

Challenging Organisations and Society

reflective hybrids*

Different Cultures, Different Rhythms

Karin Lackner

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Hüseyin Özdemir & Mannie Sher

Group Relations Work in China – Challenges, Risks and Impact for Organizational Development

Abstract

A far-reaching eight-year project, introducing organization development in a Sino-German joint venture in Wuxi, China, is the case study of this article. The main topic is the issue of public reflection as the basis for learning and change at all levels of the organization. By using a unique programme of enquiry, the authors describe the use of two complementary traditions - the organizational development tradition and the group relations tradition - in their consulting approach. The change process of the organization as well as the consulting task itself have been simultaneously explored by the authors. The research design follows the principles of Participatory Action Research (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013). The Group Relations Work (GRW) in China demonstrates that it is possible to create a hybrid model combining critical organizational reflection and individually focussed learning activities.

Key words: organization development, group relations work, participatory action research, organization reflection processes

The environment

In relation to its thousand-year history, it was only recently that the former Chinese president, Deng Xiaoping, opened his country to international investors and entrepreneurs. Since 1978, China has changed rapidly from a centrally-planned economy to a thriving market economy (Kolb & Jiang, 2005). China has become central to the global economy as a low-wage manufacturing country. Considering the size of its population, China has developed into an attractive and potentially prosperous and vital sales market for international companies (Liefner, 2005).

The intercultural challenge: Making the acquaintance of the Chinese culture

Two different concerns were at work here. From the beginning, one of the main concerns of the consultants was to avoid colluding with conservative Chinese cultural traditions. During the first round of organizational development initiatives from 2004 – 2009, in the exploratory interviews, we often heard the claim that ‘we do not have the luxury of postponing the development of new strategies’. We noted that the highly politicised context of the German factories in China generated a self-perpetuating process of an endemic short-termism. The consultants were especially wary of this risk which they were trying to expose and counteract.

The Managing Director, on the other hand, was tacitly aware of an opposing risk, viz. the endemic difficulty in the factories of getting anything done which crosses any sort of status boundary that is so important in Chinese culture. His major concern was that mindless action may be matched by inaction and the failure of empowerment. Possibly as a form of defence against the persisting unstable labour conditions, managers at different levels in the factories developed a tendency to wait for direction, maintaining a fantasy that people ‘at the top’ would somehow know what they were enduring and would come up with solutions. The Managing Director’s concerns were confirmed by the inconclusive attempts to drive individual and group empowerment processes within the lower levels of management to obtain substantial endorsement of the organizational development programme beyond vague and inconsequential general expressions of interest.

Working in an enterprise that appeared stuck in inaction mode, we were faced with an intriguing question of how to address change in the organization. Strategic initiatives often fail because much energy is dissipated in attempting to set them up. We wondered what other forms of interventions could be used in place of neat and tidy organizational development architectures. We struggled to find approaches for useful interventions for an organization that was itself struggling for greater independence from its mother company in Germany and the communist regime at home. We had no answer on how to

proceed without abandoning our basic belief that no real impact on change-related issues could be achieved without obtaining the necessary organizational support and legitimacy and willingness on the part of the management cadre to abandon strict adherence to old ways of working based on family and hierarchy.

Research background and principles

The central research question in this case study was: *What are the necessary conditions to apply a Western-oriented organizational development project to a Sino-German joint venture in China?*

Group relations action learning, like the organizational development tradition, stems from Kurt Lewin's emphasis on the importance of real-life issues as a source of learning (Lewin, 1953). Unlike the organizational development tradition, however, which is mainly focused on large-scale and systemic changes, group relations action learning often operates with a bias toward personal learning. The action learning tradition is more focused on initiating change through personal development, but it makes large-scale changes difficult to obtain. While organizational development is focused on modifying the power/knowledge dynamics that keep existing practices in place, group relations action learning intervention has a more agile and plastic architecture. Group relations action learning can be more threatening, but it is also more amenable to local adaptations that increase capacities to produce significant change effects. The enhanced research design that involves both parties, the researchers and the subjects – who thus become co-researchers – is nowadays called Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013).

The research question is tightly linked to the consulting task. The organizational development initiative relied on socio-technical systems theory (Trist & Bamforth, 1951) that involved close observation of both social sub-systems and technical sub-systems within the company. The organizational development and group relations consulting approaches of the authors relied on a foundation of action research that included the individual experiences of

the researchers in their consulting roles (Lewin, 1953) as crucial sources of knowledge as the change processes progressed through the different phases.

As research was able to demonstrate, organizational development consulting work and group relations interventions that rely on Western models of thought and practice can be applied in China on the grounds that there is coherence and correspondence between these perspectives and Chinese cultural and social values (Xiao Juan MA, 2007) of sustainable thinking and working.

The issue for the authors was how to create the conditions to link critical reflection and organizational change in practice. What strategy should be used to promote action-oriented reflection at the organizational level? How should personal reflection, group support and organizational change be bridged? Can reflection be part of a stable and self-sustaining feature of organising? We entitled the applied programme *Group Relations Work in China – Challenges, Risks and Impact* (in future abbreviated GRW) discussing the attempt to combine the creation of an organizational development programme combined with group relations conference work into a structure that would connect them into a larger and more powerful company-wide enterprise.

The Oezpa - Tavistock Institute consultants (in future referred to as ‘consultants’), following a well-established path in the organizational development tradition (Cummings and Wolrey, 1996), suggested working with senior managers to establish a driving force in the management of change in the factories. The aim was to obtain the necessary endorsement and mandate from the higher echelons of the company so that the senior managers could co-ordinate local changes and support the process through the use of well-known tools of the ‘planned change’ tradition. The Managing Director (German) supported this type of engagement. As he put it, *‘although I recognise this was the right way of doing things to develop my people, I know that we have to engage slowly with the integration of Western ideas into a traditional Chinese cultural context. We will have to find ways of working at an organizational level within the communist political environment’*.

Establishing a structure to reflect

In order to fulfil the expressed aims of the project to support senior middle managers of a Chinese industrial enterprise to cope with the changes they had to face and to turn their change efforts into meaningful learning opportunities, we needed to devise a new approach. This approach combined the practical advantages and contextual appropriateness of group relations critical reflection and action learning with the wisdom of managing change that comes out of the organizational development tradition. Because the two traditions have both elements of learning and action, as well as some contradictions for our particular situation, we felt the only way forward was to explore a hybrid model. However, examples of hybrids were difficult to find. In spite of their common roots and the recognised need for group relations action learning to link with, and extend to, other forms of 'search conferences' and 'whole system change' methodologies, the two traditions rarely meet or are put together. (Morgan and Ramirez, 1983; McLaughlin and Thorpe, 1993; Pedler, 1997b). We therefore designed our own 'hybrid', the GRW. The design of the programme was based on a simple principle: we would use the flexibility and simplicity of group relations action learning and combine it with the organizational development prescription of the need to create the necessary leverage that would support participants in their change efforts. Legitimation and empowerment were obtained from the Managing Director as a preliminary condition for the start-up of the intervention, but building such influence from the participants themselves would become one of the aims and hopefully the outcome of the project itself. To achieve this effect, however, participants would have to form a network in the company and the project as a whole would have to become an actor-network within it.

The consulting approach

The Managing Director, a few senior managers and the consultants concluded that in order to move ahead on the design of an organizational development intervention, they needed an approach that would provide active and visible support to the senior and middle managers. Given that a top-down approach

was not viable for rapid organizational adaptations to changing markets, the consultants turned to a model that was different to traditional organization-wide consultancy, i.e. a group relations action learning approach of critical reflection.

Given the aims of organizational development interventions and the conditions under which we were operating, we were interested in a particular variety of group relations action learning practices in which (i) the starting point of all learning is action, and in which (ii) participants also need to establish a dialogue and reflect collectively on the assumptions, beliefs and emotions that shape practice.

The two aims of the project focussed on the senior and middle managers in their efforts to steer the change process and to produce significant results in the industrial enterprise's abilities to manage their relationships with the local communist authorities and the company's headquarters in Germany.

We decided to test the validity of the approach by running annual group relations conferences with about 30 senior and middle managers of the two factories. These group relations conferences placed the Review and Application Groups high on the agenda in which participants address in turn an organizational or leadership issue of their choice to the rest of the group and the facilitator. After a set time, the process stops and the group reflects back to the presenter of the issue their considerations about the conduct of the interaction and its outcome. In this way a second order of learning is generated for both the presenter and the group. At the end of the session, the consultants comment on the overall experience, so that another layer of learning is added.

The participants said that in their particular environments organised and sanctioned reflection activity would have a powerful counter-cultural effect. *'The best way you can support us', they said, 'is by helping us develop a blame-free climate of listening where people can publicly discuss and review new ways of working.'*

The group relations action learning conferences (in future referred to as GRW 'conferences'), however, emphasised another aspect with which we had been wrestling in the first phase of the project, viz., the need to address the power conditions that would allow the result of reflection to be implemented to produce organizational effects in the factories. Action-oriented group reflection practices' aim mainly uses reflection to open up issues and feelings, not to address problems. When used in isolation, the GRW conferences could lead to frustration because participants would still have to carry the responsibility for sorting out the issues raised back in the factories without the support of their comrades in the conference. The GRW conferences showed that the empowerment issues within traditional hierarchies could not be put in the background and had to remain high on the agenda.

The outcomes

To achieve this goal, the GRW initiative was designed to have group relations conference work embedded in the organizational development design structure which was based on a 'whole community change conference' design. The annual conferences, three so far, were facilitated by consultants (lately joined by consultants from within the company). The objectives of the GRW initiative were to provide a space for managers to:

- reflect on their experiences as managers to improve the management levers of productivity, quality, process optimisation and cost optimisation
- develop improved organizational development levers of leadership, participation, communication and enabling
- establish ways for exchanging learning and experiences

Staff of the group relations programmes met regularly before and during each conference and acted as internal referent for the programme. Consultants defined the aims of the programme, identified and convened participants, to design and review the first three group relations conferences, to monitor progress and to design the outline of the evaluation process. They also assisted

in the efforts of the programme participants to engage with the rest of company's factories in China.

While many participants felt energised and empowered by the opportunity to take full control of their own development needs, others acted out the prevailing dependency culture, or were disoriented by the low level of direction and structure. Overall, however, the GRW conference successfully established the notion that whatever work would be conducted within the group relations reflective action learning would be part of their larger company structure. This awareness provided the necessary containment of anxiety raised by the work of the group relations reflective action learning.

The group relations conferences were spaces to reflect: Members interpreted group relations reflective action learning first and foremost as spaces to reflect on company issues affecting their everyday working lives. Reflection here meant a combination of containment and challenge that allowed participants to engage in personal and organizational development. The presence of consultants combined to create 'safe environments' (Bion, 1985) in which participants were able to report on their practical management and organizational issues and make sense of them by engaging in conversation with the other group members. The activity therefore unfolded in terms of 'public reflexive dialogical processes' (Cunliffe, 2002), which is difficult and painful work. With the help of the consultants and the active support of their colleagues in the groups, participants were then encouraged and often challenged to make links and connections between events in the conference that offered new explanations and meanings. They also had opportunities to establish connections between their own experiences and those of others, a reassuring exercise for managers who frequently complained about their silo behaviour at work.

This way of approaching critical reflection was both powerful and problematic. It was powerful because, as participants clearly stated, this way of learning was perceived as 'a form of conversation *in* practice as opposed to a conversation *about* practice' (Nicolini, Gherardi & Yanow, 2003). Themes and issues

emerged directly from actual working life; feedback was frank and at times merciless, but always delivered by peers who had a deep understanding of both the organizational and emotional conditions of the presenter. This led to the collective production of non-judgmental, non-competitive arenas that allowed participants the freedom to explore new ways of being that would generate different ways of behaving at work.

The consultants encouraged reflection of assumptions and feelings as part of the main task of the programme and then modelled appropriate supportive critical behaviour.

Several participants identified personal or organizational change objectives and used the Review groups to elaborate plans, to discuss progress and to reflect on successes and failures. This activity was sometimes interpolated with broader reflections on power and change. By studying 'power' dynamics as they emerged and manifested in the conference participants' change efforts, they were able to understand both the nature of power and how power operated within the company and within sections. This, in turn, empowered them to 'work the system better', i.e., to make progress in their change programmes.

GRW conferences were used for support, enrichment and a critical voice during planning and reviewing stages. When members were involved in their review groups in organizational planning, they used the groups to explore scenarios, understand power dynamics and engineer participation and consensus-building. They tapped into their previous experiences, allowing their colleagues to learn collectively from their experiences and make connections with their own situations. The group activities involved the copious use of flipcharts that were summarised and circulated among members of the groups and retained as a collective memory aid.

In some cases, participants of the same review group identified common issues, such as a common boundary in the factories that they believed needed to be made more permeable. This challenge was then addressed and supported by the rest of the Review group. In another case, a whole review group worked together to intervene on a complex organizational change initiative.

In this case the group took on the character of a de facto local organizational development initiative.

The group relations action learning conferences aimed at establishing connections between the conferences themselves and engaging with wider company contexts, consensus-building activity on how to turn their new learning and themselves into collective change agents, and finding a space for suitable forms of engagement with key decision-makers. Finally, for everyone concerned with the group relations conferences, the lesson was that ‘engaging’ with a whole system like the company in Germany and China meant acquiring different organizational models to those that the Chinese managers were using. They were painfully reminded of the difficulties and high levels of resources necessary to accomplish anything that was organization-wide. The lesson for the senior managers was a very harsh reality check.

Participants noted that what they had learned in the conference was an accurate mirroring of their everyday experience of the company where ‘engaging’ meant tiresome and painstaking work.

Conclusion

The Wuxi project in China was a practical test of the working hypothesis that tools, designs and techniques of the two related traditions of group relations action learning and organizational development can be combined in order to promote organizational reflection and individual and organizational change. (Morgan and Ramirez, 1983; Pedler, 1997a). The effectiveness of this approach was encouraging, although certain aspects require further development.

The evaluation process of the group relations action learning conferences, based on a number of focus group interviews with project participants, their managers and colleagues, revealed positive, deep, and long-lasting effects both at individual and organizational levels. Most participants reported that the programme had given them new tools to manage themselves more effectively in their roles, such as improved practical understanding of partnership

working, cross-boundary management, working with the power dynamics of the organization, enhanced delegation skills and applying reflection techniques as everyday managerial tools (Vince, 2002b). As one participant put it 'the group relations conferences changed my way of managing'. Some organizational results were short-term and tangible, such as new cross-boundary innovations; others were long-term and intangible. Several participants said that the programme helped them stay in the company, thus hugely reducing the costs to the organization in recruitment and training new managers at their level of seniority.

A key ingredient of the programme and its success was the recognition of the centrality of the distribution of power as a critical aspect of all organising processes and especially those concerned with development and change. By attending to questions of the distribution of power in all the forums of the programme, participants were able to deepen their understanding of its nature, manifestations and ways of operating. This provided them with a new awareness of their own capacities to influence power and gave them a set of practical tools to 'work the system better', thereby enhancing their capacity to intervene in producing and steering change. As the evaluation revealed, several participants said that the project had enabled them to see their organizations as systems they could influence.

In highly politicised environments like China, the notion of a unitary, stable, and coherent society or organization is only wishful thinking, albeit a useful fantasy that helps contain anxieties. This fantasy is somewhat nurtured by governments which try to 'put the system under control' using planned, rational approaches that assume the existence of an ordered, unitary organization. Members of organizations, in fact, deal with totally different daily experiences of loosely coupled groups in which the existence of multiple perspectives, interests, and ways of representing the world creates inevitable linguistic and practical contradictions, inconsistencies and paradoxes (Law and Singleton, 2003). In this context, 'engaging with the system' can only mean establishing partial connections, transient ties and negotiated alliances with one or another of the existing and emerging constituencies. It follows

that establishing temporary connections, learning and becoming skilled in knowing when, with whom and how to connect, and when such connections become an unnecessary burden and should be dropped, is not only legitimate, but is also a sign of managerial strength and wisdom. Many participants of the group relations reflective action learning conferences learned that their job was not so much to get rid of dilemmas, ambiguities and problems, as to accept that these are integral to their managerial work. Consequently, the results of the project suggest that in order to promote empowerment from the bottom up, innovative and flexible strategies will need to be adopted, and innovative and flexible ideals and expectations regarding the meaning of 'engagement' need to be embraced.

Our experience of GRW suggests that reflection works at individual and organizational levels if it is public, sanctioned, participative and authorised. Working with a large group of senior and middle managers in a German-Chinese industrial partnership, we developed a large organizational development-based change management initiative that combined elements of traditional organizational development and critical action learning traditions.

Despite the size of the company and its multi-national footprint and the conflicting interests that are its main characteristic features and the massive changes in their markets, the programme provided the managers with new skills and tools for working with the realities of a fragmented and politicised organization. This was achieved by devising a model of reflection that emphasised the importance of learning from real life issues. These were embedded in the three phases of work: an organizational development intervention over eight years, executive coaching, and group relations action learning conferences. Working together with the Managing Director as an internal referent group, these elements represent a unique combination of critical reflection and action learning models of the organizational development tradition that created the necessary leverage to support organizational change efforts across the company.

The GRW programme demonstrated that it is possible to create a hybrid model combining critical organizational reflection that questions organizational assumptions, and individually-focussed learning activities of group relations action learning conferences. At the same time, the programme also highlighted a number of issues that emerge from such a hybridisation and that will need further consideration. The programme was evaluated for effectiveness and evidence of change in cross-boundary company and departmental partnership arrangements.

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