

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF BUSINESS & MANAGEMENT

Cross Cultural Management Challenges in Hong Kong: In the Eyes of North American Expatriates

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Abstract:

In recent years, globalization has enhanced the interaction of global relationships in the aspect of culture, people and economic activity. With few restrictions on company entering and quitting the market, Hong Kong's economy is extremely open, thus attracting multinational companies to set up overseas locations here. One of the challenges that companies face in overseas location is the difficulties in cross-cultural management. In 2011, there were 55,236 Whites, of which 40.5% were managers and administrators and 46.3% were professionals or associate professionals in Hong Kong. Obviously, the Whites play an important role in management positions in Hong Kong and this paper aims to study the cross-cultural management difficulties that the North Americans faced in Hong Kong. A total of 98 North American executives were interviewed through in-depth interviews. The results showed that there are cultural differences between Hong Kong and North America in five dimensions. The results also indicated that the North Americans are more willing to adapt to the local culture when they face cross-cultural management challenges.

Keywords: cross cultural management, cultural differences, cultural adaption, expatriate, relationship and "guanxi", work life balance

1. Introduction

The meaning of globalization, a common concept of social sciences, is diverse. McKenna (2000) defines it as the phenomenon that is "driven by many factors which are related to mobility of people, products and ideas as well as trading environment." It always relates to the aspect of economics that reduces the barriers, such as tariff and quota, in international trade. Globalization reduces the companies' cost of doing business in the international market and encourages them to set up overseas locations. Thus, globalization increases the interaction of global relationships in the aspect of culture, people and economic activity.

One of the challenges that companies face in overseas location is difficulties in cross-cultural management. Culture affects individual's way of living, habits, language, value and belief. Managerial values are always influenced by business, culture and environment (Kelley & Worthley, 1981; Webber, 1969). The previous studies found that the value of managers given by a country influences how they make business decisions (England & Lee, 1974; Weinshall & Tawara, 1978). Therefore, cultural differences can lead to great impact on managers' choices in decision making.

With few restrictions on company entering and quitting the market, Hong Kong's economy is extremely open and cultural exchange with other nations takes place continuously. In 2006, there were 451,183 people of ethnic minorities in Hong Kong (Table 1). Asians (other than Chinese) accounted for the largest proportion with a total of 365,611 (81.03%). The second largest category is the Whites, including the British, other Europeans (excluding British), Americans, Canadians, Australians and New Zealanders. This segment included 55,236 individuals (12.24%). The remaining are Mixed (29,001 people) and others (1,335 people). Among the Whites, 40.5% of individuals were managers and administrators while 46.3% were professionals and associate professionals. Compared with the whole ethnic minorities with only 7.4% of individuals are managers and administrators and 9.2% are professionals and associate professionals (Table 2), the Whites play an important role in the management positions in Hong Kong.

Population of Ethnic Minorities in Hong Kong (2011)	
Asian (other than Chinese)	365,611
White	55,236
Mixed	29,001
Others	1,335
Total	451,183

Table 1: Population of Ethnic Minorities in Hong Kong (2011)

Sources: Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department, Thematic Report: Ethnic Minorities

Proportion of Working Population of Ethnic Minorities by Occupation (%)		
	White	Total
Managers and administrators	40.5	7.4
Professionals/Associate professionals	46.3	9.2
Clerks/Service workers and shop sales workers	8.5	5.9
Craft and related workers, plant and machine operators and assemblers	2.5	1.6
Elementary occupations	2.2	75.8
Skilled agricultural and fishery workers; and occupations not classifiable	0.1	0.1

Table 2: Proportion of Working Population of Ethnic Minorities by Occupation (2011)

Sources: Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department, Thematic Report: Ethnic Minorities.

Understanding the cultural differences play a significant role in the multinational companies. Previous studies pay little attention to cross-cultural challenges that the North Americans (Americans and Canadians) faced in Hong Kong as well as their ways of resolving those difficulties. Effort should be spent in this area and this study attempts to fill the research gap.

2. Review of Literature

Browarysand Price (2011) defined culture as "something all human learn in one way or another, like a code of attitudes, norms and values, a way of thinking that is learnt within a social environment". According to Rosaldo (1989), culture and individual's social situation as well as the historical background influence one's thoughts and feelings. Atkinson (1999) mentioned that "Individuals do not exist separately from their social worlds". Hofstede (1980) emphasized that cultural differences exist across different countries which would affect the decision making of individuals. In other words, cultural values play an important role in shaping practices and affecting efficiency in organizations. Thus, multinational companies should pay attention to cultural influences.

Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory (1980) is a widely accepted theory that measures the cultural differences between countries. The theory measured cultural differences in terms of five dimensions, including 1) Power Distance Index, 2) Individualism, 3) Masculinity, 4) Uncertainty Avoidance Index, and 5) Long-Term Orientation. The five dimensions are discussed as below:

Power Distance Index is the extent that individuals accept and expect power is distributed unequally, that is social inequality. Individualism represents the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups. In the countries with high individualism, the ties between individuals are loose and everyone only care about their personal interest. In the countries with low individualism, or greater collectivism, people are willing to integrate into cohesive groups with unquestioning loyalty. Masculinity refers to the distribution of roles between the genders; it shows the difference between men's values and women's values. The assertive pole is called 'masculine' and the modest, caring pole is 'feminine'. Uncertainty Avoidance Index represents the tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity. Uncertainty avoiding cultures try to minimize the possibility of unstructured situations by using strict rules and security measures. The opposite is uncertainty accepting culture. Individuals in these countries are more tolerant of different opinions and try to have fewer regulations. Long-Term Orientation is in contrast to short-term orientation. Values associated with Long Term Orientation emphasizing on persistence while Short Term Orientation on quick results.

Few previous studies focus on the cross-culture management challenges that North American manager faced in Hong Kong.

In the study of Selmer (1997), the difference of leadership behavior between expatriate and Hong Kong managers is explored. 240 supervisors that experienced both local bosses and expatriate bosses were taken as the sample. Quantitative method was employed as the approach in this study. 12 subscales, such as tolerance of uncertainty, tolerance of freedom and superior orientation etc., were included in the questionnaire. The results indicate that bosses from the United States are most different from Hong Kong bosses; nine of twelve subscales show a statistically significant difference. In other words, the leadership style of the North American managers is different from that of Hong Kong managers.

In the study of Ralston, Gustafson, Cheung, and Terpstra (1993), the convergence/ divergence of managerial values between Western Countries and Eastern Countries were studied. 62 managers from the United States, 182 from Hong Kong and 82 from China were interviewed in surveys. The questionnaire included four Western-developed measures and four Eastern-developed measures. The result is consistent with the previous studies, that is managerial values are different between the Hong Kong and the United States managers.

Tsui's (1996) study compares the ethical reasoning level between the auditors in the United States and Hong Kong. 50 experienced auditors from four of the Big Six Certified Public Accountant firms were selected as the samples. Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory was used in analyzing the data. The result shows that there are cross-cultural differences in ethical reasoning. The American auditors have higher ethical standard than those in Hong Kong.

The above studies indicate that the cultural differences between the North Americans and the Hong Kong Chinese affect management decisions. Cross-cultural management challenges are potential issues.

An open Hong Kong economy enables common cultural exchange with other nations and shapes the unique culture in Hong Kong. According to previous studies, the leadership styles and work values in Hong Kong are totally different from not only the Western concepts but also from those of many Asian countries (Hofstede, 1980; Selmer & de Leon, 1993).

Confucianism is the most important ideology in China. It had once provided the Chinese with great stability and resilience. Although it was abolished in China, it still has a significant influence on the characters of the Chinese. According to Redding (1990), Confucianism remains a major force in Hong Kong's culture and values. Bond and King (1985) argues that the Hong Kong people cognitively and emotionally separate modernization from Westernization. Thus, the culture of Hong Kong is special in that it is affected by both the Western ideas and the traditional Confucianism.

According to Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov (2010), the dimensions of national cultures of Hong Kong, the United States and Canada are as shown in table 3. Obviously, the culture is totally different among Hong Kong, the United States and Canada. Hong Kong has a relative high-power distance, is long-term oriented and is high in masculinity, but low in individualism and uncertainty avoidance.

Country	Power Distance	Individualism	Masculinity	Uncertainty Avoidance	Long-Term Orientation
Hong Kong	68	25	57	29	61
The United States	40	91	62	46	26
Canada	39	80	52	48	36

Table 3: Hofstede Dimensions of National Cultures: Hong Kong, USA and Canada
Source: <https://geert-hofstede.com/hong-kong.html> (2017)

3. Methodology

Qualitative research is based on the critical theories and constructivism by using the methods of interview, focus groups and observations. It is a research strategy emphasizing words rather than quantifying the collection and analysis of data. It tends to use an inductive approach to determine universal explanations of phenomena as well as to extend or develop theories (Bryman, 2004). It aims at understanding human behavior and the meaning of people. As this study attempts to understand the view of the North Americans on cross-cultural challenges in Hong Kong, qualitative approach in the form of in-depth interview is employed as the method in this research.

Utilizing 98 senior students enrolled in an undergraduate Cross-Cultural Management course, each student was asked to submit one real-life cross-cultural management issues by interviewing one North American executive. There was no limitation as to industry choice and open-ended questions were used in the interview. For each interview, students would ask the interviewee to describe the cultural differences between Hong Kong and North America as well as the cross-cultural management challenges the individual faced in Hong Kong.

The interviewers received some training in recording the responses, and then each of them completed a "case study" detailing the interviewees' responses. Although there are limitations to use this technique, such as inexperience in interviewing and misunderstanding, this research created a unique body of "thick data", containing 98 "cases" elicited from 71 Americans (72%) and 27 Canadians (28%). The cases contain 12 females (12%) and 86 males (88%), aged from 27 to 55, with three of them from the manufacturing sector while the remaining 95 were in service industries.

4. Findings

The findings of cultural differences between Hong Kong and North America are shown in table 3. The expatriates pointed out 390 cultural differences between Hong Kong and North America, clustered in five categories: 1) Communication and decision making, 2) Work-life balance, 3) Hierarchy, 4) Relationship and 5) Attitude towards jobs.

The majority of the respondents agreed that there were cultural differences in the aspect of communication and decision making (43.07%). They described Hong Kong people as "fear to express their comments in the public", "always use indirect approach to communicate", "fear to make decision and just follow the instruction of seniors", "unwilling to change" and "emphasize on groups and think more in terms of 'we'".

The second largest difference is in "work-life balance" (21.80%). The interviewees thought that Hong Kong people "spend much time on working", "the working hours are very long", "lack of leisure and rest time" and "overtime work is common and represent hard working".

The third category is hierarchy (15.38%), the North Americans believe that Hong Kong people "emphasize on hierarchy", "subordinates respect boss with fear and keep distance with bosses" and "management like to make decisions by themselves".

Other than the cultural differences above, the North Americans pointed out that there were differences in the aspect of "relationship". Hong Kong people were described as "care about others and focus more on people", "Guanxi may affect promotion" and "would not point out others' fault in the public to save their face".

The last one is "attitude towards jobs" (5.13%). Hong Kong people were described as "just do what the job descriptions listed", "focus on quantity and simply ignored the quality of products" and "view job as a mission and only work for salary".

Cultural Differences Between Hong Kong and North America	
Factors	Frequency
Communication and decision making	168 (43.07%)
Work-life balance	85 (21.80%)
Hierarchy	60 (15.38%)
Relationship	57 (14.62%)
Attitude towards jobs	20 (5.13%)
Total	390

Table 4: Cultural Differences between Hong Kong and North America

According to the findings, 151 cross-cultural management challenges are pointed out by the interviewees. These expatriates adopted three types of method, 1) adapt to Hong Kong culture, 2) change the culture and 3) avoid facing the problem, to handle those challenges. The most popular mode was adapting to the culture (69.54%). In some situations, they chose to change the culture (28.48%). Only in 1.98% of the situations, the individuals chose to avoid facing them.

Solving Method of Cross-Cultural Challenges	
Adapt to the culture	105 (69.54%)
Change the culture	43 (28.48%)
Avoid facing the problem	3 (1.98%)
Total	151

Table 5: Solving Method of Cross-Cultural Challenges

5. Implications

5.1. Communication and Decision Making

Western and Eastern cultures view silence in communication differently. In Western culture, 'talking' is viewed positively and is generally rewarded (Kim, 1999). Individuals tend to rely on 'talking' as a tool for the discovery and expression of truth. They view silence as negative and interpreted it as a "lack of interest, a sign of rejection, anxiety or a lack of verbal skills" (Giles, Coupland & Wiemann, 1992). Giles et al. (1992) also indicates that Americans believe 'talking' is an important and enjoyable activity and to fill silence when they feel stressful. Thus, keeping silence is not common in Western countries.

In contrast, frequency of 'talking' in Eastern cultures is lower than that in Western cultures (Kim, 1999). Traditionally, Eastern cultures emphasize that harmony in social group is more important than the expression of individuals' thoughts and feelings (Barnlund, 1989). Arguing is perceived as an unpleasant activity that leads to conflicts. Thus, people seem to avoid verbal communication (Kim, 1999) and keep on saying "yes" in any situation.

As the Western and Eastern cultures hold a totally different view on communication, the North Americans describe Hong Kong people who "fear to express their comments in the public", "always use indirect approach to communicate". In addition, the Hong Kong people emphasize on harmony, so individuals "fear to make decision" and "emphasize on groups". The North American executives therefore can try to motivate their subordinates to voice their ideas.

5.2. Work-life balance

Overtime is common in Hong Kong. According to the statistics of Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department, overtime work and the percentage of such work that is unpaid have been most prevalent among managers and administrators, professionals and associate professionals. The average hours of overtime work per day in 2008 was 3.8 and 94% of overtime work is unpaid. The trend was more or less maintained (Table 6). Moreover, in a survey by UBS, a banking group in Switzerland, Hong Kong employees have clocked up 50.1 hours each week, the highest among 71 cities. The hours a Hong Kong employee typically works are 38 percent more than the global average of 36 hours and 23 minutes. (Li, 2016) In the United States, the working population worked an average of 38.6 hours per week (Doyle, 2016). The working hours are substantially higher in Hong Kong than in North America.

	Average Hours of Overtime Work/Day				% of Overtime Work, Unpaid			
	2001 Jul-Sept	2003 Jul-Sept	2006 Apr-Jun	2008 Jan-Jun	2001 Jul-Sept	2003 Jul-Sept	2006 Apr-Jun	2008 Jan-Jun
Managers and administrators, professional and associate professionals	4.0	4.5	4.6	3.8	89.2	95.2	94.2	94.0
Clerks	1.7	2.4	2.3	1.8	71.4	85.0	75.1	73.5
Service workers and shop sales workers	0.6	0.8	1	0.8	58.5	76.6	69.7	63.6
Craft and related workers	1.2	1.1	1.6	1	36.6	44.4	48.6	35.6
Plant and machine operators and assemblers	1.8	2.3	2.3	2.3	26.9	21.1	23.2	23.7
Elementary occupations	0.4	0.5	0.7	0.6	38.1	47.4	32.1	38.5
Overall	1.9	2.3	2.6	0.3	75.7	82.9	81.6	100

Table 6: Average Hours of Overtime Work/Day in Hong Kong

Sources: Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department, Special Topic Reports No. 32, 37, 46 and 50: Social Data Collected via the General Household Survey

Wharton and Blair-Loy (2002, 2006) study the long working hours among professionals in the same company in Hong Kong, the United States, and London. The results show that professionals in Hong Kong experienced greater work-home interference, and expressed stronger desires for reducing working hours when compared with Western workers.

Although the working hours have been increasing in Hong Kong, the study shows that people are unwilling to have long working hours and want to improve the work-life balance. The reason that causes poor work-life balance in Hong Kong maybe people are affected by the values of Wu Lun (five cardinal relations), individuals respect their boss and just follow their instructions. Other than cultural factors, people may also be affected by the economic situation. Comparing with North America, Hong Kong has a poor social welfare system. In other words, the cost of losing a job is very high. Thus, the individuals spend more time on jobs to prevent the loss of their jobs.

5.3. Hierarchy

As mentioned above, Confucianism still plays an important role in shaping the culture and values of Hong Kong (Redding, 1990). It places great emphasis on the values of respect for elders. Five Cardinal Relations (Wu Lun), that is, the relationships between father and son, elder brother and younger brother, husband and wife, and friend and friend, formulate the vertical relation between managements and subordinates. Individuals are sensitive to their hierarchical positions and always display, enhance, and protect them.

As Hong Kong people are influenced by this ideology, people tend to emphasize on the hierarchy. Thus, the North Americans believe cultural difference in this aspect is particularly prevalent. This is consistent with Hofstede's (1980) study that Chinese culture is hierarchical and recognizes power inequality within a social system, whereas the American culture is egalitarian and values social equality.

5.4. Relationship

"Guanxi" means relationship and it refers to the concept of establishing connections with others. As Confucianism emphasizes on harmony, build up good relationship with others is important. In addition, Chinese has the concept of "insiders" and "outsiders". In other words, building a "guanxi" network can enhance personal influence. Thus, the Hong Kong people tend to save others' "faces" and use "guanxi" to affect promotion.

5.5. Cultural Adaption

Adaption refers to a process wherein parts of a system move in a direction that increases the congruence or fit (Lin, 2004). Cultural adaption is interpreted as a response in inter-cultural interaction and is conceptualized as "a change in behavior to be more typical of behavior in another's national culture" (Thomas & Ravlin, 1995). It has been commonly suggested as a strategy for improving the process and outcomes of business negotiations across cultures (Black & Mendenhall, 1991; Hall & Hall, 1987; Kale & Barnes, 1992). As the North Americans seem to use cultural adaption to solve the cross-cultural management challenges, the result is consistent with the previous research.

Cross-cultural adaption does not necessarily involve a change of a party's fundamental cultural assumptions, but only requires a level of adjustment necessary for smooth interaction. The highest level of cultural adaption is to integrate elements of the other culture into one's own (Lin, 2004). Expatriates can use such method to overcome the cross-cultural management challenges.

6. Conclusions

Past studies do not focus on the overall view of cross culture differences and management challenges that the North American executives face in Hong Kong. This paper attempts to build a more comprehensive understanding of this issue.

The result shows that North American executives think that there are cultural differences between the Hong Kong people and the North Americans especially in four categories, including 1) Communication and decision making, 2) Work-life balance, 3) Hierarchy, and 4) Relationship. This research finds that the North Americans perceive Hong Kong people as “always use indirect approach to communicate”, “fear to make decision and just follow the instruction of seniors”, “emphasize on groups and think more in terms of ‘we’”, “emphasize on hierarchy”, “the working hours are very long” and “would not point out others’ fault in the public to save their faces”. Generally, the results are consistent with the study of Hofstede of Hong Kong's performance index on power distance and individualism, but this research further indicates that the North Americans perceive the Hong Kong people to have higher uncertainty avoidance than Hofstede's index since the interviewees think that Hong Kong people fear to voice out their ideas and resist learning new things.

This study also indicates that North Americans are more willing to adapt to local culture in order to solve the cross-cultural management challenges rather than change the local culture or avoid facing challenges. This result is consistent with the findings of previous research.

7. Limitations and Further Studies

There are two potential limitations in this study. Firstly, the sample size of only 98 data points in this study cannot be taken as representative of all North America executives in Hong Kong. Extending the sample population in the future study will increase the degree of representation of the data.

Secondly, in the methodology employed in this paper, data collection is performed by students who may be inexperienced in interviews could cause misunderstanding in interpreting the meaning of interviewees. In addition, “one-shot” interviews utilized in this research are not sufficient to produce full and rich descriptions for the findings (Polkinghorne, 2005).

As the Whites include people other than the North Americans, cross-cultural difficulties that the Europeans face in Hong Kong are a possible topic for further studies. Besides, Asians are the largest category of Hong Kong's ethnic minorities, so further effort could be deployed in this area.

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