

Strengthen Your Agility Abroad: How to Be Successful in a Multi-cultural Environment

Caroline Lippers

Abstract

Have you like me chosen to live, study or work with people from other cultures? Then you know the fascination as well as frustration, the fun and the 'I just want to give up' feeling it brings. It is not only the language barrier; there is so much more behind possible misunderstandings and conflicts based on our cultural values and beliefs.

In this article you can read more about how we develop our personal cultural preferences, why we behave the way we do when we are confronted with another culture and how to strengthen our cultural agility.

Living and working abroad is a great way to widen perspectives and learn about other cultures. To really become culturally agile there is a lot of work to be done; it is about self-awareness. In the next few pages I'd like to share some theories, methods, and tools for you to become more culturally agile and thereby be more successful and fulfilled working, studying, and living in a multi-cultural environment.

Keywords: culture, intercultural competence, decision-making, ability

Knowing yourself as the starting point

I would like to begin by telling you a story. A couple of decades ago, when I started as a manager in Florence, I came with a clear idea about my leadership style, which had been successful for many years and was in line with the company's expectations and values.¹ I defined my style as

1. After I had already been living in Italy (precisely, in Turin) for some time, I was asked to become manager of the IKEA Store in Sesto Fiorentino, in the outskirts of Florence. I thus moved to this city with my family. I had the pleasure to be the Managing Director of that store in Sesto Fiorentino from 2011 to 2016.

built on shared responsibility, consensus in decision-making, a universalistic view on rules as well as equality. I had been successful as a manager for years in Sweden and the Netherlands, always working for the same company. I thus felt confident and strong in taking on this new challenge in Italy. As preparation from the company, I had received some books to read about Italy but nothing more than that. How different could it be, considering that it was the same organizational culture?

Well, it turned out to be quite different. I remember one of my early meetings with my Italian management team. Until that day they had always had Italian managers. So, I happened to be not only their first non-Italian manager but their first female manager too. One of the agenda items on this meeting was to make a decision on an investment regarding the company's stores; it was something I considered nothing more than a common responsibility. Everyone expressed their functional point of view and while I was trying to get consensus through further discussion the members were looking at me and I sensed a kind of expectation. Of course, my limited Italian and the scarce English of the team was a big hinder but there was something else going on underneath. After some time, the meeting ended and we were all confused; no decision had been made, and everyone left the room with a strange atmosphere hanging in the air.

I unconsciously jumped into "judgement mode" and considered the managers both inexperienced and unable to take responsibilities on the level that I expected. Why did they not step up and start leading together with me? Then I blamed the managers who had been there before me as being too hierarchical and micromanaging, instead of leading the team members to take responsibilities. Soon after I blamed my own leadership capabilities for not being able to get the team to a consensus decision. In sum, I felt like I had failed. Time passed and I had other similar experiences where I felt that managers did not take responsibilities on the level that I expected them to. It seemed like they wanted me to make all decisions. This was neither my kind of leadership nor what the company's values stood for.

In the end, I decided to pick up the phone and talk to a colleague who also was from Sweden but who had lived and worked as a manager in Italy for several years. She gave me the key to understand the cultural gap I was experiencing, which opened my eyes. She told me it had taken her years to figure out and adapt her leadership style to be successful in Italy. The firm had completely different expectations about me as a manager than when I worked in Northern Europe. In Italy, such cultural values as hierarchy, formal and high context communication played a big role. From a hierarchical point of view, the team expected me to make most decisions, as I was their manager. Their high context communication meant that they were sending me messages that I did not understand through my low context perspective. I did not pick up messages that were implicit in their body language and their tone of voice. Also, I underestimated the importance of the context we were in, that is, the official meeting room.

My friend's comments made me aware of what went wrong at that first meeting. Although this sense of awareness was somehow relieving, at the time I lacked the cultural understanding that would make it possible for me to re-elaborate that experience and articulate it in words. I was thus faced with two main options: either work on my team to learn what I expected from them or to adapt my own leadership style to meet their expectations. I ended up choosing a middle course, whose initial stage implied asking everyone to express their expectations and talk about our differences.

What do we mean by 'culture'?

Among the many definitions of culture that are available today I prefer the one by Geert Hofstede (1980): "Culture is a collective programming of the mind influencing the way we think and act in a certain social group." According to the most thorough research done on national culture by Geert Hofstede, Jan Trompenaars, and Edward T. Hall our cultural preference is developed during childhood. By the age of about 12 we have a clear cultural preference, and we know the dos and don'ts of the social group we (want to) belong to. Before we move into puberty, we have developed our preferred view on how to interact with others and

our values (determining, to a large extent, how we perceive the world around us) have taken form.

Culture is passed on from older people in our surroundings; their showing us what behavior is acceptable and what not creates our belief system. We copy behavior from our parents and that is the fastest way to learn. In addition, we are influenced by other adults in our surroundings, like grandparents, teachers, trainers, and official community representatives. History, religion, symbols, heroes, and politics all play an important role, as they impact the social and educational systems, the rules within society, its traditions etc.

Human beings are driven by the strong need to 'fit in' to the social group in which they live. Psychological studies on conformity have come a long way since Solomon Asch developed his famous experiments on social pressure in the 1950s. They show us that conformity is not just a learned behavior; it is innate and much more pronounced in humans than in other primates. The feeling of belonging gives us a sense of security and calmness. As psychiatrist Joanna Cannon writes: "As a society, we struggle to deal with the unusual and the unknown. We choose the ordinary over the extraordinary. In the quest for familiarity and reassurance, we reject those who highlight our differences, because those differences question our own choices and our own sense of belonging that we've been working on since the playground."²

The more we stay surrounded by the same cultural perspective our frame becomes confirmed and grows stronger. As you can imagine it becomes natural to see a different behavior as 'strange' and we easily jump to judgment of what is 'right' or 'wrong'. This can lead to a binary view ("us versus them") and who belongs and who does not. It is a way of perceiving the world that unfortunately leads to unconsciously judging others, thus breeding stereotypes. In this article I focus on some of the national cultural preferences that drive our behavior when inter-

2. Joanna Cannon is an NHS psychiatrist and author of the bestselling novel *The Trouble with Goats and Sheep* (see Bibliography at the end of this article), which she wrote during lunch breaks and those few moments of the night when her patients were all asleep.

acting with others in professional settings.

There is no right or wrong in culture

When working with cultures it is very important to come from a perspective that there is no right or wrong if the behavior is in line with the International Human Rights Law. It is also crucial to be aware that what people usually read into cultural preferences has more to do with what they perceive than what they actually see. For this reason, people with limited cultural agility easily tend to use stereotypes. In other words, they have a defined perspective of a national culture, which only takes in information that confirms that view. When new information is received, for instance by meeting a new person from that culture, the tendency is to confirm their beliefs and use words like 'always', 'never', 'everyone' and 'all'. This limits the possibility to learn and develop as it keeps the world in a kind of status quo. It is an easier and faster approach but very limiting, too. However, culture evolves and, as we all know, there are cultural nuances in every country, based on personality, experiences, education, social background etc.

On the contrary, using generalizations (instead of prejudice) in cultural work gives us the possibility to compare cultures and thereby learn from both differences and similarities. By keeping an open mind when we meet someone new, we give that person a chance to be seen as who he or she really is. Generalizations use such words as 'most', 'often', 'generally' and 'many'. Comparing cultures is a way to be able to understand them in relation to other cultures; investigating the gap between cultures can provide valuable insights. For instance, we can evaluate which cultural behavior is most effective, in what situation and with what kind of people.

When working with culture we connect a culture with a country; this process makes it easier for us to compare and, consequently, work with greater cultural agility. I want to underline that within each country there are many different cultural aspects and big differences to be found. US citizens, for instance, may want to consider various forms of behavior on the east and the west coast, north versus south or big cities versus rural areas. Of course, we should forget that exceptions always exist. Above all,

everyone is unique, having a set of cultural preferences and personality traits that impact their behavior.

Knowing your own cultural preference is the first step towards becoming culturally agile and is the key to being more successful when working in an international environment. In the next pages I will explain in more detail how we can develop our cultural agility.

Knowing your unique cultural preference

As I explained earlier in this article we are grown up with a set of cultural preferences. You can consider it the “eyeglasses” through which we see the world. These glasses have given us a key to our own interpretation and smoothly move within our specific culture. We know the informal rules, the unspoken expectations and how to navigate in such a way as to belong and be accepted. What we often are not aware of is that we see others through these “eyeglasses” and thereby unconsciously judge others, how they speak and act and the way they appear. This behavior is unconscious for most people, which is why the first step is to create deeper self-awareness.

As a Culture Mastery Coach,³ I work with the 16 cultural dimensions (based on the research by Hofstede, Trompenaars, and Hall) that have been developed by Cultural Business Consulting. These dimensions provide information about cultural preferences related to communication, power, conflict management, action time and environment. By knowing your personal preference on these dimensions, you get very valuable insights into how your unique cultural “eyeglasses” influence your worldview. Each dimension has two values on separate sides of a spectrum from left to right (again neither is right or wrong). Your preference is somewhere on this spectrum. If it is all the way to the left or right of the spectrum it means that it is important to you and a part of your identity. If you are in the middle of the spectrum, it means

3. Cultural Business Consulting (CBC) provides coaching in cultural competency to enable globally diverse corporate work teams to function harmoniously with a deep appreciation of the dimension of culture, thus enhancing productivity and profitability. Master facilitators leading CBC programs study the link between culture, business, politics, and current events to provide the most up-to-date insights about the people, places, and values that influence borderless global commerce.



that it is less important and that you are more flexible in your behavior. Adding the information where other cultures are on each spectrum enables a gap analysis to start looking at the biggest differences between your own preference and the cultures you interact with. At the end of this short article I am going to tell you more about how to compare your preference to other cultures and what that means when it comes to behavioral change.

Understandably, reasons of space make it impossible for me to write about all 16 dimensions here. Consequently, I will only highlight some of them. In the beginning of this article, I shared a story on the equality-hierarchy dimension, that is, our views on social stratification impacting how we look at power, responsibility, status, etc. Let us now look at an example of individual versus collective oriented cultures and how we view the notion of time. The examples are simplified to make the point as clear as possible; obviously, in real life there are many more layers of complexity when it comes to interaction of people from different cultures.

When going to a job interview in cultures with an individualistic orientation (such as the US and the UK), candidates are expected to be assertive and bring forward their personal successes. To this end, they often use superlatives to explain their personality. The “I” language predominates and em-

phasis is put on personal accomplishments; the desire to come across from a positive angle leads candidates not to mention either failures or weaknesses.

On the other side of the spectrum of this cultural dimension you find a collective oriented culture, for example the Netherlands, Japan, and Scandinavian countries. During a job interview in those countries, candidates are expected to highlight their ability to cooperate and reach results together with others; therefore, the “we” language is key to success. Team performance comes before personal results. Likewise, interdependency is important as well as the ability to speak about failures and personal weaknesses, which is seen as a sign of self-awareness.

This explains why an individualistic oriented candidate in Sweden would be seen as too self-focused, unable to cooperate, and unaware of his or her development areas. For the same reasons, in the US a collective oriented candidate would be perceived as too dependent on the team, not assertive enough and focusing too much on his or her own weaknesses.

Let me share another example when it comes to how we perceive time. In some countries (for instance, China, Italy, and Singapore), time is perceived as impossible to control. So, emphasis is put on the ‘here and now’; the prevailing tendency is to solve problems when they show up and to adopt short-term solutions. What is good about this cultural approach is that people tend not to worry too much about the future and are more focused on the present instead. If we fail to reach certain results within the set deadlines the general belief is that things were beyond our control.

In other countries (for instance, Japan, Germany, and Sweden) the prevailing notion is that we can control time. According to those cultures, to plan and think long term is crucial, as time is a resource that we can manage. Long term planning and strict follow-ups are key methods to reach success and expected results. Failing to reach results within a given time is attributed to people’s inability to manage time.

As I said before, there is no right or wrong in this “debate”; it is all about being aware of cultural differences and under what circumstances a certain kind of behavior will prove successful. This ties in with the ability to appreciate a different perspective and learn about ourselves, that is, our de-

sires, our needs, and what we should do in order to adapt to changing circumstances, thus performing better in (or with) another culture. When you read the above examples, you probably recognized yourself in one perspective or the other. I now suggest that you take a moment to see the benefits of the opposite perspective. What does it add in terms of value? How does it impact the people working there and the firm's structure? What skills would you have to develop in order to succeed and be happy in the "opposite" cultural perspective, that is, not the one you were born and raised in?

In the diagram above, these 16 dimensions are separated so as to better compare cultures. In real life, however, they are interconnected, influencing one another. An individualistic culture is often more direct in the way it communicates while a collective culture tends to be more indirect. A future oriented culture is often also more action oriented whereas a present or past oriented culture is more focused on the notion of being. Clearly, these are mere generalizations. However, they come from years of research and – as such – can be regarded as tools allowing us to draw useful comparisons.

Develop your own cultural agility

As I wrote earlier, the first step is about self-awareness. Knowing what your preferences are and being curious about other cultures is a great start. There are many ways to develop your self-awareness; for instance, living, studying, or working in another culture. Also useful is asking for feedback on your behavior.

In my work supporting individuals, teams, and organizations I use the trademarked Individual Cultural Blueprint Indicator™, ICBI.⁴ It measures one's own cultural preferences as well as gaps in comprehension of other cultures. The ICBI tool provides a framework for narrowing these gaps and promoting improved intercultural interaction. Individual reports from this assessment give a lot of information and

4. The ICBI, Individual Cultural Blueprint Indicator is a digital cultural assessment that takes 20 minutes to fill in. The personal report is then sent to your email address. It covers your profile, a gap analysis towards the countries you chose, and a description of each one of the 16 dimensions. It can also serve as a great team development tool.

advice on how to strengthen cultural agility.

In this respect, it should be remembered that the stronger your preference for one side of the spectrum is, the more important this cultural dimension turns out to be for you. This dimension is then connected to your values and beliefs, of which we often happen not to be aware; hence the difficulty in changing them. Secondly, the bigger the gap between your preference and the comparing culture the more complicated it is to understand each other's perspectives.

If, instead, a cultural dimension is not so important to you, you see advantages in both approaches and are willing to change, we call these features 'negotiable'. If a dimension is negotiable to you, it means that you are ready to compromise, to try out different ways and learn a new behavior to be successful in meeting another culture. However, this is easier said than done; changing behavior is a process born of self-awareness and the intense desire to break old habits.

Then we have the so-called 'non-negotiable' dimensions, that is, those cultural preferences that are particularly important to us and to our identity. As they are connected to our strongest values and beliefs we usually hesitate to change them. The way forward in an intercultural situation is to build alliances. In other words, agreeing on how we want to work together based on sharing our preferences. No less important to this end are being curious and open about other people's preferences.

For further development and to go from theory to practice I would recommend hiring a coach. His or her guidance will help to deepen self-insights and be successful in behavioral change. The coach will serve as someone who can hold up a mirror to you and support you in your journey. "You always have a choice on how you react, and the first step is to become aware of how you react when you meet a person from another culture" says Julien S. Bourrelle, who has done very successful cultural work in Norway. His advice is to learn about our natural behavior and then challenge it. According to Bourrelle you have three different ways to relate to a different culture when you are abroad. You can **confront** that culture, holding that your way of living is the only right one. As a

consequence, you believe that the ‘others’ should change and adopt your beliefs. In most cases, this strategy fails, for the simple reason that the ‘others’ are so many. Another option is to **complain** about the others and what you find to be ‘strange’. By complaining you isolate yourself and end up in a social bubble that strengthens your self-imposed segregation. The third chance is to **confirm** the other culture and see to what extent you are willing to adapt to it. This will give you the opportunity to truly benefit from the other culture. By observing and understanding you will learn and adapt, which is the basis for benefiting from diversity.

So, be curious and open your mind to what is different. Reflect on what benefits you can get from other perspectives. Ask and learn from other countries by talking about different approaches, beliefs, and values. Also, try to challenge yourself when living in another culture; it is a great opportunity for personal development that should not be wasted. In a different cultural setting, the starting point for a good relationship is always to treat others the way they want to be treated, not the way you want to be treated.

If you want to share your thoughts and ideas and talk further, please connect with me via LinkedIn or visit my website for more information about my work to build bridges between people and cultures.⁵

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5. <https://www.linkedin.com/in/carolinelippers/> | www.carolinelippers.com