

Power Distance and Uncertainty Avoidance on Change Strategies: A Small-Scale Interview Study in Chinese Higher Education Context

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Abstract

With the implementation of the continuous educational reform since 2001 and the educational decentralization, Chinese schools have been empowered with more autonomy in leading and managing changes in schools. However, the literature in this area remains sparse since the previously inaccessible literature on changes in Chinese higher education. The purpose of this study is to explore how culture issues affect the change strategies in learning organisations by employed extensive literature review with qualitative interviews of four deans who had responded the implementation of change in schools. The findings mainly revealed that cultural factors are highly important for change process, which have either positive or negative influences on the functioning of implementation.

Keywords

Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, Change Strategies

1. Introduction

“China has undergone continuous reforms over the past two decades, which is also reflected in the education system” (Tang, Lu, & Hallinger, 2014: p. 655). Chinese higher education is multifaceted and mainly driven by government policies, economic needs, globalization and technology. These changes aim to modernize the educational system, enhance its global competitiveness, and meet the diverse needs of the society. Designing and employing effective change strategies are pivotal parts of for organisational development, since organisational change, especially in higher education context, is “necessary and inevitable for their continued viability and growth” (Wentworth, Behson, & Kelly, 2020: p. 511).

Kotter's change model is regarded as "a simple and straightforward framework" which preferred and implemented by many practitioners (Kang et al., 2022: p. 271). This change model, which defines eight stages of change adaptation, namely, establishing a sense of urgency, creating the guiding coalition, developing a vision and strategy, communicating the change vision, empowering employees for broad-based action, generating short-term wins, consolidating gains and producing more change, and anchoring new approaches in the culture (Kotter, 1996; Kotter & Cohen, 2002). As Appelbaum, Habashy, Malo, and Shafiq (2012) (p. 776) stated, Kotter's model was "an excellent starting point" for people to implement change within organisations, since adopting the model could improve "the chances of success". Being regarded as "a key reference in the field of change management" (Appelbaum et al., 2012), Kotter's model is widely used across many contexts, including higher education (Wentworth, Behson, & Kelly, 2020: p. 511). Particularly, Kang, Chen, Svihla, Gallup, Ferris and Danye (2022) (p. 271) mentioned that "Kotter's change model has been used to successfully guide or account for change in higher education settings". Through synthesizing the literature review on effective change strategies and cultural factors, this article will explore the cultural dimensions, namely, powder distance and uncertainty avoidance, on change strategies by conducting an empirical small-scale case study in Chinese higher educational context.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Establishing a Sense of Urgency

Kotter (1996) (p. 35) put forward that establishing a sense of urgency was vital since it is difficult to "put together a group with enough power and credibility" if there was not enough urgency (Kotter, 1996: p. 35). As Crandall, Eiseman and Louis (1986) stated, the "top-down pressure" could "lead to success" as they reinforce people's "incentives to innovate" (p. 40). Inspiring individual's motivation in change is important for change process. Without motivation, "people won't help, and the effort goes nowhere" (Kotter, 2007: p. 97) and improvement will not be achieved (Fullan, 2006).

Researchers presented some aspects which could increase the sense of urgency, such as articulating the objectives and the benefits of implementing innovation (Gupta, 2011), showing "the attractiveness" of the change and confronting individuals with "clear expectations" (Appelbaum et al., 2012: p. 767). To be specific, Kotter (1995) noted that leaders must find ways to communicate this information broadly and dramatically. He claims that the first step is essential as the start of organizational changes require aggressive cooperation of many individuals. This need for change must be understood; otherwise, the change agents will not have enough "power and credibility to initiate the required change program (Kotter, 1995).

2.2. Communicating the Change Vision

In order to enabling people to be committed in the change process, sharing the

vision, goals and direction of the change seems important. On the one hand, communication is regarded as an effective change strategy (Borrego & Henderson, 2014; Kotter, 1996) which could help people realise “the need for and the logic of a change” (Kotter & Schlesinger, 2008: p. 5) and see the vision and the benefits of the change strategies (Gupta, 2011). Also, communication could reduce individual’s uncertainty and ambiguity (Nelissen & Van Selm, as cited in Appelbaum et al., 2012), which consequently increases employee’s “receptivity” and “enrolment” of the change (Stragalas, 2010: p. 26).

On the other hand, Doten-Snitker, Margherio, Litzler, Ingram and Williams (2021) (p. 206) noted that “shared vision is an important process for change projects, serving to amplify success, increase participation, and erode the divide between project leaders and constituents”. Researchers also addressed that communication is a vital feature of the shared vision process since it helps teams to be more effective in co-orienting and in motivating interest and collaboration with stakeholders (Doten-Snitker et al., 2021: p. 217).

2.3. Cultural Dimensions

Culture commonly refers to the values, attitudes, beliefs, norms and practices that characterise national, organisational, and individual behavior (Hinde, 2003; Oudenhoven, 2001; Tu, Liu, & Ting, 2009). Concerning the organisational culture, it is defined as “norms and practices that are shared by most people in the organisation” (Oudenhoven, 2001: p. 90). Furthermore, Hallinger (2003) described it as “the way we do things around here” (p. 346).

Hofstede (2001) identified five dimensions of cultures, namely, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism-collectivism, masculinity-femininity and confusion dynamism, which interpreted the differences in cultural values. Because of the significant roles of power distance (PD) and uncertainty avoidance (UA) in “organizational coordination and control” (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004: p. 534), the following parts will examine these two constructs.

Power distance. PD is defined as the less powerful individual’s acceptance of unequal distribution of power within a culture (Hofstede, 2001; Hsu & Marshall, 2011; Punj & Krishnan, 2006; Woodside et al., 2011), which not only reflects “power inequality” but also “authority relations” (Soares, Farhangmehr, & Shoham, 2007). As Davis (2001) (p. 220) described, PD emphasizes “the emotional and social distance between people who occupy different places in a hierarchy”.

In high PD cultures, subordinates accept the differences and inequality within a hierarchical structure. The power holders “act with little concern for the welfare of others” (Torelli & Shavitt, 2010: p. 704). That is to say, there is no complaint or resistance from the subordinates apparently. This echoes statements of Li and Guo (2012) that the less powerful members absolutely obey the more powerful members. China belongs to the high power distance countries that the social individuals prefer maintaining suitable status, and have less or no authority in decision making, the organisational cultures are “marked with more distant, hierarchically

ordered, and reserved relationships” (Punj & Krishnan, 2006: p. 6). Hallinger and Kantamara (2001) (p. 391) described this phenomenon as a “compliance culture” which could drive “resistance underground”. Therefore, in Chinese working environment, it is rather difficult for subordinates to question and totally commit to the orders from superiors because workforces are “accustomed to depend on their supervisors for direction and decision making” (House et al., 2004: p. 534). In contrast, in low PD cultures, every individual is “equal” (Thien, Thurasamy, & Razak, 2014) and tends to be involved in express his/her viewpoints in decision-making which is presented by superiors (Hofstede, 2001). Individual in low PD environment are “unperceptive and perhaps unaccepting of inequality, believing that power should be distributed evenly” (Punj & Krishnan, 2006: p. 6). As House et al. (2004) noted, the reduced PD could contribute to the “flexibility of the organisation and enhance competence” (p. 534).

Uncertainty avoidance. UA refers to the extent to which individual feels threatened or nervous by ambiguous, unstructured, risky or uncertain situations and seek consistency, stable or comfortable situations (Hallinger & Kantamara, 2001; Hofstede, 2001; House et al., 2004; Merkin, 2006).

In high UA cultures, individuals are hesitant to take on change with uncertain outcomes, which lead to a tendency towards “focusing on procedures rather than on goals or outcomes” (Hallinger & Kantamara, 2001: p. 395). Furthermore, researcher noted that strong UA makes “what is different is dangerous prevails” (Hofstede, 1991, as cited in Woodside et al., 2011: p. 789) and “impedes initial attempts at reform” (Hallinger & Kantamara, 2001: p. 395). In particular, people from high UA environment are reluctant to embrace new intercultural relations (Hofstede, 2001). Conversely, individuals in low UA context tend to be curious and feel more comfortable with “unknown events” and “rely less upon rules” (Thien et al., 2014: p. 5). As described by Hofstede (2001), the relatively comfortable with risk taking and nonconformist behavior in low UA cultures could help promote creativity and innovation.

In conclusion, culture exerts the broadest and significant influences on many dimensions of individual behavior and many aspects of organisations (Hartnell, Ou, & Kinicki, 2011; Hinde, 2003, Hinde, 2004; Lau, Tse, & Zhou, 2002; Soares et al., 2007). Culture has “a hidden but demonstrable” (Hallinger & Kantamara, 2001: p. 388) impact on the success of implementing change in the organisations (Fry & Bi, 2013; Hallinger, 2003; Hallinger & Lee, 2011; Ng, 2011).

3. Research Methodology

With the purpose of exploring respondents’ perspectives on change effort and their perceptions cultural factors’ influences on change processes, two research questions are designed as follows:

What are the participant’s perspectives on change strategies?

What are the respondent’s perceptions of cultural issues which are related to the change process?

The design of the interview questions are derived from change model of [Kotter \(2007\)](#), which consists of three issues, namely, the personal background information, participant's perspectives on change strategies and respondent's perceptions of cultural issues.

3.1. Research Context and Participants

This study adopted a qualitative approach as it enables researcher to interpret multifarious and in-depth understandings ([Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011](#)). The participants in this study were two deans who have experienced the change effort. D1 is the Dean of the faculty who has academic, programmatic, managerial and fiscal responsibility for the whole faculty. D2 is the Vice Dean who is mainly responsible for the teaching issues and teachers' development. There are two reasons for choosing these two deans as the subjects for study. First, they are all middle-level leaders at the school level, who assumed the roles of communicating with the superiors. Second, all of them experienced the change in the school which can provide in-depth insight into the understanding of culture influence on the change strategies. The two deans initiated a change which aimed at using English as the medium for the instruction within the whole faculty in 2020. The innovation was supported by the former principal. However, in 2021, there was a change of the principal leadership. This innovation received resistance since the new principal took some charges within the university.

3.2. Data Collection and Data Analysis

In this study, a semi-structured interview was adopted. Being a research instrument, semi-structured interview enables the interviewer to probe in-depth information ([McQueen & Knussen, 2002](#)), since the interview questions are open-ended which can give room for individuals to develop their own ideas and provide more complete information ([McDonough & McDonough, 1997](#)). Moreover, as [Brown \(2001\)](#) provided, semi-structured interview keeps the interviewee motivated and interested by using follow-up questions, which can also yield rich in-depth data.

The interview data, which consisted of recordings of the interviews with two deans, was recorded and transcribed firstly. The transcription is of great significance to the research, since transcribing could allow "more thorough examination of what people say" ([Atkinson & Heritage, 1984](#): p. 238). Secondly, coding was adopted for analysis. As mentioned by [Bryman \(2004\)](#), coding could transform information into a numerical value which facilitates the computer to process the information. NVivo11 was adopted to assist the process of coding, interpreting and retrieving of the categorized data ([Zamawe, 2015](#)).

4. Results

4.1. Creating a Sense of Urgency

It is of great importance to investigate whether the participants created a sense of

urgency in the change process and how they deployed this change strategy, since establishing a sense of urgency could “break through the initial resistance to change in organisations (Fullan, 2007 as cited in Tang et al., 2014: p. 665)” and create positive attitudes and inspire individual’s motivation to the change (Crandall et al., 1986).

According to the interview data, two deans acknowledged the importance of creating a sense of urgency during the change process. Two deans noted, before making the change within the faculty, the explanation of the necessity of change with a compelling object to the staff which enabled them to see and feel. D1 (Dean) stated,

There was a tendency of adopting English as the medium of instruction in higher education. We showed this to our staff and analysed the advantages of our change.

Also, D2 (Associate Dean) addressed that

Articulating the strong sense of urgency enabled the staff to be clearly about why they had to be changed and what they should do next.

The initiatives taken by the deans is in line with statements of Tang et al. (2014) that for building a sense of urgency there is a need to communicate the rationales for the impending change. In particular, it is necessary to show the need and the “valid and dramatic evidence from outside the organisation that demonstrates that change is required” (Kotter & Cohen, 2002: p. 36).

In addition, D1 put forward that

Our innovation was unique in the whole university, since other faculties did not have the qualified teachers and they could not implement this kind of change. I think this change is innovative, challenging, and attractive to our teachers.

As reviewed in the literature, when the subordinates get incentives to motivate, improvement of change could be achieved. Kotter & Schlesinger (2008) (p. 45) maintained that underlying the sense of urgency was an influential feeling of “compulsive determination” which affected individual’s behaviour.

From the interview data, it could also be found that UA had significant impact on this strategy. And UA was relatively low within the faculty. As D2 described,

From talking with the staff, I found that they felt comfortable with this change. And when we, the two deans, explained the needs of the change, I could see the expectations and excitements from their eyes. This really helps our innovation. I think this is because nearly 95% of our teachers have the overseas study experiences which enable them to be more adaptable and tolerant for the change.

On the other hand, two deans mentioned that UA of the university was quite different. D1 stated that

The former principal, who was supportive, hold positive attitudes towards this innovation. However, the new principal felt threatened with this change.

In the words of D2, the new principal was reluctant to take on this innovation since he did not realise and understand the urgency of the change. D2 noted,

I thought one important reason of the differences in attitudes was because the previous leader had the experience of study/living abroad which was the same with us, and this made him to be open-minded. Whereas, the new principal did not have such kind of background, so he could not understand our change and felt threatened and uncomfortable.

From the above findings, it can be concluded that culture construct exerts influence on change. The impact could be either positive or negative, which depends on whether the change or innovation corresponds to the culture of the organisation (Hinde, 2003, 2004). Specifically, schools with a negative culture make teachers unmotivated and reluctant to change, while schools with a positive culture make staff members will to take risks and enact reforms (Hinde, 2004: p. 3).

4.2. Communicating the Change Vision

Due to the importance of communication in organisational change, the interview also focused on investigating how participants communicate and the effectiveness of their communication.

Initially, both of the two deans acknowledged that they communicate quite often and put forward that communication plays a significant role in leading the change process. D2, the Vice Dean for Faculty, was mainly responsible for communicating with staff on all faculty matters such as teaching arrangements, personal development, professionalism, mentoring and so on. And there are three channels that the two deans communicated with staff. They held monthly meeting with all staff to discuss management teaching issues, held weekly meeting with department heads to deal with teaching issues and had face-to-face talk with individuals who had personal difficulties. D2 expressed her viewpoints as follows:

Communication not only made staffs feel satisfied since they can express their views and needs to us directly, but also enabled us to know more about what happened and helped us to made adjustment to the change.

It could be noted from the findings that communication was helpful for decreasing the ambiguity, affecting individual's responses to change (Nelissen & van Selm, 2008) and for employees to be trusting and open (Appelbaum et al., 2012: p. 770).

On the other hand, communicating with the top leaders seemed different. D1, the dean of the faculty who is mainly in charge of academic, programmatic, managerial, and fiscal responsibilities for the faculty. He described the communication by using words "passive" and "active". D1 stated,

The former principal of the university is supportive in our change. We, the

two deans, report to the principal every week to resolve any significant issue in relation to management and instruction. The principal not only encourage our initiatives in words, but also provide assistance such as inviting experts to give professional suggestion or to hold seminar. These initiatives definitely increase our confidence in making the innovation.

On the other hand, D1 noted that with the changing of principal, the organisational context changed and the communication became totally different. Both D1 and D2 pointed out that they seldom communicate with the new principal. D1 stated,

The previous principal is enthusiastic in innovation. He likes to communicate with us. However, only one year later, the role of principal was assumed to a new one. And the new principal is not familiar with the change in our faculty and viewed the innovation as the previous principal's responsibilities rather than his. Therefore, he is not supportive and seldom communicates with us on the change issues. And this explains why we get resistance from upper management and finally got failure.

Here, the findings illustrated that the communication "most strongly" supports the implementation of change (Hallinger & Lee, 2011: p. 150), which affects individual's receptivity to change.

Furthermore, it could be found that the cultural factor, PD, affected the change process in this organisational context. Within the faculty, PD is relatively low. Two deans are open-minded, and always support individual initiatives, which consequently enable the change to go smoothly. However, as for the whole university, the context was strongly hierarchical. Two deans showed deference to the principals which resulted in a "compliance culture" (Hallinger & Kantamara, 2001: p. 391). When the old principal was supportive, two deans could make progress in implementing change strategies. Whereas, when the new principal held resistance to the innovation and put insufficient focus on supporting implementation, two deans had to show their surface compliance and receive the information given by principal quietly, which led to the change unsuccessfully implemented.

Last but not the least, UA had impact on communication. Within in the faculty, the deans hold meetings and face-to-face talk with the staff, which not only communicated direction and progress, but also provided reassurance for the entire faculty. D2 described,

Our teachers were open-minded, and they all had experiences of living or studying abroad, which makes our communication to be easier.

It could be found that because UA within the faculty was low, employees were receptive with the change. As for the whole university, the culture differed. D1 pointed out,

UA was low when the old principal took charge of the university. He always

encouraged us to be open-minded, curious, and receptive on new things and uncertain outcomes. Therefore, our communication with the old principal always went smoothly.

However, the two deans mentioned, with the change of the leaders, everything changed. UA became rather high. D2 stated,

When we reported what we have done, and what we planned to do with the change to the new principal, he always showed reluctant and uninterested. This made us feel frustrated for communicating with him.

Based on the findings, it could be noticed that UA, as a construct of culture, affected the implementation of change to a large extent. When the culture of an organisation was low in UA, change could be implemented relatively smoothly since the context was relatively comfortable with “risk taking and nonconformist behavior, which in turn helped promote creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship” (Thien et al., 2014: p. 5). Whereas, as Cardon & Marshall (2008) (p. 103) stated, “high UA cultures had a tendency to resist change more often”.

5. Discussion

From the above analysis of the findings, three issues will be discussed. Firstly, Kotter’s strategies improve the chances of success in implementing changes. As Appelbaum et al. (2012) stated, Kotter’s model guarantees success and remains a recommendable reference for organizational change. In this research context, establishing the sense of urgency and communicating with the vision seem significant. For one thing, creating a sense of urgency could inspire employee’s curiosity and motivation which are quite necessary for change implementation. For another, communicating with the employees as well as the upward leaders not only helps people see clearly about the change, but also reduces individual’s ambiguity and increases their receptivity.

Secondly, culture exerts impact on learning organisations and their capacity to change (House et al., 2004). In this research context, when the former principal was responsible for the management of the university, the cultural factors had positive influences on the implementation of the change. However, when the new principal takes responsibility for the school management, the innovation gets resistances and the organisational support for the change disappears since the new principal is not aligned to the change initiatives. Although the two deans deploy effective change strategies, they get failure in the change implementation which is mainly because of the cultural impact. This finding supports the statements of Tavanti (2012) (p. 298) statements that “cultural dimensions have impact on shaping leadership perceptions and value judgments”. Further, according to the statements of Hinde (2003) (p. 4), “in order for change to be effected, the change must correspond to the culture of the school”. In this research context, the failure of the innovation is because the culture within the faculty does not correspond with the whole university’s culture when principal changed.

Finally, time elements play “crucial” (Hinde, 2003: p. 2) roles in the process of change which cannot be overlooked. Change/reform process are time-related (Hinde, 2003: p. 5) and should be put into with a considerable length of time (Guzmán, Gely, Crespo, Matos, Sánchez, & Guerrero, 2011; Kotter, 2007). In this research context, it could be noted that the length of time was rather short, which spanned from 2020 to 2021. As analysed in the above section, D2 noted that the change gets failure one year after the former principal is replaced by the new leader.

6. Conclusion

This study attempts to explore the effective change strategies and the cultural constructs which have influences on the change process. In general, there are three major findings. First, deploying effective strategies is critical to the change process. Second, cultural factors are highly important for change process, which have either positive or negative influences on the functioning of implementation. Particularly, change might face resistance in high PD context whereas low PD cultures support more participatory and collaborative decision-making processes. Further, in high UA settings, clear and detailed communication is crucial. And in low UA context, communication can be more informal and flexible. Third, the length of time for change should be considerable.

With respect to the limitations of the research, two issues are presented. The design of the semi-structured interview questions is based on Kotter’s eight steps and Hofstede’s cultural framework. However, the conceptual framework has its limitations. As for Kotter’s model of change, Appelbaum et al. (2012) stated that the model “was not expected to be applicable to all types of changes” (p. 775). Further, Hofstede’s cultural values are challenged by some researchers. It was found that there were incoherent factor structures and low reliability in Hofstede’s model (Thien et al., 2014). Therefore, the issues of effective change strategies and their relationship with cultural constructs need further investigation.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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