

the

CULTURE MAP

BREAKING THROUGH THE INVISIBLE
BOUNDARIES OF GLOBAL BUSINESS

ERIN MEYER

CONTENTS

*Introduction: Navigating Cultural Differences
and the Wisdom of Mrs. Chen* 1

- 1 *Listening to the Air*
Communicating Across Cultures 29
- 2 *The Many Faces of Polite*
Evaluating Performance and Providing
Negative Feedback 61
- 3 *Why Versus How*
The Art of Persuasion in a Multicultural World 89
- 4 *How Much Respect Do You Want?*
Leadership, Hierarchy, and Power 115
- 5 *Big D or Little d*
Who Decides, and How? 143
- 6 *The Head or the Heart*
Two Types of Trust and How They Grow 163

7	<i>The Needle, Not the Knife</i>	
	Disagreeing Productively	195
8	<i>How Late Is Late?</i>	
	Scheduling and Cross-Cultural Perceptions of Time	219
	<i>Epilogue: Putting the Culture Map to Work</i>	243
	Acknowledgments	255
	Notes	259
	Index	263

To view complete culture maps for many countries not included in this book, and to compare one culture map to another, please visit the tools page of www.erinmeyer.com.

INTRODUCTION

Navigating Cultural Differences and the Wisdom of Mrs. Chen

When dawn broke that chilly November morning in Paris, I was driving to my office for a meeting with an important new client. I hadn't slept well, but that was nothing unusual, since before an important training session I often have a restless night. But what made this night different were the dreams that disturbed my sleep.

I found myself shopping for groceries in a big American-style supermarket. As I worked my way through my list—fruit, Kleenex, more fruit, a loaf of bread, a container of milk, still more fruit—I was startled to discover that the items were somehow disappearing from my cart more quickly than I could find them and stack them in the basket. I raced down the aisle of the store, grabbing goods and tossing them into my cart, only to see them vanish without a trace. Horrified and frustrated, I realized that my shopping would never be complete.

After having this dream repeatedly throughout the night, I gave up trying to sleep. I got up, gulped a cup of coffee and got dressed in the predawn dark, and wound my way through the empty Paris streets to my office near the Champs Elysées to prepare for that day's program. Reflecting that my nightmare of ineffectual shopping might reflect my anxiety about being completely ready for my clients, I poured my energy into arranging the conference room and reviewing my notes for the day ahead. I would be spending the day with one of the top executives at Peugeot Citroën, preparing him and his wife for the cultural adjustments they'd need to make in their upcoming move to Wuhan, China. If the program was successful, my firm would be hired to provide the same service for another fifty couples later in the year, so there was a lot at stake.

Bo Chen, the Chinese country expert who would be assisting with the training session, also arrived early. Chen, a thirty-six-year-old Paris-based journalist from Wuhan, worked for a Chinese newspaper. He had volunteered to act as a Chinese culture expert for the training, and his input would be one of the most critical elements in making the day a success. If he was as good as I hoped, the program would be a hit and we would get to conduct the fifty follow-up sessions. My confidence in Chen had been bolstered by our preparatory meetings. Articulate, extroverted, and very knowledgeable, Chen seemed perfect for the job. I had asked him to prepare two to three concrete business examples to illustrate each cultural dimension I would be covering during the program, and he had enthusiastically confirmed he would be ready.

Monsieur and Madame Bernard arrived, and I installed them on one side of the big glass rectangular table with Chen on the other side. Taking a deep, hopeful breath, I began the session,

outlining on a flip chart the cultural issues that the Bernards needed to grasp so their time in China would be a success. As the morning wore on, I explained each dimension of the key issues, answered the Bernards' questions, and carefully kept an eye on Chen so I could help facilitate his input.

But Chen didn't seem to have any input. After finishing the first dimension, I paused briefly and looked to him for his input, but he didn't speak up. He didn't open his mouth, move his body forward, or raise his hand. Apparently he had no example to provide. Not wanting to embarrass Chen or to create an awkward situation by calling on him when he was not ready, I simply continued with my next point.

To my growing dismay, Chen remained silent and nearly motionless as I went through the rest of my presentation. He nodded politely while I was speaking, but that was all; he used no other body language to indicate any reactions, positive or negative. I gave every example I could think of and engaged in dialogue with the client as best I could. Dimension after dimension, I spoke, shared, and consulted with the Bernards—and dimension after dimension, there was no input from Chen.

I continued for three full hours. My initial disappointment with Chen was spilling over into full-fledged panic. I needed his input for the program to succeed. Finally, although I didn't want to create an awkward moment in front of the client, I decided to take a chance. "Bo," I asked, "did you have any examples you would like to share?"

Chen sat up straight in his chair, smiled confidently at the clients, and opened up his notebook, which was filled with pages and pages of typed notes. "Thank you, Erin," he replied. "I do." And then, to my utter relief, Chen began to explain one clear, pertinent, fascinating example after another.

In reflecting on the story of my awkward engagement with "Silent Bo," it's natural to assume that something about Chen's personality, my personality, or the interaction between us might have led to the strained situation. Perhaps Chen was mute because he is not a very good communicator, or because he is shy or introverted and doesn't feel comfortable expressing himself until pushed. Or perhaps I am an incompetent facilitator, telling Chen to prepare for the meeting and then failing to call on him until the session was almost over. Or maybe, more charitably, I was just so tired from dreaming about lost fruit all night long that I missed the visual cues Chen was sending to indicate that he had something to say.

In fact, my previous meetings with Chen had made it clear to me that he was neither inarticulate nor shy; he was actually a gifted communicator and also bursting with extroversion and self-confidence. What's more, I'd been conducting client meetings for years and had never before experienced a disconnect quite like this one, which suggested that my skills as a facilitator were not the source of the problem.

The truth is that the story of Silent Bo is a story of culture, not personality. But the cultural explanation is not as simple as you might think. Chen's behavior in our meeting lines up with a familiar cultural stereotype. Westerners often assume that Asians, in general, are quiet, reserved, or shy. If you manage a global team that includes both Asians and Westerners, it is very likely that you will have heard the common Western complaint that the Asian participants don't speak very much and are less forthright about offering their individual opinions in team meetings. Yet the cultural stereotype does not reflect the actual reason behind Chen's behavior.

Since the Bernards, Chen, and I were participating in a cross-cultural training program (which I was supposed to be

leading—though I now found myself, uncomfortably, in the role of a student), I decided to simply ask Chen for an explanation of his actions. “Bo,” I exclaimed, “you had all of these great examples! Why didn’t you jump in and share them with us earlier?”

“Were you expecting me to jump in?” he asked, a look of genuine surprise on his face. He went on to describe the situation as he saw it. “In this room,” he said, turning to M. and Mme. Bernard, “Erin is the chairman of the meeting.” He continued:

As she is the senior person in the room, I wait for her to call on me. And, while I am waiting, I should show I am a good listener by keeping both my voice and my body quiet. In China, we often feel Westerners speak up so much in meetings that they do this to show off, or they are poor listeners. Also, I have noticed that Chinese people leave a few more seconds of silence before jumping in than in the West. You Westerners practically speak on top of each other in a meeting. I kept waiting for Erin to be quiet long enough for me to jump in, but my turn never came. We Chinese often feel Americans are not good listeners because they are always jumping in on top of one another to make their points. I would have liked to make one of my points if an appropriate length of pause had arisen. But Erin was always talking, so I just kept waiting patiently. My mother left it deeply engrained in me: You have two eyes, two ears, but only one mouth. You should use them accordingly.

As Chen spoke, the cultural underpinnings of our misunderstanding became vividly clear to the Bernards—and to me. It was obvious that they go far beyond any facile stereotypes about “the shy Chinese.” And this new understanding led to the most important question of all: Once I am aware of the cultural context that

shapes a situation, what steps can I take to be more effective in dealing with it?

In the Silent Bo scenario, my deeper awareness of the meaning of Bo's behavior leads to some easy, yet powerful, solutions. In the future, I can be more prepared to recognize and flexibly address the differing cultural expectations around status and communication. The next time I lead a training program with a Chinese cultural specialist, I must make sure to invite him to speak. And if he doesn't respond immediately, I need to allow a few more seconds of silence before speaking myself. Chen, too, can adapt some simple strategies to improve his effectiveness. He might simply choose to override his natural tendency to wait for an invitation to speak by forcing himself to jump in whenever he has an idea to contribute. If this feels too aggressive, he might raise his hand to request the floor when he can't find the space he needs to talk.

In this book, I provide a systematic, step-by-step approach to understanding the most common business communication challenges that arise from cultural differences, and offer steps for dealing with them more effectively. The process begins with recognizing the cultural factors that shape human behavior and methodically analyzing the reasons for that behavior. This, in turn, will allow you to apply clear strategies to improve your effectiveness at solving the most thorny problems caused by cross-cultural misunderstandings—or to avoid them altogether.

* * *

When I walked into Sabine Dulac's second-floor office at La Defense, the business district just outside of Paris, she was pacing excitedly in front of her window, which overlooked a small footbridge and a concrete sculpture depicting a giant human thumb. A highly energetic finance director for a leading global

energy company, Dulac had been offered a two-year assignment in Chicago, after years of petitioning her superiors for such an opportunity. Now she'd spent the previous evening poring over a sheaf of articles I'd sent her describing the differences between French and American business cultures.

"I think this move to Chicago is going to be perfect for me," Dulac declared. "I love working with Americans. *Ils sont tellement pratiques et efficaces!* I love that focus on practicality and efficiency. *Et transparent!* Americans are so much more explicit and transparent than we are in France!"

I spent several hours with Dulac helping her prepare for the move, including exploring how she might best adapt her leadership style to be effective in the context of American culture. This would be her first experience living outside France, and she would be the only non-American on her team, twin circumstances that only increased her enthusiasm for the move. Thrilled with this new opportunity, Dulac departed for the Windy City. The two of us didn't speak for four months. Then I called both her new American boss and later Dulac herself for our prescheduled follow-up conversations.

Jake Webber responded with a heavy sigh when I asked how Dulac was performing. "She is doing—sort of medium. Her team really likes her, and she's incredibly energetic. I have to admit that her energy has ignited her department. That's been positive. She has definitely integrated much more quickly than I expected. Really, that has been excellent."

I could sense that Webber's evaluation was about to take a turn for the worse. "However, there are several critical things that I need Sabine to change about the way she is working," Webber continued, "and I just don't see her making an effort to do so. Her spreadsheets are sloppy, she makes calculation errors, and she

comes to meetings unprepared. I have spoken to her a handful of times about these things, but she is not getting the message. She just continues with her same work patterns. I spoke to her last Thursday about this again, but there's still no visible effort on her part."

"We had her performance review this morning," Webber said with another sigh, "and I detailed these issues again. We'll wait and see. But if she doesn't get in gear with these things, I don't think this job is going to work out."

Feeling concerned, I called Dulac.

"Things are going great!" Dulac proclaimed. "My team is terrific. I've really been able to connect with them. And I have a great relationship with my boss. *Je m'épanouis!*" she added, a French phrase that translates loosely as "I'm blossoming" or "I'm thriving." She went on, "For the first time in my career I've found a job that is just perfect for me. That takes advantage of all of my talents and skills. Oh, and I have to tell you—I had my first performance review this morning. I'm just delighted! It was the best performance review I have had since starting with this company. I often think I will try to extend my stay beyond these two years, things are going so well."

As we did with the story of Silent Bo, let's consider for a moment whether the miscommunication between Webber and Dulac is more likely a result of personality misfit or cultural differences. In this case, national stereotypes may be more confusing than helpful. After all, the common assumption about the French is that they are masters of implicit and indirect communication, speaking and listening with subtlety and sensitivity, while Americans are thought of as prone to explicit and direct communication—the blunter the better. Yet in the story of "Deaf Dulac," an American supervisor complains that his French subordinate lacks the sophistication to grasp

his meaning, while the French manager seems happily oblivious to the message her boss is trying to convey. Faced with this seemingly counterintuitive situation, you might assume that Webber and Dulac simply have incompatible personalities, regardless of their cultural backgrounds.

So you might assume. But suppose you happened to be speaking with twenty or thirty French managers living in the United States, and you heard similar stories from a dozen of them. As they explained, one by one, how their American bosses gave them negative feedback in a way they found confusing, ambiguous, or downright misleading, you might come to the correct conclusion that there is *something* cultural driving this pattern of misunderstanding. And in fact, such a pattern does exist—which strongly suggests that the case of Deaf Dulac is much more than a matter of personality conflict.

This pattern is puzzling because Americans often *do* tend to be more explicit and direct than the French (or, more precisely, more “low-context,” a term we’ll explore further in a later chapter). The one big exception arises when managers are providing feedback to their subordinates. In a French setting, positive feedback is often given implicitly, while negative feedback is given more directly. In the United States, it’s just the opposite. American managers usually give positive feedback directly while trying to couch negative messages in positive, encouraging language. Thus, when Webber reviewed Dulac’s work using the popular American method of three positives for every negative, Dulac left the meeting with his praise ringing delightfully in her ears, while the negative feedback sounded very minor indeed.

If Dulac had been aware of this cultural tendency when discussing her job performance with her new American boss, she might have weighed the negative part of the review more heavily

than she would if receiving it from a French boss, thereby reading the feedback more accurately and potentially saving her job.

Armed with the same understanding, Webber could have re-framed his communication for Dulac. He might have said, "When I give a performance review, I always start by going through three or four things I feel the person is doing well. Then I move on to the really important part of the meeting, which is, of course, what you can do to improve. I hate to jump into the important part of the meeting without starting with the positives. Is that method okay for you?"

Simply explaining what you are doing can often help a lot, both by defusing an immediate misunderstanding and by laying the foundation for better teamwork in the future—a principle we also saw at work when Bo Chen described his reasons for remaining silent during most of our meeting. This is one of the dozens of concrete, practical strategies we'll provide for handling cross-cultural missteps and improving your effectiveness in working with global teams.

INVISIBLE BOUNDARIES THAT DIVIDE OUR WORLD

Situations like the two we've just considered are far more common than you might suspect. The sad truth is that the vast majority of managers who conduct business internationally have little understanding about how culture is impacting their work. This is especially true as more and more of us communicate daily with people in other countries over virtual media like e-mail or telephone. When you live, work, or travel extensively in a foreign country, you pick up a lot of contextual cues that help you understand the culture of the people living there, and that helps you to better

decode communication and adapt accordingly. By contrast, when you exchange e-mails with an international counterpart in a country you haven't spent time in, it is much easier to miss the cultural subtleties impacting the communication.

A simple example is a characteristic behavior unique to India—a half-shake, half-nod of the head. Travel to India on business and you'll soon learn that the half-shake, half-nod is not a sign of disagreement, uncertainty, or lack of support as it would be in most other cultures. Instead it suggests interest, enthusiasm, or sometimes respectful listening. After a day or two, you notice that everyone is doing it, you make a mental note of its apparent meaning, and you are able henceforth to accurately read the gesture when negotiating a deal with your Indian outsourcing team.

But over e-mail or telephone, you may interact daily with your Indian counterparts from your office in Hellerup, Denmark, or Bogota, Colombia, without ever seeing the environment they live and work in. So when you are on videoconference with one of your top Indian managers, you may interpret his half-shake, half-nod as meaning that he is not in full agreement with your idea. You redouble your efforts to convince him, but the more you talk the more he (seemingly) indicates with his head that he is not on board. You get off the call puzzled, frustrated, and perhaps angry. Culture has impacted your communication, yet in the absence of the visual and contextual cues that physical presence provides, you didn't even recognize that something cultural was going on.

So whether we are aware of it or not, subtle differences in communication patterns and the complex variations in what is considered good business or common sense from one country to another have a tremendous impact on how we understand one another, and

ultimately on how we get the job done. Many of these cultural differences—varying attitudes concerning when best to speak or stay quiet, the role of the leader in the room, and what kind of negative feedback is the most constructive—may seem small. But if you are unaware of the differences and unarmed with strategies for managing them effectively, they can derail your team meetings, demotivate your employees, frustrate your foreign suppliers, and in dozens of other ways make it much more difficult to achieve your goals.

Today, whether we work in Düsseldorf or Dubai, Brasília or Beijing, New York or New Delhi, we are all part of a global network (real or virtual, physical or electronic) where success requires navigating through wildly different cultural realities. Unless we know how to decode other cultures and avoid easy-to-fall-into cultural traps, we are easy prey to misunderstanding, needless conflict, and ultimate failure.

BEING OPEN TO INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IS NOT ENOUGH

It is quite possible, even common, to work across cultures for decades and travel frequently for business while remaining unaware and uninformed about how culture impacts you. Millions of people work in global settings while viewing everything from their own cultural perspectives and assuming that all differences, controversy, and misunderstanding are rooted in personality. This is not due to laziness. Many well-intentioned people don't educate themselves about cultural differences because they believe that if they focus on individual differences, that will be enough.

After I published an online article on the differences among Asian cultures and their impact on cross-Asia teamwork, one

reader commented, "Speaking of cultural differences leads us to stereotype and therefore put individuals in boxes with 'general traits.' Instead of talking about culture, it is important to judge people as individuals, not just products of their environment."

At first, this argument sounds valid, even enlightened. Of course individuals, no matter their cultural origins, have varied personality traits. So why not just approach all people with an interest in getting to know them personally, and proceed from there? Unfortunately, this point of view has kept thousands of people from learning what they need to know to meet their objectives. If you go into every interaction assuming that culture doesn't matter, your default mechanism will be to view others through your own cultural lens and to judge or misjudge them accordingly. Ignore culture, and you can't help but conclude, "Chen doesn't speak up—obviously he doesn't have anything to say! His lack of preparation is ruining this training program!" Or perhaps, "Jake told me everything was great in our performance review, when really he was unhappy with my work—he is a sneaky, dishonest, incompetent boss!"

Yes, every individual is different. And yes, when you work with people from other cultures, you shouldn't make assumptions about individual traits based on where a person comes from. But this doesn't mean learning about cultural contexts is unnecessary. If your business success relies on your ability to work successfully with people from around the world, you need to have an appreciation for cultural differences as well as respect for individual differences. Both are essential.

As if this complexity weren't enough, cultural and individual differences are often wrapped up with differences among organizations, industries, professions, and other groups. But even in the most complex situations, understanding how cultural differences

affect the mix may help you discover a new approach. Cultural patterns of behavior and belief frequently impact our perceptions (what we see), cognitions (what we think), and actions (what we do). The goal of this book is to help you improve your ability to decode these three facets of culture and to enhance your effectiveness in dealing with them.

EIGHT SCALES THAT MAP THE WORLD'S CULTURES

I was not born into a multicultural family to parents who took me around the world. On the contrary, I was born outside of Two Harbors, Minnesota, most famous among drivers on the road leaving Duluth as the home of Betty's Pies. It's the kind of small town where most people spend their entire lives in the culture of their childhood. My parents were a bit more venturesome; when I was four, they moved the family all of two hundred miles to Minneapolis, where I grew up.

But as an adult I fell deeply in love with the thrill of being surrounded by people who see the world in dramatically different ways from me. Having now lived nearly half of my life outside of the United States, I've developed skills ranging from learning to eat mopane worms for an afternoon snack while teaching English to high school students in Botswana, to dodging cows, chickens, and three-wheeled rickshaws during my morning run while on a short-term executive teaching stint in India.

Today, married to a Frenchman and raising two children in France, I have to struggle with cross-cultural challenges daily. Is it really necessary for an educated person to fold lettuce leaves before eating them, or would cutting the lettuce also be acceptable? If my very kind upstairs neighbors kissed me on the cheeks when I passed them in the hall yesterday, would it be overkill

for me to kiss them on the cheek the first time I pass them every single day?

However, the lessons in this book emerged not from discussions about lettuce leaves or mopane worms (interesting as these may be), but from the fascinating opportunity to teach cross-cultural management in one of the most culturally diverse institutions on earth. After opening the French branch of a cross-cultural consulting firm, where I had the pleasure of learning from dozens of culture specialists like Bo Chen on a daily basis, I began working as a professor at INSEAD, an international business school largely unknown in Two Harbors, Minnesota.

INSEAD is one of the rare places where everyone is a cultural minority. Although the home campus is located in France, only around 7 percent of the students are French. The last time I checked, the largest cultural group was Indian, at about 11 percent of the overall student body. Other executive students have lived and worked all over the world, and many have spent their careers moving from one region to another. When it comes to cross-cultural management, these global executives are some of the most sophisticated and knowledgeable on the planet. And although they come to INSEAD to learn from us, every day I am secretly learning from them. I've been able to turn my classroom into a laboratory where the executive participants test, challenge, validate, and correct the findings from more than a decade of research. Many have shared their own wisdom and their tested solutions for getting things done in a global world.

This rich trove of information and experience informs the eight-scale model that is at the heart of this book. Each of the eight scales represents one key area that managers must be aware of, showing how cultures vary along a spectrum from one extreme to its opposite. The eight scales are:

- *Communicating*: low-context vs. high-context
- *Evaluating*: direct negative feedback vs. indirect negative feedback
- *Persuading*: principles-first vs. applications-first
- *Leading*: egalitarian vs. hierarchical
- *Deciding*: consensual vs. top-down
- *Trusting*: task-based vs. relationship-based
- *Disagreeing*: confrontational vs. avoids confrontation
- *Scheduling*: linear-time vs. flexible-time

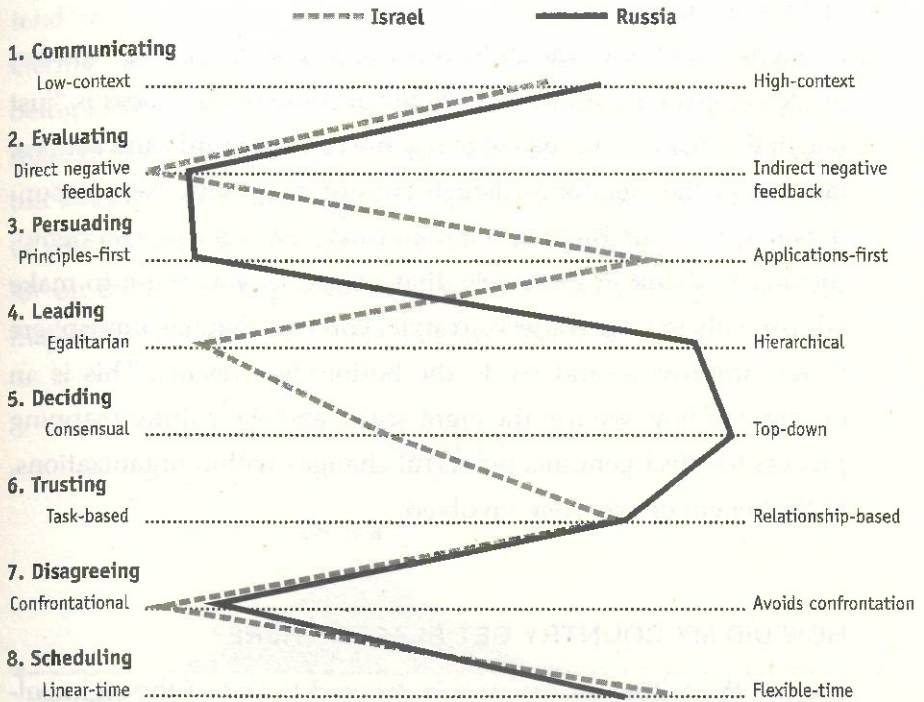
Whether you need to motivate employees, delight clients, or simply organize a conference call among members of a cross-cultural team, these eight scales will help you improve your effectiveness. By analyzing the positioning of one culture relative to another, the scales will enable you to decode how culture influences your own international collaboration and avoid painful situations like the one in which Webber and Dulac found themselves caught.

PUTTING THE CULTURE MAP TO WORK

Let me give you an example of how understanding the scales might play out in a real situation. Imagine that you are an Israeli executive working for a company that has just purchased a manufacturing plant in Russia. Your new position requires you to manage a group of Russian employees. At first, things go well, but then you start to notice that you are having more difficulty than you did with your own Israeli staff. You are not getting the same results from your team, and your management style does not seem to have the positive impact it did at home.

Puzzled and concerned, you decide to take a look at the position of Russian business culture on the eight scales and compare it

FIGURE 1.1.



with Israeli culture. The result is the culture map shown in Figure 1.1—the kind of tool we’ll explore in detail in the chapters to come.

As you review the culture map, you notice that Russian and Israeli business cultures both value flexible scheduling rather than organized scheduling (scale 8), both accept and appreciate open disagreement (scale 7), and both approach issues of trust through a relationship orientation rather than a task orientation (scale 6). This resonates with your experience. However, you notice that there’s a big gap between the two cultures when it comes to leading (scale 4), with Russia favoring a hierarchical approach, while Israel prefers an egalitarian one. As we’ll discuss in more detail later, this suggests that the appreciation for flat organizational

structures and egalitarian management style so characteristic of Israeli businesspeople may be ineffective in Russia's strongly hierarchical environment.

Here is a clue to the difficulties you've been having. You begin to reconsider the common Israeli attitude that the boss is "just one of the guys." You realize that some of your words and actions, tailored to the egalitarian Israeli culture, may have been misunderstood by your Russian team and may even have been demotivating to them. In the weeks that follow, as you begin to make adjustments to your leadership style, you find that the atmosphere slowly improves—and so do the bottom-line results. This is an example of how we use the eight scales and the culture mapping process to effect genuine, powerful changes within organizations, to the benefit of everyone involved.

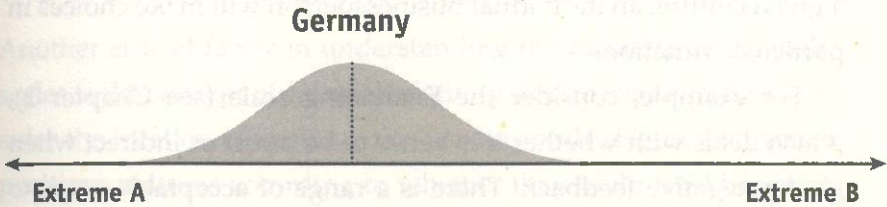
HOW DID MY COUNTRY GET PLACED THERE?

Each of the following chapters is devoted to one of the eight culture map scales. Each scale positions twenty to thirty countries along a continuum and guides you in applying the scale to dozens of situations commonly arising in our global business world. Because what is important on the scale is the relative gap between two countries, someone from any country on the map can apply the book's concepts to their interactions with colleagues from any other country.

Some may object that these scales don't give adequate weight to cultural variations among individuals, subcultures, regions, and organizations. Understanding how the scales were created may help you see how such variations are reflected in the scales, as well as how you can most accurately apply the insights that the scales provide.

As an example, let's look at the placement of Germany on the Scheduling scale, which reflects how people in various cultures tend to manage time. The first step is interviewing mid-level German managers, asking them to speak about the importance of being flexible versus organized when it comes to scheduling meetings, projects, or timelines. Of course, individual responses vary, but a normative pattern emerges. A bell curve illustrates the range of what is considered appropriate and acceptable business behavior on the scheduling scale in Germany, with a hump where the majority of responses fall. It might look like this:

FIGURE I.2.



Of course, there are probably a few outliers—a handful of Germans who fall to the right or the left of the hump—but their behavior, judging by the average German's opinion, would be considered inappropriate, unacceptable, or at least not ideal in German business culture.

It was through this type of analysis that I began to map the country positions on each scale. I later adjusted the positions based on feedback from hundreds of international executives.

When you look at the scales depicted in this book, you won't see the hump for each country, but simply a point representing the normative position of the hump, as shown in Figure I.3. In other words, the country position on the scale indicates the

FIGURE I.3.



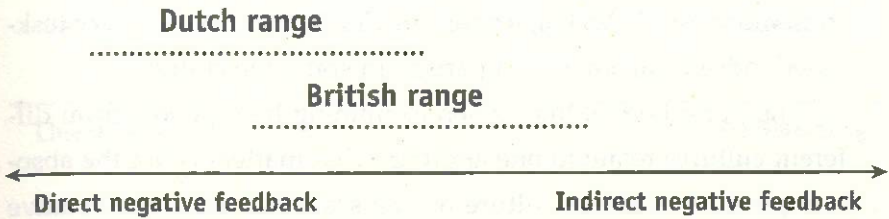
mid-position of a range of acceptable or appropriate behaviors in that country.

When you look at the scales, keep in mind that both cultural differences and individual differences impact each international interaction. Within the range of acceptable business behaviors in a given culture, an individual businessperson will make choices in particular situations.

For example, consider the Evaluating scale (see Chapter 2), which deals with whether it is better to be direct or indirect when giving negative feedback. There is a range of acceptable ways to give negative feedback in the Netherlands, and a Dutch businessperson can comfortably make a choice that falls anywhere within that range. Similarly, there is a range of appropriate ways to give negative feedback in the United Kingdom, and a British businessperson can choose a specific approach from any place within that range (see Figure I.4). The culture sets a range, and within that range each individual makes a choice. It is not a question of culture *or* personality, but of culture *and* personality.

If you compare two cultures, you may find that portions of their ranges overlap, while other portions do not. So some Dutch people might employ feedback styles that are appropriate in the Netherlands as well as in the United Kingdom, while others may use techniques that seem acceptable in the Netherlands but would

FIGURE I.4.



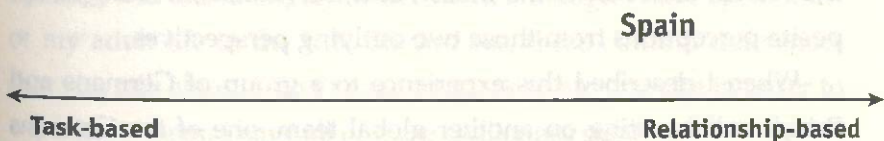
be considered inappropriate, blunt, and offensive in the United Kingdom. The eight scales can help you understand such differences and evaluate individual choices within a broad cultural context.

THE CRUCIAL PERSPECTIVE: CULTURAL RELATIVITY

Another crucial factor in understanding the meaning of the eight scales is the concept of cultural relativity. For an example, let's consider the location of Spain on the Trusting scale (Figure I.5), which positions cultures according to whether they build trust based on relationships or on experience of shared tasks.

Now ask yourself a simple question. Is Spain task-based or relationship-based? If you are like most people, you would answer that Spain is relationship-based. But this answer is subtly, yet crucially, wrong. The correct answer is that, if you come from France, the United Kingdom, Sweden, the United States, or any other culture

FIGURE I.5.



that falls to the left of Spain on the scale, then Spain is relationship-based *in comparison to your own culture*. However, if you come from India, Saudi Arabia, Angola, or China, then Spain is very task-based indeed—again, in comparison to your own culture.

The point here is that, when examining how people from different cultures relate to one another, what matters is not the absolute position of either culture on the scale but rather the relative position of the two cultures. It is this relative positioning that determines how people view one another.

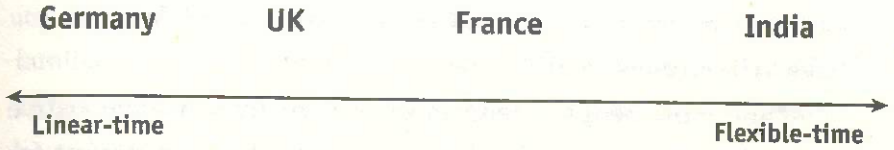
For example, consider what happened when the British consulting group KPMG created several global teams to standardize the implementation of management software systems developed by enterprise software developer SAP. One global team was composed primarily of British and French consultants, and throughout their work the British complained that the French were disorganized, chaotic, and lacked punctuality. "They take so many tangents and side routes during the meeting, it's impossible to follow their line of thinking!" one British team member said.

On another team, made up of mainly Indians and French, the Indians complained that the French were rigid, inflexible, and obsessed with deadlines and structure to the point that they were unable to adapt as the situation around them changed. "If you don't tell them weeks in advance what is going to happen in the meeting, in which order, it makes them very nervous," one Indian team member said.

Why such contradictory perceptions of the French team members? A quick glance at the Scheduling scale (Figure I.6) shows that the French fall *between* the British and the Indians, leading to opposite perceptions from those two outlying perspectives.

When I described this experience to a group of Germans and British collaborating on another global team, one of the Germans

FIGURE 1.6.



laughed. "That's very funny," he told us. "Because we Germans always complain that the British are disorganized, chaotic, and always late—exactly the complaint the British in your example lodged against the French." Note the relative positions of the Germans and British on the Scheduling scale.

So cultural relativity is the key to understanding the impact of culture on human interactions. If an executive wants to build and manage global teams that can work together successfully, he needs to understand not just how people from his own culture experience people from various international cultures, but also how those international cultures perceive *one another*.

WHEN CULTURAL DIFFERENCES ARE INSIDE US

I recently had occasion to place a phone call to Cosimo Turroturro, who runs a speakers' association based in London. Simply on the basis of his name, I assumed before the call that he was Italian. But as soon as he spoke, starting sentences with the German "ja," it was clear that he was not.

Turroturro explained, "My mother was Serbian, my father was Italian, I was raised largely in Germany, although I have spent most of my adult life in the U.K. So you see, these cultural differences that you talk about, I don't need to speak to anyone else in order to experience them. I have all of these challenges right inside myself!"

I laughed, imagining Turroturro having breakfast alone and saying to himself in Italian, "Why do you have to be so blunt?" and responding to himself in German, "Me, blunt?! Why do *you* have to be so emotional?"

While most people spend most of their lives in their native lands, the scales in this book have an extra level of interest for those with more heterogeneous backgrounds. If you've lived in two or more countries or have parents from different countries, you may begin to notice how multiple cultures have helped to shape your personality. You may find that part of your personal style comes from the culture where you spent the first years of your life, another from the culture where you attended college and held your first job, another from your father's culture, and still another from your mother's culture. The following pages may not only help you become more effective as a businessperson; they may even help you understand yourself more fully than ever before.

TASTING THE WATER YOU SWIM IN

Culture can be a sensitive topic. Speaking about a person's culture often provokes the same type of reaction as speaking about his mother. Most of us have a deep protective instinct for the culture we consider our own, and, though we may criticize it bitterly ourselves, we may become easily incensed if someone from outside the culture dares to do so. For this reason, I'm walking a minefield in this book.

I promise that all the situations I recount are drawn from the stories of real people working in real companies, though I've changed names, details, and circumstances to maintain anonymity. Nonetheless, you may find yourself reacting defensively when

you hear what others have said about the culture you call your own: "It isn't true! My culture is not a bit like that!"

At the risk of pouring oil on the fire, allow me to repeat the familiar story of the two young fish who encounter an older fish swimming the opposite way. He nods at them and says, "Morning, boys, how's the water?"—which prompts one of the young fish to ask the other, "What the hell is water?"¹

When you are in and of a culture—as fish are in and of water—it is often difficult or even impossible to *see* that culture. Often people who have spent their lives living in one culture see only regional and individual differences and therefore conclude, "My national culture does not have a clear character."

John Cleary, an engineer from the United States, explained this phenomenon during one of my courses for executives.

The first twenty-eight years of my life I lived in the smallish town of Madison, Wisconsin, but in my work I traveled across the U.S. weekly, since my team members were scattered across the country. The regional differences in the U.S. are strong. New York City feels entirely different than Athens, Georgia. So when I began working with foreigners who spoke of what it was like to work with "Americans," I saw that as a sign of ignorance. I would respond, "There is no American culture. The regions are different and within the regions every individual is different."

But then I moved to New Delhi, India. I began leading an Indian team and overseeing their collaboration with my former team in the U.S. I was very excited, thinking this would be an opportunity to learn about the Indian culture. After 16 months in New Delhi working with Indians and seeing this collaboration from the Indian viewpoint, I can report that I have learned

a tremendous amount . . . about my own culture. As I view the American way of thinking and working and acting from this outside perspective, for the first time I see a clear, visible American culture. The culture of my country has a strong character that was totally invisible to me when I was in it and part of it.

When you hear the people quoted in this book complain, criticize, or gasp at your culture from their perspective, try not to take it as a personal affront. Instead, think of it as an opportunity to learn more not just about the unfamiliar cultures of this world but also about your own. Try seeing, feeling, and tasting the water you swim in the way a land animal might perceive it. You may find the experience fascinating—and mind-expanding.

* * *

When I arrived back in my apartment in Paris after the session with the Bernards and Bo Chen, I thought back to the advice from Bo's mother. I Googled her words, "you have two eyes, two ears, and one mouth and you should use them accordingly," expecting the quotation to begin with "Confucius says" or at least "Bo Chen's mother says." No such luck. The ancient Greek philosopher Epictetus seems to have said something similar, but as far as I know he never lived in China.

That night, instead of dreaming about fruit disappearing from my shopping cart, I lay in bed thinking about why Bo Chen didn't speak up and why I kept speaking in the face of his silence, while—irony of ironies—I was running a session on cross-cultural effectiveness. I thought again about Mrs. Chen's advice and wished that I had followed her suggestion that morning.

Mrs. Chen's advice is sound, not just for Chinese children, but also for all of us who hope to improve our effectiveness working

across cultural barriers. When interacting with someone from another culture, try to watch more, listen more, and speak less. Listen before you speak and learn before you act. Before picking up the phone to negotiate with your suppliers in China, your outsourcing team in India, your new boss in Brazil, or your clients in Russia, use all the available resources to understand how the cultural framework you are working with is different from your own—and only then react.