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 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 he 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.

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 with 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

Chapter 5

Cultural Synergy: Trompenaars' Seven Dimensions and Cultural Reconciliation

5.1 Universalism and Particularism. Rules or Relationships?
5.2 Individualism and Communitarianism
5.3 Emotions: Neutral and Affective
5.4 Involvement: Specific and Diffuse
5.5 Status: Achieved and Ascribed
5.6 Time
5.7 Attitudes towards the Environment: Internal Control – External Control
5.8 Reconciliation: from Vicious Circle to Virtuous Circle
5.9 Three Steps to Cultural Synergy
5.10 Assignments

In the previous three chapters, we worked with three classic intercultural studies: Hall's Six Key Concepts, Kluckhohn's Six Variations in Value Orientations and Hofstede's Six Dimensions. In this chapter, these and an impressive range of other academic studies are brought together in a very modern and dynamic approach by Trompenaars: the Seven Cultural Dimensions. The first five of these cultural dimensions are concerned with how we relate to our fellow humans, and are called: 1. Universalism – Particularism, 2. Individualism – Communitarianism, 3. Neutral – Affective, 4. Specific – Diffuse, and 5. Achievement – Ascription. The last two cultural dimensions relate to time and nature: 6. The Concept of Time and 7. Attitudes towards the Environment: Internal Control – External Control.

This chapter then continues with Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden Turner's amazing Cultural Reconciliation. Their vision raises people out of the vicious circle of cultural clashes and into the virtuous circle of cultural reconciliation, to discover the boundless opportunities of cultural advantage and cultural synergy.

This chapter ends with a practical three-step approach in achieving the advantage of cultural synergy.

Learning Objectives

After studying this chapter, you will be able to:

1 Apply the **Seven Dimensions of Culture by Trompenaars** descriptively, not judgmentally.
2 Distinguish **universalist** and **particularist** societies in their adherence to rules or loyalty to relationships.
3 Describe the virtues of **individualism** and of **communitarianism**.
4 Explain how culture programs us to curb our emotions in public, or to openly show emotions; and distinguish **neutral** from **affective** cultures.
5 Identify the specific areas of involvement in **specific cultures** and contrast this with the multiple areas of involvement in **diffuse cultures**.
6 Define the sources of **achieved status** as well as of **ascribed status**, and understand their impact on our daily lives, from how we introduce ourselves to how we go about job interviews.
7 Describe **sequential time, synchronic time**, as well as **past, present and future orientation**.
8 Explain the attitudes towards the surrounding environment **internal control and external control**.
9 Apply Trompenaars' ten practical steps in achieving cultural reconciliation, by turning **the downward spirals of vicious circles** around to **create upward spirals of virtuous circles** of complementariness – and thereby creating c**ultural synergy** and gaining cultural advantage.

5.1 Universalism – Particularism. Rules or Relationships?

What guides us? Commitments to rules or commitments to relationships? How do we judge people's behavior? According to Trompenaars:

Universalists judge people as admirable if they keep to standards and rules agreed on in their culture. This is a rule-based society. Rules are there for everyone and under all circumstances. No exceptions. His examples of universalist countries are the USA, Australia, and Northern European countries, for example the UK, Germany and the Netherlands.

Particularists judge people according to the relationships they have. Are they your friends? Is she your sister? Is he important to you? Then you have an obligation to protect that person. Even if rules and regulations say you should not (Trompenaars & Hampden Turner, 2008). After all, who says the rule makers are perfect? We find examples of particularist countries in Southern and Eastern Europe, Latin America, Africa and Asia.

CASE 5.1
The driver and the pedestrian

Created by Stouffer and Toby in the 1950s, Trompenaars' work raised it to become the most talked-about case in intercultural history! Test yourself.

Your close friend is driving a car at 70 kilometers per hour in a 30-kilometer zone. He hits a pedestrian. You are in the passenger seat, and the only witness. Nobody else saw anything. Your friend's lawyer says that if you testify under oath that your friend was driving at 30 kilometers per hour, it will save him from serious consequences.

Question: Does your friend have the right to ask you this?

a Yes. My friend has *all* the right to expect me to testify to the lower speed.
b Yes. My friend has *some* right to expect me to testify to the lower speed.
c No. My friend has *no* right to expect me to testify to the lower speed.

(*Stouffer & Toby in Trompenaars & Hampden Turner, 2008.)*

Among the participants of Trompenaars' research, more than 90% of the respondents from the USA, Northern Europe and Australia refused to testify to a lower speed to protect a friend.

While 79% of the Brazilians, a bit less than 75% of the French and Japanese, and just under 60% from Russia, China and India refused to protect a friend. But they would give their friend a serious talking to in private!

On doing business in BRICS countries, Fons Trompenaars and Peter Woolliams explain that universalist or rule-oriented countries "probably better satisfy the desire for distributive justice, but they may become obsessed with rules and regulations – which explains why the United States has so many more lawyers than Japan does". Particularist or relationship-oriented countries "tend to resolve failure privately, through relationships. The Swiss, North Americans, and Australians are the most rule-oriented, with 70% to 80% of respondents believing that exceptions to rules should not be made to help friends. In BRICS countries, by contrast, only 25% to 40% would put the rule above the person" (Trompenaars & Woolliams, 2011).

How to reconcile these differences to gain cultural advantage? It is possible. Take a look at case 5.8.a further on in this chapter.

5.2 Individualism and Communitarianism

Trompenaars describes his second cultural dimension as "the conflict between what each one of us wants as an individual and the interests of the group we belong to. With individualism being a prime orientation to the self. And communitarianism as a prime orientation to common goals and objectives" (Trompenaars & Hampden Turner, 2008). We refer you to Hofstede's dimension Individualism – Collectivism in chapter 4.

5.3 Emotions: Neutral and Affective

How much emotion can you express? Let's first ask ourselves: What are emotions? And how important are they at the workplace, in your study environment or in international business? Stephen Robbins describes emotions as "intense feelings that are directed at someone or something". Not to be confused with moods, which do not need an object or direction. He identifies six universal emotions in the following spectrum: happiness – surprise – fear – sadness – anger – disgust. Evolutionary psychologists argue that people must experience emotions. There is a purpose for them, it helps us solve problems and it is critical in rational decision-making (Judge & Robbins, 2010). It also explains why we can be biased in our views, and not be aware of it. For more on bias, please see Chapter 8.

Table 5.2 Creating cultural synergy.

Step 1 Describe the situation from all points of view

1.a Tell the story from your point of view.

1.b Tell it again speaking from the other person's point of view.

Step 2 Interpreting the cultures

2.a What are the basic assumptions that explain your perspective and behavior? (For example. The norm in your culture is Low Context, Slow Message, Dominant over Nature, Doing, Low Power Distance, Long-Term Oriented, and Universal.)

2.b What are the basic assumptions that explain their perspective and behavior? (For example. The norm in their culture is High Context, Fast Message, In Harmony with Nature, Being, High-Power Distance, Short-Term Oriented, and Particular.)

Step 3 Increasing cultural creativity

Create new alternatives by leveraging the other cultures involved. Go beyond cultural borders.

Alternative A, Alternative B, Alternative C, et cetera.

- Select alternatives, always checking to see whether the solution fits the basic assumptions of all the cultures involved.
- Implement the solution, but be sensitive to the feedback you get. Does it work? Correct it if it doesn't.

Do both parties gain cultural advantage?
Yes? Then the result is cultural synergy.

(*Adapted from Adler, 2002, p. 119.*)

5.10 Assignments

1 Your Cultural Profile

What is your cultural profile according to Trompenaars' Seven Cultural Dimensions?

2 The Question in Case 5.1

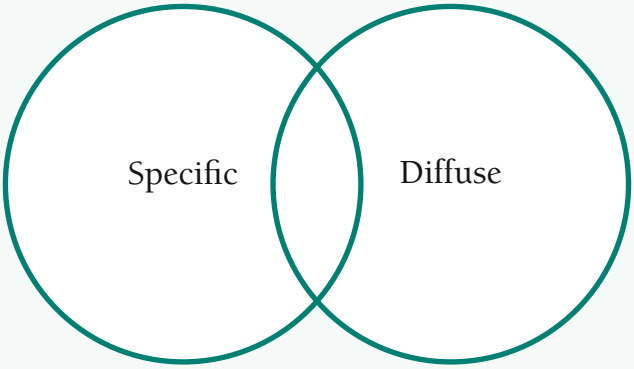
Work in pairs. Read case 5.1 about the driver and the pedestrian.

What is your answer? A, B, or C?

What is your counterpart's answer? A, B, or C?

Take 1 minute each to explain your answers to each other.

3 Specific and Diffuse



A university is trying to recruit more international students.

- Write three recruitment strategies that would appeal to students from specific cultures in the left circle. For example: Show the list of subjects taught in each year of the study. Add two more.
- Write three strategies that would appeal to students and their parents from diffuse cultures in the right circle. For example: Show pictures of the professors who teach at the university. Add two more.
- Write three strategies that appeal to both cultures.

Specific

1. Show a list of subjects taught in each year
2.
3.

Diffuse

1. Show pictures of the professors who teach at the university
2.
3.