

A Paper on Conflict Analysis

*Title:*

**A Culturally Sensitive Approach to Engage Contemporary Corporate India**

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## **Executive Summary**

This paper deals with the social and emotional conflict in contemporary India due to diverse approaches to organisational management and social structures. Culturally, India is a rather collectivist society with a non-linear concept of time. Dominant mythological paradigms that people grow up with emphasise the cyclical nature of life and hence there is no urgency built in an individual to get things right the first time.

The western paradigm, on the other hand, is largely driven by a one-life structure that consequently demands high levels of ambition and accuracy. The ground reality in corporate India presently is that of a rapidly-changing, chaotic environment where people are comfortable dealing with ambiguity. However, in the throes of globalisation, the demands of modern institutional thinking are also being imposed upon this context. The need for systems and processes is challenging traditional, sometimes ad hoc, ways of working.

In order to sustain in the global market, organisations are quick to adapt, driven as they are by ambitious leaders well-exposed to modern thoughts. Employees are naturally forced to cope with new ways of working that are efficient and effective. However, the social fabric is impacted in a silent, erosive manner. Due to the vast differences in work culture and home environments, relationships are changing in a manner that is stressful for individuals straddling between the two spaces.

There is an identity crisis created in a society where individuals are not traditionally trained to deal with it. The way to deal with it is to gently build a bridge between the traditional Indian and the globalised Indian worlds through organisation development interventions that are culturally sensitive. Creating a conversation at various levels is necessary to acknowledge the conflict and to enable organisations and employees to deal with it in a manner that transforms the conflict into a self-accepting, emotionally competent work environment. The paper highlights the role of organisation development and change management professionals in this area.

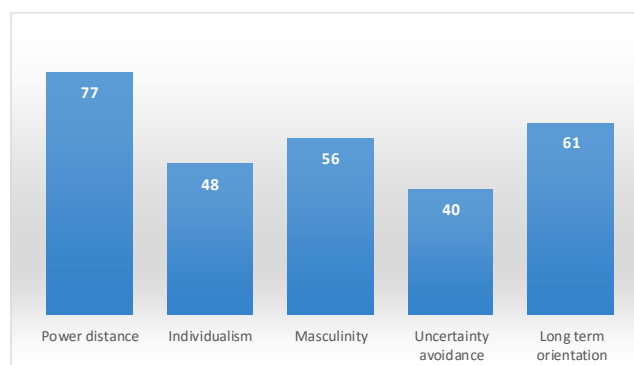
## Introduction

This paper concerns the impact of modern management thoughts and practices on the Indian corporate context and consequentially, the contemporary Indian society. At the core of the issue are the ideas of culture and conflict. For the purposes of this paper, the term culture is used as defined by Geert Hofstede as “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one category of people from another”. Conflict, as borrowed from a definition by Neil Katz is “a strong emotion resulting from a perceived difference in needs or values”.

It is important to acknowledge at this point that culture is constantly in flux and is elastic – not everyone in the said culture may conform to the generalisation. Then again, generalising or defining Indian culture is extremely difficult given the diversity in the country. However, the paper is a comment on the overall impact of corporate policies and practices on the social fabric of the country, from the perspective of organisational development consulting.

## The Context

One of the most well-established indicators of national cultures has been the five-dimensional index produced by The Hofstede Centre. The scores below indicate Indian culture:



Power distance is the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organisations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally. India scores high on this dimension, 77, indicating an appreciation for hierarchy and a top-down structure in organisations. The

Indian attitude, may therefore exhibit these tendencies: dependent on the boss or the power holder for direction, acceptance of unequal rights between the power-privileged and those who are lesser down in the pecking order, immediate superiors accessible but one layer above less so, paternalistic leader, management directs, gives reason/meaning to one's work life and rewards in exchange for loyalty from employees. Real power is centralised even though it may not appear to be and managers count on the obedience of their team members. Employees expect to be directed clearly as to their functions and what is expected of them. Control is familiar, even a psychological security and attitude towards managers are formal even if one is on first name basis. Communication is top down and directive in its style and often feedback which is negative is never offered up the ladder.

Individualism indicates the degree of interdependence a society maintains among its members. India, with a score of 48 is a society with clear collectivistic traits. This means that there is a high preference for belonging to a larger social framework in which individuals are expected to act in accordance to the greater good of one's defined group(s). The employer-employee relationship is one of expectations – loyalty by the employee and almost familial protection by the employer. Hiring and promotion decisions are often made based on relationships and not solely on performance/merit.

Masculinity means the need to be driven by competition, achievement and success, with success being defined by the winner/best in field. A low score (feminine) on the dimension means that the dominant values in society are caring for others and quality of life. India scores 56 on this dimension and is thus considered a masculine society. Even though it is mildly above the mid-range in score, India is very masculine in terms of visual display of success and power. The designer brand label, the flash and bling that goes with advertising one's success, is widely practised. However, India is also a spiritual country with millions of deities and various religious philosophies. It is an ancient country with one of the longest surviving cultures which gives it ample lessons in the value of humility and abstinence. This often reins in people from indulging in masculine displays to the extent that they might be naturally inclined to.

Uncertainty Avoidance has to do with the way that a society deals with the fact that the future can never be known. India scores 40 on this dimension and thus has a medium low preference for avoiding uncertainty. There is acceptance of imperfection; nothing has to be perfect nor has to go exactly as planned. India is traditionally a patient country where tolerance for the unexpected is high. People generally do not feel driven and compelled to take initiatives and comfortably settle into established roles and routines without questioning. Rules are often in place just to be circumvented and one relies on innovative methods to 'bypass the system'.

Long term orientation deals with a society's search for virtue, the extent to which a society shows a pragmatic future-oriented perspective rather than a conventional historical short-term point of view. The Indians score 61, making it a long term, pragmatic culture. In India the concept of 'karma' dominates religious and philosophical thought. Time is not linear, and thus not as important as to western societies which typically score low on this dimension. In India there is an acceptance that there are many truths, depending on the seeker. Hence, there is a tendency to forgive lack of punctuality. People are comfortable with a changing game-plan based on changing reality rather than abiding by an exact plan.

Contemporary corporate India, based on the ground reality mentioned above, is dealing with a barrage of globalisation (post-liberalisation of the economy in 1991) and management thought that largely comes from the Occident, and to some extent, other Oriental countries. Hence, organisations that were hitherto based on trust and paternalism are now moving towards processes and de-personalisation. This, coupled with the youth bulge (65 per cent of the population is under the age of 35), means that people in the employment space are impacted by a culture not very similar what they are exposed to in their families, the parental generation being mainly tuned to the pre-1991 culture. This has not only caused a generational divide within organisations, but also a social divide in families and communities, with a large chunk of the population open to adapting to ways of living not endorsed by their older family members.

## Conflict Analysis

The key actors in the corporate cultural conflict for the purposes of an organisation development intervention include:

- Organisational leadership (including leaders willing to adapt and those who prefer to stick to traditional Indian styles of management)
- Employees in organisations (including those willing to adapt to the contemporary needs and those that wish to stay with traditionally established ways of working)
- Internal or external consultant(s) driving change management and organisation development in any area (such as strategy, information technology, project management, human resources, etc.)

While the analysis that follows is driven from the point of view of managing multinational companies, it is equally applicable to indigenous organisations in India without any direct foreign stakeholder, given that every business in a globalised and liberalised economy is impacted by international affairs.

The model used to outline the challenges for an organisation development/change management consultant is the ABC triangle propounded by Johan Galtung. 'A' stands for attitudes of the actors towards the context and to each other, 'B' stands for behaviour displayed and 'C' stands for contradiction in the context – the root of the conflict.

The ABC triangle is used in a tabulated format below to analyse the given context:

<b>Actors</b>	<b>Attitudes</b>	<b>Behaviours</b>	<b>Context</b>
Adaptable organisational leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Driven to achieve</li> <li>- Competitive</li> <li>- Adaptable</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Open to empowering people</li> <li>- Expect compliance to processes and standardisation</li> <li>- Enforce documentation, systems and procedures</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Highly competitive market</li> <li>- Rapidly changing</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Accept dynamic environments and decentralisation/specialisation</li> <li>- Encourage employees to adapt and contribute ideas</li> <li>- Appreciate the need for engagement with employees and communication</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>business environment</li> <li>- Chaotic markets</li> <li>- Easy availability of educated workforce</li> </ul>
Resistant organisational leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Paternalistic</li> <li>- Insecure in change</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Low on delegation of authority</li> <li>- Lack of trust in modern approaches</li> <li>- Expect compliance by staff to their directives</li> <li>- Prefer stability and centralised command</li> <li>- View change consultants as disruptive</li> <li>- View employees challenging their ideas as rebellious</li> </ul>	
Employees open to change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Do not limit themselves to traditional idea of Indian-ness</li> <li>- Adaptable</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Seek challenges</li> <li>- Tend to be competitive</li> <li>- Open to change in environment and processes</li> <li>- Fairly mobile</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Highly competitive environment</li> <li>- Peer pressure to succeed</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ambitious</li> <li>- Believe in individualism</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Impacted by media to strive for material success</li> </ul>
Employees resistant to change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Value traditional ways of being and working</li> <li>- Identify themselves as Indians</li> <li>- Believe in paternalism</li> <li>- Prefer high power distance</li> <li>- Believe in collectivism</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- View changes as invasive</li> <li>- Prefer stability to challenges</li> <li>- Tend to resist authority of younger workforce</li> <li>- Resist the need to adapt to globalisation</li> <li>- View change consultant as mouthpiece of the modern leadership</li> <li>- Comfortable without standardisation of work mechanisms</li> </ul>	
Consultant/change manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Value systems and processes</li> <li>- Open to dialogue</li> <li>- Value merit more than seniority</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Appreciate the need for change</li> <li>- Engaging approach</li> <li>- Culturally sensitive</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Dilemma of tradition versus modernity</li> <li>- Need for instituting systems in a culture</li> </ul>



			attuned to working around processes - Highly competitive environment
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The drivers in the environment are fairly similar for all the actors, though the responses to them differ based on the attitude of the individual actor. The drivers include:

- Social pressure to perform and be validated
- Competition
- Gender balancing in workspaces
- Mass employment by multinationals and globalised Indian corporations

Galtung pointed out that any work done only in the area of attitudes and behaviours would only be a band-aid job. There is no alternative but to work on the root of conflict, the contradiction itself. However, an organisation or a consultant may not have the sphere of influence to shift the context that is put up by the economy and globalisation. Hence, the most efficient and effective approach would be to deal with the context through long-term advocacy, and help to shift the attitudes and behaviours through short-term interventions.

The connectors and dividers that one can tap into and address in the process include the following:

Connectors	Dividers
- Pride in the national identity steered by social media	- Higher number of modern, educated youngsters in management echelons

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Collective need for financial growth as a result of huge boom in the retail sector and the consequent access to goods</li> <li>- Interventions in organisations to bond teams</li> <li>- More organisations focussing on employee-friendly and culturally sensitive practices for sustainable growth</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>challenging the attitude of the elder, traditional professionals</li> <li>- Educated, mobile youth bulge demanding more jobs, edging out the older, less flexible workforce</li> <li>- More and more jobs needing knowledge of information technology and systems that the older generations are not familiar with</li> </ul>
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### Recommendations

A change management or organisation development consultant is hired internally or externally by organisations to not only suggest and implement process or behavioural changes, but also to catalyse a cultural shift towards what is commonly perceived as westernisation of the modus operandi. The challenge for the consultant(s) is twofold:

- To be culturally and emotionally sensitive to all the employees and business owners in the processes of aligning processes and people with business goals
- To be cognizant of the social impact of behavioural changes in organisations and to mitigate harm caused to the social fabric owing to change in workplace behaviour

Given that the workspaces need to adapt to a globalised context, a consultant may need to take into account the following factors while designing interventions/policies/systems:

- Enable shift of the organisational culture from traditional problem solving approaches towards methods based on social constructionism: Given the high power distance and collectivist tendencies, there is a propensity to label non-conformist people and behaviours as negative. Traditional problem-solving based management may exacerbate

conflicts in such situations. A solution focussed approach such as Appreciative Inquiry can be used to build culture in a more participative, asset oriented manner.

- Build learning organisations: One of the consequences of high power distance is lack of drive at the individual level to learn continually, since there is a sense of resignation about not being able to grow soon in the organisation. A gentle way of better succession planning without creating insecurities would be to build a learning culture down to the process level. This will ensure that there is leadership pipelining at all levels, generating more opportunities for individuals as well as for the organisation to explore newer territories.
- Draw on local wisdom: A lot of modern management thought draws upon or is similar to ideas expressed in ancient Indian scriptures and mythology. Creating forums at the workspace to discuss, share and acknowledge these thoughts can generate a sense of security, validation of identity and eventually ownership in the decision making process. At a very basic level, this can make people from all cultural backgrounds feel they are listened to, and that is a great boost for the emotional health of an organisation.
- Create advocacy groups in business networking forums: Advocating cultural sensitivity beyond the organisation level is necessary to eventually shift the context. There are a lot of networks related to various aspects of organisation development and change management, some of which are online, that can be used to initiate conversations about cultural identity and social impact of business practices. These groups can ultimately reach out to organisations to trigger shift in policies to make the workspace blend better with the social space.

## **Conclusion**

For a lot of Indians in the employment space in the secondary and tertiary sector, work and family are worlds apart. The nature and context of work is largely western, driven, demanding and not

necessarily aligned to what the education system has catered to. The nature of the family is mainly patriarchal, encouraging satisfaction and spirituality and low on risk taking. As a result, the individuals straddling between these two worlds have a sense of internal conflict and stress. This has an impact on both productivity and relationships, particularly in a collective society where the individual identity has not been given the opportunity to be strengthened in the first place.

At another level, this conflict carries into the workspace where there are generation gaps that further magnify the sense of conflict. The times call for mainstreaming the conflict and dealing with it rather than brushing it under the carpet by dealing with productivity issues superficially. Professionals involved in organisation development and change management need to take heed of this as they sculpt organisations in contemporary India.

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