

Using the Film “*American Factory*” in the Human Resource Management Classroom

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Abstract

This paper presents the documentary film *American Factory* as an excellent tool for teaching and applying the topics of conflict, culture, communication, unionization, training, and employee relations in undergraduate human resource management courses. The documentary involves a Chinese company opening up a glass factory in the town of Dayton, Ohio on the site of a former General Motors plant. This situation leads to a number of conflicts between the primarily American workforce and the primarily Chinese management team, many of which relate to HR concepts. The film offers rich examples that can be analyzed by students to apply what they’ve learned in the classroom. Examples of how the film could be applied in an HRM class are discussed. Films that could be used to supplement the use of *American Factory* or as an alternative are also discussed.

Keywords: Human Resource Management, Film, Conflict, Labor Relations, Employee Relations, Organizational Communication, Unionization, International

Introduction

Educators in HR are often looking for engaging examples to use in the classroom. This can include real-life examples (Barclay & Tyler, 2011; Ramlall et al., 2008) and works of popular culture (Cannon & Doyle, 2020; Oliver & Reynolds, 2010). In this paper, I explore the potential use of the film *American Factory* in HRM courses. I begin by describing the film and some of the major relevant topics for HRM classes. I then discuss the specific application to a human resource management course and how it might be applied in different course modalities. The final section of the paper explores other films and content that could be used to supplement or replace the use of *American Factory* in a class.

Description of Film

American Factory (2019, *Higher Ground Productions*, 110 minutes) is a documentary telling the story of large Chinese company Fuyao Glass opening its first factory in the United States in Dayton, Ohio, and the conflicts in the employer-employee relationship, human resources, leadership, culture, communication, and labor relations that result. Dayton, Ohio had a General

Motors (GM) car plant that was a primary focus of the economy of the town until its closing in 2008. With the city struggling with many people out of work, the announcement of Fuyao Glass creating a new manufacturing factory making automobile glass at the site of the old GM plant was seen as a great boon. However, conflict almost immediately arose.

While the GM factory was proudly unionized, Fuyao Glass wanted the new factory to be union-free and worked strenuously to avoid unionization for the US facility (despite the fact factories in China were unionized). With this lack of unionization came significantly lower salaries than under the old GM plant. Unemployed workers were happy to have a job again, but lower salaries and anti-union sentiment were a source of tension.

Fuyao Glass also brought a culture very different than the local US culture. The company and its leadership were used to Chinese workers and the Chinese safety and labor law structure. Long hours and unquestioning obedience to a manager were expected by the company. Standards for appropriate work conditions were drawn from the Chinese context, without enough consideration of US labor law.

Cultural differences, both organizational and national culture, were exacerbated by having a management and HR team almost exclusively Chinese who came from existing glass factories in China, with only a few upper-level leaders of the factory American. The line supervisors were all transplants from Chinese factories of Fuyao Glass. The movie shows frequent training sessions to managers on what American workers are like and their supposed personality characteristics, but little on the differences in legal and work customs. There seems no attention paid to the difference in HR functions in the U.S. vs China. There is also an inherent language barrier, as most of the managers did not speak English well and used interpreters to communicate with the American workforce (even Fuyao Glass chairman, Cao Dewang).

Another conflict the film shows is the obstinate visions of chairman Cao Dewang for the factory. His great success in China makes him certain in his plans and ability. Cao Dewang wants the factory to be run exactly like the factories in China and be productive in the same ways. He demands managers and HR to take actions that are contrary to US labor laws and safety regulations. Dewang expects people to defer to him in the same way as the other company branches in China. Dewang has a strongly hierarchical view of leadership, with little room for input from other leaders, HR, or the workers.

These tensions and conflict lead to an American workforce that is frustrated and feeling not listened to and a Chinese management feeling that their workforce is stubborn and lazy. The factory also shows a financial loss in its early days. A union drive is started at the organization and management targets union organizers for termination and makes anti-union presentations to the workforce. Some of these actions might be seen as violating U.S. labor law protections for unionization efforts. Management increases the hourly wage rate on the eve of the election. The workers ultimately vote against joining a union and most of the major union organizers in the plant are fired. A postscript reports that the factory is now profitable, although no wage increases have occurred since the unionization vote.

Use in the Classroom

The use of film in the classroom has been increasingly recognized as a reasonable and important tool in management and human resource pedagogy (Billsberry, 2013; Sprinkle & Urick, 2016; Taylor & Provitera, 2011). Films can fill multiple functions, such as providing a broad overview of major class themes (Holbrook, 2009) or providing specific concept examples (Urlick & Sprinkle, 2019). Films are made to be engaging, and thus whole films or video clips provide examples that are engaging places for students to apply classroom concepts they learn (Cannon & Doyle, 2020; Oliver & Reynolds, 2010; Urick & Sprinkle, 2019). Films have been used in a wide variety of management classrooms, including human resource relevant concepts and classes (Quijada, 2016; Taylor & Provitera, 2011).

Research that has examined the impact of films on the classroom has found them to benefit several important class outcomes. This includes increasing levels of student engagement, course liking, higher exam scores, and actual class learning (Fee & Budde-Sung, 2014; Smith, 2009).

The genre of documentary films has been highlighted by some as a particularly useful vein for use in the classroom, with it providing real-world examples for students to analyze, thus highlighting the relevance of class topics to real-world events (Quijada, 2016; Schmidt, 2015). Documentaries allow students to consider what happened in real situations and how those situations were impacted by the ideas they learn in the classroom.

American Factory is an engaging and award-winning documentary that illustrates many core HR management course concepts including risk management, employee responsibilities and rights, conflict, labor law, union-management relations, and training. The film could also be used to teach topics in classes focused on other HR topics such as labor relations or training at the undergraduate or master's degree level. The film and the activities discussed below could be done in classes online or face-to-face.

With the 110-minute run time, the movie could be shown across two class meetings of a face-to-face hour-and-fifteen-minute class, with time for some discussion after each film part. The film assignment sheets for an HRM course can be found in Appendix A, with a sheet with potential answers included in Appendix B. The film was produced by Netflix and is currently available exclusively on the application. Since many students already have a Netflix account, it will be easy access for many students if out-of-classroom viewing is chosen. For students without Netflix, a Netflix free trial could be used to view the film. For students still unable to access it, an alternative film could be used. The best substitute film will depend on how *American Factory* is used in a class and for what purpose.

For an HR Management class, this film fits perfectly in a unit on employee relations and global HRM. The cross-cultural conflict elements are a better fit with the structure of HR management coursework. For one example, in the text, *Human Resource Management*, by Valentine et al. (2019) this film fits well with Section 5, "Employee Relations and Global Human Resource Management," which encompasses chapters 13 through 16 that closes out the book. For Casio's (2019) "Managing Human Resources," the film would be a fit with chapter 5 ("Diversity

and Work”) and Part Five (“Labor-Management Accommodation”), which spans chapters 13 through 16). The film could be used to tie together the learning from these chapters.

HRM classes can examine the conflicts in the film, employee relations, and cultural issues as they relate to effective HR management. Students can think about what they should do if in an HR role at the organization. The legal employment environment is also something that makes sense to highlight in the examination of the film. An example assignment sheet is found in Appendix A. A version with general guidelines for answers is found in Appendix B.

Students are asked to take on the role of a new member of the HR department in the film in considering the HR problems they see in the film. They are asked to identify the problems but also consider how the company environment could constrain their ability to implement solutions. I believe this focus on the role helps them to see the issues experienced by people in the film rather than just acting as an outside observer who can critique what is done without considering the limitations and context within the factory itself. Taking on the role of helps them consider how complicated the situation is, making it difficult for one person to “fix the issue,” rather only able to improve an aspect of the larger problems.

The film acts as a good discussion jumping-off point, whether face to face or through online message boards. If showing the class in person, breaking the film across two days or showing it in a three-hour class meeting would allow time for guided discussion questions. An instructor may want to start by getting student reactions to the events of the film, what they see as the sources of conflict, and how Human Resources played a role. The instructor then could help point out issues missed by the students and help to develop discussion across major elements. In the online format, this might proceed through general discussion board questions and then comments on individual student responses. Figure 1 below presents some potential group discussion questions for an HRM class. Potential answers to those questions are found in Appendix C.

Figure 1: Potential Class Discussion Questions

How could Fuyao Glass improve its relations with its workforce?
How is the global workforce impacting this organization?
Do you see any legal concerns with Fuyao Glass’s actions?
Do you think Fuyao Glass’s anti-unionization effort was appropriate?
If you were given control of the HR department at Fuyao Glass, what is the first thing you’d try to change?
What training needs do you see at Fuyao Glass?

If shown in a classroom, instructors might consider gamification like that proposed by Sprinkle and Ulrick (2016), where a movie is paired with instructor given objectives and students

are given points based on their mastery of concepts illustrated in the movie. In applying those ideas to this film for HRM concepts, students could be asked to identify potential areas of legal trouble related to US labor law. Students could note the event, how it connects to US labor law, and how Fuyao Glass could have resolved the situation in a more legal manner. Students could also note where a competent HR function could have stepped in to help resolve an issue or conflict.

An instructor might also consider giving a handout similar to Oliver and Reynolds (2010), where class relevant topics are listed, and students need to note events in the film that fit with each topic. In such cases, prizes could be given for the most identifications or examples, correct attributions, or the like. Students could use this method to prepare detailed notes and thoughts that would then be used to answer questions in more depth in an essay assignment. This could include labor law violations, miscommunication, cross-cultural issues, and how HR responds to events in the film.

Students could also be asked to engage in role-playing of characters in the film in a similar way to Oliver and Reynolds (2010). In groups, students would role-play elements of the film related to HRM and suggest how they could have been done more effectively. Each group could then share with their class the example and a concept like effective communication or successful conflict management. If face to face, these could be presented directly to the class. If an online class, this could be accomplished through Zoom or by students recording the role-play and sharing it as a video.

The film could also be used for multiple-choice or essay questions on an exam. As described by Holbrook (2009), exams could give examples from the film and ask what class concepts they apply to. Exam questions could also offer situations with some overlap with the film and see if students can apply lessons learned from analyzing the film with class concepts to those situations.

Resources to Supplement Use of *American Factory*

There are several ways to supplement the use of this film. There is an additional short interview on Netflix related to the goals and creation of the film that could be assigned for home viewing or watched as part of a class period (Bognar & Reichert, 2019b). The documentary short, *The Last Truck: Closing of a GM Plant* (Bognar & Reichert, 2009), which was made by the same directors, focuses on the closing of the GM plant in 2008 that is the site for the Fuyao Glass plant. The short could be shown or assigned in a class before *American Factory* so that students understand more of the historical context of the film. Students could also compare and contrast what they see in the film and the later use of the facility to the workforce in *American Factory*.

Students could also look at other examples of foreign companies coming to the U. S. and owning or co-owning manufacturing plants and other organizations. This would be a great way to compare and contrast HRM approaches implemented. A good contrast might be the New United Motor Manufacturing Incorporated (Nummi) facility that represented a joint venture between General Motors and Toyota to make cars in California, which ran from 1984 to 2010 (Gomes-Casseres, 2009). Toyota used this venture as a test run for opening a number of successful car production plants in the United States. The program *This American Life* did an engaging episode

on NUMMI that could be listened to in the classroom or linked to on a course learning management system, with a link to that in the references (Glass, 2015). Students could compare and contrast how NUMMI unfolded compared to *American Factory*. Students could also be directed to find their own examples of Chinese-owned factories or organizations in the United States and compare successes and struggles.

If an instructor wanted to focus on the impact plant closings have on local communities, there are other films that could act as complements to, or be used in place of, *American Factory*. The classic documentary *Roger and Me* (Moore, 1989) focuses on a GM plant closing in Flint, Michigan and the previously mentioned *The Last Truck: Closing of a GM Plant* (Bognar & Reichert, 2009) could be used. While both films are excellent, they focus less on HRM concepts. They also are older films now while *American Factory* taking place in the 2010s might seem to have a more meaningful connection to the lives of current students. *American Factory* being on Netflix is also helpful for student access as they can view the film in an online class or review it later while writing an assignment based on the movie. Since many students already have Netflix access, no additional cost is likely incurred.

For classes looking to focus on the unionization and employee relations elements, they could use a film like *Norma Rae* (Ritt, 1979) about unionizing a textile factory in North Carolina, to see a fictionalized account of a unionization drive and the employee relations issues that lead to that unionization drive. Taylor & Provitera (2011) offer many excellent ideas for such a use of *Norma Rae* in the classroom. *Norma Rae* has strong acting and is a well-made film, but it does fictionalize the union drive it is based on. The film is also an older work. An instructor might also consider using clips from this film to supplement elements not focused on in *American Factory* related to a unionization drive. They can help to create a richer discussion of the role of HRM during a unionization effort.

Conclusion

American Factory offers an engaging and recent real-life example of organizational life that speaks to many topics we cover in Human Resource Management classrooms, such as conflict, communication, global HRM, labor law, culture, unionization, and employee relations. The film is a potentially valuable resource for students to apply the theories and practices they have learned. This paper presents several different ways the documentary film could be used in an HRM class setting. Drawing on real-world examples like those found in *American Factory* can be an entertaining, yet powerful, way to help students learn.

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Appendix A

Assignment Sheet Human Resource Management

Directions: Please write 4-5 pages, double spaced, in a 12-point font applying class-related concepts to the movie *American Factory* by answering the following questions. You will not be penalized for writing more than 5 pages, but assignments shorter than 3 full pages will automatically be penalized 20 points. For full credit, you will need to answer all parts of the questions. This film can be found streaming on Netflix and on Blu-ray and DVD through the Criterion Collection.

Movie Questions

Role of Human Resources

Within *American Factory* there are several potential issues that relate to Human Resource Management. Pick three examples of problems seen in the film and how the HR function could help to reduce or resolve each example. For one of these examples, pretend you are a newly hired member of the HR department in the organization. Describe obstacles you might face in the role in resolving the problem and how you would work to overcome those obstacles.

Global Human Resources

Describe at least 2 examples of conflict in the movie that come about due to cultural differences at the organization. How can you apply class concepts to help reduce this conflict?

The Law and Human Resources

Do you see management or company actions in the film that might be considered to be of questionable legality in the film? Choose two such examples. Describe US labor law relevant to those examples. How might the organization have instead acted in ways that would be consistent with these laws?

Appendix B

Assignment Sheet Human Resource Management with Potential Answers

Directions: Please write 4-5 pages double spaced in a 12-point font applying class-related concepts to the movie *American Factory* by answering the following questions. You will not be penalized for writing more than 5 pages, but assignments shorter than 3 full pages will automatically be penalized 20 points. For full credit, you will need to answer all parts of the questions. This film can be found streaming on Netflix and on Blu-ray and DVD through the Criterion Collection.

Movie Questions

Role of Human Resources

Within *American Factory* there are several potential issues that relate to Human Resource Management. Pick two examples of problems seen in the film and how the HR function could help to reduce or resolve each example. For one of these examples, pretend you are a newly hired member of the HR department in the organization. Describe obstacles you might face in the role in resolving the problem and how you would work to overcome those obstacles.

Potential Examples:

There are issues with levels of performance. At Fuyao factories in China, workers are expected to work overtime and weekends. Workers work in safety conditions that are undesirable in the US and, in many cases, are illegal. Management also sees the American workers as lazy and that they need to be trained over and over. HR could be tasked with improving worker performance. HR could try to help performance by creating better incentive structures for workers. HR might also consider examining training programs and making sure they are appropriate for the American workers. It is possible the training programs are not translating well to these workers. Trainers with more experience with American workers might be helpful to design or run training sessions. In trying to make such changes, a new HR person might face obstacles related to management resistance to changing training programs. Leadership might see such training programs as things that have worked before (in China) and thus should work in America, too. The HR professional will need to help convince leadership that for the success of this factory a different approach is needed. The HR professional will also need to overcome potential leader beliefs that laziness is the main cause of worker performance issues. This could be overcome by giving them more information about the workforce and helping them to see the importance of looking at the American factory as different than previous factories, with different needs for its success.

There are issues related to wage rates. Some workers worked previously in union settings with higher wages and benefits. The non-union wage and benefits thus could be seen as lacking in perceived fairness. The HR department might consider whether wage changes are needed. They may also consider how they can compensate workers in non-wage-related ways, such as showing

appreciation for work, implementing flexible work hours, or providing other benefits. Surveying and interviewing workers might help HR to get a more clear and nuanced perspective on what workers want. A person new to HR trying to make these changes might have problems making such changes as leadership currently thinks workers are “greedy” and “lazy” and thus don’t deserve such changes. As the person arguing for change, it is important to show the positive impact such a change can make and help the leadership understand the context the workforce and company are in. A worker survey on these issues might also give good evidence on the depth of the problem and why a particular solution will help.

Global Human Resources

Describe at least two examples of conflict in the movie that come about due to cultural differences within the organization. How can you apply class concepts to help reduce this conflict?

Potential Examples:

There was conflict over how long and hard workers should work. The factories in China had longer work hours (including mandatory overtime and weekends) and workers that were perceived to put in more effort. The organization could help reduce conflict by using employee surveys to help better understand the American workforce. Management and HR also need to manage their expectations of the workforce as it will always be different from the workforce’s back in China. HR might also consider wage rates and other incentives that could help motivate workers to higher levels of effort.

There were language barriers, as many managers and HR members only spoke Chinese. Many interactions with managers and workers had to go through interpreters. This hurt the ability of workers and managers to feel connected. The organization might consider more immersive language and cultural training so managers and HR can better communicate with workers.

Chinese managers were training about the American workforce but only in broad stereotypes of what Americans are “like.” This led to workers being treated like the stereotypes, not as individuals. The organization may want to revamp this training by learning more about the current workforce and area so that workers can be treated in a more appropriate and dignified manner. This will hopefully reduce conflict.

The Law and Human Resources

Do you see management or company actions in the film that might be considered of questionable legality in the film? Choose two such examples. Describe US labor law relevant to those examples. How might the organization have acted instead in ways that would be consistent with these laws?

Potential Examples:

The intent to target union organizers for termination (which does happen after the vote) is a potential violation of the National Labor Relations Act, which protects the rights of workers to act together to address conditions of employment and their right to organize. HR and leadership at Fuyao should not be specifically targeting union organizers or supporters if they want to be appropriately following US labor law.

Leaders discuss making changes to the workplace that are allowed legally in China but are not in the US. Such changes would probably violate Occupation Safety & Health Administration (OSHA) standards for safety. HR needs to communicate to leadership the seriousness of such actions and that the OSHA standards should be followed.

Appendix C

Figure with Discussion Questions and Potential Answer Topics

Discussion Questions	Potential Answer Topics
How could Fuyao Glass improve its relations with its workforce?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider how to motivate the workforce Examine wage and benefit levels Give workers greater input into decisions Help managers develop a better understanding of the workforce
How is the global workforce impacting this organization?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> American workers on the floor of the factory while management and HR are primarily Chinese Nationals Dealing with cultural conflicts between those two groups Owners are from a different country (China) compared to workers (USA) Different cultures and legal structures between factories in China and USA
Do you see any legal concerns with Fuyao Glass's actions?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> National Labor Relations Act violations related to targeting/firing union organizers and supporters OSHA violations of safety rules
Do you think Fuyao Glass's anti-unionization effort was appropriate?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meetings to advise workers not to join a union are legal but can make workplace more contentious Targeting of union organizers is not legal Anti-unionization efforts didn't deal with fixing workers actual concerns aside from pay raise Leadership is allowed legally to be anti-union if it does not violate labor law
If you were given control of the HR department at Fuyao Glass, what is the first thing you'd try to change?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Could examine wage rate Could survey and interview workers to get their perspectives on issues Could train leaders to be more understanding of worker issues Could give workers more input in decisions Could try to make sure organization follows OSHA guidelines and NLRA rulings
What training needs do you see at Fuyao Glass?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Workers appear to need more effective training to perform tasks Managers and HR need cross-cultural training Managers and HR need training on U.S. labor and safety laws Team-based training with a cross-cultural component would be helpful