Gung Ho Movie Analysis
Using Geert Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions Theory

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**Gung Ho Movie Analysis**

**Table of Contents**

Executive Summary.................................................................................................................. 3

Introduction............................................................................................................................. 6

I. Comparison of Japanese and American cultures.............................................................. 6
   A. Power Distance Index..................................................................................................... 6
   B. Individualism versus Collectivism............................................................................... 7
   C. Uncertainty Avoidance............................................................................................... 8
   D. Masculinity versus Femininity................................................................................... 9
   E. Pragmatic versus Normative....................................................................................... 10
   F. Indulgence versus Restraint....................................................................................... 10

II. Impact on Japanese and American management practices due to cultural differences..... 11
   A. Process and workflow development.......................................................................... 11
   B. Promotion, advancement and reward......................................................................... 12
   C. Planning..................................................................................................................... 12
   D. Organizing................................................................................................................ 13
   E. Staffing...................................................................................................................... 14
   F. Leading....................................................................................................................... 15

Conclusion............................................................................................................................. 16

Works Cited.......................................................................................................................... 17
Executive Summary

Soichiro Honda, founder of Honda Motor Company once said, “If you only hire those people you understand, the company will never get people better than you are. Always remember that you often find outstanding people among those you don’t particularly like” (Honda R&D Americas, Inc., 2014). Although Ron Howard’s *Gung Ho* is not based on Honda Motors, it is based on the similar yet fictional Assan Motor Company (Howard, 1986) and shows viewers the differences that two cultures face when they work together without understanding each other, and throughout most of the film, without liking each other very much at all.

To better understand the cultural significance of *Gung Ho*, we will look to Geert Hofstede’s six Dimensions of National Culture. Hofstede uses Power Distance Index, Individualism versus Collectivism, Masculinity versus Femininity, Uncertainty Avoidance Index, Pragmatism versus Normative, and Indulgence versus Restraint measurements to identify culture values and explain their differences (Hofstede, Dimensions, 2014). Because each dimension results in a measurement, Hofstede’s theory allows for the results of the analysis to be quantified as well, making the use of his Dimensions of National Culture extremely valuable for comparing cultures.

*Gung Ho* shows us the results of a very awkward, yet comical culture clash between countries when an American worker played by Michael Keaton convinces a Japanese auto firm to reopen the factory in his hometown (Amazon, 2014). While the story is imagined, the movie makes it easy to see the differences between cultures and how they can impact businesses. When comparing examples of Hofstede’s theories to the film, the results are relatively accurate in terms of measurement and symbolism. For example, Hofstede’s theory finds that the United States has
Gung Ho Movie Analysis

a low Power Distance Index (PDI) of 41, which is a measurement of acceptance of the inequality of power distribution among people, and a high Individualism measurement of 91, which is the degree to which members of society look towards group or individual needs. What these differences between PDI and Individualism translate to for the US are tendencies to establish hierarchies for convenience, thereby creating informal and participative organizational structures where both managers and employees consult and share information frequently (Hofstede, US, 2014). Japan, by contrast, has a PDI of 54 and a low-to-borderline Individualism score of 46, making them more Collectivist than Individual. What this combination of scores means for Japan is that they are always cognizant of hierarchical position, and can be slow to make decisions. Decisions must be confirmed by top management according to the hierarchical structure, but there is not always one top decision maker which can slow the process. As a Collectivist society, these decisions are group oriented, frequently based on company loyalty and are paternalistic in nature (Hofstede, Japan, 2014).

The Power Distance Index and Individualism measurements described above were loosely demonstrated in the film by the ways that both Keaton and his Japanese colleague, played by Gedde Watanabe, communicate with their superiors and their staff regarding complaints and assignments. Hunt Stevenson, played by Keaton, maintains a very casual and informal relationship with plant employees, involving them in the decision making process when possible and is quick to question the decisions of his superiors. The American employees are concerned with taking time off for personal reasons, and do not place the company’s well-being as a priority. Oishi Kazihiro, played by Watanabe, has a much more formal relationship with his employees and supervisors. He is reluctant to question decisions or his superiors and treat his
employees any differently. We can see a great example of both PDI and Individualism examples in the following dialogue from the film (Wikiquote):

Kazihiro: “We know what we are doing. I see now why they gave me ribbons of shame. Because I was beginning to think like an American!”
Stevenson: “Hah! Hey don't flatter yourself, Ace.”
Kazihiro: “It’s true! Everyone in this country thinks they are special. Nobody wants to be part of the team. They're all too busy getting personalized license plates. None of you would last two days in management training program.”
Stevenson: “None of us would be stupid enough to stay two days.”
Kazihiro: “You are all selfish, and that is what makes you weak.”
Stevenson: “I'm weak? You don't even have the guts to stand up to your own boss! You're a real Millie, you know that?”
Kazihiro: “I am no Millie!”

After comparing Japanese and American cultures using Hofstede’s theory, we will discuss the impact that the previously discussed differing values may have on management and human resource practices for companies. Some factors that may be impacted and are exemplified in the film and by Hofstede’s theories include advancement and reward practices and their relationship to company loyalty, planning, staffing, organizing and leading. Hofstede’s Dimensions helps us identify cultural differences while Gung Ho helps personify some of these management and human resource complications in an easy to understand and entertaining way. The challenges faced by the employees of Assan Motors may have been dreamed by the fantastical mind of the film’s writers and producers, but can certainly be related to and studied by business students and professors as a means to understand and overcome cultural barriers, just like the employees of Assan managed to do by the end of the film.
Gung Ho Movie Analysis

Introduction

“It's run our way. The way that we know how! That's the way it is!” was exclaimed by Watanabe’s character during the 1986 film *Gung Ho* in response to being questioned about the factory’s performance (Wikiquote). This quote is a perfect example of the cultural ideals and dynamics that may be present when two or more companies begin to work together as they did during the film. As explained in Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions Theory, there are six measurable dimensions that explain the effects of a society’s values and behaviors in its culture, and examples of these dimensions can be found in the film. This paper uses Hofstede’s Dimensions of National Culture to compare American and Japanese cultures and to describe the impact these cultural differences may have on management and human resource practices in those countries as illustrated in the film *Gung Ho*.

Analysis

I. Comparing Japanese and American cultural values, examples from the movie *Gung Ho* can be used to demonstrate each of Geert Hofstede’s six Dimensions of National Culture.

A. Power Distance Index (PDI)

A.1 Power Distance Index measures acceptance and expectation by the less powerful members of organizations of unequal distributions of power. It signifies inequality measured from below as opposed to above and suggests that it is endorsed by both followers and leaders (Hofstede, Dimensions, 2014). Hofstede’s PDI analysis of Japan resulted in a score of 54 compared to a score of 40 for the United States. Japan’s score indicates that they are always
Gung Ho Movie Analysis

mindful of positional rankings in social settings and that they act accordingly (Hofstede, Japan, 2014). The US, by comparison has a low PDI which is agreeable with their thought processes that everyone is unique, therefore, everyone is unequal (Hofstede, US, 2014).

A.2 PDI is personified in the movie early on when Keaton’s character first arrives in Japan. He encounters Watanabe’s character who is going through a management training program. Watanabe explains he is wearing ribbons of shame while begging for another chance to be a better manager. Keaton is dismissive of the proceedings and does not recognize the management relationship nor ritual occurring as significant (Howard, 1986). Having a higher PDI, the Japanese would follow the demands of their superior without question much easier than their American counterpart in this example.

B. Individualism versus Collectivism

B.1 This dimension of Hofstede’s theory measures the degree to which people look after themselves and their immediate families or tend to integrate into larger groups. On the collectivist side of the scale, loyalty falls to the group rather than the individual (Hofstede, Dimensions, 2014). The US has one of the most individualistic cultures in the world, measuring at 91. Combined with their low PDI, the US tends to place emphasis on equal rights, individual achievement, informal communication and low reliance on authority. US managers and employees consult each other frequently and share information openly. Americans are comfortable interacting with people they do not know and are not shy about doing so (Hofstede, US, 2014). Japan, on the other hand, has a borderline score and is more collectivist at 46. Harmony is important to Japan, as well as loyalty to the group and company, and paternalistic practices are common (Hofstede, Japan, 2014).
Gung Ho Movie Analysis

B.2  *Gung Ho* depicted the clash between collectivist and individualist cultures beautifully. The Japanese workers performed without complaint at a lower wage and higher production rate consistently. The American workers, however, showed less loyalty to the company than Japanese workers and it was evident when Keaton tried to convince his workers to meet the 15,000 production quota. Instead of making concessions to meet the company goal as their Japanese counterparts had, the American plant workers immediately began talking themselves out of meeting the goal and finding ways to lower it. Keaton thought he could get them to push to the 15,000 quota anyway, but found without the same level of company loyalty, the US workers were not as driven and motivated to meet the goal (Howard, 1986).

C.  Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI)

C.1  Hofstede’s cultural dimension of uncertainty avoidance measures a culture’s ability to deal with uncertain situations. Cultures that avoid uncertainty try to do so by implementing laws and rules to protect them, and are often motivated by their nervous energy. On the opposite side, uncertainty accepting cultures are more tolerant of differing opinions, try to have fewer rules and are more open to varying religions and philosophies (Hofstede, Dimensions, 2014). The USA has a below average score of 46 which means they are fairly accepting of new ideas and are relatively willing to try new things (Hofstede, US, 2014). Japan is one of the most uncertainty avoiding countries in the world with a UAI score of 92. This is often attributed to the constant threat of natural disasters but does translate to the business world and can be seen through the long and very thorough decision making process they usually follow (Hofstede, Japan, 2014).

C.2  Hofstede’s UAI dimension can essentially be used to describe the entire plot of the film, *Gung Ho*. As the two cultures clash throughout the film, we are left wondering if they will be
Gung Ho Movie Analysis

able to accept each other, and if the plant will be able to be successful. Ultimately the successful acclimation of these two cultures is needed to save this small town, and the uncertainty therein is the basis of the film (Amazon, 2014).

D. Masculinity versus Femininity

D.1 Masculinity versus femininity refers to the delivery of emotional values and roles such as assertiveness and achievement versus social support and nurturing that can sometimes be associated with masculine and feminine gender roles. The USA has a high score in this dimension at 62, which indicates a masculine society driven by achievement and success. Combined with a high individualism score, the USA is both masculine and individualistic and tend to place high values on personal achievements and operate with a “winner take all” attitude (Hofstede, US, 2014). Japan, by contrast, is one of the most masculine societies in the world with a Hofstede score of 95. However, in combination with their collectivist mentality, this tends to be displayed by perfectionism and workaholism (Hofstede, Japan, 2014).

D.2 Japanese and American masculinity is portrayed well at the end of Gung Ho when the workers realize the will fall short of the 15,000 production goal. To try to meet the goal, the American workers decide they can take some shortcuts and Keaton’s character says, “Now on these last few, we might need to cut a few corners. Just little things, like…engines” (Wikiquote). When Assan management inspects the last vehicles, they find far less than the perfection they expect from their workers and proceed to fire him. Keaton’s character convinces Assan to give them another chance by comparing their performance to the success of a winning basketball story and saying they will make a great comeback, which is a great use of symbolism of American masculine and individualistic cultural dimensions (Howard, 1986).
E. Pragmatic versus Normative

E.1 Pragmatic versus normative, also known as long-term versus short-term orientation describes how society has to maintain some links to its past to deal with challenges of both the present and future. The USA has a low, normative score of 26 and is present-oriented with traditional values and tend to measure performance on a short-term basis (Hofstede, US, 2014). Japan is very pragmatic with a score of 88, is future-oriented and persistent with virtue and tend to measure performance on a long-term basis (Hofstede, Japan, 2014).

E.2 An example of the differences between American short-term orientation and Japanese long-term orientation in *Gung Ho* is when Keaton’s character learns that Assan may never open the factory in his town. Keaton was expecting immediate action for his workers, which follows the present-oriented trends of the American people, while Assan management were planning for the future of the company, following the future-oriented trends of the Japanese people (Howard, 1986).

F. Indulgence versus Restraint

F.1 Hofstede’s dimension of indulgence versus restraint is a measurement of humanity and impulse control. Weak impulse control is considered indulgent while strong control is considered restraint. Japan has a low score of 42, indicating they have a culture of restraint and do not emphasize desire gratification or leisure time, which may, in some cases, lead to pessimism or cynicism (Hofstede, Japan, 2014). The USA is more indulgent than Japan with a score of 68, indicating a work hard/play hard culture (Hofstede, US, 2014).
In *Gung Ho*, we see Watanabe’s family cross the cultural barrier from restraint to indulgence. When Keaton first visits for dinner, the home is very clean, organized and without many indulgences in American fares, but later in the film, we find that Watanabe’s wife has embraced the indulgent American culture and is serving punch and sausage for dinner while the children watch MTV and dress like G.I. Joe and play with action figures to match, a far cry from the restricted home environment earlier in the film (Howard, 1986).

The impact on management practices, specifically those related to human resources can be large due to the cultural differences found between opposing countries. Examples of management and human resource practices that can be impacted by Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions Theories.

A. Process and workflow development

A.1 The major difference between the USA and Japan in terms of process and workflow development can be described as best practice versus continuous improvement. American managers tend to establish a “best practice,” that is, a best way of doing things, and then repeat the process to obtain the same “best” outcome. Japanese managers tend to establish this same best practice, but instead of repeating it, they find ways to continuously improve it the method for an even better outcome (Victor, 2011). We see examples of this dynamic in *Gung Ho* through American specialization on the production line where everyone has a job to do with no attempts to make the process any better or attempts to improve production. The Japanese plant had a much higher production rate by contrast, as they trained everyone on each task and continuously looked for ways to be more efficient (Howard, 1986).
A.2 Process and workflow development can be linked to Hofstede’s theory of power distance and individualist versus collectivist culture. The Japanese collectivist culture with higher PDI places a higher value on management decisions without question and performs with loyalty to the company, thinking of the greater good of the company first, which follows the continuous improvement process very well (Hofstede, Japan, 2014).

B. Promotion, advancement and reward

B.1 Rapid advancement and reward is the norm in American culture and is usually based on merit. However, in Japanese culture, dedication and long service is rewarded, so it is rare for a new employee to advance beyond a longer, more dedicated employee (Victor, 2011). The expectation of the quick reward by Americans is depicted in Gung Ho when workers ask if they will be rewarded for not meeting the 15,000 production quota. They expect rewards for coming close to meeting the goal, which falls in line with the rapid advancement expectation discussed by Victor.

B.2 Expecting a quick reward is an example of normative or short-term oriented, individualistic American behavior as explained by Hofstede (Hofstede, US, 2014). Japanese culture does not reward behavior this quickly due to their pragmatic, long-term oriented culture, and we see in the film that they did not give rewards for meeting goals, the work itself was the reward. Also, as a collectivist culture, they are more loyal to the company which also makes the work more rewarding than the rewards they may receive from performing it (Hofstede, Japan, 2014).

C. Planning
C.1 There are several differences in managerial planning between Japanese and American culture. Americans tend to make faster, individual based decisions that start at the top and flow down and involve a few people who sell the decision and then communicate it to others. Japanese managers take longer to make decisions but implement it much faster, and do it collectively. Whereas only a few Americans may present or sell an idea or decision, a large group of Japanese managers may be present for a similar presentation for their company. (Weihrich). We see a great example of these differences in the beginning of Gung Ho when Keaton’s character travels alone to Japan to speak to a large group of Assan managers to convince them to reopen the factory. The difference in management group size in the decision making process is apparent from the beginning of the film.

C.2 Two of Hofstede’s theories are extremely apparent in management planning differences between cultures, including long-term versus short-term orientation regarding the timeliness of decision making, and individualism versus collectivism regarding the group thinking processes presented as well as the way in which information is shared between management and staff (Hofstede, 2014).

D. Organizing

D.1 Organizing among American managers tends to follow individual accountability and a formal structure, with clear and specific decision making responsibility. Japanese managers tend to have collective responsibility and accountability without clear decision making or formal structure (Weihrich). Gung Ho frequently showed large groups of Assan managers versus small or singular American managers, which exemplifies this trend. We also see examples of American organizing trends when Keaton takes responsibility in the end of the
Gung Ho Movie Analysis

film for misleading his workers and allowing them to think they could get a raise if they only made 13,000 cars when the goal was actually 15,000 (Howard, 1986).

D.2 Organizing practices follow Hofstede’s theories of individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance and power distance. All four of these dimensions are related to organizing differences in whether or not the country has an individual or collective approach, is assertive or supportive in company communication, has a long or short decision making process and is linked to the acceptance of power inequality in surrounding authority figures (Hofstede, 2014). We see all of these traits through organizing behavior and all are handled differently, depending on the culture.

E. Staffing

E.1 Staffing differences between American and Japanese management can be found among advancement and appraisal timing, hiring, loyalty and training. American managers tend to hire people directly from school or from other companies and there is loyalty to the profession, not the company. Rapid advancement is desired and acclaimed, performance is evaluated frequently on short-term results and promotions and rewards are given based on individual performance. Hesitation is placed on training unless rewards and promotions are likely. Japanese managers also hire young people from schools but rarely from other companies as loyalty is to the company, not the profession. Performance evaluations are infrequent and are based on long-term results, promotions are very slow through the ranks and training is considered an investment. Lifetime employment with the same company is common in Japan (Weihrich). Gung Ho illustrates company loyalty from the Japanese perspective throughout the film. They work long, hard hours without complaint and with rare extra reward. Watanabe’s character explains they are not paid overtime for extra work,
gung ho movie analysis

getting the job done is the reward the employees seek, not extra pay. The American workers frequently made personal demands of time-off, more pay, and leave early, showing no loyalty to the company at all (Howard, 1986).

E.2 Staffing differences between Japan and American can be attributed to Hofstede’s theories of short-term versus long-term orientation and individualism versus collectivism. As a short-term oriented, individualist culture, Americans tend to want to be rewarded quickly for individual achievements (Hofstede, US, 2014). With their long-term oriented, collectivist culture, our Japanese colleagues tend to shy away from individual attention and focus back on the group effort and are much more loyal to the company and group, as a result (Hofstede, Japan, 2014).

F. Leading

F.1 American leaders tend to act as the head of the group and are clear and direct, communicating from top to bottom. Japanese leaders, however, adopt a patriarchal style and act as a group member, frequently communicating from the bottom up with somewhat ambiguous communication styles (Weihrich). Keaton was the epitome of an American leader throughout Gung Ho, speaking as the spokesperson for the group, meeting directly with Assan management, who always approached Keaton as a group (Howard, 1986).

F.2 Differences in leading styles can be attributed to Hofstede’s individualist versus collectivist dimension. America has a very high individualistic culture, so they would have singular leaders that would approach their inferiors directly and communicate face-to-face with them to clarify instructions and roles (Hofstede, US, 2014). Since Japan has a lower score and has a collectivist culture (Hofstede, Japan, 2014), managers can be expected to use a group
Gung Ho Movie Analysis

approach as described above by Weichrich, which can cause managers to become facilitators instead of commanding leaders in some situations.

Conclusion

As demonstrated through an analysis of the film *Gung Ho*, in comparison to Hofstede’s six Dimensions of National Culture, there are many differences between Japanese and American societies, business and management practices, customs, values and norms. The film provided a fictional platform to depict culture clash, and while a real life merger with such offensive clashes would not be as entertaining, *Gung Ho* made the elements of Hofstede’s theory easier to identify and understand. If viewed for entertainment value alone, it was witty and charming, with a classic 80’s feel good song and ending, but could hopefully be used to propel people to research cultural differences further so that viewers can walk away from the film with newfound knowledge and respect of others and all their differences. Like the Soichiro Honda quote from the beginning of this paper implied, we, as a person or a company, will never grow to be any better than what we already are if we don’t step outside of our comfort zones beyond what we currently understand. *Gung Ho* along with Hofstede’s theory provide the tools for managers to learn to do just that.
Gung Ho Movie Analysis

Works Cited


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