PUT YOUR FINGER ON THE DIFFERENCES

The obvious differences we notice in people from other cultures are just the surface realities. Achieving genuine cultural literacy can only come from a deeper look.

by Deborah J. Barrett
Our globalised, multicultural world requires leaders with a keen understanding of national cultures. By learning from other countries, culturally literate leaders build cultural bridges, enabling them to leverage culture as a tool for competitive advantage,” writes Robert Rosen in Global Literacies: Lesson on Business Leadership and National Cultures (Simon & Schuster, 2000). Realising the value of cultural differences is a key component of emotional intelligence and absolutely essential for leading in today’s global environment. Technology enables cross-global communication and makes working across time zones, geographies and nationalities a given. Leaders need to be educated about cultures to lead effectively and to take full advantage of the value diversity provides. Today, being cross-culturally literate is essential in order to succeed in the global marketplace in which we do business. But what is cross-cultural literacy, and how do we achieve it?

**DEFINING CROSS-CULTURAL LITERACY** What does it mean to be cross-culturally literate? Traditionally, to be literate was to be able to read and write. However, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation provides a broader and much richer definition: “Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute, and use printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning to enable an individual to achieve his or her goals, to develop his or her knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in the wider society.” Literacy is important in order to understand ideas and to connect successfully with others. It allows us to transfer meaning to others. It allows us to “participate in the wider society” of the world in which we live.

And “culture”: culture is “the way of life of a people, or the sum of their learned behaviour patterns, attitudes, and material things.” (Edward T Hall, The Silent Language, 1959). It is the way people make sense of and give meaning to their world. It is the frame of reference and the behaviour patterns of groups of people. It includes social characteristics as well as physical characteristics, gender, age, profession, organisational function, and company structure and style. Culture is learned and shared equally by others of the same group. Culture is the lens through which we see others and understand them and their words, and interpret the meaning of those words and respond.

**LOOKING BENEATH THE SURFACE** One traditional image used to suggest the multi-level complexity of culture is the Iceberg of Differences, a popular cultural concept of unknown origin (Figure 1, page 80). Royal Dutch Shell uses this image in their diversity training to illustrate how little we see of an individual’s culture in a short encounter and how many cultural differences lie below the surface. Gender, race, age, and physical ability are the tip of the iceberg, with nationality, work style, social status, wealth, culture and languages just breaking the surface, sometimes obvious, often not. Much more is below the surface of visibility, influencing how we see and judge the world. What the iceberg demonstrates is that achieving cross-cultural literacy is challenging.

**IDENTIFYING MAJOR CULTURAL DIFFERENCES** To understand a culture fully, we must live it — breathing the air, speaking the language, existing as one with the people. However, we can obtain greater cross-cultural literacy by recognising the major differences we will encounter when communicating across cultures. Several books on travelling and doing business globally provide advice on basic verbal and nonverbal communication,
such as gestures to avoid, dining customs, gift giving, and exchanging business cards. When travelling, we should review such dos and don'ts, but these guidelines help with superficial rituals only, and information is limited to the specifics of one country over another.

**DISTINGUISH ONE CULTURE FROM ANOTHER** A deeper cultural framework of the major variables can help us recognise and be prepared to deal with cultural differences below the water level. Various anthropologists have isolated many variables to distinguish one culture from another. The framework in Figure 2 (page 81) illustrates the most important ones to recognise when communicating across cultures and shows that the variables overlap and influence each other.

Recognising these differences can serve as a platform of understanding to help us reach our audiences and build our strategy for communicating and interacting effectively with people of all cultures. What follows provides a brief definition of each of these seven cultural variables.

1. **CONTEXT** The first topic in almost any discussion of culture will be “context,” a difference Edward T. Hall first explored at length in his groundbreaking 1983 work on culture, The Dance of Life. Cultural context is anything that surrounds or accompanies communication and gives meaning to it. Some cultures are considered high context and others low context.

High context cultures rely on interpersonal relationships to understand meaning and notice nonverbal cues, such as tone, gestures, and facial expressions. They emphasise trust, intuition, and the importance of getting to know people as people. These cultures tend to be community-oriented, valuing group harmony and consensus over individual accomplishments. Saving face is important to them. Their communication style tends to be indirect. Japan, most Asian cultures and functions such as human resources and corporate communication are high context cultures.

In contrast, low context cultures depend on explicit verbal messages for meaning in communication.
They value facts and figures, are very direct and to the point when communicating, and expect written legal agreements in business. The United States, Germany and the accounting and finance functions exemplify low context cultures.

2. **INFORMATION FLOW** Information flow refers to how and how fast information is exchanged. Does the information flow freely and openly across and up and down the organisational levels, or is it controlled and more uni-directional, usually from the top to the bottom? The importance of context in a culture influences how individuals approach exchanges of information and determines how messages flow between people and levels in organisations. Context controls who initiates communication and with whom, what kinds of messages are sent, what channels are preferred, and how formal or informal the exchange of information will be. Low context cultures, the US and German cultures for example, are known for directness and “bottom line” communication. They want the “so what?” right up front and do not want to read a lengthy prologue to get to it. Examples of more indirect communication and less open exchange of information are the Japanese, Chinese, and African cultures, with Spain, France, and Russia falling more in the middle.

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3. **TIME** On one side is polychronic time, that is, time as a state of being consisting of many events occurring at once. Polychronic time is open-ended and flexible, and people are more important than promptness and schedules. The opposite cultural view of time is called monochronic, a view of time as linear, divisible, and consisting of one event at a time. Time is a commodity and is meant to be measured and managed, conserved or wasted, spent wisely or foolishly. Events are scheduled sequentially, one at a time, and this schedule takes precedence over relationships and people. High context cultures tend to be polychronic, and low context cultures monochronic. For instance, North Americans see time as a scarce resource, and the expression “time
is money" conveys the kind of value placed on time in US business. Cultures also differ in how they view the past, present and future. Some see now as all there is and think it presumptuous to try to control or predict the future. Others value the past. The typical North American is strongly oriented toward the future, devalues the past, and often overlooks the present, whereas many Middle Eastern cultures value the present and leave the future to Allah, and most Asian cultures place tremendous value on the past.

4. LANGUAGE According to Hall, “culture is language; language is culture.” Language shapes how we see the world. Although language usually presents the most obvious differences when people from different cultures come together, it is not just a matter of someone speaking Spanish and someone else speaking Mandarin. All types of cultures have language differences: industries, professions, functions, and genders. Language includes words, syntax, and vocabulary, various dialects, the jargon of disciplines, and also the silent language of context and nonverbals.

As most of us realise, “without more than passing familiarity with the language of a culture, it is virtually impossible to scan the environment for business cues, negotiate, or evaluate performance.” While speaking totally different languages can make communicating difficult, learning a little of the language and understanding something about the structure of the language can be

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helpful in appreciating the world view. However, most important is realising the “real feelings” we are always communicating, “our silent language - the language of behaviour.” (Hall, The Silent Language). In a high context culture, the silent language communicates more than the words.

5. POWER AND EQUALITY Cultures differ tremendously in their view of power and equality. Some believe in hierarchies with distinctions between levels and formalised respect for people at the higher levels of an organisation. Others see everyone as equal, and although a title may command some respect, it will not be as rigidly observed as in a hierarchical culture. Some cultures respect age; others do not. Some think education demands respect, while others see it as simply another item for a résumé. The difference in how power and equality are viewed leads to differences in how individuals approach reporting relationships within organisations, how they function on teams, and how they interact with one another on a daily basis.

The differences in how cultures view power affect leadership in particular. What might be considered leadership in one culture may be seen as tyranny in another. Leaders who move outside of the culture they know must be particularly mindful of how the culture they
have entered views power. Examples of high-power distance cultures (more hierarchical) are Central and South American, Asian, and African countries; examples of low are the US, Great Britain, Denmark, and Sweden.

6. COLLECTIVISM AND INDIVIDUALISM: Cultural emphasis on context, on how information is shared and how power is viewed are all influenced by how individualistic or collectivist a culture is. Individualism (the T cultures) pertains to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose; everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family. Collectivism (the ‘we’ cultures) pertains to societies in which all people are integrated into

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strong, cohesive groups that protect them throughout their lives expecting unquestioning loyalty in return.

The major verbal characteristic to notice is: do individuals express interest and concern more about their own needs or those of the broader community? Cultures considered individualistic are the US, Australian, British, and Belgian; those considered more collective are the South American, Asian, and African.

7. SPIRITUALITY AND TRADITION Spirituality and tradition involves values as defined by R. Inglehart in his Values Map (Modernisation, Culture, Change and Democracy: the Human Development Sequence, CUP, 2005). Inglehart found that traditional versus secular/rational values and survival/self-expression values dominate all other cultural variables, explaining “more than 70 per cent of the cross-national variance.”

The traditional values dimension reflects societies in which religion is very important. The religion/tradition value determines behaviour and how individuals will communicate and interpret messages. Many of the customs and ways of interacting with others depend on their belief systems, and often very traditional cultures will adhere strictly to rituals that honour their beliefs. For example, in Islamic cultures, the call to prayer (Adhan) is honoured five times a day with a speaker heard across the communities reciting the lyrical Arabic text of the Adhan. A culture’s spirituality and tradition influences where its people will look for direction, and how they will respond emotionally to authority messages in particular.

To conclude, one of the dangers of cataloguing cultural differences is stereotyping. Cultural characteristics are typical of a group, but they will not necessarily be found in each member of the group. We all know that all people in a given culture will not necessarily behave exactly as all others. The goal of describing the differences is to make us more sensitive to the deeply embedded, usually below the surface, cultural variables that influence how we behave and interpret the behaviour of others and how we communicate and interpret the communication of others. Such knowledge should move us toward being more cross-culturally literate — knowledgeable about the fundamental differences across cultures so that we see the behaviour of others through a clear-enough lens to avoid distorted meanings caused by our own cultural bias. It is hoped that such recognition will help all of us be more open and flexible and better able to connect and communicate across the different cultures we encounter every day.