

Power distance and work engagement

: A case study of organizations in Thailand

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Abstract

The central aim to explore how work engagement reacts with power distance, include to studying four factors: *gender, marital, education, and tenure* influence on work engagement and power distance. Additionally, expect that a large power distance is evinced in organizations since the hierarchy system is a root of Thai culture. Correlations analyses were used to detect their relationship. The results showed that work engagement and power distance is minimal react in a negative way, and education level has a negative relation with power distance, work engagement is higher in participants who are more years of experiences in organizations, whereas genders do not present their influence on work engagement and power distance. Therefore, implications for organization should not overpass with how to develop work engagement in staff level, and how to close the gap of power distance, and knowledge-based environment could decrease power distance and increase employees' work engagement. Furthermore, creating the climate of work engagement in organizations should implement low power distance environment; equity, leadership, employee's involvement, and centralize policy.

Keyword, *power distance, work engagement, culture.*

1. Introduction

Work engagement, an organizational development tools, is popularly implement in organizations in order to improve employees' productivities (Sak, 2006), employees' satisfaction, organization's profit and less turnover (Christian et al., 2011; Harter et al., 2002). Work engagement is also positively related with organizational citizenship behavior (Rich et al., 2010), task performance, innovativeness (Gorgievski & Bakker and Schaufeli, 2010), and

Work engagement not only provides benefits for organization, but favor employees to happy in work also, since work engagement involves employees' well-being (Page & Vella-Brodrick, 2009). Work engagement has been receiving considerable attention from both scholars and practitioners in the fields of human resource development, organization development, psychology, and business (kim & Kold and kim, 2012).

How to form employees to raise their work engagement, logically if we want a consequence must be completely realize about antecedence, therefore this present study aims to study factors impact on work engagement. If we understand how factors influence on work engagement, including which kind of factors are matter, these would be helpful.

Social factor like culture which are explained in term of shaping people's behavior in each society. Work engagement involves with emotion and behavior (Kahn, 1990), therefore culture could be emphasized as an effect on work engagement. However, culture is large and complex, therefore this present study focus on one dimension of Hofstede's framework (1990), namely *power distance*, to explore culture influences on work engagement.

Power distance (Hofstede, 1980) refers to the degree of less powerful person accept and expect to unequally, the large power distance could be observed in some situation as the employees avoid to make conflict with superior, the supervisors always make decision without consult with their staff, including centralized management.

The kingdom of Thailand provides a unique set of cultural values associated with social harmony (Knutson, 2004), indirect and implicit communication (Verluyten, 1997), respect in seniority (Komin, 1991) including Hofstede's study indicated a large power distance in Thailand, with scores 64 on power distance index, slightly lower than the average Asian countries (71), he explained that paternalistic management, the attitudes towards managers are more formal, the information flow is hierarchical and controlled are generally excepted in Thailand.

Since Thailand is claimed as large power distance power society (Hofstede, 2010), therefore how does power distance related to work engagement was underlined in this study.

The aims of this present study are:

1. To study power distance and work engagement in organizations.
2. To find what kind of relationship between power distance and work engagement and its components.

3. To explore how work engagement interacts with power distance

2. Literature review

2.1 Hofstede's cultural dimensions: HCD

Geer Hofstede (1980,2010) studied national culture by launched his project within IBM in 1967 and 1973 , Hofstede defined culture as the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another, and categorized four dimensions of national culture as power distance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation, and the sixth dimension names indulgence versus restraint was added in 2001.

Power distance:PDI, is extent to which less powerful member of a society accept, and expect, that power is distributes unequally.Describing about power distance in society are manifested by an inequality in society, for example children are expected to be obedient and respect to their parents or other elders or their teacher in large power distance society, while in small power distance society , children are more or less treated as equals as soon as they able to act.

A large PDI in workplace can be observed by a relationship between superiors and subordinates are existentially unequal and boss are more powerful, manual work has a much lower status than office work, centralize system in decision making, managers rely on superiors and on formal rules, including the idea boss are a benevolent autocrat or good father.Large power distance organization will typically have more layers and the chain of command is felt to be more important, and employees are expected to comply with management's directives without questioning them (Hofstede, 2010).

Contrary to small PDI that decentralization is popular, the idea boss is a resourceful democrat, including manual work has the same status as office worker,managers rely on their own experience and on subordinates. Small power distance firms are also characterized by more delegation of authority and fewer layers of authority, managers motivate employees in a more participative manner, and employees expect more say in decisions affecting their work.

Regarding to PDI in Thailand, could be predict that Thailand is large PDI country wherewith Thai's values culture are developed from feudal system, adding respect with senior, elders or higher work or social status (Komin, 1997), support by Hofstede's survey

(2010) indicated Thailand is large PDI with score is 64, thus the estimate results of PDI score in this present study would be tendency to moderate to large.

Power distance differences between demographics characteristics.

Gender, Hofstede (2001) concluded that cultural dimensions do generally not differ by gender, but a study of Stedhan and Yamamura (2004) presented gender differences exist in power distance dimension in Japan, but not exist in the United State, and changing in education, increasing women workforce participation, increasing women's awareness of their right influence on women's perception in power distance dimension.

Education level, Hofstede (2010) wrote about power distance that PDI index within countries will decrease with education level since knowledge workers in organization erode centralize system become to decentralize, and decrease the gap between employees and their superiors. Meanwhile knowledge would shape people more concern about their right (Stedhan and Yamamura, 2004).

Organization tenure, since culture can exist at the national, industrial, professional, and organization thus employees who are more year experience could be socialized by organizational or industrial culture, contrast to a study of Pizam and colleagues (1997) indicated national cultures (PDI was included) have a stronger effect on managerial behavior than culture of industry, infer to the hypothesis as follow,

H1a Power distance across gender is significantly different.

H1b Power distance across education level is significantly different.

2.2 Work engagement (UWES)

The concept of work engagement refers to a positive fulfilling work related state of mind that characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli et al, 2002).

Vigor: VI is characterized by high level of energy and mental resilience while working, the willingness to invest effort in one's work, and persistence even in the face of difficulties.

Dedication: DI refers to being strongly involved in one's work, and experiencing a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge.

Absorption: AB is characterized by being fully concentrated and happily engrossed in one's work, whereby time pass quickly and one has difficulties with detaching oneself from work.

Consequently, engaged employees work hard (vigor), are involved (dedicated), and feel happily engrossed (absorbed) in their work. (Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter, & Taris, 2008).

Work engagement differences between demographics characteristics

Gender, Taipale and Colleagues (2010) studied work engagement in eight European countries, presented that women are more engaged in their work than men, including a study of Wajid and colleagues (2011) indicated work engagement differences between genders.

Marital status, level of work engagement differences among employees' marital status is presented by Bakker & Demerouti, and Schaufeli (2005), they found the crossover of work engagement among couples in a bi-direction crossover of work engagement (vigor and dedication) from husbands to their wives and from wives to their husbands.

Education level, logically education level can help employees looking for some new job, this could be say that higher education would conduct lower work engagement, but there is rarely evidence to support.

Organizational Tenure, one of work engagement indicator is intend to stay in organization, organization tenure could be positively associated with work engagement, but rarely evidence to support, while the study of Burke and colleagues (2009) stated that longer organizational tenure indicated lower levels of work engagement.

Concluding to the second Hypothesis as,

H2a: Work engagement across gender is significantly different.

H2b: Work engagement across marital status is significantly different.

H2c: Work engagement across education levels is significantly different.

H2d: Work engagement across organizational tenure is significantly different.

2.3 Power distance related to work engagement

The drivers of work engagement, the study of Bakker and Demerouti (2008), indicated that personal resource as low neuroticism in combination with extroversion and high level of

mobility (Langelann et al, 2006). Furthermore, job resources are not only positively associated with work engagement, but it can predict work engagement also (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004).

Job resources as autonomy and support were found as positive factors that impact work engagement (Taipale et al, 2010), including social support from colleagues, performance feedback, skill variety, autonomy, and learning opportunities are positively associated with work engagement, especially in the context of high job demand (Bakker, 2011).

The study of leadership indicated that servant leadership style is positively related to work engagement, in addition to transformational leadership style influences followers' attributes of work engagement that transformational leaders transfer their enthusiasm and high power to their subordinate, support by a study of Tims and colleagues (2011) indicated that a daily transformational leadership is positively related with employees' daily engagement. While leadership style in large power distance environment, powerful leader with autocratic style, including focus more on coercive and reference power, these could be conversely.

Power distance pushes down work engagement both direct and indirect ways, generally large PDI involves inequality, superior respect, autocratic leadership style, centralized management, and subordinate expects to be told what to do. Generally, employees may work without willingness and do not want to put more effort (VI) because they follow their superior, autocratic style and centralized management may lead employees to lack of involvement and autonomy of work (DE), inequality workplace or atmosphere could make employees unhappy during they are working (AB). Moreover, superiors are more powerful in large power distance workplace, if they use their power in inappropriate ways these could make employees' unhappy and unwilling to accomplish their work.

Indirectly, Power distance could push down work engagement, PDI was found to have a significant negative effect on cooperative social and environment performance (Ringov & Zollo, 2007), meanwhile work engagement is positively related with cooperative social responsibility and learning toward high power distance appeared to hinder the adoption of teamwork, empowerment, and communication (Hope, 2004).

Concluding to the third and fourth hypothesis as,

- H3 Power distance has a negative relationship with work engagement.
- H4 Power distance has a negative relationship with vigor, dedication, and absorption.

3. Research's model

Toward to find results of the aims of this present study, the research' model was constructed base on Hofstede's cultural dimensions, work engagement concept, and concerning of four demographic characteristics (DEMO), gender(GEN), marital status (MAR), education (EDU) and organization tenure (TEN), which might be related to power distance (PDI) and work engagement (UWES) and three components of work engagement as vigor(VI), Dedication (DE), and Absorption (AB).

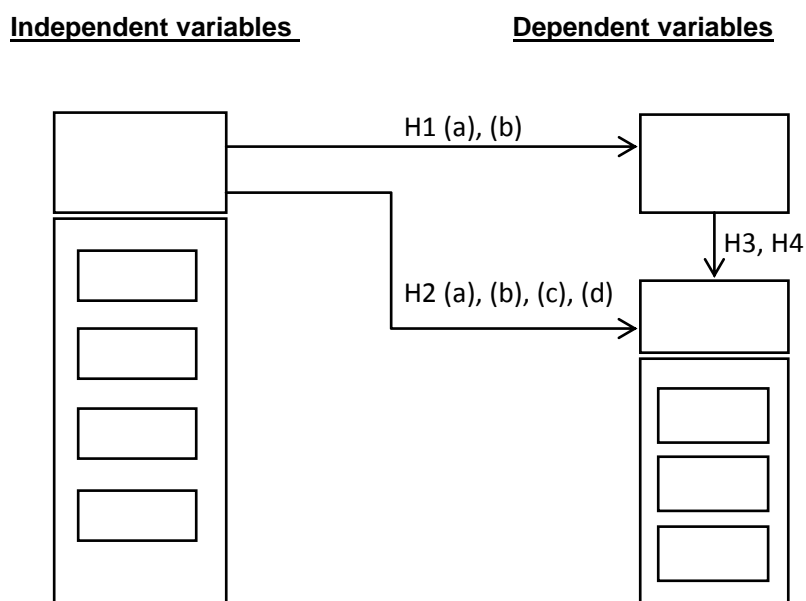


Figure 1 Research Framework and Hypothesized Relationships

4. Method

The survey was conducted in August - October 2012 in Thailand, all participants received a paper-and-pencil questionnaire with a letter that explains the purpose of the survey, participants were asked to fill out the questionnaires and were sent back to researcher by post.

Participant profiles

A self-evaluation survey by employees, who are staffs and operation or supervisor, from 27 electronic and electric companies in Thailand, totally 247 completed the questionnaire; males are 115, and females are 132 about 72.8 % of participants were born

between 1660 to 1981 or generation-X. the participants are divided to staff and operation group, the detail is showed in table 1

Total n = 247 (operation level =114, staff = 133)														
Male = 115							Female = 132							
MAR		EDU			TEN		MAR		EDU			TEN		
S	M	Tech	BA.	High	≤ 10	>10	S	M	Tech	BA.	High	≤ 10	>10	
47	68	28	62	25	59	56	67	65	41	77	14	70	62	

Table 1 the participants' profile

Instrument

The questionnaire consist three parts; introduction, PDI survey, and work engagement survey. The questionnaires include scales that were translated from English to Thai which follow by the translation –back- translation procedure,demographic data; Gender (male/female), marital status (single / married and others) , education level (less than bachelor's degree/bachelor's degree/ master degree and higher), and organizational tenure (10 years and less , and more than 10 years).

Power distance are assessed by five items ($\alpha = 0.628$) which applied from Dofman and Howell (1988), each items are measured on 5 point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), ask about perceptions of decision making, power accepting, submissive attitude, and centralize management, examples are “By your experience, the employees always afraid to disagree with higher positions” and “Managers should make most decisions without consulting subordinates”. A higher score indicates large power distance.

Work engagement was assessed with the 17-items Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-17; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003), but one item of VI is low reliability, thus the UWES contains 16 items which includes three subscales that reflect the underlying dimensions of work engagement ($\alpha = 0.873$): VI (6 items , $\alpha = 0.672$), DE (5 items , $\alpha = 0.806$), and AB(6 items, $\alpha = 0.663$),each items was scored on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (never) to 6 (everyday) , a higher aggregate score indicates higher levels of work engagement, the UWES-17 asks about how often they experience feeling that relate to work engagement. An example item for VI is “At my job, I feel strong and vigorous”, an example of DE is “I am

proud of my work that I do”, an example of AB is “It is difficult to detach myself from my job”.

Analysis

Analysis step was divided to two parts, first descriptive statistic by SPSS V.20.0, describes demographic characteristics, gender, marital status, education level, and organizational tenure, followby t-test and ANOVA fortesting H1 and H2. The second part, usingcorrelation analysis to approve H3, H4 and to extricate the objective of this research “how work engagement interacts with power distance”

5. Results

A resultexplanation in this section presents the detail which follows three objectivesof research as;

1) To study power distance and work engagement in organizations, the table 2 shows power distance scores, work engagement scores, by overview, PDI is indicated a moderate score, work engagement as well. In operation group,UWES score in is higher than staff, while PDI score is lower than staff group, but noany significant (sig.<0.05) difference score of all variables between two groups.

Variables	Staff (n=133)		Operation (n=114)		Total (n=247)	
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D.
VI	4.71	.895	4.80	.821	4.75	.861
DE	5.02	.902	5.25	.759	5.13	.844
AB	4.40	.870	4.42	.873	4.41	.870
UWES	4.71	.803	4.82	.734	4.76	.772
PDI	3.32	.581	3.27	.629	3.33	.603

Table 2 power distance and work engagement scores.

Power distance, refers as an inequity acceptance by less powerful person, thus staff (n =133) and operation group (n=114), total = 247, are focus, analysis by t-test and one-way ANOVA are used of mean comparing, the results showPDI is not differences among genders, marital status, and organization tenure, therefor *H1a is reject*.

PDI scores are found significant differences when compared by education level ($f=4.36$, $p<0.05$), PDI score of participants who got college degree is larger than bachelor's degree and master degree, see table 3. PDI score comparing, which separated by staff and operation group, present significant difference PDI score in staff group ($f = 3.134$, $P<0.05$), not in operation group, thus *H1b is particularly support*.

PDI score by education level		Staff Group (n =133)		Total (n=247)	
		M.D.	S.D	M.D.	S.D
Less than bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree	.296*	.105	.185*	.088
	Master degree	.366	.206	.264*	.119
Bachelor's degree	Less than bachelor's	-.296*	.105	-.185*	.085
	Master degree	.070	.199	.078	.108

M.D. = mean difference,

*significant level <0.05

Table 3 PDI mean different by education level

Work engagement, the results show their scores among genders, married status, education levels, and management levels, staff and middle level, are not significant difference, while a significant differences are found in organizational tenure group which participants who have work in organizational more than ten years are higher engaged than participants who have work in organizational for ten years and less than ten years, but not found in staff group, see table 4, therefor *H2a b, c, are not support, while H2d is support*.

Conclude that power distance is homogenous among genders, and the perception of power distance in organization is vary by education level, a higher score in less education group especially in staff level, while work engagement is higher in middle management level who works more than 10 years in organizational.

Variable	Organizational tenure	Middle management group (n=113)				Staff and Middle group (n=247)			
		Mean	S.D.	M.D.	Sig .	Mean	S.D.	M.D.	Sig ,
UWES	10 yrs. and less	4.66	.653			4,64	,777		

	more than10 yrs.	4.96	.593	.302	.028	4,90	,746	.263	.007
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M.D. = mean difference

Table 4 Work engagement mean different between organization tenure.

2) To find what kind of relationship between power distance and work engagement and its components. A correlation analysis by SPSS 20.0 presents relationships between power distance with work engagement and its components among two groups, staff and middle level are in table 5.

Group	Variables	Pearson Correlation	VI	DE	AB	UWES
Staff level (n = 133)	PDI	R – value	-,147	-,176*	-,123	-,165
		Sig. (2-tailed)	,091	,043	,160	,058
Operation level (n= 114)	PDI	R – value	-,103	-,122	-,070	-,108
		Sig. (2-tailed)	,277	,196	,459	,252
Total (n=247)	PDI	R – value	-,128*	-,155*	-,098	-,140*
		Sig. (2-tailed)	,044	,015	,126	,027

*significant level <0.05

Table 5 correlations between PDI with VI, DE, AB, and UWES

Therefore, H3 is support since PDI is negative correlation with work engagement, however no correlation when test by each group. H4 is particularly support that PDI is negatively related to VI and De, but not significant related with AB, while PDI is negatively related to De in staff group only.

Conclude that a relationship between PDI and work engagement is minimal negative, and not significant when test by each group these because the factors which related with power distance and work engagement are difference, for example PDI score, not work engagement, in education levels are differences in staff group, not middle group, and UWES score, not PDI score, in organizational tenure are differences in operation level, not staff level.

3) To explore how work engagement interacts with power distance, since a negative influence by power distance on work engagement, thus work engagement is decrease in large power distance environment. However, factors impact work engagement and power distance are not same; the results in this present study present level education have a negative

influence on power distance, while organization tenure has a positive impact on work engagement, furthermore gender and marital status are not related with work engagement and power distance. Therefore, the model of power distance influences on work engagement, figure 2, provides the explanation of the third objective.

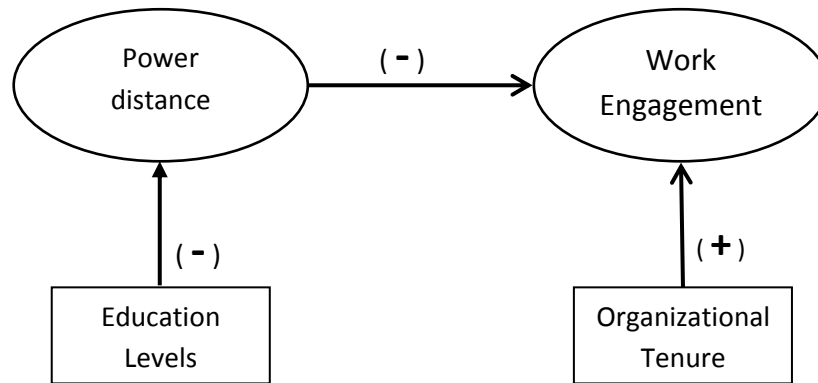


Figure 2, Power distance influence on work engagement model

6. Discussion and conclusion

The result indicates that PDI level in Thailand is moderate to high score with 3.33 (out of 5), according to Hofstede's (1988) reported that Thailand is a society in which inequalities are accepted, these may conclude that, although culture is not stable, it could be changed by social environment, economics, technology, and others, but need for decade in changing

The participants presented there are more hierarchy gaps between authorities and subordinates, accepting power equity, centralize management, and less participation by subordinates, for examples, two of third participants are agree and strongly agree with "by your experience, The employees always afraid to disagree with higher positions", and three of fifth participants are agree and strongly agree with "It is frequently necessary for a manager to use authority and power when dealing with subordinates", and three of fifth participants said they agree and strongly agree with "managers should seldom ask for the opinions of employees".

Verluyten (1997) recommended to the Westerners when work with Thai that "do not make decisions without extensive prior consultation in order to ensure that your decision will meet with a broad consensus", these because of the seniority system ; age, social rank, and position are the predominant one that has been observed throughout Thailand for centuries. (Thai ways magazine, online), and which is relevant with Thai culture, Kreng Jai value ; Being Kreng Jai to give your opinion in a meeting. You may have a fantastic idea or

something important to say that can improve the business but you keep quiet because you don't want to be seen to claim superiority over your boss or senior colleagues(Fitzroy, P.,online),

Demographic variable, education level is negative relationship with power distance, this confirms Hofstede's study(2010) that an important of education help people to gain knowledge, when employees became knowledge worker, the coming of more decentralize management, more participation, more involvement, less autocratic, and less power gap are occurred, there for the scale of power distance is smaller among higher education.

PDI is not differences among gender, marital, and tenure, these not surprise with PDI among marital and tenure group since Thai society is based on a deep respect for age and status.

Work engagement level is 4.76 (out 6.00), stated that there is moderate to high work engagement in Thailand, the score of vigor, dedication, and absorption are 4.45, 5.13, 4.41 by respectively. About 37.7 % of participants behaved every day and two or three times per week in work engagement, 59.6% performed once a week and two or three time per month in work engagement, and only 2.6 % told that they behaved two or three time per year with work engagement.

Nevertheless, work engagement level difference by marital status which married employees are higher work engagement than single employees, furthermore employees, who are more than 20 years in organizational tenure, are more work engagement score than employees who are less than 10 years in organizational tenure. Especially, organizational tenure is positive relationship with work engagement.

Concluding to work engagement model as figure 2, explains power distance negative impacts on work engagement that the education levels are negatively influence on power distance, but education levels are not relate with work engagement, since work engagement is an individual cognitively, emotionally, and physically with their works (Kahn,1990), while power distance involves with a societal environment, an organization climate, and a relationship between superiors and subordinates.

How work engagement react with power distance, this model explains the negative relation between large power distance with work engagement level, thus work engagement level would be higher in small power distance environment, to enhance work engagement level should be concern about the size of power distance, a small power distance such as a few gap between boss and subordinates, employee participation and involvement, decentralize

management, improving leadership style, including to transform employees to knowledge workers could increase work engagement.

7. Conclusion

This present study explore how work engagement react with power distance, a large power distance will pull down work engagement, therefor to increase work engagement in organization should be focus on how to create an organizational environment with small power distance. A size of power distance is depend on organization system; decentralize management, employee participation channel, employee involvement tools, depend on leadership style; transformation and servant leadership , and depend on employees; knowledge worker.

However, work engagement level are differences among organizational tenure, and between management level, thus to research about why they are differences in work engagement, these could be know how to enhance work engagement in another ways.

Strengths and limitations

The strengths of this study about participation is about the qualitative method in order to find a mathematics support, the number of participants is high (265) that could be a representative group, and the number of genders and marital statuses is not difference that type 2 error not happen.

This present study also possesses limitations. First , focusing on only four demographics characteristic would not enough for explaining an influencing, second the reliabilities' value of some variables are moderate (0.6), that results could not strongly confirm. Third, the self-report of dependent variables may be bias, and fourth culture could be bias if the participants misunderstand between desired and actual values, thus, study of culture should aware about that and conduct an observation as a parallel method.

Directions for future research

Accordingly, PDI is negatively relation with work engagement and work engagement relates to organization outcomes; productivity, satisfaction, performance, intensity, and intends to stay. The future research should exam or compares the relationship between work engagement and organization outcomes in power distance context, including focus on education level is a mediator between power distance and work engagement, or how does

work engagement interact with others culture dimension such as individualism, masculinity ,and others.

Practical implications

One interesting finding in the present study is that work engagements react with power distance in negative way, although a correlation is minimal, therefore realizing about culture as a socialize system that it will not change quickly and clearly, but such a few all the time, when the time has been passed we could notice that there are changing. This if we ignore and let a large power distance has happened, decreasing employees work employee would be notice, also.

The findings could have significant implications for large power distance organizations, to concern with equity, power gap, leadership, employee participation, and management systems in organization to increase employees' work engagement, including human resource development while design human development program by increasing knowledge employees to decrease power distance gap and to enhance work engagement in organizational.

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