

**THE THIRD CULTURE:  
ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING  
IN INTERNATIONAL JOINT  
VENTURES**

**Mike Berrell & Marianne Gloet**

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**Abstract**

Studies in organisational learning generally accept the existence of two 'cultures' within an organisation - the 'systems' culture (the first culture) and the 'organisational' culture (the second culture). However, cultural influences of a social anthropological nature in international joint ventures (JVs) have a significant but often underrated impact on organisational learning and can be thought of as the 'third culture'. Using three generic stages in the organisational learning process, viz. knowledge acquisition, knowledge dissemination, and knowledge utilisation, the influence of the third culture is discussed using examples drawn from collaboration in Malaysia with the management structure comprising Australians and Malays. The paper argues at a conceptual level that while all JVs engage in knowledge acquisition, the dissemination and subsequent utilisation of that knowledge is frequently affected by the third culture. Unless knowledge about the third culture becomes an integral component of organisational learning in JVs, the potential for competitive advantage derived from an offshore operation may be significantly reduced. Furthermore, knowledge of the third culture can be developed as a core competency of JVs.

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## THE THIRD CULTURE: ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING IN INTERNATIONAL JOINT VENTURES

### INTRODUCTION

The role of knowledge and learning and the impact of these factors on organisations have emerged as areas of study in their own right in the 1990s. The literature in the field clearly indicates that organisations *per se* can be analysed as learning systems. However, the capacity of an organisation to learn by acquiring and using knowledge is a much underrated asset (cf. Kim, 1993; Senge *et al.*, 1994). In this context, the capability of an organisation to harness particular combinations of knowledge and learning can be a distinct source of competitive advantage (Nevis, DiBella and Gould, 1997). Studies in the field of organisational learning are varied and range from the links between articulated and tacit knowledge (Hedlund, 1994) to learning processes in knowledge-intensive firms (Starbuck, 1992). Nevertheless, despite a variety of contexts and content, all implicitly accept that two 'cultures' exist within an organisation (Nevis, DiBella and Gould, 1997). These can be referred to as the 'systems' culture (the first culture) and the 'organisational' or 'work' culture (the second culture).

Given the wide-ranging nature of studies in organisational learning, Nevis, DiBella and Gould (1997) construct a model that includes three generic stages in the organisational learning process, *viz.* knowledge acquisition, knowledge sharing or dissemination, and knowledge utilisation. They argue that comprehensive understandings of an organisation's assumptions about the purpose and nature of learning are prerequisites to success. Nevis, DiBella and Gould (1997) also interpret all organisations as learning systems that have in-built mechanisms within the systems culture, which facilitate both formal and informal learning. Furthermore, over time all learning is appropriated by this organisational culture. In turn the organisation influences how learning occurs and which knowledge is valued.

The significance of organisational learning is evident in Australian perspectives on human resource management (cf. Kramer, McGraw and Schuler, 1997). Studies in the acquisition, dissemination, and utilisation of knowledge in cross-cultural or cross-national settings are now more frequent in the literature on organisational learning. Such studies are potential resources in strategic planning for Australian companies. However, the 1990s witnessed a significant growth in offshore operations by Australian companies, and by the mid-1990s, nearly 70% of Australia's leading companies had major investments offshore. Within this group, significant percentages of total income were being generated overseas. For instance, this level of income included NewsCorp (85%), Foster's Brewing (53%), STR Nylex (45%) and NBA (44%) (in Kramer, McGraw and Schuler, 1997).

Despite the present trend toward globalisation, prior to the mid-1980s, the general management literature used the word 'culture' to describe either dominant patterns of organisational behaviour established over time or organisational systems and structures in a normative sense. As a consequence, the early incursions into organisational learning included references to 'culture' in their scheme of things. However, what was invariably being referred to was the organisational or systems culture. References to culture in its social anthropological sense were generally absent. In this light, the prevailing issue for Australian companies as they move into culturally diverse markets, is what is termed the 'third culture' (cf. Berrell and Gloet, 1999). This is the realm of cross-cultural issues that transcend both the first and second cultures. Since the late 1980s, the literature on international management in particular has begun taking stock of the third culture (cf. Adler, 1997).

Against the background of globalisation, the pivotal role of organisational learning in an international joint venture (JV) is reinforced in several studies (Hamel, 1991; Inkpen and Crossan, 1995; Inkpen and Beamish, 1997; Parkhe, 1991). It is the contention here that the third culture and understandings of this culture derived from social anthropology extend a salient influence on the development of organisational learning in JVs, which typically involve a cross-cultural management structure. Moreover, the third culture is more likely to affect the development of organisational learning processes and mechanisms in a JV over time than either the systems culture or the organisational culture. This is because the product of

cultural diversity operates at the deep level of organisational life. Influences of this type constitute the unconscious life of an organisation. Whereas the embedded nature of the third culture challenges researchers in the field of international management (cf. Adler, 1997; Hofstede, 1994; Mead, 1994), management studies generally can benefit from more sustained and interdisciplinary research into organisational learning in cross-cultural settings.

In cross-cultural JVs, the partners or collaborators are generally receptive to the idea of establishing and nurturing organisational learning and knowledge management processes that will benefit the organisation. Notwithstanding this enthusiasm, the third culture intrudes into the process of organisational learning at all levels and in quite subtle ways. For Nevis, DiBella and Gould (1997), 'true' knowledge is an all-encompassing idea because it transcends mere information to include semantics and tacit knowledge. While this assessment is valid, the mission excludes explication of the third culture. To this can be added that significant differences between the worldviews of the collaborators in a JV create a cultural dissonance and subsequently, a degree of ambiguity in the management of the organisation. Furthermore, managers frequently underestimate the inhibiting influence of this sometimes-implicit discord. Constructed on axial principles, the third culture subtly rationalises discourses on management, knowledge, power, control, and learning within an organisation. It lets managers know the *way things are*.

### THE THIRD CULTURE AND ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING

A recent study of Australian and Malay collaborators in a cooperative venture in Malaysia (Berrell and Gloet, 1999) highlights the effects of the third culture on managerial behaviour and the implications of this influence on organisational learning. Following Hofstede (1994), the study noted the consequence for Malay managers of accepting the unequal distribution of power was tolerance of paternalistic management styles and structures that lionised senior managers. Australian managers, however, less readily accepted unequal distributions of power and overbearing management styles. This group valued competition, flexible organisational structures, individual achievement, individual rights and universalistic social philosophies. In contrast, the Malays placed more worth on cooperation, formal structures, collective action, and particularistic social philosophies. Australian managers minimised uncertainty through strategic planning whereas Malay managers were less inclined to 'beat the future' (Mead, 1994) although they exhibited behaviours that suggested 'what was different was dangerous' (Hofstede, 1994). However, the antecedents of this behaviour resulted more from the influence of collective action, the strong need to avoid conflict, and the belief in predetermined nature of events.

The observed patterns of behaviour also conformed to the attributes generally exhibited by low-context or high-context cultures (Hall, 1976). The homogeneous nature of the high-context Malay cultural group produced more fixed behaviours among managers. A strong respect for positions of legitimate authority also underpinned the management behaviour of Malays. They felt comfortable with insiders and hierarchical management structures that allowed them to deal with people on an individual basis. Permanent affiliations within the management group and implicit exchanges between its members characterised the management behaviour of the Malays. In contrast, low-context Australian managers appeared to be more outgoing and less discriminating between insiders and outsiders due to the socially mobile character of a heterogeneous group. Australian managers relied on explicit outcomes during exchanges and favoured devolved authority structures, which allowed them to deal more with structures than individuals. Active support for participatory decision making structures, the shared values of the organisation and tolerance for dissenting views was noted among Australian managers.

Several basic cultural orientations provided additional means to compare and contrast managerial behaviours within the organisation (Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck, 1961). These orientations manifested themselves in macro-level questions concerning how people thought about their relationship to the environment and to one another. Other orientations influenced the manner in which people executed their work activities and the temporal focus of these activities. Further differences emerged in orientations toward the use of organisational space, physical resources, the flow of time, and causal relationships (cf. Adler, 1997; Hickson and Pugh, 1995). For example, philosophical perspectives founded on the implicit need to dominate, manage, transform, and restructure the environment drove Australian managers. In

contrast, the approach of the Malays toward work sought to actualise harmonious and well-balanced relationships with their environment. The interpersonal relationships of Australians displayed an assertively individual orientation while Malays displayed strong group affiliations where robust exchanges and argument were negative attributes. Conceptual understandings about temporal matters also subtly influenced organisational behaviour. Australian managers were oriented to a future shaped by planning and control in the present. Therefore, potential outcomes could be appraised in terms of future pay-off. This contrasted with the orientation of the Malays to the past. This led them to evaluate knowledge in terms of its fit with tradition and justify its utilisation based on previous experience. From this philosophical standpoint, innovations without exemplars were not options for Malay managers. A public (Malay) versus private (Australian) orientation influenced the allocation and use of physical space and material resources within the organisation. In terms of orientations toward causality, Malays allowed a sequence of events to run their course while Australians intervened in events in order to 'make things happen'. For Australian managers, explicit links existed between causes and effects and critical inquiry accompanied problem solving. In contrast, the Malays, inclined to deterministic explanations, tended to be less systematic in exploring links between causes and effects. From the standpoint of a broad interpretation of cosmology, Malays conceived of time as infinite and intermittent while Australians saw time as finite and chronological.

Given the cultural orientations that the partners bring to a JV, it is not difficult to see the ways in which the third culture has the potential to short circuit organisational learning. Further, in the context of the three generic stages in the organisational learning process, both knowledge dissemination and knowledge utilisation will be more affected by the third culture than knowledge acquisition. As JVs are learning systems, all will engage in the knowledge acquisition process. The local partner may contribute significant amounts of local knowledge, physical resources including regional expertise, whereas the overseas partner's contributions might be related to finance, marketing, technology, and expertise in project management. While this acquisition stage is complex, it is in many ways less problematic than the subsequent stages because information amassed by knowledge acquisition cannot be turned into competitive advantage unless it is disseminated and subsequently utilised for the benefit of the organisation.

Herein lies the litmus test for offshore JVs with regard to organisational learning because aspects of the third culture will subtly override the first and second cultures. These latter cultures are, of course, the repositories for the processes that facilitate organisational learning. However, to complicate the matter further, both knowledge dissemination and utilisation are more prone to decision-making by management with regard to the form these processes should take. This influence is accentuated in offshore JVs where the external social and cultural milieu clearly penetrates the organisational structure (Meyer and Rowan, 1991). Consequently, the third culture stands to play an even greater role in influencing management decision-making as well as in creating the dissonance that actually leads to reduced action in the areas of knowledge dissemination and knowledge utilisation.

The widely differing cultural orientations above also manifest themselves in approaches to organisational learning at all levels within the organisation. In this sense, the third culture determines the content and gives flavour to the process of knowledge dissemination and utilisation. In the Malaysian collaboration, for example, Australian managers tended to be more assertive, proactive, and questioning in receiving and processing information compared to Malay managers who were non-assertive and more accepting of knowledge in similar circumstances. Whereas Australian managers were active discovery learners, the Malay managers were comfortable with passive styles that included rote learning and time-honoured knowledge. Furthermore, the role of status among Malay managers meant that seniority and not necessarily capability impelled organisational learning. For Australian managers, the effective use of knowledge regardless of its source benefited the organisation. Malay managers, however, were only comfortable with knowledge passed down by local experts, respected peers, and senior managers. In this process, the approach of the different cultural groups within the collaboration placed inordinate amounts of pressure on organisational learning. The role of status constantly intruded in to the process. In addition, the different perceptions of managers about causal relationships led to delays in policy development and implementation on numerous occasions. When breaks occur in the pattern of organisational learning, the relationship between the partners comes under enormous pressure and one partner will seek out

alternatives. For example, a lack of the dissemination of knowledge in a JV over time about in-country government contacts might trigger one partner's search to acquire the select knowledge that was previously the domain of the other partner. In such instances, the acquisition of select knowledge of this type results in a significant shift in the bargaining power of the parties. This change contributes to instability and dysfunction within a JV (Inkpen and Beamish, 1997). It is important to note, however, that under such circumstances, one partner's acquisition of greater knowledge is not the result of either knowledge sharing or knowledge utilisation.

To achieve a sustained source of competitive advantage, particularly in today's dynamic global setting, JVs must be able to extract value from intangible and esoteric areas such as organisational learning. Such intangible assets are qualitative in nature and as such, are difficult to observe, let alone quantify. Nevertheless, research increasingly points to their significance. While JVs will continue to function despite the existence of dysfunction in the knowledge sharing and utilisation processes, if it goes unchecked, the overall capability of the organisation to adapt and grow through learning will be impaired. This outcome endangers the stability of the JV, and in the longer term, it will negate any competitive advantage derived for the offshore nature of the venture. While it is not possible to change or eliminate the impact of third culture, it is possible to promote a critical mode of inquiry with regard to its existence. In the longer term, reflective thinking results in greater understandings between stakeholders as to the pervasiveness of culture and its enduring effects, particularly at the deeper level.

Drawing from our experience in Malaysia and elsewhere in the Asian region, several factors have the potential to reduce the inhibiting effects of the third culture on organisational learning. There is no doubt that senior managers have the capacity to influence the processes of knowledge sharing and utilisation and direct these resources to gain a competitive advantage. However, research suggests that inflexible managers who are unwilling to take on board new practices limit the effectiveness of organisational learning (Inkpen and Crossan, 1995). Addressing this shortfall among managers becomes more intricate with the influence of the third culture. Non-managerial employees too are engaged in the learning process, and as such, this group has the potential for being either facilitators or inhibitors of organisational learning. This knowledge of the third culture, however, can be developed into a core competency and the proactive recruitment of senior managers who have lived for extended periods in the other partner's culture increases the likelihood that inter-cultural learning will become a priority within a JV. This is a giant step forward considering most cross-cultural training by JVs is conducted away from the 'other' culture, and furthermore, such programs are generally one-off exercises at predeparture briefings (Mead, 1994). Training of this type must occur on a permanent basis with the full commitment of senior managers in terms of philosophy and finances in order to succeed (Berrell, Wright and Hoa, 1999). Furthermore, knowledge about the third culture should be constantly renewed. As suggested above, it is simply not possible to simulate third culture influences or 'train' a person to live as an expatriate. A one-off predeparture exercise in cross-cultural training for one partner in isolation is almost a pointless exercise (cf. Wright and Newton, 1998).

It is also essential to match the dissemination of knowledge about organisational matters as well as the third culture with the preferred learning styles of the target group. Using exemplars for all knowledge dissemination and utilisation is one way to ensure that knowledge does not become extant within a JV. Using the case of Malay managers (Berrell and Gloet, 1999), unless knowledge is articulated from within the cultural context, it is not valued regardless of its value to the JV as a whole. Furthermore, to underestimate or miscalculate the significant role of status in knowledge dissemination is to tread on dangerous ground. For example, mistaking the person who appears to be in charge for the actual decision-maker during negotiations has dire consequences for a JV as well as its organisational learning processes.

Given the particularistic and high-context flavour of many JVs in the Asian region, the use of more direct forms of personal communication can be a significant advantage. It is also important to recognise that timelines for organisational learning programs do not hold the same significance for managers in some high-context cultures as they do for Australians. Further, organisational learning must be placed in the context of the benefits accruing from cooperative and shared rewards, and not on individual outcomes and rewards.

## CONCLUSION

The third culture has the capacity to exert greater influence on organisational learning than either the first (organisational) or second (systems) culture within a JV. However, if learning is appropriated by the organisational culture, understandings of an organisation's assumptions about knowledge and learning must be tempered with knowledge of the third culture. To do otherwise is to diminish the potential of knowledge dissemination and utilisation. Therefore, competitive advantage is more likely to be gained in JVs that actively allow third culture knowledge to penetrate all aspects of organisational learning.

In conclusion, while this paper presents only a broad and preliminary treatment of the issue at a conceptual level, a thorough awareness of the third culture in a JV that concentrates its resources on factors that facilitate learning will result in greater levels of productivity in offshore operations.

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