

Choice Theory: Unlocking the Success of the “Japanese Post-War Economic Miracle” for
American Companies

Marcus C. Hubbard

Leading Change Virtual Conference

#LEADCC21

February 18-19, 2021

Author Note

Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Marcus C. Hubbard, School of Strategic Leadership Studies, James Madison University, 298 Port Republic Road, MSC 1505, Harrisonburg Virginia, 22807. Email: hubbarmc@students.jmu.edu

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Abstract

W. Edwards Deming and William Glasser were both American born and educated scholars who have received international recognition for their work. In recognition of Deming's positive impacts on Japanese manufacturing and business, Japan named The Deming Prize in his honor in 1951. Glasser, best known for his Reality Therapy and Choice Theory, attempted to illuminate Deming's teaching for the American audience articulating Deming's secrets of success through the lens of Glasser's Choice Theory. Surprisingly, the philosophy of business leadership Glasser shared with Deming seems to have gained more traction in Japan than in the U.S. This paper provides suggestions for researching the validity and utility of Choice Theory applied to management for companies in the United States. Specifically, five suggestions are made for future research: one, a theory paper that positions Choice Theory in comparison with similar organizational leadership perspectives; two, the development of a *Choice Theory Lead Management Scale*; three, analyzing influences of culture; four, developing hypotheses of performance differences based on *lead management* practices using cross-sectional studies of existing organizations to compare outcome differences; and five, analyze effects of Choice Theory Lead Management training and coaching interventions.

Keywords: Boss Management, Choice Theory, Control Theory, Lead Management, Leadership, Organizational Culture, W. Edwards Deming, William Glasser

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Introduction

There is a great deal of interest in discovering the factors that influence workplace productivity. The entire field of Industrial Organizational (I/O) Psychology is centered on this interest. The field of Leadership Studies has also emerged to partake in this quest to unlock the secret of moving people efficiently towards a collective goal. While scholars in both I/O Psychology and Leadership studies have contributed significantly to our understanding of workplace productivity, some individuals outside of these specific fields claim to have solved the puzzle. Two such individuals, Drs. W. Edwards Deming and William Glasser, may be worthy of our attention and further research. This presentation seeks to share their philosophy of leading change to improve productivity. Other theories that make similar recommendations to Deming's and Glasser's will be referenced briefly for context. Finally, suggestions for further research will be discussed as a way to determine the legitimacy of their suggestions on how to lead change in organizations.

Deming and Glasser, while trained in different disciplines, (Glasser in Psychiatry and Deming in math and physics) united behind the same philosophy of strategic leadership to lead change in the workplace. Illustrative of this fusion of ideas, William Glasser wrote the book *"The Control Theory Manger: Combining Control Theory of William Glasser with the Wisdom of W. Edwards Deming to Explain Both what Quality is and what Lead-Managers Do to Achieve it."* Note, Glasser originally used the label *Control Theory* to conceptualize his ideas but later renamed the concept *Choice Theory*. Glasser believed that the U.S. did not value Deming's suggestions because Deming did not articulate "why" they work (Glasser, 1994). Glasser wrote the aforementioned book to highlight for a U.S. audience the philosophy Deming was lauded for

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in Japan. Glasser believed that incorporating this philosophy of leadership would enable American companies to regain a global competitive advantage.

Though academically trained with a Ph.D. in Math and Physics, W. Edwards Deming worked with business leaders as a consultant to assist Japan in 1950 and was subsequently recognized in Japan as the most impactful person on Japanese manufacturing and business not of Japanese heritage. Japan established the Deming Prize in his honor in 1951. William Glasser, MD, a Psychiatrist, realized that his own theories about how people are motivated aligned very well with Deming's teachings and sought to communicate these principles to the American audience in his 1994 book. Glasser's broader theory is applicable to many contexts such as counseling, primary schools, marriage and raising children. While Glasser's Choice Theory as a whole was relatively well received in these areas, its application to business organizations, similar to Deming's attempts, seemed to gain more traction in Japan than in the United States (Carelton & Kakitani, 2017).

The Japanese consulting company, Achievement Corporation, founded in 1987 with only three employees, grew exponentially and trained 32,127 people (89,046, if including repeaters) in concepts of Choice Theory applied to Management by 2016. Achievement Corporation created the *Proficiency Test of Choice Theory in a Business Setting* and a "Choice Theory Game." Japan now has two *Choice Theory/Reality Therapy/Lead Management* (CT/RT/LM) organizations which include the *William Glasser Institute* (WGI) – Japan and *Japan Association for Choice Theory Psychology* (JACTP). In partnership with WGI – Japan and JACTP, Achievement Corporation hosted William Glasser in 1989, 2000, 2004 and 2007 (Carelton & Kakitani, 2017).

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Boss Management versus Lead Management

In relation to business, Glasser used the term *Boss Management* as the typical way that people are managed and *Lead Management* to denote how managers should operate. Glasser's Choice Theory applied to management is charted in the table below.

Boss Management	VS.	Lead Management
External Control Psychology		Internal Control Psychology – Choice Theory
Four Elements		Four Elements
1. Boss sets task and standard. Rarely consults workers. Boss does not compromise, workers must adjust		1. Continually listen/dialogue and encourage workers to offer any suggestions that will improve quality and lower costs when possible.
2. Boss tells rather than shows. Rarely asks for input.		2. Manager or designee trains with example demonstrating clear unambiguous expectations but solicits feedback for improvements which increases workers' control over their jobs.
3. The boss or designee of boss inspects the work. Workers perform at the minimum and are ostracized by coworkers if they do more than the minimum.		3. Workers are responsible for inspecting their own work. Manager makes clear that quality takes precedence over cost.
4. When workers resist, bosses use threats & punishment creating an environment where managers & workers are advisories and workers fear rules.		4. Teaches that the essence of quality is continual improvement. Makes it clear that their job is to facilitate improvement by providing tools training and a friendly place to work. When profit increases (from increased quality), management sets up reward for workers to share some of what their efforts have made possible.

Literature Review

Scholarly literature on Choice Theory in Management/Leadership is practically nonexistent. Of the articles in this domain uncovered by a thorough search of multiple databases, few were empirically based or found in reputable journals. The table below is a reference to the

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process by which articles of interest were identified in relation to the use of Choice Theory in organizations. “Glasser” was included as a keyword after determining that using the term “Choice Theory” alone resulted in numerous studies that did not relate to William Glasser’s Choice Theory. While the table below presents Google Scholar search results, a search in all databases in Academic Search Complete through JMU Libraries was also conducted with similar limiting results.

The following table presents the numbers of articles that appeared from each set of keyword searches. Even when utilizing very specific keywords for the search, it was found that an overwhelming majority of articles on Choice Theory were related to counseling, teachers in school and mental health. As an example, a search for “Choice Theory, Glasser and Management” resulted in articles on classroom management and anger management rather than business management within companies.

Keywords used	Google Scholar		Reasons for exclusions
	Results	Relevant Articles	
“Choice Theory” Glasser and Leadership	2,420	12	Majority of articles related to counselors, teachers in schools, mental health, classroom & anger management
“CT” Glasser and Consulting	1,630	5	
CT” Glasser and Management	3,280	0	
CT” Glasser and Business	1,930	2	
CT” Glasser and “Organizational Culture”	158	5	
CT” Glasser and Japan	522	2	
CT” Glasser and “Personal Development”	350	1	

Most relevant articles were found in just a few journals, one of which was the *International Journal of Reality Therapy*. This journal, though not rigorous, presented articles worthy of mention. For example, Klug (2006) discussed the usage of Glasser’s Choice Theory

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and Reality Therapy techniques in coaching. The author, Klug, who was a former basketball coach at Harvard University, shared that many of the best and long-term coaches exemplified *lead management* in their coaching. Klug examined autobiographies and interviews and cited examples from coaches such as Mike Krzyzewski (Coach K), basketball coach at Duke University, who stated: “Almost everything in leadership comes back to relationships. The level of cooperation on any team increases tremendously as the level of trust rises” (Klug, 2006, p. 37). This is a core Choice Theory concept utilized by Coach K as well as the practice of intentionally seeking suggestions from team leaders. Other coaches were cited such as John Wooden, former UCLA basketball coach, in addition to football coaches and one swimming coach. While these coaches had likely never heard of William Glasser’s Choice Theory, Klug suggested that Glasser’s framework could be a valuable training tool for coaches. Klug also suggested that in addition to the Glasser Quality Schools, which already exists in the U.S., a Glasser Quality Athletic Program could be created. This article gives credence to *lead management* as a useful construct for leaders (coaches) in a competitive domain.

Schoo (2008) discussed similarities between Emotional Intelligence and Choice Theory. Caring habits (accepting, encouraging, listening, negotiation, respecting, supporting and trusting) promoted by Choice Theory’s *lead management* requires a degree of Emotional Intelligence (Schoo, 2008). Further research to decipher where overlaps lie and how one may inform the other may add greater insights and help support the under-researched concepts of Choice Theory. Again this article was philosophical and not backed by data but suggested another point of entry for research in identifying distinctions and similarities between Choice Theory and Emotional Intelligence.

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Bell and Habel (2009) demonstrated how Choice Theory can be used to improve servant leadership acumen for individual leaders wishing to increase their leadership abilities. The article presented a dialog between the leader and a Choice Theory coach. While this article was relatively weak in its presentation, authors expanded on this work in a 2010 publication in the *International Journal of Servant Leadership*. In their case study experiment, they used the researcher's professional leadership role overseeing 120 teachers, as the subject of the case. Bell and Habel acquired survey feedback from 14 teachers, (of 120) regarding the researcher's leadership behaviors. While the rigor of the study was wanting, authors provided great detail describing the coaching process and included questions of self-reflection used by the coach to teach Choice Theory concepts.

A theme that was presented in a dissertation on leadership in politics as well as an article regarding co-leadership in group settings was the utility of using Choice Theory concepts to enhance relationships among leaders. In their discussion of co-leaders, Fall and Hartwig (2016), expressed the importance of leaders articulating to each other their vision of what an ideal co-leader relationship will look like. To do this, they specified the importance of recognizing one's own *quality world* as it relates to what they perceive to be ideal for their co-leader interactions. They expressed that it is also important for co-leaders to recognize the relationship as an opportunity to nurture a basic need of *love and belonging*. This Choice Theory perspective sets the tone of relationship forming as an important element of co-leadership which will ultimately have a positive impact on the followers being led (Fall & Hartwig, 2016).

According to Bjornstad (2009), political spheres could also benefit from the use of Choice Theory to enhance relationships between politicians who work closely together in their leadership roles. Bjornstad coded and scored intrinsic differences that mirrored Glasser's five

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basic human needs using autobiographical documents, media interviews and speeches of President Obama and Vice President Biden between 2007 and 2009. It was suggested that this process could be used by advisors of high profile politicians as additional data to build relationships between partnered political leaders and thereby enhance their leadership effectiveness as a unit.

Lead management vs boss management, which is specifically directed at leadership within an organization, was highlighted by Bock and Greene (2007). While the contents of their article have utility in explaining differences between *boss management*, *lead management* and *laissez-faire management*, their article was written specifically as a call for Adventist education to adopt Glasser's lead-management in their Christian schools. This article included graphics to illustrate differences but contained no empirical evidence to support the suggestion.

Clifton (2011) highlighted an interesting observation; that neuroscience was beginning to confirm many of the same basic human needs that Glasser had articulated but feared that the direction of science would only breed more "outside in" methods of healing such as chemical experimentation. This is in contrast to Glasser's beliefs in the power of human interaction and understanding the power of individual choice to mitigate much of the stress and depression related symptoms that individuals within society suffer from society as a whole. Clifton terms these Choice Theory methods as "inside out." There were no suggestions for advancing the Choice Theory perspective (Clifton, 2011).

The most rigorous and intriguing study used Glasser's Choice Theory as a theoretical basis to articulate a potential dark side of competitiveness and working long hours in sales people. Jelinek and Ahearne (2010) stated, "We believe that highly competitive reps view others as a threat to their need for success and survival; as such, they would be more likely to engage in

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forms of interpositional deviance.” (p. 305) With competitiveness and hardworking professions typically identified as desirable traits by Human Resource experts for sales people, Jelinek and Ahearne produced counterintuitive hypotheses that suggested a potential dark side. Jelinek and Ahearne (2010) surveyed 160 employees and found support for competitiveness corresponding to increased organizational deviance.

Jelinek and Ahearne (2010) hypothesized that person-organizational fit would be negatively associated with deviant behaviors because organizational fit would indicate that the needs for love and belonging are being met. Their study supported this finding that person-organization fit was negatively related to interpersonal deviance and frontline deviance. Also, meaningfulness of work lessened the effect of hours worked on interpersonal deviance and frontline deviance. The authors suggested that competitiveness may be a double-edged sword that could potentially lead to both positive and negative outcomes. Recommendations for managers to mitigate negative effects based on their research were presented.

In order for research on Choice Theory to advance, reliable scales must be developed to measure Choice Theory Concepts. Recently, Kheramin, Sahebi, Shirazi, Matekzadeh, Mohseni, and Shirazi (2019) took on that challenge by creating the *Quality of Life Scale based on Choice Theory* (QOLSCT). This scale was designed to measure an individual’s level of need for each of the five human needs as well as the degree to which each need is being met. This scale did not address however the *boss management* versus *lead management* aspects of Choice Theory. While Choice Theory has been well defined in a broad sense through Glasser’s books, it was clear through the review of the literature that research regarding the use of Choice Theory in the workplace is severely underdeveloped. From this review, it is advised that a more comprehensive review would incorporate related leadership and management theories that may provide

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empirical evidence needed to make research based hypotheses that could be tested in empirical studies.

One example of a theory that has similarities to Choice Theory applied to business is Douglas McGregor's (1960) Theory X and Theory Y. Theory X shows similarities to the concepts of *boss management* while *lead management* appears more closely aligned with Theory Y. McGregor also argued that the less popular Theory Y perspective was ultimately more productive when properly performed. This is in agreement with Choice Theory's claims that *lead management* is a more effective management style than *boss management*. McGregor's view of the superiority of Theory Y management has been advanced by many successors yet there has been little in the way of empirical evidence to prove this (Kopelman, 2013). Choice Theory with its specific suggestions may lend itself more readily to an operationalized definition that can be empirically tested.

Discussion/Next Steps

A challenge in theory development involving people and personalities is that it is often difficult to create an experimental design or even a quasi-experimental design due to the difficulty of creating an operationalizable definition. In McGregor's case, for example, the language is centered on managers' beliefs more than the outcome of actions. Choice Theory makes specific behavioral suggestions which may make operationalization more feasible. Scholarly research in the domain of Choice Theory applied to the workplace is long overdue. While the propositions put forth by W. Edwards Deming and redefined through William Glasser's Choice Theory, are not new, the research to provide evidence to accept or reject the claims remains in its infancy.

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Given the acceptance and apparent success that these concepts have achieved in Japan, first by Deming and later Glasser, the call for further research in this domain is a worthy endeavor. The following are suggested to advance the literature of Choice Theory applied to the workplace. First, a theory paper that positions Choice Theory in comparison with similar organizational leadership perspectives; second, the development of a *Choice Theory Lead Management Scale*; third, analyzing influences of culture; fourth, developing hypotheses of performance differences based on *lead management* practices using cross-sectional studies of existing organizations to compare outcome differences; and fifth, analyze effects of Choice Theory Lead Management training and coaching interventions.

The first logical step would be to expand on this paper by clearly defining where Choice Theory overlaps with other management style models and where it diverges. Due to the dearth of research on Choice Theory in the work setting, it will be important to leverage the literature within tangential domains to provide evidence based hypotheses that can be tested. As articulated in this paper, emotional intelligence, servant leadership and McGregor's Theory X and Theory Y are examples of concepts that should be compared with Choice Theory to both substantiate and differentiate Choice Theory as a unique strategic leadership strategy. Such a paper should provide a strong foundation from which testable hypotheses can be constructed.

The development of a valid and reliable scale of Choice Theory in the workplace will be critical for subsequent empirical studies and therefore an important foundational step. Such a scale would have utility for assessing the degree to which an individual leader holds a more boss management or lead management perspective. Such a scale could also be used to analyze industry differences in management style. Finally, pre and posttests with Choice Theory training interventions could utilize such a scale.

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A study of cultural differences that retaliate to Choice Theory suggestions might provide evidence for why these concepts have been more readily accepted in Japan and also suggest potential barriers to implementation in the U.S. It has been suggested that the collectivist culture of Japan vs the western culture of the U.S. may have influenced the lack of acceptance of these ideas (Glasser, 1994). If such a claim is found to be valid, this may lead to modifications of the theory to improve adoption for western cultures. Implications for effectiveness after any potential modifications should be thoroughly reviewed based on knowledge of the theory and the differential factors that make it unique and distinct from other models.

Evaluating existing organizations on the Choice Theory measure and comparing these measures to outcome differences may provide valuable information while being practical and require relatively minimal resources. Also, some organizations such as churches and political offices change leadership in predictable patterns which may be fitting for this research. Seventh-Day Adventist churches, for example, change pastors every four years. Leveraging historical data on church membership and revenue correlated with individual pastors scores on the Choice Theory measure may provide an opportunity for incites absent an intervention.

Lastly, there are Choice Theory coaches associated with the William Glasser institute who provide coaching services for leaders. A final suggestion for further study is to measure the impacts of consulting interventions that teach Choice Theory leadership. Such studies will need to first assess whether the leadership changed its practices as a result of the training. Pretest posttest designs have the potential to provide evidence on not only of the effectiveness of the Choice Theory practices but also the degree to which it can be taught and adopted effectively and enhance the performance of a company.

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The potential of Choice Theory to add value to our knowledge of leadership effectiveness is vast given the evidence of its effectiveness in Japan. However, the relative lack of attention this theory has received by American industry gives some pause. It is clear that extensive research is needed to answer many questions regarding the utility of this theory as well as the contexts under which it may be of value. This paper has outlined suggestions regarding how such research may begin to provide a foundation to answer such questions.

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