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A Critical Perspective to Managing Generational Diversity in The Workspace in East Asia

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A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE TO MANAGING GENERATIONAL DIVERSITY IN THE
WORKSPACE IN EAST ASIA

by

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SYNTHESIS*
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Abstract: The paper takes a look at the cultural themes that influence behavior and decision-making processes in East Asia, highlighting dimensions of hierarchy, collectivism and saving face. The social constructs that are shaped by these dimensions cultivate an organizational culture that is top-down and group-oriented. To delve into a more meaningful understanding of the generational conflict in East Asia, an analysis of generational theory and the changing work environment provides an insight into the widening generational gap and the domains of tension experienced by those sharing a multi-generational workspace. The author suggests that managing generational diversity has its roots in fostering better understanding of communication patterns practiced by East Asians. Through the facilitation of critical thinking and reflective practices in the workspace, the paper explores initiatives for better communication channels.

* The Synthesis can take a variety of forms, from a position paper to curriculum or professional development workshop to an original contribution in the creative arts or writing. The expectation is that students use their Synthesis to show how they have integrated knowledge, tools, experience, and support gained in the program so as to prepare themselves to be constructive, reflective agents of change in work, education, social movements, science, creative arts, or other endeavors.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1.INTRODUCTION	3
2.CONCEPTS AND THEORIES	3
Cultural Themes of East Asia	3
East Asian Business Culture	5
The Generational Divide.....	7
Changing Work Environment.....	8
3.THE ROLE OF CRITICAL THINKING	12
Critical Thinking for Engagement	12
Plan for Practice.....	14
Current Diversity Initiatives in East Asia	18
4.CONCLUSION.....	20
My Journey of Synthesis.....	20
REFERENCES	22

INTRODUCTION

Growing up in an Asian community, you learn from a very young age that there are ways you are expected to behave and think. You learn about tradition, to be obedient to your elders, and to fulfill your social duty. In most Asian cultures, social duty is an intricate web of principles that an individual is expected to uphold to ensure harmony within the group. The concept of maintaining harmony, as you would see in the subsequent chapters, plays a large role in an individual's psychology and decision-making. As a member of this community, I grew up with these principles of collectivism and filial piety. I learned from a young age that 'we' comes before 'I'.

For many individuals, we are often unaware of how culture influences our work-related values and attitudes. While there are a significant number of Western studies that focus on generational cohorts in the workspace and their influence to organizational culture, there is still not as much research carried out on the workplace dynamics between different generations in other more traditional cultures. This paper explores past the generalizability of Western findings around generational diversity and delves into the generational conflict in East Asia, providing a critical analysis to the widening generational gap and its impact in the work environment.

CULTURAL THEMES OF EAST ASIA

Like many of my peers of East Asian descent, Confucianism strongly influenced my cultural upbringing. One of the core beliefs was the concept of harmony, *he* (和). In some philosophical analysis, the Confucius concept of harmony *he* (和) is identified as the most cherished ideal and can be interpreted into three distinct notions; harmony between man and nature, between man and heaven, and between man and man (Kirkbride et al., 1991). Despite widespread cultural homogenization that occurred such as the adoption of new religious beliefs and modernization of ideologies, there is still a degree of Confucianism influence in East Asian personal, familial, and social relationships. Several studies conducted with target groups consisting of Asian Americans (Kramer et al., 2002; Oyserman & Sakamoto, 1997) noted collectivist values in upbringing and cognitive processing, despite being second or third generation naturalized citizens. At the forefront of preserving harmony are the three principles of hierarchy, collectivism, and saving face.

Hierarchy

One of my earliest memories of social etiquette was learning to call my elders by their family title before eating. This is a practice that is still widely done in East Asia and is initiated by inviting the elder members at the table to begin eating before you do. There is a hierarchal aspect to this custom where seniority plays a role in food distribution as well as interactions during the meal. As food is often served in a shared platter, it is expected for the younger members at the table to give priority to the elders to choose their portion first (Ma, 2015). This, among other customs, are means of emphasizing social order. In countries like Japan and Korea, individuals who are in the lower social order always bows first and lower as a sign of respect and deference. Throughout East Asia, there is a collective belief in the importance for an individual to be conscious of their status relative to others as this dictates the level of respect that should be given and to accept the duties that comes with their position in the social hierarchy (Riel, n.d.).

Collectivism

Knowing your place in the community is critically important to maintaining the collectivist culture practiced in East Asia. As highly group-oriented people, a strong emphasis is placed on communities as the major source of identity. Therefore, the decision that an individual makes reflects not just on themselves, but on their upbringing and family, creating pressure to put the group's goals and needs ahead of their own personal desires in order to maintain harmony within the group. While undeniably adolescent psychosocial development brings with it a degree of rebelliousness (Sanders, 2013), I was often reminded that I did not exist as a separate entity but was inextricably bounded to the context of my family and heritage. A cultural analysis conducted by Kim & Markus (1999) highlighted how uniqueness, which is often perceived with positive connotations of freedom and independence in American culture, was interpreted with negative perceptions of deviance in East Asia. An individual making a simple decision of personalizing their order in the United States may feel vindicated when the order is fulfilled whereas the making of the same personalized order in East Asia would create feelings of guilt from inconveniencing others, especially when the individual is aware of their lower social status. The notion of conformity exists because we are conditioned to place collective well-being before individual wants and this leads to discouraging deviations that may undermine the harmony of the community.

Saving Face

Another significant facet in East Asian interactions is to weigh the impact of their actions on the reputation, pride, and dignity of others. Due to the collectivist nature of East Asian society, maintaining good relationships is considered fundamental and this is best achieved by practicing mindfulness to avoid causing embarrassment for others. Absent in English terminology other than in the idiom 'saving face', the term for this in Korean is kibun (기분)) while the Japanese recognize it as mensu (メンツ)) and the term in Confucius philosophy is lien (臉) (Riel, n.d.). This concept is closely tied to hierarchy, as disputing the views and opinions of others is seen as questioning their credibility and thus, challenging their position in the social order. It is so deeply ingrained that causing shame to another person, especially of a higher social order, regardless deserving or not, is perceived as a sign of bad character and upbringing. Because of this, East Asians often avoid confrontation and antagonism and would deliberately practice an intentional lack of directness in conversation to refrain from appearing disrespectful (Kirkbride et al., 1991).

EAST ASIAN BUSINESS CULTURE

For many young adults, their first step into the working world promises two possibilities; the beginning of a new journey with wonderful learning opportunities that would lead to a discovery of their passions and self or the introduction of a cog into the organizational machine where they are the mere worker bee of zero influence. For many young adults in East Asia like myself, the latter is more likely to occur. The cultural themes mentioned before are carried forward into the working environment as we are conditioned into prescribed ways of behaving and thinking. I found that many organizations in East Asia further accentuates these values as there is a strong emphasis on superior and subordinate relationships.

Decision-making

Due to the influence of culture, organizations and business interactions in East Asia are usually hierarchical and group-oriented. Similar to the social structure, there is an emphasis on respect for seniority and elders, which plays a considerable role in employer and employee relationships. Each individual in the organization is expected to be aware of their place within the hierarchy and to behave appropriately. This influences the decision-making process within an organization as decisions are almost always made by the management and followed compliantly by employees (Riel, n.d.), mirroring the parent-child relationship in

East Asian upbringing. To question the decision of the management is normally perceived as challenging their authority and is not socially encouraged as it separates the individual from the group consensus, creating friction in the organization dynamics(harmony) and will be viewed as being uncooperative.

Authority

The cultural perspective of equating status and age to authority creates an organizational structure where upper levels of management are the eldest or most experienced employees. In an in-depth interview I conducted with a consultant from a reputable recruitment and human resources company, the consultant shared experience of explicit age preferences practiced by stakeholders in organizations in South East Asia. Younger individuals, regardless of ability or qualifications, were restricted to lower-level vacancies as there was a dominant belief that they were unprepared to manage or lead. It is very uncommon in East Asia for young talent to surpass older and more experienced colleagues for a promotion. In addition, because of the cultural emphasis on respect and mindfulness of others, values such as obedience and steadfastness are better rewarded as opposed to honesty and potential.

Communication Behavior

The social pressure that is brought by cultural themes of hierarchy and collectivism influences East Asians to be less assertive in communication styles. Due to the cultural significance of preserving the dignity of others, employees tend to engage in avoidance behavior during arguments and conflict management. It is important to recognize that the degree to which assertiveness is considered acceptable is contingent upon the individuals' positions in the social order (Kirkbride et al., 1991). Generally, employers or older employees who are of a higher social status are able to be more direct in their interactions while younger employees are seen to not have 'earned' this privilege yet. This affects several organizational interactions such as discussions, negotiations, and feedback. In a culture of personal sensitivity, employees of similar social standing refrain from negative or constructive comments even among themselves.

THE GENERATIONAL DIVIDE

In order to address the issue of generational conflict in East Asia, it is important to look into the different dimensions that contributed to its existence. While generational gaps have existed for a long time, global recession, delayed retirement and job competitiveness have created a more hostile environment between younger and older employees than before. In this section, we analyze the impact of culture and historical events on generational theory as well as the changing work environment to gain an insight into the widening generational gap and the domains of tension experienced by those sharing a multi-generational workspace.

What is Generational Theory?

Generational theory was proposed by William Strauss and Neil Howe to describe the alternating cycles of growth and passing that society experiences and the change in values and attitudes of each generation in the cycle. As stated in Parry and Urwin (2011), the precise categorization of these generations vary between studies but the standard approach across Western economies is to recognize the current four generations of the theory as Veterans/Silents, Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y/Millennials. A majority of publications on generational theory draws upon the definition from Mannheim's work, suggesting that generations are groups of people born and living through similar experiences of a particular time period and having collective memory of these historical events as formative experiences (Murphy, 2012). This is often used to explain the shared attitudes and values that these individuals have as a result of common experiences, and builds the foundation to justify the distinct differences between generational cohorts.

As different countries around the world experienced different national significant events at different times, it could be possible that the generational characteristics that are commonly used to affiliate by birth year like Generation X (1965-1981) and Baby Boomers (1946-1964) would vary across regions. In the white paper presented by Codrington (2011), it examines the national events that influenced the generational framework of different countries. For example, in the United States of America, the Baby Boomers generation is usually defined as those born in the late 1940s that signified the increase in birth rate of the post-war population. This generation is characterized as individuals who grew up during a time of idealism and were therefore, more likely to be the workaholic generation, driven and goal-oriented. In contrast, Vietnam had severe difficulties in recovering from the Second World War and the following Vietnam War (1955-1975). Child birth statistics show that the

country never really had the chance to experience a ‘boom’ during those decades. The generational cohort that grew up in the years of 1946 to 1964 witnessed events and atrocities that contributed to lingering trauma, developing characteristics similar to the Veterans/Silent generation in the US (Edwards, 2013). Only recently, did the nation of 86 million people, two-thirds under the age of 35 and a national average age of 26 years, experienced an increase in births due to promising economic conditions (MacKinnon, 2008).

How Does This Widen the Generation Gap in East Asia?

The above analysis suggests the influence of Inglehart’s (1997) theory of culture change that proposes a correlation between the national economic development level and the values held by the generational cohorts growing up in those periods (Egri & Ralston, 2004). The theory espouses that values of egalitarianism, interpersonal trust and individualism are more likely to be seen in generations familiar with economic security. Consequently, generations experienced in socioeconomic and political insecurity are likely to embrace modernist survival values of materialism, economic determinism and prioritized rationality (Ralston et al., 2005). With the rapid development of technology that brought globalization within the short span of the last few decades, the situation at hand, is one of two worlds within the same country. As much as the older East Asian generation held firmly to traditional values cultivated through times of uncertainty, the younger generation began to develop more individualistic characteristics from economic restructuring and new technology (Yu & Miller, 2003). The older Chinese generation who had grown up during the Cultural Revolution of Mao Zedong experienced a decade of political and social chaos. This has cultivated very protective tendencies that are seemingly absent in today’s Chinese Millennials who are constantly exposed to international media. Truly there are always two sides to progress, every milestone of development pushes one generation further away from the one before (Arora, 2011).

CHANGING WORK ENVIRONMENT

The need for new initiatives for people management comes from the recent dramatically changing nature of the workplace. In a research conducted by Joe Aki Ouye (2011), he notes that organizations are becoming less concentrated and have begun to distribute functions and decision-making wider and more spatially within the organization structure. This means that instead of centralized workplaces, organizations now function as

collaborative platforms where employees are expected to interact more frequently. Heerwagen (2016) resonates this point of view by establishing that as we enter a knowledge economy, the nature of work changes to an increased use of teams and cross unit work where relationship development becomes more important between employees and employers. The need for adopting new management styles and work practices is also strongly advocated to minimize the potential for animosity (Tucker & Williams, 2011; Ouye, 2011). Codrington (2011) explains that as organizations become more globalized and volatile due to the increasing interconnectedness of global forces, managements are more likely to face workplace conflicts brought by generational differences. The higher percentage of older workers remaining in the competitive workforce for economic reasons and the increased demand for collaborative efforts indicates that there is a need to create an internal environment where different generations with their different characteristics and work ethics could work together productively.

Like many workspaces globally, some East Asian workplaces have evolved over the past few years. Due to technological developments which opened up access to a more global market, the workplace has become more diverse and casual. This is seen even in dress codes where some organizations are beginning to embrace the change from formal attire to business casual or completely casual (Landrum, 2017). For many workers of the older generation, the workspace is the first thorough collaborative effort with the younger generation. As stated earlier in this paper, the traditional collectivist culture experienced by the previous generations have cultivated a more formal perception towards management structures and this is reflected in expectations of proper work behavior that vastly differs from that of the younger generation. This encounter in an environment with deadlines, expectations and clients creates a resistance from both sides to bridge disparities. Naturally, the different generations would continue to push changes in the workplace to fit their preferences and this often manifests itself into generational tension. The domains of tension identified from the interview¹ and relevant literature are divided into three main categories.

1

Domains of Tension Between Generations in the Workspace

Basis of Judging Work

One of the common points of contention between generations is the interpretation of work ethics. For the older generations, being a part of the organization and practicing long work hours is an example of strong work ethics that shows hard work and participation. This stands in tension with the younger generation who desires a work-life balance despite also believing in the virtues of hard work. They do not believe that commitment should be measured by the amount of time they are present in the office and this has created a discord as to what constitutes as merit in the workspace. As verified in the interviews conducted previously, many of them showed potential that is recognized by the management but due to their youth and inexperience, are seen to be less reliable as opposed to someone older and with a longer work history. For the older generation, trustworthiness is determined over a long period of time but as the working environment changes and there is a demand for career progression, decisions have to be made faster and with shorter assessments.

Different Communication Styles

The difficulty in communication that is experienced by both sides is not due to preferred mediums as most believed (face-to-face vs. technology), but more often due to different communication styles and preferences. The older generation having experienced more conservative environments are therefore more reserved with their conversations and can appear to be abrupt. This makes it difficult for communication with younger employees who have a tendency to display a more informal behavior due to the emergence of social media. The ease of access to information online have cultivated an inquisitive learning habit in the younger generation and this leads to comprehension and feedback becoming an important aspect to their learning. While the desire for ownership and autonomy over their task is appreciated, the older generation are unfamiliar with elaborately answering their questions. ‘Millennials tend to want explanations for everything they’re told to do rather than just following orders, as older workers might’, quoted an article written by the Associate Press. At the same time, the difference between explicit and tacit knowledge

further complicates the knowledge transfer.

The Organizational Culture Divide

An interesting perspective provided from the interview is the different organizational cultures practiced in government-linked companies (GLC) and multinational corporations (MNC). Due to the cultural influence of senior management in GLCs, these organizations tend to practice a more top-down approach to people management where hierarchy and seniority is valued as it is in line with the nation's cultural emphasis on collectivism. The workplace environment in GNCs is one where financial stability is the main priority, and long-term loyalty and respect for traditions is expected and rewarded. On the other hand, the rise in MNCs have welcomed a need for innovation and competitiveness that is ripe for career progression. The younger generation in East Asia who is constantly seeking for value and passion would often turn to these industries. However, it is important to note that as the market becomes more competitive and retrenchment occurs, employees may need to compromise their preferences for organization culture in return for financial needs. It is often in these situations, where a clash of values, expectations, and ambitions between generations materializes.

CRITICAL THINKING FOR ENGAGEMENT

Identifying the Problem

Looking deeper into the issue, the problem of a generational divide has its roots in communication. Within the domains of tension between the different generations at work, the existing conflict is not an issue of values disparity as many would believe. The older and younger generation share similarities in several dimensions; both generations appreciate hard work, are driven to achieve success, and share the same priorities of economic stability. As a matter of fact, the older generation concurs with the younger generation that there is a need to keep up with technological advancements in line with work (Venter, 2016). The difference mainly lies in their definition and methods in achieving these goals.

The communication behavior of an individual can be traced back to their upbringing and family communication patterns. A famous model that measures these dimensions was the Family Communication Patterns instrument designed by Steve Chaffee and Jack McLeod, and later revised by David Ritchie (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2006). The revised model identifies two types of orientation within families; conformity and conversation. Families in the conformity orientation creates an environment of collectivism, stressing on the uniformity of attitudes and values. Parents encourage children to conform to views and therefore, discourage discussions. In terms of interactions, family members interact less meaningfully with one another and are expected to behave according to the family's norms. Families who are on the low end of this dimension and leaning more towards the conversation orientation recognize the personal growth of individual family members, encouraging open, unconstrained discussions. A fine balance is achieved in Consensual families who practice high conformity and high communication orientations. In these family types, there exists a tension between the need to agree and preserve hierarchy, and the interest in communication and exploring new ideas. Parents resolve this tension by dedicating effort to understanding their children, explaining their own decisions and values, in hopes that these beliefs would be internalized by the younger generation (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2006).

Many families in East Asia exist across both ends of this spectrum, cultivating similar communication behaviors into their children. I was fortunate enough to be brought up in a Consensual family type, appreciating the importance of family and community as a unit but at the same time, recognizing that unresolved conflicts were just as damaging to relationships

as explosive arguments. It was upon reflection that I realized that the current older generation in East Asia were most likely the communication product of high conformity orientations with their elders. At a point when access to technology was limited, families were the main source of influence and this creates an echo-chamber of values, principles and standards. Children were expected to follow instructions without the need for explanations. As adults, they carry these characteristics and communication patterns into the workspace, attempting to enforce it upon the new generation.

Critical Thinking as a Tool for Better Communication

Most organizations in East Asia aren't prepared to handle and share a workspace with the younger generation as equals and this creates a misperception of their 'argumentative nature' as disrespectful and hindering efficiency. The first step of designing initiatives to manage generational differences in East Asia is to acknowledge one of the core principles of change management; Change is about people ("Ten guiding principles of change management", 2004). In order to bring transformative change, it is important to engage with individuals on a deeper level to build support and involvement in the process. The cog mentality that is prevalent in many organizations does not take into consideration the opinions and contributions of the individual employee and this amplifies the existing rigid communication habits within the structure, further intensifying generational conflict.

There are many interconnected elements between critical thinking and communication. Being open to other views involves processes of good communication such as listening well, appreciating diverse opinions, and exchanging information. For the employer who is in the upper levels of management or the employee who is collaborating on a project, being able to communicate effectively fosters critical thinking that improves the quality of discussions and brainstorming. At the same time, critical thinkers are often encouraged to practice self-awareness through critical reflection of their emotions and positions. This requires a purposeful attitude towards interactions and to adopt meaningful inquiry into existing practices and thinking. Not only does this provide clarity of perspective, but it allows individuals to recognize their own thought processes and to respond instead of react. Practicing restraint in judgment is essential to nurturing good relationships between individuals in the East Asian workspace.

By proposing a framework that would encourage better communication within the organization, this paper aims to create an environment that is more conducive for critical

thinking. The next section of Plan for Practice explores the theoretical framings around encouraging meaningful interactions between the older and younger generation of employees in East Asia. At this point, there is a contention around the characteristics that are prioritized in an individual in the workspace. Through the facilitation of tools and practices, I hope to provide support for future endeavors seeking to make changes in managing generational diversity.

PLAN FOR PRACTICE

At this point of the paper, we have explored the multiple factors and cultural structures that hinder meaningful communication within multi-generational organizations in East Asia. The Plan for Practice is a section that examines the link between knowledge and action, taking into consideration theoretical principles and how they can be applied into real-life situations. What is important to keep in mind is that these approaches require inquiry, clarity, and compassion. As most communication problems are chronic, and not a one-time event, the participants involved should be encouraged to experiment within the situation to discover underlying patterns.

Implementing Real Conversations at the Workplace

Personality or values disparity is often cited as the source of relationship conflict in the workspace, especially in complex assignments which require interdependence between workers. In fear of a negative work environment, organizations in East Asia usually prefer employees who share similar expectations and work ethics to encourage compatibility and increase team performance. However, if properly facilitated, critical thinking and cognitive conflict within a group, will play an important role in the team's success by providing more alternatives and allowing a broader view of the topic at hand (Jung & Lee, 2015).

Goal: To ensure that both employees and employers are able to express themselves with clarity and to empathize with the needs of the other in a setting of shared meaning.

Method: Dialogue Process

- The establishing of mutual respect
 - Provide guidelines that will move both sides into a space of inquiry, reflection and non-judgment. Viewing any form of disagreement as a challenge creates an adversarial environment that influences selective hearing and lends itself to

a use of language that is more demanding and divisive. It is important to lead employees and employers to suspend their habitual ways of communicating and practice authentic communication.

- Provide opportunity to be heard
 - Turn-taking builds upon the principle of postponing judgment and encourages both sides to focus on listening. Suggest a topic of shared importance to both sides such as the necessity of innovation or passion and encourage them to communicate their reasons. Different perspectives enhances the quality of brainstorming and is able to encourage different levels of critical thinking in ways that would not exist in other groups where that diversity is absent. This would lead employers to realize the value of similarities and differences.
- Metaphor (Employment as a Journey)
 - The use of metaphors to describe their hopes for development within the organization encourages the individual to reflect and be aware of their aspirations and provides the room with an insight of their expectations. Knowing the values that matter to each member would guide their future interactions and help them to seek support when needed.

Case Study: Practical Implementations

A prime example of successful implementation of the Dialogue Process is within a series of experiments conducted by MIT known as the Dialogue Project. In a case involving labor and management representatives from a steel mill, the group uses dialogue to transform the existing adversarial relationship into an inquiry about categories and labels. There were certain guidelines in place to ensure the communication process remained civil and non-judgmental as there was a 50-year-old animosity between both parties. While tensions were acknowledged, the participants actively refrained from bringing up the past and the decades of mistrust, instead choosing to focus on exploring assumptions and the labels which have been applied. One steelworker noted that identifying under the category of ‘union’ created both protection and limitations. By opting to suspend their own categories and judgments, the group was able to appreciate the similarities they shared. This, in turn, facilitated dramatic changes in their ways of thinking and talking together (Isaacs, 1993).

It is important to establish that the Dialogue Process does not imply or impose agreement. As many organizations face highly complex problems, pressuring participants in

the Dialogue Process to compromise diverts attention from deeper issues. For this reason, dialogues often call for a facilitator instead of a leader. As much as participants join a dialogue to build a consensus around their concerns, exploring different opinions and inquiry encourages new possibilities for shared meaning. In these contexts, dialogue for greater coherence within the organization implies creating an environment of conscious reflection as opposed to forced concessions. A case that illustrates such a situation occurred in a university that was deliberating the continued design and manufacturing of nuclear bombs on campus in the late 1960s (Isaacs, 1993). As the committee consisted of participants from various political positions, they were 'in an uproar' and unable to agree on anything. The facilitator of the committee insisted that the participants talked, with or without an agenda. In slightly over a month as their relations grew and their communication improved, a report was produced. The members of the committee had different reasons and yet, were able to agree on a direction for action.

Encouraging Knowledge Sharing by Collaboration

For many employees, meetings are a unanimously unpopular. They are considered ineffective, a waste of time and sometimes, confrontational. The key problem in East Asia is that meetings are often focused on instruction as opposed to collaboration. On the contrary, encouraging employees and management to work together and share knowledge have transformed many organizational performances. In addition to forming the first step for succession planning, the process of sharing knowledge is recognized to cultivate dynamic interaction and good relationships in a workplace. Through the coordination of effort to share and learn, the knowledge evolves and is strengthened by problem solving and critical thinking.

Goal: To discuss regarding certain issues or policies within the organization that will allow both sides to gain insight into their respective frame of mind and construct a bridge to better understand and provide support.

Method: Facilitation and Observation of Patterns

- Opening-up themes on neutral grounds
 - Through the action of asking questions to stimulate and clarify, the purpose of this step is to help the speaker (employee/employer) bring out details of the issue they are currently facing in the workplace and to gain better understanding of it. It

is important that the speaker do not feel that it is their shortcomings that created the situation but to view the activity as a medium to discuss their needs.

- Sharing without imposing
 - The room is encouraged to take on a more supportive role by utilizing their deep-diversity and offering their strengths to discover solutions collectively. By creating a sense of community in these meetings, closer relationships are created between employees and employers that allows others to comfortably confide in situations of difficulty as well as encourage productivity and a commitment to individual and professional growth.
- Observation and Reflection
 - The involvement of a Process Observer serves to point out traits and observations during the process so that both sides may notice the effect of their participation and in reflection, identify areas which are in need of development in their communication or brainstorming process. Noting the general dynamics and emotional tone of the meetings, especially at points of tension or alternative opinions, brings awareness of the need to be more resourceful in finding ways to communicate and interact.
- Closing Circle
 - Before leaving the meeting, a go-around is done for each member to be given opportunity to state a positive perspective that they will take away. This practice hopes to shift the prevalent negativity into inquiring and exploring the organization's strengths, successes and most important, possibilities.

Case Study: Practical Implementations

The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound) was established as a research organization to provide information and expertise in specialised areas of European Union (EU) policy. The Governing Board of the organization consists of a range of stakeholders such as employers, trade unions and government representatives from all 27 EU Member States. One of the greatest challenges faced by Eurofound was to facilitate the knowledge sharing of multiple voices concerning issues on a broad range of topics. A particularly significant example of collaboration was the 'Foundation Seminar Series' project that offered the opportunity to discuss issues and increase knowledge on policy implications at national levels. In a two-session seminar

dedicated to a specific topic, the representatives of the unions, employers' organizations and governments were brought together to form communities of practice (Schmidt-Abbey, 2011).

Initially on three different sides of the industry, the country representatives of the unions, employers' organizations and governments now have to jointly work together to exchange practices with the 'national' team of another country. The change in positioning meant that the interactions between the three sides were beginning on neutral ground with a common purpose as opposed to the usual situation of being on opposing sides. The collaboration in the project encouraged members to develop new habits of learning and communication as they work together for six to nine months. Understandably, each member still retains their position and point of view on issues such as the prioritization of working conditions of older workers by the union representatives and the productivity and company performance by the employer representatives. However, the team achieves a different level of discourse as they reflect and examine through collaboration and knowledge sharing.

Through the project, participants reported an appreciation for the diverse products and interactions that encouraged reflection on their own situation and stance. By collaborating with representatives of opposing sides, they were able to learn important information that can be applied to their own work. This aspect of knowledge sharing shows far-reaching possibilities as participants have shown to share the experience and knowledge gained with other colleagues. Additionally, the collaboration is seen to have improved professional relationships between the different sides as an ex-post evaluation revealed that 80% of the participants in a previous project still often keep in contact with other fellow participants from their own country (Schmidt-Abbey, 2011).

CURRENT DIVERSITY INITIATIVES IN EAST ASIA

Many organizations in East Asia are beginning to make the shift towards a more inclusive workspace, recognizing that with diversity, comes a need for better communication channels and initiatives. This section looks at some of the ways organizations in Asia can create a culture that embraces the melting pot of differences that exists.

In an article published on Inc. Southeast Asia, the digital analytics company, Sparkline, explains the use of a creative system where employees personalize flags to

represent their culture and home countries. Paired together with weekly celebrations that target cultural appreciation, the practice is to introduce and give insight to other employees regarding the diverse cultures of the team. The organic change that was fostered by these initiatives created a desire of sharing that presents itself in the frequent form of gift-giving and souvenirs from their home countries. Another strategy implemented to improve connectivity can be seen in the Singaporean big data company, Nugit. Launching a program that encourages employees to get to know one another, the organization sets up one-on-one ‘dates’ to enhance collaboration efforts in the future. At the same time, knowledge sharing sessions are conducted every week so that team members can share opinions, best practices or even to introduce themselves better to the team.

The drive for more inclusivity in the workspace can also be attributed to the Western influence brought by the robust expansion of economies in Asia Pacific. Multinational corporations are able to transfer organizational practices in the West to their subsidiaries in East Asia, promoting hybridization and local adoption. In countries like Korea, which traditionally had difficulties in integrating gender diversity into the workspace, many women were pressured to leave their jobs and take care of their families (Heidrick & Struggles, 2013). IBM, an organization that has 30 consecutive years of achievements in the ‘Working Mother 100 Best Companies’ in the US, was among the first to introduce family-friendly policies to Korea (Ilbo, 2015). Similar patterns could be observed from organizations like Google, Goldman Sachs, and Baxter, among the companies that facilitate the transfer of gender inclusivity programs into Asia.

While there is no single way to deal with diversity (Mercer, 2014), being aware of the differences and viewing these characteristics as opportunities for an exchange of perspectives is the first step to mitigating the effects of miscommunication and encouraging critical thinking. Because of our tendencies to perceive the world from our own perspectives, one of the major barriers to critical thinking lies in our egocentrism and socio-centrism (Elder, 2004). Practicing metacognition in diversity experiences breaks down rigid modes of thinking and brings to light perspectives outside our own range of experiences. Through meaningful interaction with individuals of different backgrounds and values, we challenge biased generalizations and increase sensitivity and appreciation of diversity. Like all efforts to assimilate change, it is consistently often a work-in-progress and organizations have to be critical and adaptive in their approach to develop a critical consciousness.

CONCLUSION

My Journey of Synthesis

The concept of facilitating generational diversity as a work-in-progress appeals to me because I was one of those individuals at the crossroads of a cultural upbringing and individualistic tendencies. As an undergraduate student, I actively pursued debating because it exposed me to a world beyond my culture. Through inquiry, I learned to practice critical reflection on myself and my environment. However, my new consciousness created a profound conflict as I became dissociated from the values of those around me and my heritage. I wanted to explore and question the premises that were presented to me since young but there were many social constructs that made it taboo. In some ways, having the awareness of alternatives but being asked to accept status quo was much harder than not being aware at all.

In my attempts to find reconciliation with this anxiety, I worked on a sociology research project trying to understand the concept of deviance and knowledge. For me, the contention lies in finding a balance where critical thinking would be a tool to generate new perspectives as opposed to an undisciplined application that exists to criticize. Through the Critical and Creative Thinking Program (CCT), my understanding of critical thinking have matured but just as importantly, so has my understanding of myself. I realize now that overcoming my emotions in the process of inquiry is among the many steps of self-development. Critical thinking is not necessarily about finding flaws or choosing one option over the other, but about acknowledging that there is always space for growth.

I believe my journey through the program is a reflection of the process that many generational cohorts experience in the workspace in East Asia; a tug-of-war between culture and change. There is a desire to innovate and to see progress beyond what was believed possible but at the same time, a fear of losing your sense of identity to foreign influences. For me, harmony between the two was achieved by moving away from the platform of fear towards a path of sincere curiosity. I opened myself to diverse viewpoints and situations, regardless if they complimented my own. I learned to reason through complex issues and evaluate ideas in tension with alternative suggestions. All of this, allowed me to find a position that was uniquely my own.

In my future work, I hope to be in the position to apply some of these principles that I've learned to facilitate generational diversity and critical thinking in human resource

development. In my opinion, there needs to be a combination of theoretical and practical knowledge to acquire a comprehensive understanding of issues and possible approaches. I would like to extend the literature on managing generational diversity in East Asia with relevant case studies from my own experience. Similar to the topic of this synthesis, there is no definite solution or final answer but we can learn and contribute from past endeavors. I hope to begin a dialogue around this topic in East Asia to bring awareness to the professional community and to cultivate purposeful inquiry.

When I was younger, I always thought I wanted answers. As it turns out, what I really liked were questions.

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