A CASE STUDY OF ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE OF CONSTRUCTION JOINT VENTURES IN HONG KONG

Anita M M Liu[1], Richard Fellows[2]

1. Professor, Dept. of Civil and Building Engineering, Loughborough University, UK.
2. Professor, Dept. of Real Estate and Construction, University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong.

ABSTRACT

Culture can be regarded as a system of shared meanings that organises values into mental programmes which guide the behaviours of people within communities – notably, nations and organisations. Organisational culture involves cognition, affect and behaviour and reflects customary thinking, feeling and acting that are attributed to a particular group of people as they learn to cope with their environment. Largely, behaviours of organisations depend on the decisions and business strategies of top management and are greatly influenced by culture. There is a close relationship between the characteristics of organisational culture in a joint venture (JV) organisation and the parent company; often, the organisational culture of the (most) powerful parent company dominates. That reflection relates to the top management's strategy and the allocation of authority among JV partners.

The case study investigates the organisational culture of an international JV project in Hong Kong that pools resources from partners with different cultural backgrounds; the project director is seconded from the dominant parent company. The JV exhibits cultural characteristics which show a synergy of elements from the founding partners but with emphasis on the culture of the dominant partner in the JV.

Keywords: Joint venture, organisational culture, Hong Kong, construction projects

Introduction

The realisation of major, international construction projects often involves joint ventures (JVs). The realisation process comprises a myriad of transactions amongst a huge number of participants. Viewed as a supply chain (Titus and Brochner, 2005), each component transaction is founded in the use values attributed to the subject matter of the transaction by the two transacting parties who, then, arrive at the market price at which the transaction occurs. Aggregating the results of the constituent transactions between individuals and organisations yields the completed project. On the assumption of (reasonably) rational behaviour within various competitive markets, thereby indicating that each component transaction is necessary, the realisation process is a complex of interdependencies between individual transactions amongst social institutions. Hence, as the realisation process depends upon those social institutions, so too, to varying degrees, do those social institutions (performance, survival and success) depend upon the project (and other) transactions.

Kotler (1972) notes that: "a transaction is the exchange of *values* between two parties." The things-of-value need not be limited to goods, services, and money; they include other resources such as time, energy and feelings. In many international joint ventures (IJV), the vast number of interdependent, component transactions, coupled with diversity amongst participants leads to complexity and, consequent, boundary management issues and risks. As Das and Teng (1999) note, "Because of incompatible organizational routines and cultures, partner firms often do not work together efficiently".

Joint Ventures – Culture and Conflict

Formally, a JV is a particular category of business alliance; and JVs usually have a hybrid organizational structure that is different from, but similar to, the organization features of the partners involved. However, an informal JV, such as a construction project, is a hybrid of market and hierarchy elements, via both the more formal inter-organisational relationships and the more informal processes through which the individuals working on the project operate and interact. Over time, JVs tend to develop their own cultures, with important contributions from their parent organisations, but also incorporating whatever cultural values other organizational members bring with them. It is this process of culture in action, i.e. the development of a new culture for the joint venture, which is the source of many conflicts and a major contributor to the failure of many JVs (Swierczek 1994).

A business alliance may be defined as "an ongoing, formal business relationship between two or more independent organizations to achieve common goals" (Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1992). Glaister, Husan and Buckley (1998) suggest that, within the many alternative forms of long term, inter-firm accords (coalitions, joint ventures, licenses, supply agreements etc.), there are "two basic organizational modes of alliance: equity joint ventures (EJVs) and non-equity joint ventures (NEJVs)".

The strategic purposes of alliances are categorised as growth opportunity, strategic intent, protection against external threats, and diversification, whilst operational purposes are resource efficiency, increase asset utilisation, enhance core competence, and close any performance gap with competitor(s). A supplementary consideration is that an alliance form may be stipulated as the legally required structure for external organisations to operate in the location. Alliances with competitors (horizontal) may be made with existing competitors, potential competitors, indirect competitors, and new entrants whilst non-competitor alliances (vertical) occur with customers, potential customers, suppliers, and potential suppliers.

Clearly, the focus of alliances is on transactions which are (otherwise) external to the individual participants (occur in a market context) and so, necessitate formal relationships between independent organisations which intend to undertake activities together through some pooling of resources, thereby leading to the imposition of formal governance structures (to convert to a form of hierarchy in the supply).

The reasons for forming an alliance may be the need to enter new markets, obtain new technology / best quality, economies of scale, reducing financial risk and sharing costs of R&D, achieving / ensuring competitive advantage (Elmuti and Kathawala, 2001; Glaister et al, 1998). However, Li (1995) finds that international JVs involving US pharmaceutical and computer companies have a higher rate of failure than wholly-owned investment projects.

Julian (2005) reports that the presence of two or more parent organizations from different cultures and geographic locations tends to make an IJV a complex form of organisation structure that is often difficult to manage. Also, because parent organisations are legally separate entities, each has its own corporate culture and managerial way of doing things. This further increases managerial complexity and complicates the issues of coordination and joint problem solving for managers in IJVs.

Given the importance of relationships and behaviour to the operation and (successful) performance of JVs, together with their objectives, it seems clear that culture is of fundamental impact, especially when considering compatibilities amongst participants.

Culture is manifested through facets of behaviour. Behaviour is dependent upon values and beliefs, whether any behaviour is determined by conscious thought/evaluation or 'instinctive'. Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952), following their discovery of 164 definitions, define culture as, "…patterns, explicit and implicit of and for human behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiment in artefacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and, especially, their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other as conditioning elements of future action".

Hofstede, (1994a) defines culture as, "…the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes one category of people from another." That definition indicates that culture is learned, rather than being innate in the person or inherited genetically; it is inherited behaviourally through replicating and responding to the behaviour of others. Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997) advance five value-oriented dimensions of culture which, they suggest, "…greatly influence our ways of doing business and managing as well as our responses in the face of oral dilemmas". Cameron and Quinn (1999) employ a 'competing values' model in which 'flexibility and discretion' is juxtaposed to 'stability and control' on one dimension; the other dimension juxtaposes 'internal focus and integration' and 'external focus and differentiation'. The resultant model yields four quadrants, each denoting a type of organisational culture: Clan, Adhocracy, Market, Hierarchy.

Cameron and Quinn (1999) emphasise that organisations may not exhibit a single, unitary culture. However, Schneider (2000) asserts that every successful organisation has a core culture (control; collaboration; competence; cultivation) which is central to its functioning and Weeks and Gulunic (2003) discuss the gradual, evolutionary nature of change in organisational cultures in path-dependent directions, which may be punctuated by periods of stability and others of rapid, step-type changes.

Encounters between (inevitably) somewhat differing cultures generate clashes / conflict. In particular, research into organisational 'mergers' indicates that, "Usually the corporate culture of the most powerful or economically successful company dominates." (Furnham, 1997). Practically, 'merger' means 'take-over' and so, in JVs, whether formal or informal, one participant is likely to dominate (if only transiently) the shifting multi-goal, power-based coalition in construction joint venture (CJV) projects.

IJVs are autonomous organizations from their inception (Auster, 1987). However, the academic and practitioner literature suggests strongly that parent firms do not allow IJV to function independently and form their own organizational culture and identities apart from the parent companies (Geringer and Herbert, 1989; Main, 1990). Parent companies want to exert management control over the newly formed IJV through different types of parental control structures. Killing (1982) suggests that the most effective form of control is the situation where one partner dominates decision-making control within the venture.

Conflict inevitably exists in JV projects which may lead to project failure. However, some organizational theorists believe that if conflict is managed properly, it can increase organizational effectiveness. JV contractual procurement is adopted widely on major construction projects in Hong Kong. Amongst such projects, most are formed between local and foreign partners. The Airport Core Program (ACP) is a classic example of IJV construction in Hong Kong. This set of projects demonstrate that, despite conflicts, if the projects are managed properly with appropriate styles, (I)JVs can be successful on large-scale infrastructure projects.

Project-based CJVs

Most CJVs in Hong Kong are "Project-based", each with a finite life span – the JV is dissolved upon (physical) completion of the project. Sillars & Kangari (2004) state that a project-based JV is a special type of alliance and, often, is used to form a competitive organisational structure in the global market; it allow participants to assemble project-needed assets quickly – on a short-term basis without substantial investment. Such JVs are temporary in nature, i.e. the creation of a separate entity through the alliance of two or more organisations for the purpose of carrying out a specific project (as under 'project partnering' – Bennett and Jayes, 1995). The JV participants join, often through contractual agreement, to contribute resources of skill, experience, financing or physical resources (Badger et al. 1993). According to Lorange and Roos (1992), project-based JVs are organisations to which the parents put in a minimum of strategic resources, entering an arrangement for jointly creating strategic value through a common, temporary organization. The resources generated do not get distributed to the parties except for the financial results (e.g. dividends, royalties, etc.). An example of a project-based JV is the creation of a strategic alliance in a certain country to facilitate entry into that country; each of the parties contributes resources only as required to perform the project, and the rewards are repatriated to each party as financial return (Lorange and Roos 1992).

Project-based JVs are characterized by pre-determined limited life spans and activities which are oriented towards well-defined objectives (Hung et al. 2002). In construction, this type of JV is usually formed when one partner is required to undertake a special project with high technology and financial requirements and the other contractor has a market advantage. The JVs are terminated upon the completion of the given project. Such limitation in time usually leads to management problems – for instance, pressure for rapid decisions, the selection of an inappropriate partner. Parent firms have less time to understand the local environment and to investigate their potential partner(s) thoroughly. Further, culture related conflict is almost inevitable in this type of JV if adequate planning and deliberation do not precede key partnership and venture formation decisions. Lynch (1993) compares projected-based and traditional, more enduring, JVs (see Table 1).

Table 1: Comparison of project-based and traditional joint ventures.

Area of comparison	Project-based JV	Traditional JV
Life span	Finite	Indefinite
Nature	Dissolving after project	On-going
Strategic planning	Short-term orientation	Long term orientation
Time to rectify default	Within contract period	On-going process
Decision making	Relatively fast	Relatively slow
Management style	Task oriented	Business oriented
Partner relationship	Short-term orientation	Long term orientation
Information flow	Must be Quick	On-going process
Product/Service improvement	Defined by contract	On-going process
Control	Hierarchy	Team work
Primary Objective	Completion of project on time	Business objective
Possible benefits	Possible win-lose situation	Win-win situation

(Source: adapted from Lynch, 1993:26)

According to Lynch (1993), the differences of the project-based and traditional joint ventures are wide ranging, from the limited life span of the venture, the planning horizons, to the decision making and management styles, and the required information flows for yielding potential benefits for the two different types of JV. International construction projects are often project-based IJVs.

Johnson et al (2001) also state that parental control over a legal autonomous organisation may also result in an area of conflict unique to IJVs. The constant interference from parent organisations prevents an IJV from evolving into an integrated organisation. Therefore, conflict inevitably exists between parents and a newly formed, project-based IJV. According to Johnson et al (2001), the three conflict relationships which might appear in IJVs are:

1. Conflict between parents,
2. Conflict within the IJV between parents, and
3. Conflict between parents and IJV management

Rationale for the Case Study

Both mergers and CJVs involve procedural integration as well as physical integration of resources to various extents – depending on the environmental/project specifics at the time. Whilst procedural integration, in mergers, involves the combination of systems procedures and rules, physical integration entails the consolidation of assets and equipment. However, in CJVs, managerial and socio-cultural integration is more important, and relates to cultural integration, integration of management styles and changes in organisation structure.

Datta's (1991) findings indicate that one aspect of managerial integration in mergers, namely differences in management styles, has an important impact on post-acquisition performance while impediments to procedural integration in the form of differences in reward systems do not play an important role. Thus, research is necessary to explore the importance of task forces in mediating problems and conflicts in CJVs that emerge out of differences in terms of conflict management styles, cultures, and systems to provide insights.

A CJV brings together the management groups of two or more organizations with styles which might be similar or very different. Significant differences can contribute to *cultural ambiguity* (Buono, Bowditch and Lewis 1985), a situation characterized by uncertainties concerning whose style or culture will dominate. Datta (1991) argues that compatibility in management styles facilitates post acquisition assimilation, hence, it is postulated that major differences in management styles and philosophies can prove to be serious impediments to the achievement of success in CJVs.

An organisation is made up of people and it is the beliefs and values of the leaders which shape the organisational culture. Organisational culture is manifested in company goals and strategy which are underpinned by the beliefs and values of those leading the organisation. Kotter (1996) examines the process of how managers in a young company develop and attempt to implement a vision/philosophy and/or a business strategy; when strategy implementation works, people behave in ways that are guided by the philosophy and strategy; the organisation then continues its success over a period of years; finally, a culture emerges that reflects the vision and strategy and the experiences people had in implementing them. Hence, organisational culture is highly influenced by, and dependent on, top management's strategy and philosophy. In the case of JV organisations, the dominant culture of the management team may influence the establishment of the organisational culture of the CJV.

In this paper, it is hypothesised that the characteristics of organisational culture of international construction joint ventures are similar to those of the organisational culture of the parent company from which the dominant manager in the project management team comes.

Background of the Project Case

This paper discusses the case of a CJV in Hong Kong involving the construction of the superhighway, Route 8, commissioned by the Highways Department of the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) is the largest infrastructure development in current progress in Hong Kong (according to the pubic works information given by the Highways Department, http://www.hyd.gov.hk/eng/major/majorworks/index.htm).

The selected case study for analysis is one of the IJV projects in Route 8 carried out by a JV company formed from local-foreign contractors: parent company A is the local partner and parent company B is the foreign partner. Parent company A was established in the 1970s and has grown to become one of the largest contractors in Hong Kong strong in civil engineering construction. Parent company B is a Japanese company which has extensive JV experience in Hong Kong and provides expert advice and financial contribution to the project.

The international CJV project organization adopted an independent JV approach where the project director enjoys extensive decision autonomy in daily site management and operations. On this project, parent company A exercises operational control at the CJV general management level and this is reflected in the appointment of the CJV project director who is seconded from parent company A. The CJV project director has been working for parent company A for more than 25 years. The project director is appointed as the chief person-in-charge and exercises overall control of all aspects of the project administration and site construction activities. He is responsible for ensuring that all employees, consultants and subcontractors are directly responsible to the IJV for achieving and maintaining the site daily operation. In the event of non-compliance, the project director is empowered to make the final decision and so, enjoys extensive decision autonomy.

Apart from the civil infrastructure works, the electrical and mechanical works form a significant portion of this project. Parent company A is responsible for all E&M works; therefore, parent company A plays a dominant role in site management.

Data Collection and Analysis

The Organizational Culture Assessment Instrument (OCAI) is developed by Cameron and Quinn (1999, 2006). It is a validated instrument used to identify the organisational culture of a company and classifies organizational culture into four main types: Clan, Adhocracy, Market and Hierarchy culture. According to Cameron and Quinn (2006), the purpose of OCAI is to assess six key dimensions of organisational culture; namely, Dominant Characteristics, Organisational Leadership, Management of Employees, Organisation Clue, Strategic Emphases and Criteria of Success.

The OCAI questionnaire is administered to the following respondents of the case study; the respondents are required to indicate their preference on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree).

(1) The IJV project director (who is seconded from one of the parent companies and is the highest and final decision maker of the newly formed IJV),
(2) project staff from the parent company which second the IJV project director, and
(3) project site staff from the newly formed IJV.

The IJV project director is asked to identify (1) the organisational culture of the parent company from which he is seconded, and (2) the organisational culture of the IJV. The project staff from the parent company (N=9) are asked to identify the organisational culture of the parent company and the project staff from the IJV (N=11) are asked to identify the organisational culture of the IJV.

One sample t-test at 95% confidence level is used to test the difference in perceptions on the organisational culture dimensions between the project director, the staff from the parent company and the staff from the IJV. The null hypotheses for the t-test is:

$$H_o: \mu = \mu_o$$

i.e., there is NO significance difference between the sample means.

Results

The organizational culture profiles of the IJV and the parent company are quite similar (see Figure 1 and Table 1).

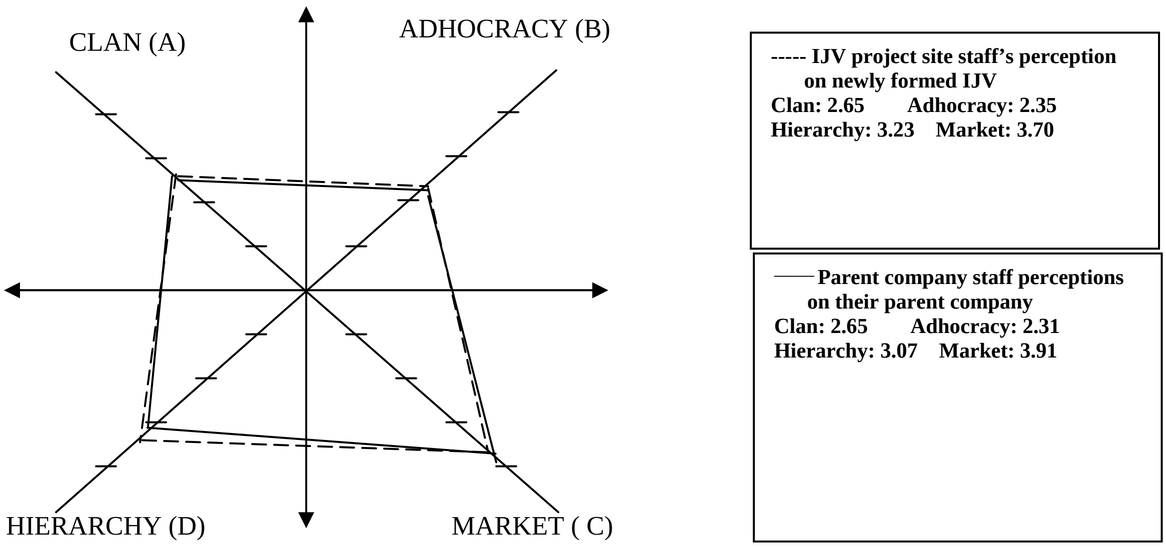

Figure 1: Organisational culture profiles of the IJV and parent company

The results are summarized as follows:

1. The project director perceives that the IJV has the same organisational culture profile as the parent company.
2. The IJV staff perceive that the IJV organisational culture profile is similar to the parent company except that the parent company scores significantly higher on the market culture dimension.
3. (a) The project director perceives a higher rating for both clan and adhocracy culture in his parent company and his IJV.
   (b) The project director perceives a higher market culture in the IJV than his IJV staff.

Table 1: Organisational Culture of IJV and Parent Company

Mean Scores	IJV (N=11)	Parent company (N=9)	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
Market	3.6964	3.9078	-2.157*	0.045
Hierarchy	3.2273	3.0744	1.858	0.084
Clan	2.6518	2.6478	0.031	0.976
Adhocracy	2.3473	2.3144	0.161	0.874

* significant difference

The project director perceives that the IJV has the same organizational culture profile as the parent company

As the highest level decision-maker is seconded from the dominant parent company, he brings with him the norms (of how things are done) and the values (in which are the more important matters) of the parent company. The project director probably does not wish to change any of these norms, has been carrying out the practices that he is used to (in the parent company) and sees himself being able to replicate the organizational culture of the parent company.

The IJV staff perceive that the IJV organisational culture profile is similar to the parent company

There is only significant difference in one dimension, i.e. market culture, where the parent company scores higher than the IJV. This is understandable as the parent company is expected to make the business decisions involved in the general construction market environment and the IJV is more empowered in making the day-to-day operation decisions on a project basis.

The project director perceives a higher rating for both clan and adhocracy culture in his parent company and his IJV

Both the project director and the IJV staff have the same ranking of the organisational culture dimensions, i.e., market culture being ranked the highest to adhocracy culture being ranked the lowest. However, the project director has significant difference in perceptions of most of the IJV organizational culture dimensions compared to that of his IJV staff (see Table 2).

Table 2: Project Director's perceived organizational culture of IJV and parent company

	IJV				Parent Company			
Mean Scores	Staff (N=11)	Project Director	t	Sig.	Staff (N=9)	Project Director	t	Sig.
Market	3.6964	4.0000	-4.346*	0.001	3.9078	4.0000	-1.342	0.217
Hierarchy	3.2273	3.1666	1.244	0.242	3.0744	3.1666	-1.402	0.199
Clan	2.6518	2.3333	3.328*	0.008	2.6478	2.3333	3.554*	0.007
Adhocracy	2.3473	1.8333	4.050*	0.002	2.3144	1.8333	3.062*	0.016

* significant difference

The project director perceives a higher rating for the market dimension and lower in clan and adhocracy. Clan culture activities focus on empowerment, teambuilding, employee involvement, human resource development, and open communication. The clan culture (which is internal focus but wanting flexibility) emphasises loyalty and tradition where "commitment is high. …The leaders are considered to be mentors and, perhaps, even parent figures." (Cameron and Quinn, 1999:87). Adhocracy culture includes such activities as surprising and delighting clients/customers, creating new standards of performance, anticipating client/customer needs, engaging in continuous improvement, and implementing creative solutions to problems. In the context of construction, it would mean that the construction companies are ready to be innovative and pioneer initiatives that lead to new products and services, i.e. an emphasis on "creating a vision of the future organised anarchy and disciplined imagination" (Cameron and Quinn 1999:38).

It is suggested that the IJV staff operate in a much more friendly and cooperative atmosphere (clan) and are much more resourceful, performance-focused and ready to innovate/improvised than the project director believes.

The project director perceives a higher market culture in the IJV than his IJV staff.

Since the project director perceives the culture profile for his IJV to be the same as his parent company, he is less aware of the power-based decisions being shifted, e.g. parent company makes strategic market-oriented decisions in a business context for the project and the project director is involved in these decisions. However, his staff are involved in daily project operational decisions and not empowered to the same extent by the parent company as the project director; hence, IJV staff may perceive the IJV being in a much less market-oriented position.

Conclusion

As Kamminga and Van Der Meer-Kooistra (2006:234) conclude, “case research was a very suitable method to study a complicated concept such as joint venture control” and furthermore, “the international aspect of the international joint ventures had a great impact on control”.

Literature suggests strongly that parent firms do not (and perhaps should not) allow IJVs to function independently and form their own organisational culture and identities apart from the parent companies (Geringer and Herbert, 1989; Main 1990). Johnson et al (2001) review that IJV parents intervene directly or indirectly in their IJVs to accomplish and maintain control over IJV. As a result, parental control inevitably exists in IJVs as the parent companies may want to achieve their own objectives especially in the project-based CJV with finite life span.

Further, Geringer and Herbert (1989) state that a parent may be able to influence the relative allocation of control over an IJV by influencing staffing of the IJV’s top management positions. The IJV general manager’s position, in particular, can affect an IJV’s operations since the general manager is responsible for maintaining relationships with each of the parents as well as running the IJV. The relative power and how conflict is managed by IJV general manager is an important factor influencing the organizational culture and management style of the project-based CJV.

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