# Cultural Differences and the Development of the IPMA-HR Competency Model in China during Its Economic Transitional Period

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**Abstract:** This qualitative inquiry research uses the case study methodology within a constructivist conceptual framework. This study explores cultural differences and the development and implementation in China of a human resources competency model, the IPAM-HR competency certification training program, and analyzes the dynamics of the Chinese understanding of the competency model.

## Introduction

Training and certification training programs are on the increase in China as a result of globalization. Education and training programs are set to foster the broadest concept of international civilization by building education linkages across culture and countries. The importance of bridging cultures and cross-cultural learning and training has been emphasized by many scholars. In this study, I investigated the training program that I have assisted in developing in China, a single phenomenon—the competency certification program developed by the International Publication Management Association for Human Resources (IPMA-HR). The purpose of this study strives to understand how Chinese HR professionals make sense of the competency model when it is presented to them, and how meaning is constructed by particular Chinese individuals situated in a culture that influences his or her practices.

## Background and Setting

The IPMA-HR competency certification training program is an innovative practice of collaboration and partnership. IPMA-HR is an international human resources association with locations in 27 countries worldwide (http://www.ipma-hr.org). As a leader in public HR management, the organization has grown in size and stature throughout the world. The Chinese organization is called TC-SAFEA (Training Center of State Administration of Foreign Professional Experts Affairs). One of its main responsibility is to establish and administer training bases both in China and overseas in addition to its strong emphasis the introduction into China of international intellectual resources, including expertise and programs in a wide range of fields, including industry, agriculture, education, certification, and professional development.

The IPMA-HR competency model focuses in greatest detail on four emerging roles, HR expert, change agent, business partner, and leader. These roles then form the focus for the IPMA-HR Human Resource competencies instructional program. Before introducing its competency certification program into China, IPMA-HR adjusted its certification program based on a brief study of the China HR professional market. The modified China certification program retains the same four-day Competency Model but with an additional fifth day of training in the technical capacity modules. The technical capacity modules cover topics in the areas of employee selection, classification and compensation, performance management and employee and labor relations. China chose to import the IPMA-HR competency certification program mainly because of the competency model, the core of the IPMA-HR certification program, according to Neil Reichenberg, executive director of the IPMA-HR. USA. Zhang Jianguo, Deputy Director of

SAFEA said, the adoption and promotion of the IPMA-HR competency certification program will greatly advance the development of China's human resources management, and help improve China's HR evaluation system and management level.

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that guided this research is Constructivism from a cross-cultural perspective. The cross-cultural perspective referred to Hofstede's cultural differences theory, which was valuable in assessing, conceptualizing and responding to differences in culture. The work of Jean Piaget (1962, 19700), Lev Vygotsky (1978) and John Dewey (1938) as well as their integrated view of a constructivist perspectives established the parameters for this study. Each of their different foci in learning provided a solid basis for constructivism. The constructivist approach acknowledges cultural diversity with respect to both knowledge and ethics, suggesting that agreement can achieved through a process of cross-cultural dialogues when necessary.

There are studies on the influence of cultural differences in international program development (Hofstede, 2001) and studies on the transfer of training across international settings (Lim & Wentling, 1998; Lim, 1999; Kim, 1988). The research in this study focused only on the competency model of IPMA-HR certification program as a special case. It explored to what degree the cultural differences affected the construction of meaning by people situated in different cultures. This study examines from a cross-cultural perspective the Chinese HR professional understanding of IPMA-HR competency model on two obvious levels.

On the first level, participants are learning the IPMA-HR competency model not only to understand it in their minds but also to blend this model with their understandings from their professional practice in China. The active role taken by the participants enables each individual to develop the competency concept—make meaning of it in terms of their own understanding and experiences. Linking with learner's experiences helps avoid them being passive information recipients and it also helps them to identify ways in which they actively construct their knowledge in terms of their own prior experience and the meaning they attach to the people and environment they live in.

On the second level, HR Chinese professionals build their knowledge within their own cultural and social contexts. Participants will consciously or unconsciously apply each module or skill sets presented by American Instructors to match what they think is needed or necessary and useful in their job environment in China. The social and cultural factors play a very important role in their understanding of the competency model which is grounded in the Western HR culture. It was anticipated that the participants may experience uncertainty and ambiguity in their understanding.

## Study Methods and Design

Qualitative case study (Rodwell, 1998; Yin, 1994; Merriam, 1988) guided the research methodologically. To be more specific, this is a context-bound case study. All the participants of the study are not bound by site or location or in any way other than the fact that they are all IPMA-HR certificated professionals; they are all trainers and would-be trainers. The American participants are trainers who went to China to teach the IPMA-HR courses. The Chinese participants are those who received the same train-the-trainer training courses delivered in English by American instructors in China. I have conducted face-to-face interview with seven of the participants during the time I was in Beijing. Each interview was conducted privately to ensure that the participants would freely share their ideas and experiences. Open-ended email

interviews (surveys) were employed as the secondary methodology. Documentation review and participant observation were also employed as other methods of data collection for this research.

I was particularly interested in learning what each individual understood about competency and how that understanding is similar to or divergent among the IPMA-HR American professionals or IPMA-HR Chinese professionals. The first question investigated the commonality of the understanding of competence; the second set of questions investigated the culture differences. The third set of the questions tested the adaptation, integration and acceptance of the competency model.

I went to class every day as a regular student for about 10 days. I participated in the learning, discussion, role playing and other activities. I also attended the two examinations administrated by IPMA-HR. I took field notes for classes and activities in which I was involved. Through participation, I experienced various activities in the classroom, including ice-breaking introductions, role-playing and group discussions. The participatory experience enriched my background information and allowed me to "get a holistic view and to gather data that would inform the structuring of the interview process" (Kalnins, 1986, p.103). My personal experiences and involvement with the learning group also helped me collect additional information for the study.

The languages used in this study especially for data collection were English and Chinese. All the participants in the study understood and used the English language at various levels: native English speakers, non-native English speakers, native Chinese speakers and non-native Chinese speakers. Some non-native English speakers (native Chinese) were very comfortable and preferred to use English for communication in both spoken and written form when they participated in the study. Data analysis involved the inductive method followed the "bottom up" approach, moving from specific observations to broader generalization to concept. During the coding process, I followed the tasks identified by thematic analysis such as summarizing segments of data to generate concepts, patterns and themes, building hierarchies of themes and linking themes into theoretical models.

This study is limited in that respondents might be affected by factors of time and differences of education level, gender, and age, as well as by the type of work organization, working experiences and by the point in time when the survey and interview was conducted (Hofstede, 2001). As in all social science case studies, this study relied on the information provided by different participants, accepting the chance of false response or omitted details. Also some of the information collected during the interviews might be subject to problems of inaccuracy due to cultural misunderstanding. In addition, the position or the bias of the researcher might also have influenced the answers from some participants. This is the first study that has focused on the specific IPMA-HR/TC-SAFEA competency certification-training program which has been heartily welcomed in China. This study joins with many other cultural studies in its mission of encouraging cross-cultural training and adult education development as well as promoting culture awareness and reconciliation

## Findings

Based on the research questions, the findings emerged from the perspective of commonality of understanding, cultural differences and the effects and acceptance of the program. The analyses of the study demonstrate that cultural differences exist between China and America just as Hofstede (2001) and Fons Trompenaares and Hampden-Turner (1998) note and discussed in their studies. However, this case study also found that differences in culture do not affect the development of the IPMA-HR competency program with the right implementation

process, nor do they hinder Chinese HR professionals' learning of the IPMA-HR competency model and its training content. The high acceptance rate of the competency concept and the IPMA-HR competency model by Chinese HR professionals indicates the program has been successful in China and that the results of the training have been significant in assisting Chinese HR professionals in their practice. The analysis also summarized much useful information for programs to be delivered overseas. I list of the specific findings here. They include:

- Both Chinese and US IPMA-HR certified professionals who participated in the research shared an identical understanding of the competency definition and its connotation. There is more agreement than difference in their opinions and understanding of the IPMA-HR competency model.
- The data showed a high percentage of agreement that cultural differences exist in different respects, but they do not affect the development of the IPMA-HR program and do not hinder learning of the competency model and training content. A gap between US and Chinese culture did not create a problem in the training transfer.
- The competency concept and model is still new in practice in the HR profession in China, but the study showed a 99% percent acceptance rate of IPMA-HR training among the participants.
- The acceptance and adaptation of the training of each individual may vary due to personal factors, such as education, gender, age, profession, working experience and learning ability.
- Training that promotes universally recognized conceptual learning theory, such as competency and performance management, made it possible for a higher acceptance rate among Chinese learners.
- System-related factors, such as government support (State Administration of Foreign Expert Affair of PRC) and the commitment of organizations had a stronger influence on the development of the program than that of people-related factors in China.
- The current Chinese political environment and economic development is in favor of IPMA-HR program in China.
- The leadership function of TCSAFEA, the government agency, played a vital role in IPMA-HR program introduction, development and management in China. Government agencies in China represent authoritativeness and accreditation.
- The leadership and commitment of the IPMA-HR management team was important to the success of the physical transfer of the program to China.
- The well-established IPMA-HR program and strong partnership between accredited organizations made the program more accountable and trusted by organizations and individuals in China.
- Global impact and competitiveness in Chinese job markets forced individuals and professionals into learning and obtaining world-class certification.
- Instructor training, utilizing Chinese instructors and program localization, including the use of the local language, textbook translation, textbook modification, and Chinese case-study development helped the program to become more Chinese-orientated.
- Teaching techniques, including learner-centered principles, questions, discussions, and experience-sharing or networking allowed students to link experiences to the study and promote the application of the learning in their jobs.

- Cross-cultural issues must be considered, though they should not prevent an international training program from being physically transferred to another culture or country. Cross-cultural theory can provide more specific understanding about local learners.

There are various factors that account for these findings. The first of these factors is timing and environmental readiness. This refers to the initiation of the program through the effort of TC-SAFEA in recognition of the need for this type of training in China. TC-SAFEA's initial plan and the cooperation of IPMA-HR provided a ready environment and paved the way for the positive progress of the program. The second factor explains why cultural differences did not greatly inhibit the learning and development of the program. Local efforts were exerted by both IPMA-HR and TC-SAFEA, particularly with respect to program and content adjustment and the application of principles of adult teaching and learning. The third factor at play in the willingness of participants to accept, adapt and integrate their learning into practice is the impact of globalization and the competitiveness of the job market in China, as well as the importance attributed to learning for personal growth. The fourth factor, which may operate indirectly, consists of external elements such as the requirements for such training imposed by the dynamic HR industry, professional organizations, and local governments in China. Requirements for taking the training imposed by the national government, the local government, or other related organizations might be factors among the different interest groups and regions of China.

## Implications for the Theory and Practice

Several research implications also surfaced from this study. First, the consideration of culture and cultural differences in the development of international training programs is one of the most important elements in determining success. More and more researchers and scholars take this position as we march further into the 21st century because people are turning to cultural factors for explanations regarding modernization, business strategy, the behavior of ethnic groups and economic development. Second, cultural differences can be reconciled and minimized by efforts such as promoting cultural awareness and cultural exposure and exchange. Cultural reconciliation is one of the three step strategies of Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner in the integration of cultural differences. The study is an example of reconciliation of cultural differences, which is not only possible but also can be successful. Because of the shared desire to be successful, the IPMA-HR and TC-SAFEA worked to build consensus in relation to their business development goals. They paid great attention to relationship building; their *Guanxi* is getting ever closer with each meeting and discussion. This relationship building, the intimacy of cooperation, allows trust and friendship to develop between culturally different people and the cultural gap gradually loses its threatening nature, and culture distance is diminished (Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey, 1998, as cited in Hofstede, 2001, p. 425). Third, establishing a process that will minimize cultural differences is the key to the acceptance of the program. The program development plan and implementation approaches used by both TCSAFEA and IPMA-HR corresponded with suggestions and recommendations I have collected from the research participants, which I summarized in the study as a three-phases process: Instructional, developmental and adaptation/integration.

## Conclusion

A number of the conclusions of this qualitative study indicate critical factors in intercultural program success. In foreign program introduction, it is crucial to introduce well established programs and build strong partnerships between accredited organizations to promote trust and program accountability. System-related factors, such as government support (State

Administration of Foreign Expert Affair of PRC) and organizational commitment will influence the development of the program. It is also important to consider cross-cultural factors and modify training content and materials for local learners to increase local potential for acceptance and adaptability.

In program delivery, by emphasizing teaching techniques, including learner-centered principles, questions, discussions, and experience-sharing, learners can link experiences to the program model and enhance the application of the acquired learning in their jobs. Furthermore, it is very important to establish an implementation process that bridge cultural gaps. The analytic process employed in this study focused on three distinct phases of program implementation: development, instruction, and adaptation. However, further studies on developmental learning or the cognitive apperceptions of the participants will help evaluate the program in greater depth.

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