



## Organization management and the art of gardening

Manage your organization's garden.

# #3

### Fairfaber Strategy Papers

Fairfaber develops strategy papers devoted to critical issues of organization management. The papers are part of our commitment in providing business executives with analysis and management thought to help them creating value for their organizations. For further information and management advisory contact our office or send an email to:  
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## 1. Manage your organization's garden.

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"Life starts the day you start a garden".

Chinese proverb.

Gardening can provide very powerful metaphors for organization management in a broader point of view. Organizations and garden are indeed biological systems which live, grow and develop in surprising similar ways. The gardener and the organization leader face very resembling challenges. When managers and gardeners look back to the job they have done in the past they have troubles to recognize any reward in the current status of their garden or organization. Plants and flowers and weeds and leaves, like employees, managers, talents, high and low performers have come and gone. Harvests have been done and pruning and regular irrigation, how many interviews, meetings, performance assessments and selection. Where has all that work gone? All that energy spent in so many years. Is the garden there in front of you really what you dreamed of? Has your neighbour, whose grass is always unmercifully greener, toiled so much? The carpenter who builds an house can see the result of her endeavour, since she can look to the nailed boards, the doors placed and the plumbing. But gardeners and managers do not build anything, they tend superior forms of life.

### But the truth of imagination.

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I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the heart's affections, and the truth of imagination.

John Keats

There are no given things in the life of gardener. Everything has to be demonstrated always and always again. The dahlia which bloomed a thousand times this time will die. A dandelion breaks up through concrete asphalt where no craftsmanship would have prevailed. Even the most advanced scientific knowledge cannot predict with absolute certainty the results of her work. Gardeners have no illusion of control. They just create the right growing conditions, nurture healthy soil, plant a diverse variety of sturdy, healthy plants and watch them grow. They adjust as they go along, removing excess weeds, mulching, preventing insects, watering and fertilizing. The end result usually includes some failures, and some surprising successes, but they have no control. It is not about knowing the arid recipe of theoretical proceedings, it is about gaining a deep intimacy with the source of nature's inner forces. And much more than this, it is about toiling and struggling and gaining with immense fatigue every little step toward your goal. The same applies to leading organizations. You can count just on very flimsy cognitions, which may result as reliable as a morning's dream, and on the passion that fills your heart with your truth. The truth of your imagination.



## 2. Know your turf.



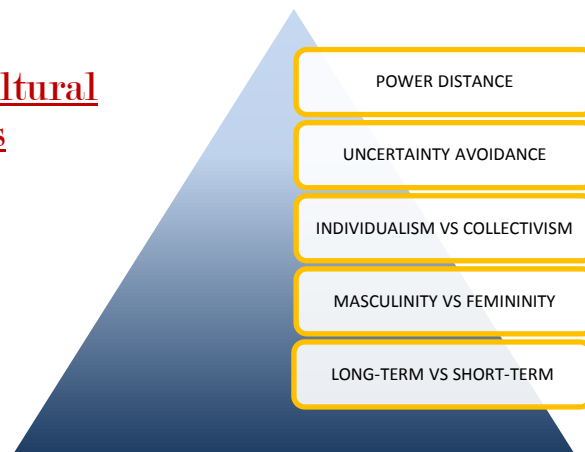
Leontopodium alpinum

The Amazon rainforest is the place on Earth with the highest biodiversity. Spanning 6.2 million Km<sup>2</sup>, the Amazon is home to a huge number of different species of mammals, birds, plants and flowers. However vast and hospitable the forest cannot be home to all the flora and fauna of our planet. Edelweiss or steinbocks cannot live there. Nor can primroses or groundhogs. Indeed every species needs the right environment to thrive. That means the right weather conditions, nourishment and food chain. The same apply to organization management. Human beings are in absolute the most adaptable species. Men can live virtually everywhere and can adapt to the most extreme conditions. Perhaps even more importantly different people, with different education and background integrate each other, mutually enriching themselves. But when it comes to organization culture then not every practice can be applied anywhere. Organization cultures vary with time and place, business and industry. Cultural dimensions have been analysed with a particular focus on cross-country multicultural aspects. Significant differences have been identified by a number of studies across countries based on observed cultural dimensions. In order to measure experimentally these cultural factors specific cultural factors have been identified:



Ophrys sphegodes

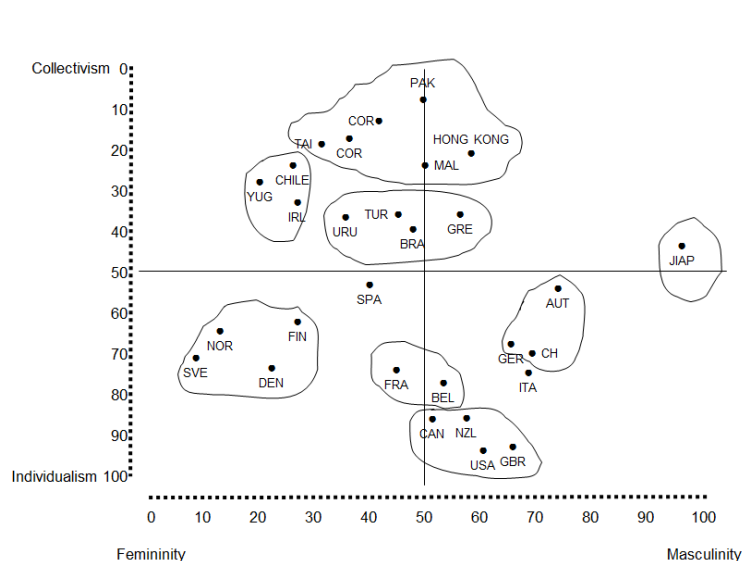
### Cross-country Cultural Dimensions



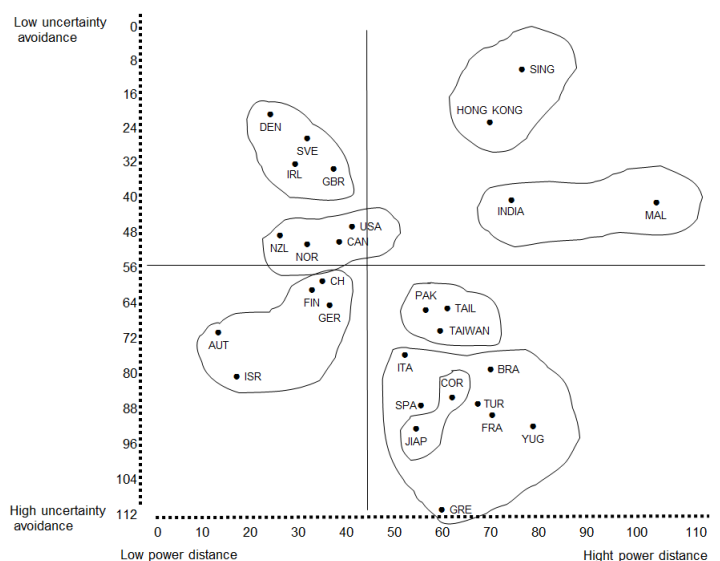
It is one of the most strategic management responsibility to develop positive specific organization resources and to transform them into sustainable competitive advantages.

The pioneer work done by the Dutch social psychologist Geer Hofstede on cultural dimensions is fundamental to understand multicultural issues in organization management. We will not enter here into an analysis of multicultural studies, many comprehensive research have been written about this subject, so we will avoid to repeat what can be found in much wider extend in other studies. What we wish to remark is the huge variety of corporate cultures that composes the business world. These differences are not just deriving from different country cultures. Even within the same country it is possible to find significant cultural variations. This is extremely visible in a big country like the United States. Just let's think to the different management style between the formal attitudes of legal and financial business communities in the West Coast and the downright casual easy-going demeanour of East Cost high-tech environment. Management practices and people management programs are not easily transferable from company to company. Each program has to be designed on the needs of the individual company. Every company has its specific type of garden. In the same way we distinguish English, Italians, or Japanese gardens, so every company has its specific organization features. It is one of the most strategic management responsibility to develop positive company's specific organization resources and to transform them into sustainable competitive advantages.

## Hofstede Cross-Cultural Maps



Collectivism vs Individualism & Masculinity vs Femininity Map - G. Hofstede.



Uncertainty avoidance & Power distance map - G. Hofstede.

### 3. Tend your Garden.

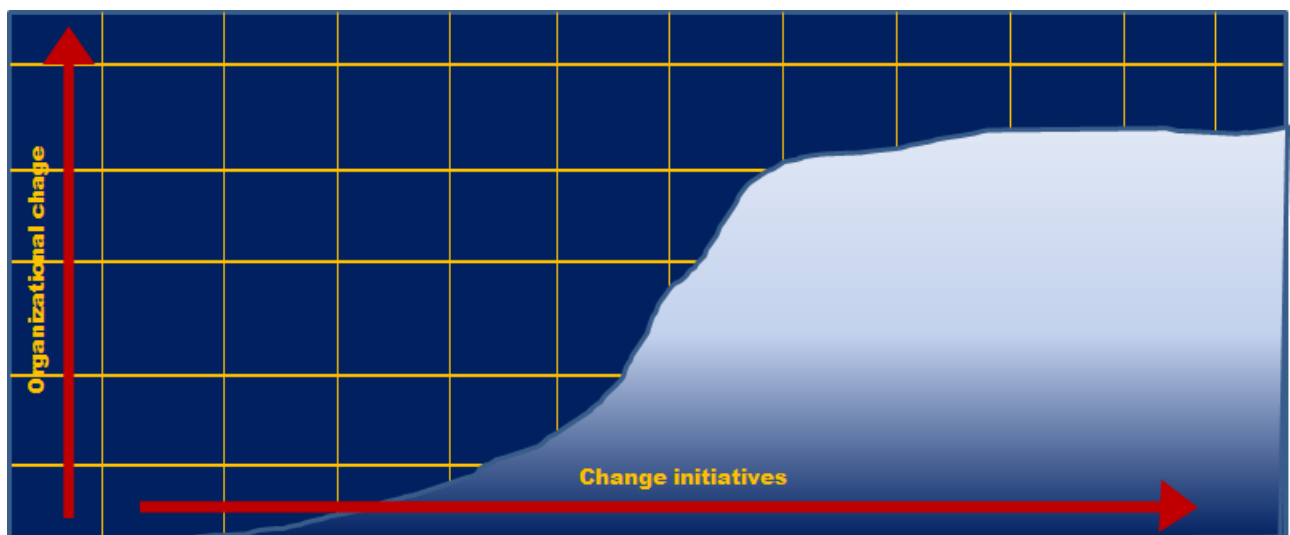
As mentioned, gardening offers many analogies and metaphors to organizational leadership. Virtually every gardening task may be matched with a corresponding organizational process. Far from being a merely abstract or academic exercise these analogies shed a powerful light on the nature of organization management. Indeed if we consider people management process in the same way we may consider garden tending we will discover a new revealing approaches. Plowing, seeding, fertilizing, watering, pruning, are all activities which can be translated in an organizational context. For each of these tasks we will find surprising meanings which will help us to get more traction in our management chores.

#### Plowing and fertilizing.

Organizational grounds are much more hard to tame than soil. Organizations are deeply embedded in cultural contexts which tends to remain stable and relatively unchanged in their fundamentals. Values and beliefs change indeed very slowly and influence organizational behaviours profoundly. Plowing and fertilizing are needed to assure that seeds will germinate and grow to plants. If the soil is not appropriate or not suitably prepared, germination will not start and seeds will die. This is complementary to those organization strategies which devise the onboarding of new talents instrumentally to change management projects. As it is often the case if the ground is not fertile for new ideas new starters will soon conform to old behaviours and will not bring any noticeable improvement. Change management processes are successful only when they are sustained by and associated with consistent management actions, which include an extensive set of initiatives, both hard and soft. In the same way as preparing the soil includes hard and soft actions.

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#### Deployment of change management actions



Communication, indoctrination and training are the most common plowing tools for organizations. They are necessary to prepare the ground for new ideas. They are also very effective as fertilizers, since they support the rollout of new practices. Indeed the rollout of new management practices, the realignment of organizations with business strategies and the change of organization behaviours are based to a great extent on communication - communication and training initiatives often combined with innovative ICT applications and management procedures.

According to Fairfaber's change management experience, failures on change management projects are mostly due to the lack of communication and more generally to the inadequacy of employees' involvements initiatives. Similarly to biological processes, change doesn't present an additive progression, it doesn't have a linear relations with quantitative factors. Change processes typically show strong anelastic responses to increasing communication and indoctrination supply. Massive efforts in communication and employees involvement are needed prior to report any significant results in organizational behavior.

**Change programs are also apt to quick relapses if not sufficiently sustained by enduring organizational actions.**



## Sowing, watering, pruning

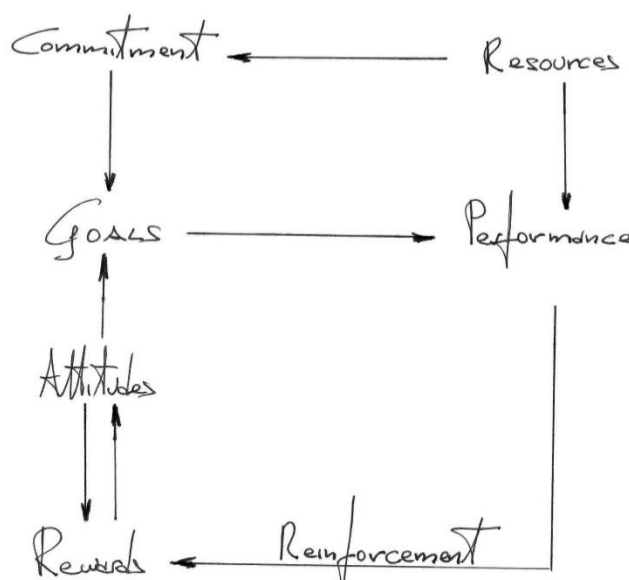
Sowing, watering and pruning offer perfect and enlightening metaphors for organization management. Sowing clearly corresponds to the hiring of new talents, we can however see here a fundamental difference. In sowing a rose we already know which will be the result in case our gardening effort succeed. In organization management this holds just in specific situations, for example when we hire an already experienced employee, yet in the case of more junior new starters we cannot hold up this assumption. Junior employees are profoundly influenced and hence transformed by the work environment, training programs and more generally by their actual professional experience.

Junior employees are profoundly influenced and hence transformed by the work environment.

However similarly to the way a garden designer creates his own special concept of garden, organization managers are able to literally mould the organization. They can leverage a wide set of very sophisticated and powerful instruments, like structures' design, responsibilities, competences, skills, values, management style, culture. Both practices, organization management and gardening, deals with nonlinear processes which extend over considerable length of time and whose results cannot be precisely predicted as actual outcomes depend on a huge amount of different self-influencing factors.

Watering offers profound inspiration to organization management. Water is deeply needed by dry and barren soil, by lands where life cannot flourish since it cannot find any kind of nourishment. In those environments the landscape becomes unproductive, seeds are not able to germinate and grow. That has a profound resemblance with organizations aggrieved by demotivation and a general lack of engagement.

### The motivation loop.



To cure these situations is never easy, as they are extremely thirsty for values and inspirations. Change management programs targeted to re-energize organizations affected by insufficient engagement level may be difficult to manage and present very low success rate. And what about too much watering? May that happen in the organization world? The answer is yes, more often than you may believe. It is the veteran syndrome. Employees who have fought thousand wars, who survived waves of turn around, restructuring, delayering, change of management, engagement programs and many other corporate HR programs. How do you made they believe again?

If you are authentic you will.



One of the most frequently overlooked element in organization management is that organizations are hugely more resilient than any conceivable forest. Organizations are commonly thought as extremely fragile ecosystems, and certainly they are under certain circumstances. However they oppose change very strongly, since human beings face changes as personal treats and so they tend to be very resistant to it. Modify organizational behaviours implies modifying the way we think about ourselves or even about our most profound nature. Indeed one can metaphorically prune or even cut organizations and in surprising short time, if not supervised, old bad values will perk up stronger again.

This is why people engagement and cultural values have to be constantly managed through dynamic communication initiatives, lean and frequent assessment procedures and effective rewarding. Due to the considerable influence that low performers have on team's morale and performance, several companies, borrowing from General Electric early management practices, adopted forced distribution appraisal. A practice, that similarly to the effect that pruning exercises on a tree, reduce the amount of wasted resources to the benefit of more positive purposes. However people are not really like trees and be forced to label our employees as dumb or loser is probably not the best people strategy a company may envisage.

### About Fairfaber

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