Cultural agility for intercultural effectiveness 01

Most people think of culture as *only* something experienced when in another country or when interacting with people from another culture. This is not true. You can experience cultural differences **without ever leaving your hometown**. Here are some examples:

- Did you attend a meeting where many participants were older or younger than you? If so, you might have experienced **generational culture differences**.

- Did you participate in a conference call with colleagues from a different functional area? If so, you might have experienced **professional cultural differences.**

- Did you move to a new neighborhood? If so, you might have experienced **regional cultural differences**.

- Did you start attending a new school or start work with a new employer? If so, you might have experienced **organizational cultural differences**.

As a keynoter, I have given numerous talks about cultural agility and am often asked, what is the strongest cultural influence? My answer is to describe national cultural differences as being analogous to primary colors. Subcultures, such as organizational, regional, professional, and generational cultures, are like recognizable secondary colors and can also be powerful socializing agents affecting values and norms. In the same way countries have socializing agents, a generations' shared historical experiences, pop culture, technological advancement, and the like foster a given generation's culture. Companies also have a shared set of policies, practices, values, and corporate history comprising a company's corporate culture.

This book is designed to help you become culturally agile so you can be interculturally effective in **any** cross-cultural situation—national, organizational,

professional, or regional. If you need to identify whether a given group has its own culture and will require your cultural agility skills, ask yourself the following questions:

- Do I feel like I am a "fish out of water" or an outsider when I am with this group (if I am not part of this group)?
- Can I see behaviors and sense that values are shared by many members?
- Are these behaviors and values relatively stable within the group?
- Does the group shape the newcomers' behaviors and values?

Answering "yes" to these questions means you are in a situation requiring cultural agility.

Cross-cultural differences

What comes to mind when you think about cross-cultural differences? If you are like most, you thought of:

- an interesting—or possibly embarrassing—experience you had when traveling to another country,
- a time when you were surprised to try unfamiliar ethnic cuisine and learn that the restaurant's definition of "spicy" was different from your own,
- or maybe a frustration you had working with a colleague who was from a different country.

Whether producing interest, embarrassment, surprise, or frustration, these experiences share the same reality: what you **experienced** was different from what you had **expected**. Our brains are hardwired to interpret—and then expect—certain things based on its [insert your age here] years of stored data. The mismatch between *what you expect to experience* through your brain's perceptual lens and *what you experience* is the definition of a cultural difference. Oversimplifying a bit, the wider the range of different experiences you have stored, the wider your brain's range of possible interpretations for any new situation.

Your expectation for what qualifies as "spicy" is a nice example. If you are not from a culture that uses chili peppers liberally in your cuisine, ordering a "spicy hot" dish in an authentic Thai restaurant may expand your understanding. If you are not accustomed to heavy spices, what you consider "spicy hot" may only be considered "mild" in Thai culture, Conversely,

if you are from a "chili pepper culture," go to an authentic Irish pub and order something spicy. I would be willing to bet you did not even detect heat. If either experience was novel to you, then your definition of spicy became wider. If you had already had both experiences, then your spicy meter, already wide, did not change. This is how cultural differences work. The wider our store of knowledge for what to expect, the less surprising a cultural difference will be.

Your brain, a highly effective predicting machine in familiar settings, is a faulty predictor in novel ones. In familiar situations, your brain can reliably, efficiently, and accurately perceive people, behaviors, contextual cues, and nonverbals. In familiar situations, this speedy processor between our ears saves us cognitive energy without sacrificing accuracy. We do not need to think too hard (or at all) to be correct. However, in culturally new or novel situations, the opposite is true. You will be wrong more times than you will be right. Your hardwired brain can only rely on what it has stored which means that in a culturally new or novel situation, your split-second initial reaction will misjudge the contextual cues and the intended meaning of a person's behaviors, nonverbals, words—or misjudge the meaning of the word *spicy*.

There is a paradox here. Our highly effective "home court" brain, while useful in familiarity, makes us cognitively lazy when experiencing cultural novelty. Our brains are lulled into believing we do not need to put in much effort to "get it right," when, in fact, we do. Neuroscience mixed with novel experiences and stirred with cross-cultural competencies will produce your reaction to cultural differences. This recipe creates the need for cultural agility, the ability to effectively work in different countries and with people from different cultures. To be culturally agile, we need to get our lazy brains off the proverbial couch and train them.

Think of this book like your trainer, blowing a loud whistle or providing gentle encouragement (whichever you prefer) to help you develop your cultural agility.

Understanding cross-cultural differences

Geert Hofstede has aptly defined *culture* as "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another."[1] Cultural differences are what makes generations, organizations, and nations *feel* different when you are in them but not from

them. In the case of national cultures, countries are programmers of the mind because, within their boundaries, each country has its own socializing agents. Native-born or those who immigrated to a specific country at a young age share a common history, legal system, art, literature, media, educational system, political system, economic system, and the like. These nation-level socializing agents produce some similarities among their inhabitants as they learn to live, study, or work within the country's systems. Over time, behavioral norms, attitudes, and values are shaped and a national culture emerges.

National culture is the most widely shared "helicopter view" to understand cultural differences because everyone was born into and socialized into a place. Most of the examples in this book will be in the context of national cultural differences because people tend to feel contextual novelty most intensely when in a different country or when interacting with people from a different culture.

At this point, it is important to note that a conversation about national culture, generational culture, or professional culture is not an endorsement of stereotyping. Within any group, there is plenty of variance in behaviors, attitudes, and values so individuals should be treated uniquely. Each individual person has their own wide variety of socializing agents. Culturally agile professionals realize that it is just as important to recognize individual differences as it is to understand the norms of the culture.

It is also important to note that in some national cultures, sensing cultural differences will seem easier than in others. Michele Gelfand and her colleagues discovered that some national cultures are "tight" while others are "loose."[2] In tight cultures, deviation from the social norms is not tolerated and as a result, its citizens have developed stronger neural pathways for behavioral expectations. People in tight culture countries, such as Japan, Pakistan, and Germany, act in similar ways. If you are in (but not from) a given tight culture country, you will quickly sense cultural differences and the feelings of being an outsider. In loose culture countries, such as the United States, Australia, and the Ukraine, there are a variety of subcultures which each have their own cultural norms, resulting in greater variation in the determination of acceptable behavior. Because of this wider variation and acceptance of differences, those in (but not from) a given loose culture country might not sense these cultural differences because they are generally accepted.

How we learn cultural norms

Think about how the various groups in your life have influenced you. It is often said that describing one's own culture is like asking a fish in water to describe what it is like to swim in water. The fish might not be able to describe swimming in water but certainly knows the difference when it is on the shore. The best way to learn your own cultural norms and values is to experience contextual novelty.

Consider the last time you started a new job or relocated to a new place for work or school. Chances are you learned the ropes of the new place by observing, talking to people, and testing approaches. You might have had coworkers, neighbors, or classmates take you under their wings and teach you how to function in the new place (e.g., what day is garbage collected, where is the best place to buy produce, where to park and not get a ticket). You might have been socialized into mowing your lawn more often, being on time for meetings, calling elders by their titles, etc.

Whatever the novel context, you eventually learned what was expected of you. As your brain learned which behaviors to view as "correct," you shaped your own values to align more closely with the group values. Once social-ized into the group, you stopped sticking out as a newcomer and, at some point, were able to guess the newbies because they were the ones acting in a way that did not fit with the context. Conversely, if the new values of this group did not align with your own, you might have left the organization or the neighborhood altogether.

This is how culture is created. You are not born with cultural values. Through a process of iterative and successive experiences with people in groups, you are shaped—and help shape—the culture of those groups to which you belong. When you were young, the greatest cultural difference you experienced might have been families in your neighborhood. Today, you might reflect on the neighborhood from your youth and see those same families as being more similar in terms of cultural values. This is likely true if you moved out of that neighborhood and experienced a wider range of cultural norms at school, work, and travel.

A framework to understand cultural differences

There are three popular metaphors for describing culture: an iceberg, an ocean, or an onion. Icebergs, oceans, and onions have something in common. On the surface they seem relatively manageable, but beneath the surface, they are far more complex. What you can see can be navigated, but what you cannot see can be more challenging. When you are in a novel situation, you will first see behavioral norms and then, over time, you will sense the culture's values.

Behavioral norms are the first impression you will have of a novel culture because they are the differences you observe when you first step off the plane or walk into a new company. You might observe style of dress, manner of communication, foods, sense of order, art, architecture, homes, and offices. Your brain's perceptual lens compares what you are observing to your stored norms and expectations. If your brain signals "different" you are experiencing some contextual novelty at the behavioral level.

Values, unlike behavioral norms, may not be readily visible. Rather, you will sense and feel them as you spend time in the novel context. For example, you might sense informality when you see colleagues joking with each other or observe little protocol at business dinners. You might sense punctuality when meetings start exactly on time and or when someone apologizes for being late. These two examples of values (informality and punctuality) affect how behaviors are evaluated. Values form the lens through which subjective judgments are made, such as what is considered fair or unfair, good or bad, beautiful or ugly, respectful or rude, appropriate or inappropriate.

When you are in a new context and your brain starts firing off subjective judgments, you are experiencing contextual novelty at a deeper cultural level. Cultural values are even more deeply embedded in those who are socialized into them and ascribe to them closely. Sometimes they cannot be easily articulated, especially to those who have never been outside their home country.

The relationship between behavioral norms and values is important. If you could time travel to different countries 100 years ago, you would see different behavioral norms everywhere you turn. Seeing the differences, your brain needs to do some cognitive heavy lifting to understand the new place. Today, when you travel to large cosmopolitan cities, you see things

that look familiar and your brain, seeing similarity, registers that it does not need much additional effort to interpret the situation. Your brain stays comfortable and "on the couch," so to speak.

This "lazy brain" problem is a significant trip wire and a natural limit on our intercultural effectiveness. While behavioral norms seem familiar, the values underlying that behavior can be quite different. In these mixed message situations, culturally agility is critical because the reality of the situation is embedded in cultural values that are hidden beneath the behavioral norms. When you are lulled into seeing similarity in a novel context, I want you to think "iceberg, straight ahead."

As we start the cultural agility workout in the chapters ahead, we need a cultural framework, a way to understand the cultural differences we are perceiving. In 2002, I created a model for explaining cultural differences that was based, in part, on the decades of scholarship emerging from cross-cultural psychology, international management, and cultural anthropology and, in part, on the stories that were being conveyed by the many international managers with whom I was working. What emerged from both was eight dimensions of culture:

- Formal versus Informal Style
- Egalitarian versus Hierarchical Structures
- Individual versus Group Interests
- Transactional versus Interpersonal Relationships
- Direct versus Indirect Communication
- Fluid versus Controlled Time
- External versus Internal Control
- Balance versus Status Motivation

In the paragraphs that follow, I explain each of these cultural dimensions and provide questions for you to consider that will help you better understand where you fall on each of these dimensions[3]

Formal versus informal style

In groups with greater formality, individuals will be called by their formal titles, dress more intentionally for the situation, and adhere to protocol and etiquette. They will be more likely to judge those who do not do these things as being ill-mannered, impolite, or rude. If you are entering a formal culture,

learn the communication protocol (e.g., whether to shake hands with everyone in the room upon entering the room, whether to use a title when addressing a person, the appropriate way to handle a business card) so not to be written off as unprofessional—or worse.

Informal cultures follow few social conventions and do not judge each other based on what they wear, how they interact, their adherence to certain manners, and the like. In groups with an informal culture, people are called by their first name. There is more casual dress, casual dining, greater use of expression in speech, conversation on a wide array of subjects, more humor in business settings and, sometimes, greater self-disclosure because there are fewer social norms regulating polite conversation. In informal cultures, communication protocol is viewed as being unnecessarily stilted.

Do you have more formal or informal values? Ask yourself the following questions. The more you agree with these, the more formal you are. The more you disagree, the more informal you are.

- Do you believe that wearing formal business attire demonstrates respect for one's organization and the people in it?
- Do you prefer to use people's appropriate titles (e.g., Mr. Smith or Professor Suarez), as opposed to calling them by their first names?
- Do you think it is more appropriate to have offices decorated with office appropriate things, compared to personal (or fun) things?
- Do you think it is important that protocol and etiquette is strictly followed so as to not appear rude?

Egalitarian versus hierarchical structures

Groups differ in the extent to which they embrace a reporting structure and appreciate power and authority in the hands of fewer group members. In hierarchical groups, leaders' authority is not questioned as leaders are expected to have expertise and provide direction. In hierarchical cultures, asking for suggestions is considered a sign of weakness. In hierarchical cultures, you may observe leaders with status symbols, more specific titles, executive perquisites (e.g., corner office, executive dining rooms, reserved parking spaces).

On the other end of the continuum, groups with a loose structure where power and authority are shared are egalitarian. In these groups, power and authority is not granted by rank; rather, they are earned, and there is a belief

that solutions can come from any level in the organization. These groups tend to value shared governance, agency, and members' voices. You are more likely to see business cards without job titles, more personal interactions between supervisors and subordinates, and the like.

Do you have more egalitarian or hierarchical values? Ask yourself the following questions. The more you agree with these, the more hierarchical you are. The more you disagree, the more egalitarian you are.

- Do you believe that people at different levels in the organization have different rights and privileges?
- Do you believe it is important for high-level executives to look and act like senior leaders?
- Do you believe that senior leaders should provide clear direction for their subordinates and not have an expectation that their direction will be questioned?
- Do you believe it is the senior leaders who should make the decisions?

Individual versus group interests

Cultures will vary on the extent to which the group members will place the group's interests above their own interests or their own interests above the group's. In cultures placing high importance on the group's interest, membership in a group provides a strong sense of identity, and members will adhere closely to the norms of the group. Acting in a way that the group did not condone would reflect negatively on the entire group and would cause feelings of shame or guilt. For group-oriented or collectivistic cultures, being a member of a successful team, organization, or unit is highly rewarding. In group-oriented cultures, you may observe team competitions at work, greater use of public transportation, open office or communal office space, and team recognition.

In groups valuing self-interests or individualistic cultures, members will think about their own self-interests before the interests of the group. While the group might have norms, deviating from those norms would not be cause for consternation or concern because the behavior was a personal choice. Since there is greater differentiation across group members' behaviors in individual-oriented cultures, people can comfortably use more than their "fair share" of a space, money, etc. For example, you may observe large houses for smaller families, families with more cars than drivers, a greater

use of individual rewards and merit increases, and more personal offices with oftentimes closed doors. People in individual-oriented cultures can easily talk about their own achievements, personal contributions, and success without directly acknowledging the broader group.

Do you have more individualistic or group-oriented values? Ask yourself the following questions. The more you agree with these, the more group-oriented you are. The more you disagree, the more individually oriented you are.

- Do you believe that people work less efficiently when they work alone, compared to working in teams?
- Do you believe the best work is usually the result of a team's effort?
- Do you believe that group members should not express an opinion contrary to the group's consensus?
- Do you believe you should put the group's interests above your own?

Transactional versus interpersonal relationships

In interpersonally oriented groups, members will build trust through long-standing relationships compared to more transactional groups in which members will build trust through evidence of competence and achievement. With groups valuing interpersonal relationships, members will devote time to developing the relationship and building trust before engaging in business. For this reason, interpersonal societies prefer to work with friends and family members because they are the people who will work hardest for you in the role of vendor, coworker, or subordinate. Given the emphasis on relationships, in business there is a high premium in developing one's personal network over a long period of time.

On the opposite extreme, people in transactional cultures will value the depth of individual competence over the depth of the relationship; hiring friends is viewed more negatively because it is believed that objectivity is sacrificed. In these transactional groups, you will experience a greater amount of work conversations at social events, more legal contracts (fewer agreements over handshakes), and more of an emphasis on what one has accomplished as a marker of professional trust.

Do you have a more transactional or interpersonal orientation? Ask yourself the following questions. The more you agree with these, the more relationship-oriented you are. The more you disagree, the more transactionally oriented you are.

- Do you believe it is important to have a long-term relationship with a person before you transact business with him or her?

- Do you believe it is good to conduct business with family and friends?

- Do you believe business relationships will last throughout your entire career?

- To complete an important project, would you trust in a competent friend who is less of an expert over an unknown person who is more of an expert?

Direct versus indirect communication

The difference between low-context or direct and high-context or indirect communications is the extent to which just words (direct) versus the context of words (indirect) are needed to understand the meaning of a message. Edward T. Hall found that in indirect or high-context groups, you will need to fully understand the subtle nuances (e.g., tone, facial expressions, body language) to accurately interpret the message.[4] This is not needed in low-context, direct communication groups in which whatever is said is meant, with little need for interpretation. In these cultures, you will observe more direct feedback being given and shorter written communications (such as, email).

I have found that the difference between direct and indirect communication cultures can be one of the more challenging when working across cultures. Indirect communicators are interpreting the entire context in which a communiqué is delivered and might be told they are "reading into things too much." Direct communicators, on the other hand, read no meaning beyond the actual words spoken and cannot understand why when one thing is said, something else is done.

When in a more direct culture, be certain to speak declaratively, offer opinions clearly, participate in group conversations without waiting for an invitation to speak, and speak persuasively and not in hypotheticals. When in a more indirect culture, ask questions with humility to better understand the context, observe subtle nuances for patterns in communication, be patient, and pay attention to gestures and tone to gain a deeper understanding.

Do you have more direct or indirect communication style? Ask yourself the following questions. The more you agree with these, the more direct you are. The more you disagree, the more indirect you are.

- Do you believe you should provide direct and honest feedback on a person's poor performance?

- Do you believe that openly challenging a presenter's opinions is appropriate and even appreciated to improve the ideas?

- Do you believe you can disagree with a colleague in a meeting without concern for harming your personal relationship?

- Do you believe that you should offer an honest opinion, when asked, even if it means that someone's feelings may be hurt?

Fluid versus controlled time

In some groups, time is controlled and treated as a commodity. In these controlled time cultures, you can buy time, waste time, and spend time. Some of the things you will observe in controlled time cultures is meetings starting on time and adhering to an agenda, prompt public transportation, more clocks in public spaces (which are in working order), and people apologizing for being tardy if even only a few minutes late.

Some groups have a more fluid relationship with time, where there is little value placed on punctuality and deadlines. People, the quality of work, personal priorities, and other aspects of life will intervene regularly to control the flow of time. Deadlines, schedules, and agendas are more of general suggestions without expectation of adherence. In fluid time cultures, people will be late without any intention of being rude, public transportation will not have great precision, and meetings might have start times but not end times.

The difference between fluid and controlled time cultures can be a source of frustration. Controlled time groups, which emphasize punctuality, deadlines, agendas, and strict schedules, often misinterpret fluid time cultures as being unprofessional, lax, and unprepared. On the other hand, fluid time often view controlled time cultures as being overly rigid and lacking focus on issues that should matter more than time, such as relationships and quality.

Do you have a more controlled or fluid sense of time? Ask yourself the following questions. The more you agree with these, the more you have a controlled sense of time. The more you disagree, the more fluid your relationship with time.

- Do you believe that if a person is late for a meeting, then he or she is being disrespectful?

- Do you believe that lateness means that someone is disorganized and unprofessional?

- Do you believe meetings should have both a scheduled start time and end time and adhere to a fixed agenda?

- Do you believe time is like every other commodity which can be wasted, spent, and saved?

External versus internal control

The historical roots of some societies reflect caste or class-bound pasts, where one's status in life was determined by birthright. These cultures believe in fate and that your future is externally controlled and not yours to change. If you do work to change your destiny, the change might not be accepted. In internally controlled cultures, there is a dominant belief that anyone, irrespective of background, education, or physical limitations can rise to power, achieve their goals, and succeed.

Whether a culture has more of an external or internal sense of control will also affect how they attempt to control the natural, physical, and economic worlds. In internally controlled cultures, there tends to be greater risk-taking, innovation, and entrepreneurship because of the belief that the status quo can be changed. In externally controlled cultures, there is a greater desire for stability, security, and predictability. On this continuum, groups will vary on their comfort in taking charge of their own future, their preferences for rules and regulations, their adherence to traditions, and comfort with change and uncertainty.

Do you have more external or internal sense of control? Ask yourself the following questions. The more you agree with these, the more you have an internal sense of control over your destiny. The more you disagree, the more externally controlled you believe your destiny to be.

- Do you believe that people can achieve anything in life provided they put in the hard work and effort?

- Do you believe you can conquer any limitation life has handed you to achieve anything in life?

- Do you believe your status in life is not determined from your birth or your family's status?

- Do you believe that people have control of their destinies?

Balance versus status motivation

You might have heard the difference between groups that "live to work" and those that "work to live." The former groups have status-oriented values and the latter have more balance-oriented values. In groups that value status, members will be motivated for career success even if it encroaches on their personal life. In these cultures, you will see people who answer emails and work on weekends, take fewer, shorter, or no vacations, and prioritize work responsibilities over family and personal activities.

In balance-motivated groups the personal and work spheres of life coexist but great effort is made such that they do not interfere with each other. In balance-oriented cultures, the reward of additional vacation days would be more motivating than a financial bonus. You might observe people from balance-oriented cultures taking vacations of two to four weeks (which seems excessive, if not envied, by those in status-oriented cultures).

A mistake that is often made is to perceive those from balance-oriented cultures as being disinterested in career success. This is untrue. Career success can be just as important to those in balance-oriented cultures as in status-oriented cultures. The difference is that the status-oriented cultures appreciate the power, wealth, and recognition of career success whereas the balance-oriented cultures appreciate the sense of accomplishment, meaningful purpose, and belonging that comes from success.

Are you motivated more by status or balance? Ask yourself the following questions. The more you agree with these, the more you are motivated by status and achievement. The more you disagree, the more you are motivated to have balance in your life.

- Do you believe it is appropriate that your work responsibilities take precedence over your private home or family life?
- Do you believe it is appropriate to stay in touch with the office while on vacation?
- Do you believe that most people in senior levels of organizations cannot make full use of their vacation time because their professional obligations would make it difficult to be away that long?
- Do you believe it is important to work late to get ahead in your career?

What is cultural agility?

The concept of cultural agility follows what we know about physical agility—the ability to change the position of your body without losing balance. Everyone responds differently when experiencing the cultural differences in situations of contextual novelty. Some are steady while others lose their balance, so to speak. The differences in these responses are a function of the differences in our cultural agility.

Culturally agility is the ability to be comfortable and effective in situations of cultural novelty. As a mix of "nature and nurture," your personality, knowledge, motivation, and experiences all combine in a unique way to create your current level of cultural agility.

The nature of cultural agility

If you enjoy watching professional sports or performance arts, think of your favorite athlete or dancer for a moment. This person likely has some anatomical benefit enabling her or his success: long legs, ideal arm span, petite frame, or higher lung capacity. These benefits are gifts of genetics that facilitated, but certainly did not guarantee, success. Cultural agility works in the same way, as certain personality traits help facilitate your cultural agility.

Personality traits facilitate cultural agility because they help people handle the ambiguity of novel situations and be open to new cultures and people. About 50 percent of personality traits have a heritable component. This means that at least some portions of your personality traits are hardwired into your DNA. As an example, some people are natural novelty seekers. Novelty seeking is linked—at least in part—to the way your body regulates dopamine, a neurotransmitter associated with reward-motivated behavior. You can sense your own level of novelty seeking by (1) how likely you are to try something new, (2) how much you deliberate before making a decision, and (3) how much you enjoy novel situations—or, in the reverse, get bored from familiar ones.

Your genes are only one piece of the cultural agility equation. They are the accelerator—not the engine. In this book, I want you to understand your hardwiring enough to understand your natural gifts (or trip wires) for building cultural agility but be fully confident that you can build your cultural agility from any start point. There is a definite "nurture" side to the cultural agility equation.

The nurture of cultural agility

Think of your favorite prima ballerina or an elite athlete again. Of course, they won some genetic lottery and have natural agility. But, even the most flexible dancer or talented athlete needs to learn skills and practice, practice, practice to be successful. The same is true for cultural agility. Cultural agility requires skills and practice, usually in the form of building cultural awareness, social learning, and experience in increasingly more novel situations, to increase.

At the most basic level, understanding how a context might differ goes a long way in helping you perceive and understand that cultural difference. A recruiter might explain the unique aspects of your new employer's organizational culture, you might read an article about how to best communicate with someone from an older or younger generation, or you might engage with a cross-cultural trainer to learn about a different national culture before an important business trip. These are all examples of building your understanding of the novel culture before experiencing it.

Just as no one ever becomes a professional athlete by just learning the rules of the game, in cultural agility you need to get out there and put yourself into novel contexts. If this is a new area, your practice might start small by engaging a colleague from another culture and forming a professional relationship. If you are more professionally and culturally seasoned, you might be practicing some of these skills during your next client presentation or global team meeting.

Think of cultural agility more as a practice, not an achievement; and building it is a process, not an event. From wherever your start point, the recipe for developing your cultural agility remains the same: gain self-awareness for how you are hardwired to experience cultural differences, and then put yourself actively into increasingly more novel experiences.

Cultural agility for intercultural effectiveness

For centuries, pioneers, traders, immigrants, adventure-seekers, and missionaries have led cross-border lives full of cross-national interactions. They have been driven by the need to relocate, the belief in their mission, or the taste for adventure—propelling them to succeed in their quest, sometimes in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges for survival. Movies are

made from their exciting lives. Their challenges, hardships, and experiences offer exciting tales of triumph and tragedy.

Today, we move around the world with ease for vacations, work, and school. Our passport stamps and personal journeys are not as worthy of movie plot lines compared to the more famous international adventure-seekers of the past. Perhaps they should be. While usually less physically demanding than the plight of Indiana Jones, professionals who work in different cultures face some of the most cognitively, psychologically, and emotionally difficult challenges existing in business today—often without the guide of a corporate compass (policies, procedures, and precedent). They must rely on their personality, skills, and oftentimes, the assistance of strangers. In other words, they need to rely on their **cultural agility**.

Innovations in technology and communications have created a new cross-national comfort zone for business professionals by lowering some of the initial hurdles for doing business in today's global economy. However, as many seasoned global professionals have learned (often the hard way), mastering time zones and translations are only small pieces of a much larger and more complicated puzzle. Those who can effectively navigate the complexity of the global economy succeed, while those who cannot derail, often taking their firm's business and reputation down with them. We need more people with cultural agility, but it is a skill that is woefully lacking in the world.

The need for more culturally agile professionals is high. In one large-scale global study by DDI and the Conference Board, 13,000 professionals from forty-eight countries in thirty-two industries were asked to self-rate their effectiveness on twelve managerial tasks; the three tasks with the lowest ratings were the only three on the list with an intercultural component (i.e., integrating oneself into foreign environments, intercultural communication, and leading across countries and cultures).[5] Similarly, the Economist Intelligence Unit surveyed business leaders from sixty-eight countries and found that 90 percent of them reported that "cross-cultural management" is their top challenge when working across borders.

Even in the university systems, rich with national diversity, there is evidence of limited cultural agility. According to a large-scale survey conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers, only 20.7 percent of employers rate new graduates as proficient in "global and multicultural fluency," while, by comparison, they rate 77 percent of new graduates as proficient in "teamwork and collaboration."[6]

My hope is that this book, in some small way, closes the gap. I want more people to have the ability to comfortably and effectively work in different

cultural contexts. The content for this book is based on my extensive academic research in the areas of expatriation, strategic international human resources, global leadership development, and cultural agility. It is also based on my consulting and coaching work around developing cultural agility.

The cultural agility competencies

Cultural agility is a mega competency composed of nine cross-cultural competencies. These competencies collectively enable culturally agile people to be effective in intercultural situations in three important ways, each one corresponding to a separate part of this book.

Part One covers how you can build your *self-management competencies*: tolerance of ambiguity, curiosity, and resilience. These three competencies enable culturally agile individuals to effectively manage their reactions, emotions, and cognitions when in a novel situation. Part Two covers how to build your *relationship-management competencies*: humility, relationship-building, and perspective-taking. These competencies give culturally agile people the ability to connect with others from different cultures, to communicate appropriately, build trust, and gain the necessary credibility to work effectively in cross-cultural jobs, tasks, and roles. Part Three covers how to build your *task-management competencies*: cultural adaptation, cultural minimization, and cultural integration. These competencies enable culturally agile professionals to make appropriate decisions by accurately reading and responding in the cultural context, while accounting for the business strategy, the key elements of the culture, and the interconnected system of the context which includes laws, regulations, level of education, and similar factors.

The balance of this book will cover the nine competencies that compose cultural agility:

Part One: Self-management competencies

- Tolerance of ambiguity (chapter 2)
- Curiosity (chapter 3)
- Resilience (chapter 4)

Part Two: Relationship-management competencies

- Humility (chapter 5)
- Relationship-building (chapter 6)
- Perspective-taking (chapter 7)

Part Three: Task- management competencies

- Cultural adaptation (chapter 8)
- Cultural minimization (chapter 9)
- Cultural integration (chapter 10)

Each of these cross-cultural competencies will have a dedicated chapter. In each chapter, I will cover the importance of the given competency, how to develop the competency with tips for behavioral change, and case examples for the competency in action.

Thank you for allowing me to join you on your journey as you build your cultural agility.

Endnotes

1 Hofstede, G. 1991. *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*. London: McGraw-Hill.

2 Gelfand, M. J., Raver, J. L., Nishii, L., Leslie, L. M., Lun, J., Lim, B. C., Duan, L., et al. 2011. "Differences between Tight and Loose Cultures: A 33-Nation Study." *Science* 332: 1100–1104.

3 If you are interested in an in-depth assessment of these cultural dimensions, please visit TASCAglobal.com.

4 Hall, E. T. 1959. *The Silent Language*. New York: Doubleday.

5 The Conference Board and DDI. 2015. "Ready-Now Leaders: 25 Findings to Meet Tomorrow's Business Challenges." Pittsburgh, PA: DDI.

6 National Association of Colleges and Employers. 2018. "Employers, Students Differ in Perception of Graduates' 'Career Readiness,'" February 22, 2018. https://www.naceweb.org/about-us/press/2018/employers-students-differ-in-perception-of-graduates-career-readiness/ (archived at https://perma.cc/38PB-YN3K) [Accessed March 10, 2018].