

# Quality circles and human rights: tackling the universalism and cultural relativism divide

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**Abstract** The implementation of international human rights law has traditionally been undermined by the dichotomy between universalism and cultural relativism. Some groups regard human rights as more reflective of other culture's and are unwilling to subscribe to them. One response to this is to enable groups to take co-ownership of human rights. Quality Circles based on institutions and technology, and the collaboration they encourage, provide one such means for doing so. What is required is for states to facilitate rather than undermine and censor these processes. Human Rights Quality Circles at different levels represent one way in which the cultural relativism and universalism division can be addressed, particularly in an ever-globalising world.

**Keywords** Quality circles · Teleology · Co-ownership · Universalism and cultural relativism · Human rights · Global Civic Quality Circles · Institutions · Social networking · Censorship

## 1 Introduction: quality circles and co-ownership

Quality Circles, which developed in an industrial setting in Japan 50 years ago, were based on the view that quality could be promoted by encouraging employees to participate in decision-making. They challenged the traditional top-down models, which often created unhelpful barriers between members of staff, and recognised that efficiency

could be improved through group effort.<sup>1</sup> They created a participatory and collaborative space that not only affirmed the skills of individuals, but one in which issues could be addressed in the spirit of teamwork. Members of the Circles were encouraged to work together to identify quality solutions to issues.

The Circles were developed as an industrial tool; however, they reflect principles that can be adapted to other contexts. Principally, they are based on the view that there is not necessarily one means to an end, but that successful outcomes are often based on a number of perspectives coming together. Objectives are optimised when all the participants feel that they have *co-ownership* of a process and can contribute to its outcome.

This has been successfully applied, for example, to the educational environment. Some schools have encouraged their students to form Quality Circles in order to complete academic activities. They have been supported to take learning into their own hands and work together as part of a team. This has not only fostered a spirit of co-operation, but has also engendered a culture of responsibility that has enhanced student learning. As Richard Ennals, for instance, observes:

At the level of a single school or university, space can be created for students to take the initiative, going beyond an initial presentation, starting to build a movement. Student Quality Circles are about collaborative learning, rather than competition. We seek collaborative advantage, rather than competitive advantage.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See, generally, Hutchins (1983).

<sup>2</sup> Ennals (2010).