

Press Release

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PolyU Study Finds Cultural Values Influence Service Provision

Cultural values have a significant influence on service delivery in Hong Kong's tourism and hospitality sectors, according to Dr Nelson Tsang of the School of Hotel and Tourism Management (SHTM) in a recently published research paper by the *International Journal of Hospitality Management*. Dr Tsang surveyed frontline staff to identify the link between specifically Chinese cultural values and service delivery and determine the most influential of those values. He argues that the human resource professionals and managers of multinational service firms "must work to analyse Western organisation management concepts and methods critically" to evaluate "how their core values differ from those of the Chinese". The management implications for these firms are considerable.

The provision of services is becoming an increasingly global business in parallel with China's rise as an economic power. At the same time, intensifying competition amongst tourist destinations and service firms at the international level means that those firms are increasingly looking to their employees "as a long-term source of differentiation and competitive superiority". Success or failure in service delivery is largely a matter of the attitudes and behaviour of customer-contact staff, Dr Tsang notes, "especially in services with a high level of interaction between customers and employees", such as those in the tourism industry.

Staff attitudes and behaviour are profoundly influenced by cultural values, remarks Dr Tsang, although little attention has been paid to the link between those values and service delivery. However, there is ample evidence of significant cultural differences between East and West, which are broadly held to display 'collectivist' and 'individualist' orientations, respectively.

Although some forms of behaviour are universal, there are clear cultural differences in social distance, acceptable levels of bodily contact, self-presentation, gestures, facial expressions, status and politeness, all of which have implications for service delivery. If the managers and human resource professionals of international tourism and hospitality firms are to develop culturally appropriate staff training programmes to improve service provision in their Hong Kong and Chinese mainland branches, Dr Tsang explains, they need to be aware of both culturally specific and culturally compatible practices.

Dr Tsang set out to determine which Chinese cultural values have the greatest impact on service delivery by frontline staff in Hong Kong's major tourism and hospitality sectors and identify their underlying dimensions. Seven hundred and ninety hotel, travel agency, catering and theme-park employees completed a questionnaire asking them to rate 32 cultural values identified for their relevance to tourism and hospitality.

Just over half of the respondents were male (51%), the majority worked in travel agencies (41%) and hotels (36%), and most were under the age of 30 (65%). The majority (81%) had a secondary school level of education, with most of the remainder having completed university or technical college studies. More than half (64%) earned between HK\$5,000 and HK\$9,000 per month. Dr Tsang noted that these demographics are typical of frontline staff in Hong Kong.

The Chinese cultural values that the respondents perceived to have the greatest impact on service delivery were courtesy, trustworthiness, harmony with others, tolerance of others and self-cultivation. Dr Tsang remarks that these values, when combined, can best be considered as providing a five-part structure “that influences the attitude or behaviour of service employees in providing service”. That structure covers the broad dimensions of ‘attitude towards work’, ‘attitude towards people’, ‘moral discipline’, ‘status and relationships’ and ‘moderation’.

The first dimension, ‘attitude towards work’, was associated with the largest number of values, including those that emphasise the importance of hard work and a group orientation in the workplace. Both of these values are central to the Confucian ideology that underpins Hong Kong society. In the first place, the benefits to employers of employees who value hard work are self-evident.

Dr Tsang further suggests that “human resource managers can gain a better understanding of how group orientation values are associated with attitudes”. A group orientation is particularly important in ensuring co-worker support, which can in turn be used to assess the attitude of an employee in terms of organisational socialisation, or how the “employee interacts with, and is accepted and supported by, peers in the workplace”.

The other four cultural dimensions are more related to human values. The ‘attitudes towards people’ dimension includes such values as harmony with others, courtesy and trustworthiness. “It would be prudent for tourism and hotel managers, particularly expatriate managers”, Dr Tsang writes, “to embrace this important dimension by facilitating favourable interpersonal relationships”. ‘Moral discipline’, the third dimension, contains personal traits that may help employees to “avoid deceptive and dishonest practices in their pursuit of satisfying customer and guest needs”. Both dimensions bode well for a happy workplace and satisfactory service delivery.

In contrast, the fourth and fifth dimensions, ‘status and relationships’ and ‘moderation’, pose considerable challenges for human resource professionals and managers in the tourism industry. The status and relationships dimension is associated with hierarchical and social relationship values that emphasise respect for elders and authority. Hence, employees prefer their superiors to make decisions, and “accept and expect power to be distributed unequally”, Dr Tsang notes. The problem is that this “may destroy the sense of proactive participation” encouraged by managers with a Western orientation and “prevent fully autonomous and flexible teamwork”.

Similarly, ‘moderation’, which values aiming at ‘the mean’ between two extremes, leads to risk-avoidance, an aversion to uncertainty and a reluctance to make even simple decisions without consulting superiors, which presents considerable barriers to

autonomy. This may explain “why Chinese employees are reluctant to accept the added responsibility and risk involved with empowerment”, Dr Tsang suggests. Valuing moderation, they tend to believe that there is “no incentive to doing more than what is required”, particularly as doing something wrong may result in punishment and a loss of face.

Dr Tsang’s analysis suggests that it is crucial for multinational tourism and hospitality firms to recognise that the cultural assumptions underlying Western management theory and practice may not be appropriate for Chinese organisations. For example, although empowerment may be a good motivator in the West, it is at odds with the collectivist orientation of Chinese society. That orientation may encourage a commitment to the team, but the accompanying emphasis on hierarchy and risk-avoidance militates against it. Dr Tsang concludes that these firms must develop human resource and service strategies that are “based upon principles derived from these specific values, beliefs, and social relationships and interactions”.

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