knowledge industry' (Segalla et al. 2000) is, it seems, under some pressure to reformulate its guiding notions. A starting point is the recognition by Bartholomew and Adler (1996) of a need for 'a conceptual shift: from a hierarchical perspective of cultural influence, compromise and adaptation, to one of collaborative cross-cultural learning.' These scholars have also stressed that cross-cultural management should ally itself with (a) technological innovation; (b) the management of transnational enterprises; and (c) strategic networks and social networks. Holden (2001a) has argued that cross-cultural management studies are seriously out of touch with the workings of the modern global economy with its emphasis on knowledge-sharing, organisational learning, and network development.

The idea of cross-cultural management as knowledge management

There is nothing profound in this proposition, but the failure to reposition culture as an aspect of organisational knowledge is an all too strong indicator of the reluctance to see culture in any terms other than cultural ones. The value of perceiving culture as knowledge is that it paves the way for appreciating facets of culture as an organisational resource which, if understood judiciously, can facilitate cross-cultural knowledge sharing, organisational learning on a multicultural team basis, and networking which may be seen as the activity guiding pathways to resources. Presenting culture in terms of this functions and practices ought not to sound earth-shaking, but it appears to be so. This becomes clear when we try to discover what the current cross-cultural literature has to say on these specific topics, which appears to be not much. A search of the ABI/Inform and MCB Emerald databases, which cover articles in 1,000 mainstream management and related journals from 1998 to the present and 130 MCB journals across a broad spectrum of management topics from 1967 to 2000 respectively, produced these results using cross-cultural and intercultural in the key words (table 1)

ABI/inform	Total	MBC Emerald	Total
Cross-/intercultural learning	1	Cross-/intercultural learning	0
Cross-/intercultural networking	0	Cross-/intercultural networking	0
Cross-/intercultural knowledge-sharing	0	Cross-/intercultural knowledge-sharing	0

Table 1 Selective literature search for items on cross-/intercultural learning, networking and knowledge-sharing (source: Holden, 2001a)

A major implication is that cross-cultural management as broadly defined as the management of cultural differences in the international (or global) marketplace is wholly inadequate and

outmoded. Accordingly I have advanced the following definition of cross-cultural management as more keeping with the modern business world:

The core task of cross-cultural management in a globalising business world is to facilitate and direct synergistic interaction and learning at interfaces, where knowledge, values and experience are transferred into multicultural domains of implementation (Holden, 2001a).

Clearly the repositioning of cross-cultural management as a form of knowledge presents serious intellectual challenges, not least because of the epistemological problems of defining knowledge which are as notorious as those inherent in defining culture. But one way of bypassing this challenge pragmatically is to confine the concept of knowledge to management knowledge, which may be regarded as knowledge from any source which a firm recognises and exploits as a resource in order to maintain a competitive advantage (or at least survive).

From these premises I have defined culture 'as varieties of common knowledge', in which the expression common knowledge may be seen as the knowledge that 'employees learn from doing the organisation's tasks … to differentiate it from book knowledge or from lists of regulations or databases of customer information' (Dixon, 2000). Knowledge management itself has been defined as 'the systematic and organised attempt to use knowledge within an organisation to improve performance' (KPMG, 1999), and for pragmatic reasons I agree with Burton-Jones that as an activity it facilitates three things: knowledge sharing, organisational learning and decision-making. The knowledge management literature is, however, not precise about how to handle cultural factors (Bresman et al., 1999; Holden, 2000b) and extensive studies of firms from a knowledge management perspective (Holden 2000a) suggest that the division of cultural knowledge into tacit and explicit forms is not satisfactory; that contextual knowledge from psychologically and cultural distant societies is especially difficul to capture 'mechanically' and then store in databases; and that the processes of knowledge transfer involve what I call interactive translation and require what I call participative competence.

Without further explanation I have defined these terms as follows. Participative competence refers to 'an adeptness in cross-cultural communication for engaging in discussions productively in, say, a group project even using a second language; to contribute equitably to the common task under discussion and to be able to share knowledge, communicate experience, and stimulate group learning' (Holden, 2000a). Interactive translation is 'a form of cross-cultural work, in which participants engage in (multicultural) groups in order to negotiate common meanings and common understandings in an international company whereby the participants also learn how to be able to work in those teams. Interactive translation calls for participative competence for facilitating and modulating the intra- and interorganisational transfer of knowledge, values and experience.'

Three ways of looking at culture as management knowledge

In order to understand culture as a knowledge resource which firms can use to competitive advantage, it is necessary to deconstruct culture into usable categories. For general purposes I have made a distinction between general cultural knowledge, specific cultural knowledge and cross-cultural know-how.

General cultural knowledge refers to freely available knowledge about cultures. This kind of knowledge is explicit and is already available in on-line or printed reference sources such the world-wide web, encyclopaedias, country surveys in newspapers and so forth. It can be formally classified. *Specific cultural knowledge* is that which is specific to a given source of common knowledge. It is subjective in the sense that it is selected for relevance to the firms' operations. Such knowledge can be tacit and explicit according to the convention, but perhaps more crucial is the degree of relevant pre-existing knowledge on the part of those who gather and interpret it. *Cross-cultural know-how* is a facet of a firm's core competence, whereby its knowledge-sharing and organisational learning contribute to international competitive advantage. Cross-cultural know-how is a store of learning for cross-cultural knowledge-sharing throughout companies' entire webs of relationships and is primarily internally created knowledge applied in cross-cultural interactions. It may be derivative of the two other kinds of cultural knowledge, but this kind of know-how is often subjective and experiential. This kind of know-how may have a very high tacit content. It is knowledge that is passed from head to head. It facilitates interaction, informs participative competence and stimulates cross-cultural collaborative learning.

Conclusion

A knowledge management perspective gives a new approach to cross-cultural managment. Under this perspective cross-cultural management is the art of appreciating the value and interrelationship between these three kinds of cultural knowledge and knowing how to apply each form of knowledge, singly or in combination, with other organisational resources in order to enhance organisational learning, facilitate knowledge sharing and guide networking all as international activities. Implications of this concept are that it contests HRM as the 'rightful' home of cross-cultural management, creates meaningful categories for knowledge managers, and presents an approach to culture that is not snared by 19th century anthropological traditions nor shackled by Hofstedian dimensions, which were constructed for a by-gone corporate era.

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