

Achieving Cross-Cultural Sensitivity in Management

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Abstract

The need for cross-cultural sensitivity and understanding is emphasized not only by the attention to "multi-culturalism" in the U. S. but also by the tensions arising over the incursion of foreign cultures into Germany from Central Europe, into France from Islam, into Britain from former Asian members of the Commonwealth, and into Australia and Japan from Southeast Asian nations. The tensions do not arise simply from the competition for employment or place but from different mind-sets, modes of behavior, community activities, and expectations.

The desire to maintain these difference is so great that Canada has sought to isolate itself from U. S. media, France from U. S. TV and movies, and now even Japan from U. S. culture in an attempt to tie itself more closely to Asia. These differences become significant both in cross-cultural management and in the introduction of products and services.

If companies are to be successful internationally and to be able to compete in a peaceful world, they will have to become sufficiently familiar with and "sensitive to others" so that they readily accept the differences. Without such sensitivity, there will be no chance to build the global economy.

1. Pressures for Greater Sensitivity and Understanding

Several forces presently are pushing the world toward the necessity to achieve greater sensitivity to the deep cultural aspects of other groups, organizations, nations, and regions. Among them are the gradual emergence of the global corporation, the ethnic conflicts evident today, the imperative of international economic integration, and the devolution of political power from the center to the periphery.

Measured by an understanding of the different cultures and management styles in the countries in which they are involved, no transnational corporation has achieved "globalization". They are all still culturally divided — both in terms of differences in national behavior and in intra-corporate behavior. The need of many transnationals to "spread our corporate culture" has

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been expressed frequently. It shows up not only in management practices but also in mind-sets, reflected in different strategic objectives among members of TNCs or their alliances.

At the national and regional levels, tensions are much wider and deeper than those within multi-national corporations. Although culture is not the direct origin of conflicts among or within nations, it is often contributory in that it permits extreme distinctions—racially, geographically, economically, politically, psychologically, and philosophically—to be exacerbated into the triggers of conflicts. The conflicts occur within international organizations, and within and among nations and regions. Such tensions can be mitigated by agreements on economic, social, and political policies and behavior. But their eradication requires a deeper cultural change—not implying the unification of cultures into a singular mush.

A third pressure to achieve cross-cultural sensitivity is the imperative of international economic integration. The sweep of history shows a continuing merging of economic capabilities and markets through the expansion of integrated activities of trade, investment, and technology transfers. It began with the family and expanded into the tribe, the tribal-nation, the city, the city-state, the nation, the nation-state, and the regional association of nations. Whether global integration will be achieved depends on removal of culturally based—political and social—obstacles.

The fourth pressure is the devolution of political power and control from the national centers towards the province (or state) and the municipality (or city). The inability of the central government to plan and control the whole and the desire of localities for greater autonomy have weakened the center. Further, every step to reduce the barriers among nations reduces the importance of national policies and enhances the ability of states or localities to “guide” economic growth or behavior. Generally, such “guidance” is an encouragement of interaction with foreign entities—companies and “sister-cities”. The objectives are to enhance economic growth and social development. And concerns for “security” are lessened at this level of government.

However, devolution can lead to political dis-integration if groups at lower levels decide that independence and “sovereignty” are important. This desire arises especially within those groups that have been under “foreign” domination through the use of force. To permit this “self-determination” among political entities or ethnic groups seeking separation will also require deep cultural change, so as not to ignite conflicts.

Underneath these four movements are two “drivers” and they are linked: one is the continuing significance of technology, arising out of institutional and individual pursuits of science; the other is the differences in the cultural modes of defining the meaning of life and appropriate behavior. Some cultures are not involved in the scientific/technological pursuits and are little touched by advances therein; others are highly involved.

2. Means of Achieving Sensitivity

To be able to assess, understand, and, react, to these pressures, much less to those likely in the 21st century, will require an appreciation of the cultural differences and major adjustments to them. Five steps are required: observation, appreciation, tolerance, enjoyment, and recognition of unity.

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A. Observation.

To achieve the necessary appreciation ultimately requires direct exposure through *living* in a different culture — whether in a foreign country or not. Nothing substitutes for first-hand experience, though the value depends on the ability and willingness of the participant to observe and respond.

Observation of cultural differences can be accomplished by reading and viewing (as a tourist), but these hardly permit the same "baptism" as living in the foreign environment. However, even living there can be done in a way which lessens the needed observations; they can be made more relevant through "living on the economy" — as do local citizens. But even this is not sufficient if it is done in a cloistered fashion, without an effort to become part of the local culture, which requires learning the language.

The difficulty in making accurate observations is that everyone passes through one dominant culture in reaching maturity, which shapes the ways in which they question, make associations, and draw conclusions from what they see, hear, touch, smell, and taste. The unfamiliar is seldom recognized to be "what it is". Mere observation, therefore, requires the ability to "see" without pre-conception and certainly without pre-judgment — an extreme form of which is "prejudice". This is extremely difficult, and few even see the need to do so.

Americans are particularly unwilling to expend the time and effort to learn about the cultures of others, partly because they see their own as "more advanced" than others; foreigners, therefore, should learn ours. Many of the mistakes made by U. S. government and corporate officials would have been mitigated or eradicated by a better understanding of the cultures of people with which they were dealing — especially in foreign aid and in business and diplomatic negotiations.

U. S. companies have often sent managers into foreign affiliates with little or no cross-cultural preparation, including no language training. And, upon accepting some such training, most U. S. managers have voiced the need for it earlier to eliminate the mistakes that were made.

The myopia of American management is seen also in a 1959 study of worldwide management, which concluded that Japan would simply not succeed industrially unless it adopted the American style of management.²⁾ And during the early 1970s, the consulting firm of Booz-Allen and Hamilton, under contract with the German government to assess the competitive position of German industry, concluded that its weaknesses stemmed from the lack of adoption of American management techniques.³⁾ Both conclusions were, of course, proven wrong, and the cultures and past practices of both countries remained determinative of their management styles. The recent comment of one Japanese manager is apropos: "Japanese and U. S. management are 95 percent the same, but completely different in all important respects."

B. Appreciation.

An appreciation of the differences begins with an understanding of the reasons — grounded in the environment, history, beliefs, education, language, and, so on. The reasons for the mores, traditions, customs, and so forth are likely to be rational in their environment and to reflect belief systems. An appreciation of how the cultures have developed and why reduces the propensity to rank, classify, or judge one culture as better than another. Each culture is an adaptation to a series of circumstances, even the belief system, and may very well be the "best"

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that could come out of those conditions over the years.

To appreciate another culture is to understand that those living in it usually consider it the best available — not the best for *others* necessarily, but the best for them. And few people are eager to give up their culture — even if they would like to have the material advance of another country. A Peruvian Minister once observed that the U. S. should stop thinking that they were trying to protect culture; they wanted the automobile in the society and knew that it would change their culture. Yet, at the same time, the government plastered large billboards with the slogan: “Sea orgullo ser Peruano” — or, “Be proud to be Peruvian” — with the picture of a peasant woman with a wagon used in rural areas.

To appreciate one culture means not to judge it by criteria from another. At a recent conference on cross-cultural sensitivity American B-school officers and faculty were amused by a quotation from Mercedes that— “Mercedes makes the finest car in the world”. They “observed” that some Japanese luxury cars were selling better. What they did not understand was that the German criteria for “best” are sound engineering with *durability* — i. e., long life and infrequent maintenance. *Only* Mercedes has been able to point to a number of its vehicles still in service over 500,000 miles and one or two over 1 million — ergo, “the finest”. The comment should have elicited no humor, but rather, an understanding of the different criteria used.

Similarly, a comment from American companies that they have a difficult time hiring and retaining managers (not matched by similar comments from Japanese or Germans) was interpreted as meaning that Americans do not treat their managers well — rather than a recognition that mobility (and low organizational loyalty) are distinctive features of American culture because of its large geographic area, ease of movement, social and economic opportunity, and individualism.

A report that the Japanese saw “globalization” as the most important attribute for its management, was interpreted as their finally recognizing their need to take a new place in the world; whereas, it more likely reflects the fact that they have done quite poorly in this regard compared to all other aspects of management, so it was singled out. They will *still* have a difficult time doing it, and if it *had been* the first priority, more would have been done by now. Japan’s culture demands a recognition of “fault”, but it does not require fixing something that goes strongly against it.

Appreciation, therefore, requires an assessment of reasons, and they need not be seen as “rational” by the foreign observer. Rationality is itself culture-bound, as reflected in the story of a (Eastern) scorpion and a (Western) frog in Egypt on the bank of the Nile: the scorpion approached the frog saying — “I would like to go to the other side of the river; you know that I cannot swim, but you can; please give me a lift.” Frog — “Stay where you are! I know your nature; as soon as we are on the river, you will sting me, and I will die.” scorpion — “That would be foolish; if you died, I would die.” Frog — “Of course, that makes sense; hop on.” The frog had made it to the middle when the scorpion stung him mortally. Frog — “Why did you do that? now I will die and so will you; that simply wasn’t rational.” Scorpion — “You forgot; you are in the Middle East.” (Lesson on the Mid-East — it is better to be “who you are” than be concerned about specific results, even death.)

What is rational to one is not to another — environment and experience are different — to say nothing of tastes. George Bernard Shaw used this difference to contradict the Golden Rule: “Do not do unto others as you would have them do unto you; their tastes may be different.” Of

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course the Rule includes acceding to "others' tastes" just as you would wish them to take yours into consideration. To learn to appreciate the deeper differences and their reasons is necessary for the next step.

C. Tolerance.

After differences are understood and appreciated, acceptance must arise — that is, it is "all right" for others to continue with their culture [so long as the fundamental constraint on all cultures is included — that of "doing no harm"⁴⁾]. In order for cultural freedom to remain, each must not attempt to rank others or to set itself above the others.

Among the peoples of the world, Americans are seen as the most culturally ethnocentric. One might agree, with the exception of the British, the Germans, the French, the Chinese, the Japanese, the Brazilians, the Indonesians, the Indians, and so on. All peoples are likely to consider their culture best, or they would change it. Cultures *do* get changed, but as a result of external forces and the impacts of technology and "progress". History shows no example of a culture changed from dictat by a leader. Even Mao, Peter the Great, and Stalin, each of whom tried to change the culture at the roots by force, failed to do so; the peoples of both China and Russia show the same basic cultural traits as before these traumatic periods.⁵⁾ And Gorbachev concluded that he could be successful in his reforms during the 1980s and 1990s only if he could change Russian culture.

Tolerance requires that we accept also that cultural change will be slow and that it requires *deep* changes in mind-sets. However, the world faces the necessity to make such changes, for it is being threatened with massive destruction of both peoples and the environments necessary to sustain them.

D. Enjoyment.

One of the first steps in seeing the need for tolerance is developing the ability to enjoy the diversity of cultures. If one is to enjoy nature, diversity needs to be appreciated and even a subject of awe and wonder. The same attitude should be acquired with reference to the modes of living of other peoples. No one would seriously expect the Eskimos to adopt a California culture; yet we do seem to expect a manager in Africa or India, in Germany or Britain, to think and act the way an American manager does.

The joy should arise from diversity *and* from the challenge of bridging the differences to formulate agreed goals and successfully pursue them through mutual efforts. To try to "correct" the views and practices of others, rather than to seek accommodation and adaptation, is to create tensions and reduce diversity. Though diversity is not *always* desirable, there is a *prima facie* case for sustaining or at least leaving it.

This case is based on the recognition that we have not yet found the "one and only path to the truth". We have not even found the most efficient processes ("first, best solution" of the economists) for material progress. It behooves us to continue to permit varied methods and approaches to inquiry in *all* fields of endeavor to enrich our efforts and increase our chances of evolution to higher forms of being. In Arthur Clarke's novel of life in 20,000 AD,⁶⁾ the savants of the time had determined how to create children at age 12 and provide them with all the

qualities needed to become "perfect" individuals within "The City" and how to materialize all they needed. Life was, in fact, rather boring; but the savants had also programmed a central energy — a "creating crystal" — to include a "unique" individual every several hundred years. In this stage, the "unique" discovered another (unknown) city, which altered their perceptions by opening new vistas. In his *Abolition of Man*, C. S. Lewis saw that the search for a controlled perfection of mankind would end with its demise, since the experts would simply reproduce themselves, considering that they were the highest form and nothing more advanced could arise.⁷⁾

Diversity is needed to maintain life itself, and it should be enjoyed, rather than declaimed.

E. Unity.

It is unlikely, however, that diversity will be accepted *unless* mankind also reaches deeply into mind-sets to change their perception of the nature of nature and the nature of man. At present, the Western perception is dichotomous: man is a distinct entity, and nature is outside of mankind. Man is to be in control of nature, bending it to his desires. This leads to a materialistic society which does not even revere materials and resources. Rather, there is a drive to turn everything possible into waste as soon as possible and to enjoy the process of "consumption" — a slow or fast process of combustion.

Man needs to consume; but the process should be one of maintaining nature and of recognition of man's relation to and place in nature. This relationship is not dichotomous but one of unity. Man cannot live apart from nature; he is, in fact, within it fully, rising through evolution (i. e., the process of creation). He will continue to evolve only to the extent that he understands how to live with, adapt to, and use nature and to meld this with spiritual growth.

Since all mankind is part of that nature, it is necessary for all men to understand their unity — regardless of race, creed, or culture. No one is happy seeing any one species of nature eradicated, though we continue to act so that this occurs; elimination of a species may actually be part of nature's processes, but man is not sufficiently intelligent to know which should be permitted to die and which retained. We need to appreciate the wisdom of nature itself and to examine our role in it rather than seeking to shape it. It is quite clear that nature is more powerful than man, and it is conceivable that it can "decide" to proceed without the human species, just as it permits others to die off. The result will depend on the will of mankind — the use of its own thinking to play a role in the continuous creation of the earth and the universe.

Only with such a view of unity can mankind begin to try to observe the differences, appreciate their origin and rationale, tolerate them, and then enjoy and benefit from their diversity. We will, eventually, be forced for our own survival to recognize the unity of all despite the apparent diverse manifestations. But survival is not sufficient. The prospects for mankind are higher and greater if mankind is, in fact, a reflection (image) of the One, as all major religions assert. And no one manifestation of that image is any better or worse than another — whether in nature or in man.

It is man who has brought the distinction of good and evil into the world with his *intent* to benefit by altering conditions or events in his (individual or group) favor, and more so than is justified by his contribution. He cannot *take* from nature and expect nature to continue to support him. Any serious imbalance will be corrected by nature, which has its own intelligence.

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And the denigration of any of the higher manifestations through ethnic cleansing or cultural insensitivity will be a cause for redress or continued missed opportunities to evolve. The future of mankind requires our learning how to live together, for we all must advance together in order for each to achieve his/her own highest development.

Unless we do learn, we will continue to be faced with the same tests, as emphasized by Teilhard de Chardin, the lauded monk/paleontologist/philosopher. After a talk to a French audience he was asked what he thought of the Holocaust. He was nearly run out of the auditorium when he replied: "It was as God intended for us to learn!" It was a horrible evidence of our failure, since Hitler gave other Western countries the opportunity to accept the Jews — some 6 million of them. President Roosevelt agreed to take 25,000, and the numbers set by the others were little better — so Hitler knew he would not be prevented from applying "the ultimate solution". And some Russian officials are now espousing the same methods to remove the "mafia-Jews" in their country. The conflict in Yugoslavia has introduced ethnic cleansing only slightly less ghastly and cruel, and similar acts have occurred in Africa and Asia. The world has, so far, refused to learn. Only by recognizing the fundamental unity of all mankind and of man with nature will we build the base for tolerance of differences, as is necessary for peaceful evolution together.

Notes

- 1) *The Economist* (July 30, 1994, p.58) observed: "Firms have to be responsive to national needs, yet seek to exploit knowhow on a worldwide basis, while, all the time, striving to produce and distribute goods globally as efficiently as possible. Many companies manage to achieve one; maybe even two, of these objectives. It is hard to think of any company that has yet managed to balance all three simultaneously"

"Managing such vaguely defined relationships is difficult enough in the best of times; distance, language and culture bring added complications."

- 2) Harbison, Frederick & Charles A. Myers, *Management in the Industrial World*, N. Y.: McGraw-Hill, 1959.
- 3) *Herausforderungen des deutschen Managements und ihre Bewaltigung*, Gottingen O. Schwartz, 1973.
- 4) The criteria for doing no harm are not simple, because the very concept of harm will differ among cultures — as, for example, the circumcision of girls in some African countries to reduce sexual temptation; or the earlier binding of girls' feet in China to keep them small so as to emulate the natural smallness of the feet of the Empress, praised in poetry by the Emperor, and thereby enhance marriage prospects.
- 5) The record on the attempt by Peter the Great is found in E. V. Anisimov, *The Reforms of Peter the Great: Progress through Coercion in Russia*, Armonk, N. J.: M. E. Sharpe, 1993.
- 6) *The City and the Stars*, N. Y.: New American Library, 1957. See also Diana Adkins, *Introduction Confrontation II*, Wassenaar, The Netherlands: Servire, 1970, in which a Galactic Federation invites Earth to join them and describes a life pattern similar to that of "The city".
- 7) *The Abolition of Man*, N. Y.: Macmillan, 1947.

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