Hints on Cross Cultural Skills

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Background Reading
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This document outlines suggestions about dealing with cultural differences among collaborators drawn from the business literature.

Different authors present different schemes, but there is broad consensus on three elements of effective cross-cultural interaction.

1. Self-awareness

Self-awareness requires developing conscious identification of one's own orientations towards the various aspects of interaction with others. Different authors suggest different "self-tests" that a person can use to develop this conscious awareness by asking themselves various questions about how they like or dislike various forms of interaction. The self-test developed by Training Management Corporation[1] asks questions designed to elicit an individual's orientations along the following dimensions of interaction:

Social and Physical Environment:

- control (a person makes her/his own way)
- harmony (a person does best by maintaining a balanced relation between self and social and physical environment)
- constraint (a person must live within fairly tight limits imposed by social and physical surroundings and has little scope to challenge or change them)

Time:

- single-focus (person prefers doing one task at a time and following schedules)
- multi-focus (person will do many things at once and hold to vague schedules)
- fixed (time consists of discrete units that need to be managed and used well)

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[1] Training Management Corporation "Cultural Orientations Indicator" described in Danielle Medina-Walker, Thomas Walker, and Joerg Schmitz, *Doing Business Internationally: The Guide to Cross-Cultural Success*, 2nd edition. New York: McGraw-Hill.

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- fluid (time is available and schedules can be adjusted to the needs of the situation or task)
- past (the past is the best guide for behavior, novelties should be examined carefully before adopted)
- present (focused most on current and near-term future; open to trying new things)
- future (emphasize the long-term; evaluate proposals in terms of long-term effect)

Action:

- being (concerned to build relations of trust before getting into an activity; prefer working with others who have already established credibility and reliability)
- doing (focused on getting a particular task or job done and willing to extend trust to those showing interest in collaborating until they demonstrate they are not trustworthy; tasks often mean short-term interactions)

Communication:

- high context (value symbolism and propriety; extract meaning from nonverbal and situational cues as much or more than on spoken and written cues)
- low context (rely on explicit statements and written commitments to record understandings)
- direct: (conflict situations can be positive when resolved, and most can be through open and honest statements of views)
- indirect: (conflict is best handled by of waiting direct confrontation, thereby preserving everyone's dignity and avoiding embarrassment)
- expressive: (emotional elements are expected and important parts of communication; high value on symbolism and stylistic sophistication)
- instrumental: (communication is unemotional, problem-centered, and goal-oriented; symbolism and style are not useful if they get in the way of achieving goals)
- formal (following proper social conventions and customs is important in all interactions; lack of formality is unprofessional)
- informal: prefers relaxed, egalitarian interactions with others and low social distance with in the workgroup; impatient with ceremonial)

Space:

- private (emphasizes maintaining spatial and psychological distance between people, separating work from private life)
- public (emphasizes close human interaction, face-to-face contact; work and social relationships tend to merge)

Power:

- equality (all persons have the same central value rights and responsibilities; economic and social differences should be downplayed so that everyone is included and has the same opportunities; procedures can be short-circuited to attain goals)

- hierarchy (stratified societies and organizations function best; different people have different rights and responsibilities and it is important to acknowledge people's place through proper etiquette and following established procedures)

Society:

- individualist (persons define themselves and are motivated primarily by their own personal interests and goals, value autonomy, and expect reward on the basis of their own accomplishments)
- collectivist (persons define themselves and are motivated primarily by the expectations of the group to which they belong, value interdependence within the group, and expect to be rewarded as part of the group)
- universalistic (judgments and actions should be guided by general rules of fairness and of right and wrong that apply to all)
- particularistic (judgments and actions should be guided by consideration of the unique needs of the individuals or groups involved; rules are guidelines to be modified as needed in specific situations)
- competitive (individuals compete with one another for recognition and reward; personal ambition and assertiveness are acceptable)
- cooperative (individuals support one another, maintain long-term relationships with collaborators, share in group rewards, and avoid self-assertion)

Structure:

- order (prefer a clearly defined parameters and guidelines for actions and work activities, precise definitions of what is expected, and preference for stable environments)
- flexibility (willing to adjust actions as conditions change, open into innovation, see change as an opportunity)

Thinking:

- inductive (derive patterns and generalizations from multiple examples and apply them in a pragmatic way, detail oriented, expects careful analysis of data)
- deductive (thinking moves from the general to the specific emphasizing the soundness of concepts on which proposals are based; more concerned with underlying principles than with pragmatic application of ideas to particular situations)
- linear (approach problems analytically looking for discreet components and the cause and effect relationships between them; convert problems or issues into a chain of elements each of which can be handled individually in a logical sequence)
- systemic (approach problems from a broad perspective focusing on the relationships among the elements of the situation; treat problems or issues as complex of interrelated things that cannot be decomposed into chains of events)

2. Preparation

Getting ready for anticipated interaction with colleagues of other cultures by determining their cultural backgrounds and orientations, identifying potential culture gaps between your own and their orientations,

and considering strategies for minimizing negative effects of those cultural gaps. The information needed for these activities can be drawn from media originating in the other culture, individuals with experience in a particular cultural environment, and direct information gathering with those with whom you will work.

3. Engagement

Drawing on the repertoire of alternate behaviors developed during preparation to reduce problems stemming from cultural gaps. This is easier in some areas than others. Many individuals find it easier to shift between information-focused and relationship-focused styles of communication than to move from an individual to a collective orientation regarding goals and achievements. Successful engagement over the medium to long term requires remaining open to more information and attentive to changing dynamics as different individuals enter or leave the collaborating group.