

## Cross-cultural management: With insights from brain science (a review)

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When I first attended a lecture by Dr Mai Nguyen-Phuong-Mai at a SIETAR event in London she laid a model brain on the desk and talked about the importance of neuro-science in linguistics and intercultural understanding. Vietnamese by birth, she was associate Professor at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences and travelled the world as lecturer in other universities, particularly Australia. Her first book, *Intercultural Communication: A Disciplinary Approach* published in 2018 is reviewed by Philip Williams in *Training, Language and Culture* Volume 2 Issue 2, and her second major book on cross-cultural management was published in 2019.

The key to *Cross-Cultural Management* is the application of brain science to the study of business culture, although that is by no means all that the book covers. The fourteen chapters cover globalisation, diversity, bias and change management before going on to motivation, leadership, business communication, negotiation and marketing, offering practical business tips in the context of her underlying philosophy. The book has a preface by the doyen of intercultural awareness studies, George Simons.

The book is a gift to intercultural trainers and teachers, packed with facts and stories of critical incidents, with two bonuses at the back of discus-

sion cases and problem-solving cases (great sources for critical incidents).

What makes the book different is its rejection of what Mai calls a static paradigm of cultures and adoption of the dynamic paradigm, which shows how cultures actually work. The static view of culture focuses on differences and the relationship of country to culture. It focuses on binary differences (for example, individualism vs collectivism) and highlights national values rather than individual values. The slogan she uses to sum up the static paradigm is *Think global – act local*.

The dynamic paradigm focuses on the individual and on similarities, what brings people together and the fact that individuals unite around global values, national values (I would want to add regional values), organisational and group culture. Values influence behaviours but even deep-seated values can change. People can be both individual and collectivist. Culture is a process of communication and negotiation both within and between insiders and outsiders. Above all, we don't do business with cultures but with individuals, and individuals can rethink and reshape a culture in dealing with internal and external forces and influences. The slogan for the dynamic paradigm puts individuals firmly in the frame: *Think global – plan local – act individual*.

In expounding her thesis, Mai adopts theories not frequently invoked by interculturalists: the theory of evolutionary biology, expounded by Mark Pagels in his book *Wired for Culture*, and the theory of cultural neuroscience. She also explores a newish awareness, the ability of the brain to rapidly adapt and reconstruct according to a new context. As she writes, 'If we have to use the software metaphor, then it's not culture. Culture is not just socially learned, but geographically influenced, genetically inherited, and neurally enabled'. And for businesspeople? *'The goal of an international businessperson is to cultivate a multicultural mind so that (s)he can dynamically adapt or create the kind of cultural pattern that suits a context the best'*.

At bottom, believes Mai, culture is about survival. It is about practices and beliefs individuals accept to protect them against the environment and which become established group ways of living and working together. She gives the example of the Hindu reverence for the cow, an animal whose use in traction and as a source of milk meant it had to be protected in an agricultural society. As she puts it, *'A culture is an immense and active archive of what is best to do to survive'*. But, as a huge resource, humans can choose to follow it and improve and broaden it. So, culture is dynamic and can adapt and change to suit new environments and conditions. To show how this works she presents a Diagramme of Diversity Pathways, based on a simple acronym GCEB-Be, standing for Gene, Culture, Environment, Brain and Behaviour. We are influenced by our genes, which are largely fixed at birth, our culture, which is adaptable but strongly influenced by our geographical surroundings and environment, and our brain, which enables us to make connections and think how we can best succeed, all of which influence our behaviour. A successful business will adapt to the local market culture and will work with it or reshape it and even create new cultures to achieve success, depending, of course, on the context.

Context is crucial and stimulates change. Just as the brain can process opposite ideas when it

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needs, so cultures can change at the levels of individual experience, professional requirements, and social, regional and national and even global pressures, dependent on the context. Mai likens culture to a tree with roots and a trunk, branches and foliage. The roots and trunk represent the fundamental concerns, the building blocks of what makes a culture, illustrated by language, music, loyalty, hierarchy and artistic culture and, at bottom, what allows survival. The fundamental concerns are the basis of the branches, core values and attitudes which govern the group's life either by its adherence to or revolt against them. These core values manifest in the canopy (the foliage) which represents the behaviours which illustrate the core values in action, also by adherence to or by revolt against. It is the revolt against and the need to adapt to a changing environment that leads to cultural change and evolution.

Mai is interesting on the origin of the well-known cultural iceberg, first popularised by the anthropologist, Edward Hall. The cultural iceberg concept with its two levels of above the surface (behaviour you can observe) and below the surface (values you can't) originated in the cold war between Eastern communism and Western capitalism. It created a binary opposition which Mai argues is outdated. The point, writes Mai, is that culture is changing, is often contradictory within and between communities and is capable of evolving. This corresponds in Mai's research into brain science into the relationship between the amygdala (emotional memory) and the hippocampus (factual memory). As humans we often respond culturally out of fear and stress against cultural 'realities' that do not suit us. Mai's view is

that cultural change comes from positivity in the face of difference and the readiness to adapt.

In her chapter on Change Management Mai introduces another concept with the acronym STREAP Be. This is a framework for adapting to cultural differences. *S* means *safety* (recognising and respecting differences in status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness and fairness). In business it manifests in being on the same page, allowing local control, allowing choice, building trust but also keeping an eye on the competition. *T* means *trigger* (changing routines to suit changing contexts). *R* stands for *reward* and recognising different ways of achieving and recognising results. *E* stands for *emotion*. Mai points out that change is driven by emotion. Empathy, building a happy workplace, and acting with kindness are all part of emotion. *A* stands for *alignment*. It is important to look for similarities and areas of cooperation, looking at common values, vision and common interests. *P* stands for *people*. Culture changes because people change and successful business puts its faith in change agents, important people but also the involvement of the rank and file. *Be* at the end obviously refers to behaviour. Part of behavioural change lies in recognising how you yourself are changing and evolving as part of the process of cultural change.

Having established the STREAP-Be acronym Mai then goes on to apply it to motivation, communication, leadership, negotiation and mar-

keting in International business with lots of practical examples. A very valuable practical part of each chapter is the chart where she lists core cultural values and matches them with management strategies that international businesspeople can use. Very useful summaries.

In concluding the review of this extraordinary book which really can change thinking let us return to the basic strategy of the dynamic paradigm: *Think Global, Plan Local, Act Individual*. Think global means recognising universal human motivation, building trust, weeding out fear and using similarities as your starting point. Plan local means being prepared to align yourself with local culture but developing the ability to reshape it and even create a new culture on the basis of the old. Act individual means resisting prejudice and stereotypes and thinking and acting contextually while expecting surprises, changes and contradictory values and behaviours.

This is a deep and genuinely inspiring book which offers a new and dynamic view of cross-cultural relations in life and in business. It shows how the brain works and how it influences cultural attitudes and behaviours at an international level. It develops new acronyms based on brain science and shows how information and emotions are processed and offers strategies on how people and international business can adapt to and even create culture change. Definitely one for your bookshelf or university or business library.