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# The university as a learning organization: A case study of teamwork and team learning in a private university in Taiwan

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**Abstract:** *This study aims to investigate if the concept of the learning organization which is based on Western corporate culture will work in academe in Taiwan. Building a learning organization is argued in recent years to be crucial for organizations to adapt and lead change in this new era of rapid change. As organizational culture and change are complex issues, especially if the change proposed by the learning organization is to take place in an Oriental culture which is different from that of the West, this study attempts to examine change in the context of a Taiwanese university's adoption of teamwork and team learning, which has never been examined before. The theoretical framework used in the study includes Schein (1996)'s clinical approach to organizations, learning, and culture, and a model of effective teamwork and team learning developed by this researcher derived from literature on effective teamwork and team learning. The research applies qualitative methodology of pre-test and post-test of the problem through intensive detailed interviews of four teams of the university, including the President's executive team, and data collected are based on intensive in-depth observations of real phenomena, as well as the effects of organizational learning and interventions big or small. Findings provide evidence of a positive relationship between culture and learning, and changes brought about through team learning. However, there is still concern that academics are hard to re-educate because they are assumed to have their own subjective logic and personal interests based upon their previous studies and firmly held beliefs.*

**Keywords:** *organizational culture and learning, the learning organization, teamwork and team learning*

## Introduction: the problem

The last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the new 21<sup>st</sup> century have witnessed radical changes in politics, economics, society and warfare, and these have resulted in new social patterns and needs which emphasise the overwhelming power of technology. Like the business sector, where competition is so intense that one-third of the top 500 industries listed by Fortune Magazine in 1970 had vanished by 1983 (Senge 1992 in Starkey 1996), rapid changes have had a profound impact on education. In higher education, the crisis is seen in many parts of the world. The stability of many institutions is being threatened. For high-cost institutions without a distinctive image, the issue is not stability, but survival, and all higher education institutions, including the elite, are challenged to respond to increasing competition, changing demand, and declining public confidence (The Innovation Network, 1992).

Beyond the 1990s and in the new era of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, higher education's challenges to do more and better with less resources are indicated in a synthesis report on trends and developments in higher education by UNESCO (2003).

In response to the changes, it is strongly recommended that universities should set goals for substantial and lasting change and quality management processes which rely on team input to understand and respond to customer expectations (London, 1995; Baughman & Hubbard, 2001).

This study asserts that teamwork and team learning in the Taiwanese situation could lead to the implementation of beneficial educational change. The rationale for this assertion is based upon four elements: the trend toward greater participation by all stakeholders in decision making; the fact that the implementation of successful educational change requires collaboration among the stakeholders; the research findings which suggest that collaboration, collegiality, and commitment to participative management are important indicators of the effectiveness of educational institutions, and the emergent theory of the learning organization, especially that of team learning by dialogue would develop a collective intelligence which is assumed to be greater than the sum of the individual members.

Although the trends of change are similar, Western assumptions of teamwork and team learning might be challenged by Eastern management due to the social and cultural differences. This study was conducted to determine whether the type of teamwork and team learning advocated in Western countries would work in an Eastern country such as Taiwan. The study involved a detailed examination of teamwork and team learning in a single private Christian university in Taiwan (referred as PCU), which has a student enrollment of around 14,000 and 600 faculty members with a mission on the spirit of Christian love for the world.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The Learning Organization espoused by Senge (1992) distinguishes itself from the traditional authoritarian and controlling organization for the learning of the five disciplines, which help build the culture of learning and competency for organizations striving for excellence.

The learning organization viewpoint focuses heavily on the work team and goals of learning; how to perform better as a team, including how to learn better as a team and how to learn how they learn. The perspective of the learning organization requires more attention to the collective part of the equation. Sugarman (1997) maintains that the added value that the learning organization provides is two-fold: it lies in the heightened role of learning in work and in the enhancement of the collective effectiveness of teams. These two together make “organizational learning” and this is the mother of all core competencies in today’s world.

In the context of this study, the literature suggests that teamwork and team learning must often be supported by major changes in culture, structure and systems for success. It identifies the positive relationship between organisational factors and effective teamwork. These factors are identified as cultural leadership, a shared vision, resources for teamwork, and rewards for teamwork. Effective teamwork exists in an organisational culture that believes people are the most important asset in it. The culture of an organisation is concerned with what people believe, how they feel, and the shared norms and cultural messages that emerge from the groups and communities with which they identify (Sergiovanni, 1990).

Based on the above concepts of the learning organization and organizational learning, as well as the research findings on team work and team learning, a conceptual framework of effective team work and team learning is developed as a framework for examining characteristics of effective teamwork, team learning, and the processes of team building in this study (fig.1).

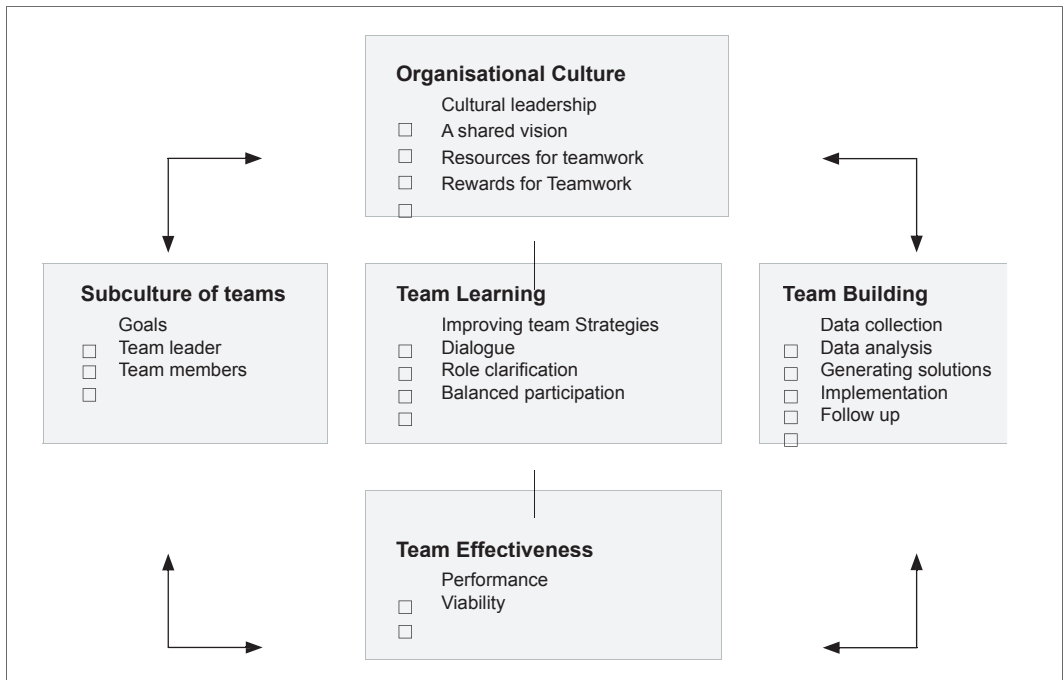


Figure 1: Effective Teamwork and Team Learning

## Research methods

As the purpose of this study was to investigate whether Western conceptions of teamwork and team learning were appropriate in a specific Taiwanese setting and whether collaboration through teamwork and team learning could help in the implementation of educational changes in a private university in Taiwan, the inquiry was focused on human perceptions and behaviours which required data to provide descriptions and interpretations of the phenomena studied.

Moreover, the study placed a focus on finding evidence for the management trend towards teamwork as proposed in the literature, especially in the context of another culture that had not been examined before. The study was complicated and involved two levels of investigation:

1. An investigation of the existing perceptions of human relationships, beliefs and behaviours in groups or teams within the university ; and
2. An investigation of any perceived changes in human relationships and beliefs after efforts to improve teamwork to effect change were carried out in the university.

Based on the nature of the research, this study adopted qualitative methodologies which employed in-depth observation and interviews, generated rich descriptions of the beliefs and norms of the participants, and provided findings that could be used to improve an understanding of change and change implementation. Numerous writers and educational researchers who have focused on change and training and development issues support these assertions for the use of such methodologies (e.g. Best & Kahn, 1989; Cziko, 1989; Owens, 1991).

## Sampling

This private university (PCU) was selected on the basis of purposive sampling. Teams for study were selected on criteria based on variety, i.e. nature, goals, membership of the team, and their needs and interest in the study. Five teams were first identified on the basis of consultation and recommendation on campus. Eventually four of these teams were selected to participate including the President's executive team, the personnel team, the engineering integrated team, and the gospel team. Each team consisted of seven to ten members. The prospective participants were informed of the purpose of the research and a timetable was organised for the researcher to interview them.

## Triangulation

As the aim of the research was to call for rich descriptive data from an honest account of the informants' views of reality so that the findings would be reliable, the study adopted triangulation techniques, which included observation, interviews, and document analysis, as the major data-gathering techniques. The findings of the study were triangulated through three separate but integrated phases as described below.

### The three phases of the study

To answer question of whether Western conceptions of teamwork and team learning were appropriate in an Eastern setting, data were collected in three distinct but integrated phases as follows:

#### Phase 1 Preworkshop interviews

The aim of this phase of the study was to collect and analyse data on participants' perceptions of current staff involvement in the work of the university, especially in decision making and teamwork, including their perceptions of the organisational culture and sub-culture of the teams.

#### Phase 2 Organizational learning - Workshop sessions and initial team meetings

In phase 2, the researcher and her supervisor collected observational data from workshops and initial team meetings. Firstly, the introductory workshop on 'universities as learning organisations' was conducted with all participants. After the concepts of learning organisations were presented, the participants were asked to write down their perceptions of their ideal 'learning organisation', their existing organisation, and a comparison between the two. Their written responses were anonymous so they were able to make their assertions without any restraint.

Special workshops to address specific issues were organised for those teams which requested them. The researcher and her supervisor attended the initial team meetings and discussed their observations with the team leaders where appropriate. Once again observations were guided by the findings from the literature on effective teamwork. After observing each team meeting, the researcher and her supervisor compared notes on their observations and completed a integrated summary.

#### Phase 3 Follow-up interviews

The participating teams were given a period of three months to complete their selected tasks. The purpose of the study was to investigate if changes occurred among teams resulting in improved teamwork and team learning. The data gathering instrument for this phase was a structured interview. Data analysis of this phase was based on the three processes suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994:139): building the display, entering the data, and drawing conclusions. Firstly, outcomes were sorted according to the themes of the questions, such as the respondents' perception of teamwork, the development program, the team process, and the leadership style. Secondly, the researcher entered summarising phrases. Those

that received a strong emphasis by the respondents, or that were confirmed by the respondents were underlined. Thirdly, by comparing and contrasting intended objectives, conclusions on the aspects of change, including the negative ones, were drawn.

### Special considerations

Special considerations as follows are taken care to ensure the research findings are valid, reliable, or credible to the people studied and to the readers:

#### Internal credibility

There is fit between the design of the research and the standards of a good qualitative research suggested by Borg & Gall (1989) as follows:

- Research involved a holistic inquiry carried out in a natural setting
- Humans were the primary data-gathering instruments
- Emphasis was on qualitative methods which consider multiple realities
- Purposive sampling was used rather than random sampling
- Inductive data analysis was used to develop understandings and draw generalisations
- The theory developed was grounded in the data
- The design emerged as the research progresses
- The subject played a role in interpreting outcomes
- Intuitive insights were utilised
- Emphasis was on social process and the meanings that participants attribute to social situations.

#### The use of an audit trail

Throughout the study, the researcher maintained an audit trail to verify the study's consistency and credibility as mentioned above. The documents contained in the audit trail of the study are similar to those Owens (1991:299) suggests:

- raw notes from interviews and observations;
- edited summary notes of interviews and observations;
- records of meetings about the research;
- all documents used as data sources;
- guidelines and "rules" used for content analysis;
- decision rules by which data were categorised;
- interview guidelines.

#### Triangulation

This study used multiple data-gathering techniques including semi-structured and structured interviews, observations, and document analysis to ensure the accuracy of information could be checked and different actors' perceptions of given events could be tested.

#### Ensuring effective and intensive interviews and establishing rapport and gaining trust

In order to elicit honest and complete data on members' perceptions of and the processes of teamwork, the researcher took care to first establish trust and good rapport in the first phase of the semi-structured interviews and then follow this through the whole process.

Maximising the understanding of the situation and phenomenon under study

As a native of Taiwan, the researcher had the advantage of knowing the language and culture of the respondents. Thus understanding was maximised between the researcher and the respondents.

Proper presentation and proper use of audio recording to collect data

The interviews were mainly recorded on a miniature recorder to ensure that the atmosphere of the interviews was friendly and non-threatening.

Team observation was intensive and double checked

Separate observations by the researcher and her supervisor provided sophisticated data, which were able to be quantified and interpreted with less risk of bias than might occur with a single observer.

Referential adequacy material was created and maintained

The researcher created and maintained a file of the site which included handbooks, copies of memos, audio tapes, raw notes from the interviews and observations to preserve the sensitivity of the context over time.

External credibility

The model of effective teamwork developed by the researcher in this study has important implications for research and practice.

Firstly, the framework and findings suggest that in order to account for the experiences and outcomes associated with teamwork and team learning, researchers should consider the social context of system development, the intentions and actions of key players, and the implementation process used by the organisation. Secondly, the study could inform and improve educational practices. The findings suggest that practitioners will be better able to experience effective teamwork, if they understand that such implementations involve a process of team learning over time. In this regard, the findings on group processes and team learning in the study provide implications for future study.

Ethical considerations

The researcher followed guidelines set by the Council of the American Anthropological Association prior to entering the site, during data collection and analysis, and after the research. The ethical codes maintained by the researcher in this study were made through careful notification and explanation of the study to the respondent, and through careful preparation of questions and choice of research methods.

Limitations

The study has two limitations. Firstly, data translated from Chinese to English was not able to convey the complete meaning of the respondents. This is due to the fact that a direct and literal translation does not provide an understanding of the nuances which can be conveyed through an understanding of the cultural setting and the society under investigation. Secondly, despite the forty-plus committees which currently operate in the university, only four teams participated in this study. There was a limit to the representativeness of four teams selected to participate.

Research findings

The study establishes a positive relationship between organizational learning and change, which implies

that through organizational learning, the concept of team learning can work in academe in Taiwan. However, there is also concern that academics are hard to re-educate and team learning, which needs resources such as time to dialogue, has its constraint. The findings of the study are elaborated as follows:

#### Changes brought about through team learning

It was found in the first interview that the four participating teams had few development programs on teamwork. Immediately after the first round of interviews and as a result of the workshops, the four teams adopted two aspects of teamwork processes in their team meetings: team learning and team goal setting/problem solving.

In the second round of interviews, as a result of improved teamwork, changes were found among the four teams. All of them had made improvements in meeting efficiency, changed the leadership style which resulted in greater empowerment of members, shared goals, and had more open communication. In addition, two of the teams achieved the goals they had set themselves as scheduled. Of the other two teams: one increased the level of participation by team members, while the other expressed an increased interest in teamwork.

#### Advantages and disadvantages of teamwork

Positive changes of the participating teams demonstrated the advantages of teamwork and team learning. Participants believed that teamwork was a means of disseminating knowledge and assisting the learning of team members. They also considered that teamwork helped to achieve quality education as demanded by the intention of the education changes that had been introduced by the Ministry of Education. It was found that most heads of the academic departments involved in the teamwork project had introduced greater levels of teamwork in their administration processes, in departmental research projects, in developing the curriculum, in the organisation of student activities, and in generating a more proactive approach to committee work. Team learning, which is a feature of effective teamwork, was identified as a benefit for individuals who may learn from others and thus improve themselves and avoid repeating the mistakes of others.

The interviewees express their concern on team work and team learning as follows: Firstly, teamwork was not considered suitable for all tasks, especially those concerned with sensitive issues such as salaries or assessment. Secondly, teamwork was not accepted by those who adopt the philosophy which assumes that people are lazy at work and they would not change much even if they were given development programs on teamwork. Thirdly, it was questioned whether team learning was possible among academics, who, because of their status and the respect shown to them by others, and a philosophy that reinforced the correctness of their personal views and interests. Such a group was seen as one which it would be difficult to bring about changed attitudes towards the benefits of teamwork and team learning.

Other disadvantages of teamwork that were identified through the interviews are very much the same as those in the literature. It was thought that teamwork would bring an added burden to everyone because of the extra resources needed such as time, money, and development and training courses which would be necessary. In addition, it was considered that the concept of teamwork was in not of the traditional Taiwanese value system and its work culture based upon a rigid hierarchical structure. It was considered to be a fad, and a way of disguising authority by people who espouse democracy but really believe that autocracy is a more efficient and effective way of managing.

The study found that the main barriers to teamwork and team learning in Taiwan are: the mental models of some of the staff of PCU, the influence of the traditional Oriental culture of hierarchy, the university's mission of love, and the constrained resources of the university, especially time.

Some participants believed that teamwork, a Western system of management, can be transplanted into Taiwan society. However, they believed that many people have not had sufficient experience in managing and practising democracy, and many are still used to being told to do things, instead of using their independent thought. This suggests the need for considerable training and development efforts to help the people develop the skills necessary for effective participation through teamwork.

The university's mission of love is an asset to teamwork, but also a liability. Although the university is proud to have a mission of love that makes it unique and successful, it is also this mission of love that produces unclear roles and responsibilities among the members of some committees. This can result as leadership problems. Without a clear leader who acts as the manager of meaning, such as the Gospel team, the team has been struggling hard to set a common goal. When people are indulged in love while ignoring the true meaning of it, unclear boundaries are created which inevitably impede teamwork.

Scarce resources, especially lack of time, restrained teamwork and team learning. A common phenomenon in the university is that everyone is very much occupied by his or her routine work, as well as attending meetings of various committees. It is hard for members to find a common time to meet, and some meetings are held at lunch time during which members eat lunch boxes while discussing things together. They do not think it to be a healthy way to have lunch, but otherwise, they cannot find a more suitable time for all team members. Time constraints are a big problem both to teamwork and team learning. Although members agree that they benefited from the workshops on team learning and the Learning Organisation, they state that it is hard for them to find time for development programs to improve their team learning and team working skills.

### **Recommendations for future study**

There are several limitations of the study. Firstly, the sample of four teams at a single university is small. Therefore, the findings should be verified and elaborated by further studies. Secondly, the time of the research is short for a study on changes which may take a longer time to occur and to measure.

To verify this study it is suggested that future studies should be focused on the following areas:

The research found that group processes in Taiwan are different from those in the West. Unlike the Western social system which embodies the ideals of individual freedom and autonomy, the Eastern social network is characterised by group cohesion, group structure, and group identity. Collectivism is seen as the foundation of Taiwanese traditional values and the culture is built on a hierarchical authority that demands obedience from people. Group theory is based on harmony achieved by means of virtues such as loyalty, obedience and love, instead of on group processes such as lateral communication, dialogue, conflict resolution, participative decision making and problem solving as found in teamwork and team learning.

The cultural influences as indicated above were evident in PCU although participation was promoted throughout the campus. Some participants questioned whether teamwork can work as there was contradiction between the two concepts of participation versus hierarchical authority.

It was argued that the cultural value of hierarchy is not likely to be removed from Taiwanese society within a short time. Therefore, in order to validate the idea that teamwork can work in Taiwan, it is recommended that more studies should be focused on investigating how the current group processes in Taiwan can be developed into team processes.

Although data on the teamwork process identified a positive impact of team learning, there was some concern that academics are hard to re-educate because they are assumed to have their own subjective logic and personal interests based upon their previous studies and firmly held beliefs.

By examining the features of effective teamwork and the changes brought about through teamwork in this case study it is argued that teamwork, a Western system of management, can work in Taiwan with an Eastern culture.

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