

Intercultural Sensitivity

From Denial to Intercultural Competence

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Preface

This book is a first approach of what can happen at the university or business schools where students of all nationalities and cultures come together.

You are going to read an enlightening testimony on what could happen to you students when working later in companies, without being aware of the content of this book.

The authors most warmly thank Mr Luis Miguel Rojo Y Pinto for sharing his field experience with the students.

“With both parents from Spanish origin, I was born in France and considered myself as being a pure multicultural product, till I had to settle in Latin America a few years ago. That’s where I got my first real “intercultural slap” while having a meeting with Colombian engineers. As we were looking into security issues for our vehicles, my purpose had been to concentrate on the necessity to fit them out with series airbags and ABS. One of them just replied that security was essentially linked to the engine power, which was vital to overtake on the overcrowded roads of this magnificent country.

This anecdote cruelly brought me back to the notion of context.

Another example: when a Marketing team in Venezuela presented me with a very interesting project, I let out a vibrating “Not bad!” which made the Project Manager immediately turn pale and asked me why I didn’t like that project. This was all a question of interpretation, “Not bad” in Venezuela is a polite way to say you refuse the project. Consequently, when working for a Korean brand, I had to change the way I defended and presented the projects to the Korean executives, presuming that it was impossible for them to lose face opposite their counterparts with the same power distance, even if I had previously succeeded in obtaining their agreement. All a question of culture.

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I am now working with Nissan, in a Regional Business Unit, bringing together France, the Netherlands and Belgium. It is a daily concern to me as I am confronted to the difficulty to adapt communication patterns in order to align multicultural teams and meet shared goals. Strange as it may seem, a French “yes” is not necessarily interpreted in the same way as a Dutch “yes”. There is no such thing as a universal way of applying the filters we get from our upbringing, our social environment or our experience. Even if we are used to global environments and we have the feeling that we do know “the world” through all kinds of media and tools at our disposal, we are not always aware of the need for decoding the messages. In that case, we have to use our counterparts’ references and not ours.

This book is based on real examples and exercises and enables the reader to, not only understand why the exchange of messages that seem clear are not understood, but also to ponder on questions about his own story. In each chapter you will find basic principles which throw a light on the differences in interpretation between cultures. Take some time and hindsight to consider those aspects and you will most probably avoid blunders that can sometimes cause violent shocks. Those are more often related to the use of an inadequate form rather than to a disagreement on the content.”

Luis Miguel Rojo Y Pinto, Marketing General Manager, Nissan West Europe

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Culture, Communication and Global Citizenship

Introduction and Definitions

- 1.1 What is Culture? Visible and Invisible Culture
- 1.2 Definition of Culture
- 1.3 Cultural Programming
- 1.4 Culture and Subcultures
- 1.5 Intercultural Communication
- 1.6 Noise. What Exactly is Communication Noise?
- 1.7 TOPOI Model, Intervention for Cultural Noise
- 1.8 Global Citizenship
- 1.9 Conclusion
- 1.10 Assignments

In this chapter we will define culture, intercultural communication and Global Citizenship. Culture is learned. Culture influences the way we think, feel and behave. It even shapes our perception and influences our judgment of others. We are not always aware of the impact of culture on the way we communicate. The aim of this chapter is to become more aware of our own culture, how it influences our communication, and how we can become better intercultural communicators in an interconnected world, as true Global Citizens.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

- 1 Define culture,
 - 2 Identify the layers of culture, and show examples of each layer,
 - 3 Demonstrate cultural programming,
 - 4 Describe your own culture(s), as well as how and through whom you learned your cultural norms, values and behaviour,
 - 5 Explain the communication process and the meaning of intercultural communication,
 - 6 Describe cultural noise,
 - 7 Explain the TOPOI model's five areas in communication that can be sources of communication noise,
 - 8 Intervene in case of communication noise or cultural noise using TOPOI,
 - 9 Demonstrate the knowledge, skills and attitudes that promote Global Citizenship.
-

1.1 What is Culture? Visible and Invisible Culture

According to the interculturalist Edgar Schein, culture consists of layers, like an onion.

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Illustration 1.1 *Cultural onion.*

1. Artefacts of culture
2. Norms and values
3. Basic assumptions

1. The outer layer, or material culture, we call *artefacts of culture*. Artefacts are the first things you notice when entering a new country. Foreigners arriving in the Netherlands notice: the bicycle lanes, large windows and open curtains, the tall people, and how they dress. They notice that a lot of Dutch people eat bread and drink milk at lunchtime. The first time you enter a new company, you'll notice the artefacts: company logo, company house style, and whether or not the employees wear ties. Artefacts are easy to perceive, and they're nice to know, but intercultural communication is not going to be about artefacts.

2. The second layer we call the *norms and values*. These are written and unwritten standards of correct, desired behaviour. Is it the norm to arrive in class a few minutes early, exactly on time, or is it the custom to be a few minutes late? Is 3 minutes late acceptable and 10 minutes not? These are examples of norms. Values express what we think is good or right. For example, is it good to stand up for an elderly person on a crowded bus? Is it right to send a card or make a phone call to a classmate who is ill? Norms and values are not as visible as artefacts. It takes some time to notice, let alone learn them. But with the necessary effort and observation, they can be learned.

3. The deepest layer is that of the *basic assumptions*. They are abstract and invisible, we learn them when we are very young – before the age of 7 – and we are unaware of their influence. Yet the perception of the world around us, and the judgments we make of others, are very much shaped or distorted by the basic assumptions of our culture. Intercultural communication is about making us aware of the basic assumptions of our own culture and recognising the basic assumptions of other cultures. This will allow us to communicate creatively and more effectively with people from other cultures, to use cultural diversity at work as a source of inspiration and growth, and to achieve cultural synergy. In chapter 5 of this book we will present a 3-step strategy on how to achieve cultural synergy.

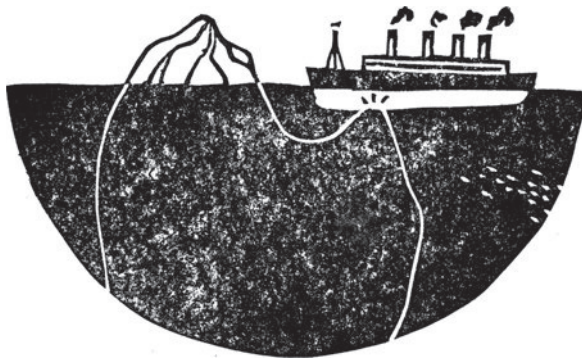


Illustration 1.2 *Cultural iceberg and the Titanic as metaphor for cultural clashes on the invisible level of culture: the basic assumptions.*

1.2 Definition of Culture

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This book is not about Culture with a capital C, such as literature, art, music, theatre, museums and architecture. It is about culture with a small c. It is about the familiar way we think, feel and behave. How we learned this and share the meaning of it with other members of our society. The list of definitions of culture is endless. The table below gives four definitions. We have chosen this short definition by interculturalist Geert Hofstede because it is concise and reflects the essence of culture: culture belongs to a group, and we learn culture as we interact with our group(s).

“Culture is the collective programming of the mind, which distinguishes the members of one group (...) of people from another.”

Some Definitions of Culture

- 1 The British anthropologist, **Edward B. Tylor** (1871) was the first to define culture as: “... That complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Tylor, 1871).
“*That complex whole...*” makes Tylor’s definition of culture inclusive. (Meaning everyone has culture, and not just a select group of people.) And from “... *acquired ... as a member of society*”, we can conclude:
 - Culture belongs to a society or a group.
 - Culture is something that we learn.
- 2 Edgar Schein defines culture as... “A pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and therefore to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.” (Schein, 2004)
- 3 Mijnd Huijser defines culture, as “a group’s set of shared norms and values expressed in the behaviour of the group’s members.” (Huijser, 2006)
- 4 Geert Hofstede: “Culture is the collective programming of the mind, which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another.” (Hofstede, 1991)