

Original Research

Business cultural training in a globalised economy

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As the economy globalises the concept of cultural training in business needs a rethink. As this paper explains, the key change is that every area of business increasingly involves multinationals, making the cultural analysis of countries as independent entities increasingly irrelevant. Cultural trainers are having to think in different terms in training businesses to improve performance in new markets, overseas branches, multinational teams, joint ventures and international mergers and acquisitions and above all to create trust. This change is presenting the models developed by thinkers like Hofstede, Trompenaars, Lewis and Meyer in a different light, placing emphasis on the concepts they have developed rather than the countries they apply them to. This paper explores how cultural concepts can be applied to business and suggests practical training activities to raise cultural awareness and improve business performance. The author concludes that cultural training is an aspect of management training, not an extension of language training, although understanding something about the language and even speaking it is important in avoiding misunderstandings and communication breakdown.

KEYWORDS: *intercultural communication, international business, cultural models, globalisation*



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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Business Cultural Trainers Certificate

This paper is based on the training programme of the Business Cultural Trainers Certificate (BCTC) taught at International House London, one of the world's leading language and cultural training private school chains. The BCTC is a three-day intensive programme aimed at language teachers who want to diversify their careers into business training, existing cultural trainers wishing to increase their skills and competences and HR managers seeking to introduce cultural training into their companies. The three-day programme covers cul-

tural programming and research, programme design and marketing and delivery. This paper identifies the key issues faced by delegates and how they can be overcome.

1.2. Why culture matters in international business practices

Twenty years ago, at an international trade fair, Barry Tomalin asked the director of a leading relocation firm when culture was important. The answer was when they had a problem and could not find another solution. Today, the situation is very different. As long ago as 2012 an Economist Intel-

ligence Unit 2012 survey interviewed business managers from 68 countries. The survey revealed that 98% of managers interviewed saw cross-cultural management' as their biggest challenge across borders and that 51% cited different cultural traditions as the greatest threat to cross-border relationships and 49% cited different cultural norms (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2012).

In his book entitled *The World is Flat*, New York Times correspondent Thomas Friedman laid out the principle of globalisation with brutal clarity as whatever can be produced more cheaply somewhere else in the world will be (Friedman, 2006). This explains that products we buy in our stores and supermarkets, marketed by nationally and internationally recognised firms are manufactured where labour is cheapest.

There is no question that cultural issues affect every area of international business from multinational teams within a company, overseas offices and branches, international banking and transfer of funds, international supply chain management, international joint ventures, or JVs, and international mergers and acquisitions.

The key areas of international business influenced by different cultural operational practices are capital flows (money, currency transfers, assets transfers), production (manufacturing), supply chain management, jobs (relocation and work migration) and migration due to climate change and war. All these have huge cultural and social implications.

1.3. The influence of ICTs and automation

The influence of cultural differences in ways of working has been accentuated by electronic contact through ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) through the Internet and social media (Naughton, 2012). This has both increased the contact between markets and brought to the fore differences in the use of language, particularly the English language. The international language of the Internet is recognised to be English (the most used language is Mandarin) but different forms of expression in English can cause problems. Tomalin and Nicks (2014) give the advice to writers

using the Internet in English: (1) keep your sentences short, 15 to 25 words maximum; (2) check your communications before you send them (if there are too many 'and' and 'buts', maybe you could change them into separate sentences to make them shorter and clearer); (3) If you are starting a new thought or suggestion, begin a new paragraph, it will make it clearer; (4) finally, leave a line space between paragraphs, it will make your communication easier to read and to understand. Tomalin and Nicks (2014) also suggest ways of greeting and signing off emails and online correspondence. What they describe as 'the new brutal', beginning sentences with a name, e.g. 'Barry' and no sign-off may be efficient in northern Europe but be less well received in Eastern Europe or Asia. It may be better to use 'Dear' and also to sign off with 'Regards', 'Best wishes' or 'Kind Regards', depending on the relationship.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Cross-culture or interculture?

Intercultural training has been traditionally based on models developed by linguists, anthropologists and psychologists over the last fifty years or so. Once again these have been based on studies of companies and employee based on the country of origin. The globalising of the world economy has meant that the understanding of cultural relations has changed and that we now need to use a broader perspective and a less restrictive terminology (Livermore, 2011).

It is interesting that the study of international cultures has gone through a number of terminological changes in the last fifty years, reflecting to some degree the changes in attitude to the relationship. Fifty years ago, 'culture clash' was not uncommon. Even as late as 1996, in a much broader context, Samuel Huntington referred to the 'Clash of Civilisations' as the title of his book predicting future ideological conflicts (Huntington, 1996). As the recognition of the need to formalise strategies of adaptation grew and theories developed to encompass it, 'Culture Clash' was replaced by 'Cross-cultural Communication'. Essentially, this means that I do not change my thinking and beha-

viour but I adapt my behaviour to accommodate yours. This concept is still used today but has transmuted into a form more suitable to our interconnected world, intercultural-communication or interculture. Interculture recognises that cultural interchange is a two-way process. You adapt to me and I adapt to you and in the process BOTH of us subtly change our thinking and our behaviour process and become more adaptable to different ways of thinking and behaving. We would recommend using 'intercultural' or 'interculture' in all your training.

2.2. Culture is a sub category of all management processes

There is a danger that language teachers put cultural differences ahead of the essential factor of business, making a profit. As pointed out above, getting the culture wrong is increasingly recognised as a way of losing money. One of the most famous European/American failures was the merger between the German Daimler Benz automobile company and the US Chrysler automobile company in 1998, the price being a \$39 billion stock swap. Eight years later, the merger having nowhere near reached its projected share price value the merger collapsed and was sold to Cerberus Capital management in a \$7.4 billion exchange, a loss of \$31.6 billion. The principle reason for the failure of the merger between the two national automobile companies? The failure of understanding between the Chrysler (US) and Daimler Benz (German) management cultures. As a joke among the Chrysler workers at the time had it, 'How do you spell Daimler Chrysler?' The answer? 'D-A-I-M-L-E-R. The Chrysler is silent'.

What happens is that cultural misunderstandings often frustrate efficient business process, destroying trust and confidence, leading to low productivity, falling profits, failed assignments, capital losses and failed international Joint ventures and mergers and acquisitions (Lewis & Hammerich, 2016). Teachers need to learn that understanding business culture depends on understanding three things – the three core drivers, as Tomalin and Nicks (2014) describe them:

- business expectations (based to a degree on national attitudes and values);
- business communication styles (including directness and indirectness, presentations, meetings, negotiation and networking styles);
- business management styles (including attitudes to time, how teams are organised and run.

2.3. Countries vs communities – the avoidance of essentialism

According to Zhu (2014), 'essentialism' is a term that expresses the view that everyone in a country conforms to a set of countrywide beliefs and behaviours. It enables us to say, 'The British are like this' or 'The Germans are like that'. It is a tremendously convenient way of classifying people's cultural behaviour but it increasingly untrue, if indeed, it was ever true.

Assessing attitudes and behaviours by national characteristics easily becomes stereotyping. Although a nationality is a useful starting point, use generalisations to describe national characteristics and be aware of the different communities (regional and ethnic) that make up a nationality and use the word communities rather than nationalities when describing them. Finally, use intercultural rather than cross-cultural in all your dealings as it stresses the importance of interchange and interrelationship in dealing with people with different cultural experience from yours.

In training it is especially dangerous, although very easy to do, to classify people by national traits as everyone knows someone who does not conform to type and you can quickly be accused of dealing in stereotypes. This is a training 'killer'. *Stereotypes* completely undermines your authority as an intercultural consultant. It is important to counter it by making sure that you substitute the word *generalisations*. 'Stereotypes' pigeonholes people and does not allow flexibility of attitude and behaviour. 'Generalisation' simply asserts that most people in a group adhere to a common set of beliefs and behaviours but that there are exceptions. In fact, we are all a mixture of a different range of experiences, which can be presented at five levels (Hurn & Tomalin, 2013):

‘Obviously, a degree of sensitivity to status and willingness to share personal information is important but it is interesting how people are happy to share and do not feel the questions are intrusive’

- national (your national culture);
- regional (your regional culture);
- professional (the influence of the organisations in which you have worked or studied);
- social – (the influence of where you grew up and age and gender);
- personal – (what makes you unique, including travel and other personal experiences you might wish to share).

National experience. I am British and was born in England so I probably have a number of characteristics I share with a number of people born in England.

Regional experience. I was born and brought up in the London area in the South. So, I also have to a degree, regional characteristics. If, however, I had been born and brought up in Devon, in the South West, Birmingham in the Midlands or Leeds in the North East, my regional characteristics might be much stronger.

Professional experience. Most people in executive positions or managerial support roles are affected by at least one of their professional experiences. They adopt as part of their operational style and culture the values and procedures of the organisation that has most influenced them.

Social experience. Our views and behaviours are also influenced by our social environment, our home environment, our education, and our parents. These influences can have profound effects on attitudes and behaviours, which may reinforce people’s attitudes in business.

Personal experience. This describes personal experience which may affect attitudes to different cultural communities and focuses mainly on travel or working / living abroad. It also covers personal interests, family and hobbies as these may be important in promoting good business relationships.

It is natural to start with the national experience. However, the important thing is never to stop there but when time and opportunity allow, to use that as a platform to drill down to more professional and potentially personal experience. This way you get a fuller idea of your counterpart’s background and interests. A good way to practise this is the ‘Get to know Jo’ activity.

Divide your group into pairs or groups of three and get them to ask each other questions. Even with closed groups within a company, where everyone knows each other, this can still be a very efficient and revealing exercise to find out more about your neighbour and build bonds within the group.

1. Ask everyone to stand up.

2. Ask everyone to pair off with someone they do not know very well. If there is an odd number, make yourself as part of the group or have one group of three.

3. Explain the five levels and the five types of question people can ask. Here are the questions.

National. Where are you from?

Regional. What part? What is it like there?

Professional. What did you do before you worked here? How was it different? What’s your main professional influence?

Social. Where were you brought up? What was it like?

Personal. Have you travelled much? Where to? Why to these places?

4. Each pair asks each other questions and discusses for 10-15 minutes.

5. Still standing, bring the group together. Ask the group, ‘Who learned something interesting?’

The answers are often very interesting ranging from, for example: ‘I discovered we were brought up two streets away from each other’, to ‘Jo’s father is Tibetan. He was brought up partly in Dharamsala in India and studied at the University of Delhi’.

Obviously, a degree of sensitivity to status and willingness to share personal information is important but it is interesting how people are happy to share and do not feel the questions are intrusive.

2.4. Concepts not country styles

Although the leading theorists of international business cultures have tended to choose country classification, as a matter of convenience, rather than group classification, their concepts still maintain value as features to examine, in the study of any particular cultural group. If you accept the three key areas of international business culture – expectations, communication styles and management styles (Hurn & Tomalin, 2013) – which are the core divers of intercultural understanding, then you can examine their concepts in your training within these three broad categories.

By expectations, Hurn and Tomalin (2013) are referring to client expectations of the business relationship – do they match yours and if not, how do you need to adapt? This might cover, for example, the difference between task-based management culture and relationship-based management cultures as presented by commentators such as Meyer (2014) and Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (2012). By communication styles they mean the study of typical conversational patterns (such as direct or indirect communication), body language, presentation styles, how meetings are run and negotiations conducted and how business clients typically network and socialise. By management style they mean operational management (attitudes to time, how teams are organised and operate and how the working week is organised). Within this conceptual spectrum all the concepts explained in the models developed by Hofstede et al. (2010), Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (2012), Lewis (2018), Meyer (2014) and others can be incorporated but distinguished not by country but by organisational or individual management style.

What is also important is the establishment of paradigms rather than scores. Scoring countries out of a hundred on a linear scale has the effect of fixing a social group (in this case a national population) at a particular level. The adoption of paradigms placing communities along a line in relation to two vectors, for example, individual and collective decision-making, allows greater flexibility and better illustrates the relative preferences of one business community to another.

‘What is also important is the establishment of paradigms rather than scores’

2.5. Cultural due diligence

Lewis (2019) emphasises the importance of considering the importance of ‘human capital’ in international business and stresses the value of ‘cultural due diligence’. Due diligence is a business term used in mergers and acquisitions and joint ventures to describe how accountants and business managers assess the financial health and level of compliance with regulations of the organisation being acquired. Lewis (2019) argues that what is also needed is cultural due diligence – an examination of typical communication and management styles of the companies which are joining forces to avoid misunderstandings and failures in productivity leading to declining profits and ultimately failure.

Hurn and Tomalin (2013) break down the key features of cultural due diligence into five areas summarised as ECOLE. ECOLE, meaning ‘school’ in French is simply an acronym combining the first letters of the key concepts:

- E** Expectations (values and attitudes);
- C** Communication (language, presentations, meetings, negotiations and networking styles);
- O** Organisation (time, teams, routines and projects);
- L** Leadership (hierarchies, decisions, delegation and consultation, gender in management);
- E** Etiquette (greetings, leave-taking, dress code, gift-giving, hospitality).

The authors also developed a system designed to explore affective relationships called MIRO standing for Motivation, Interest, Respect and Offence. Each component can be explained through the prism of cultural due diligence:

- M** Motivation (how to motivate teams and colleagues);
- I** Interest (how to show interest and build good personal relations);
- R** Respect (how to show respect);
- O** Offence (how to avoid causing offence).

All these terms present a framework of analysis designed to make it easier to prepare for and use these levers to achieve success in international business relationships by understanding the concepts and applying them to the issues that might arise.

2.6. Cultural relativity

This paper has already established that cultural characteristics vary according to background and experience but also they vary according to com-

munity. For example, you may consider me to be direct if you come from a culture where people tend to be more indirect but if you come from one where people are very direct in their opinions and feedback, I may be considered comparatively indirect. This is an example of cultural relativity, where different communities have different views according to their relative customs. This is well expressed by Meyer (2014) of INSEAD in France in her analysis of how negative feedback is given in different communities (Figure 1).

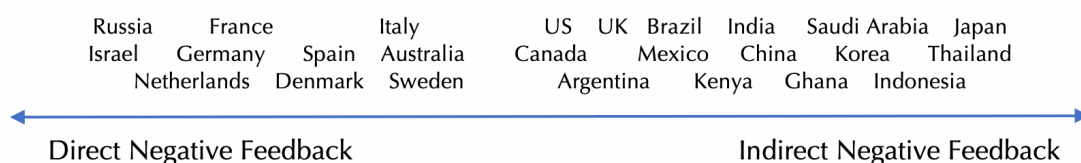


Figure 1. Cultural relativity: perception of negative feedback

So, my comparative directness may be seen by a Russian as indirect and maybe displaying weakness or by a Japanese or Thai as blunt and rude.

2.7. Definitions of culture

All definitions of culture are illuminating to an extent, but one of the most valuable, which actually relates to corporate cultures, is known as the ‘View and Do’ definition. Coined by Deal and Kennedy (1982), it goes like this: *culture is the way we view and do things round here.*

However, it is important to allow participants in cultural training programmes to form their own definitions of culture and this business culture definition activity is a simple, quick and effective way of doing so.

1. Divide the participants into groups of three or four (depending on group size).
2. Write up this sentence opening ‘*Business culture is...*’
3. Say they must complete the sentence.
4. The groups complete their sentences and read them to the group.
5. The group works together to produce a final definition they can all share.

2.8. Summing up

Although the models developed by thinkers such Hall (1959), Hofstede et al. (2010), Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (2012), Lewis (2018) and others are still valuable, the diversity of international business and ICTs have made it important to avoid essentialism and take other factors into account. The concepts they have developed can be applied to how individual corporations actually communicate and manage operations so as to minimise misunderstandings leading to errors and delays, which could otherwise have been avoided.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Cultural understanding

The three-day intensive BCTC divides into six sections: cultural understanding, research, resources, course design, marketing, and delivery. This part of the paper summarises each in turn and illustrates key training activities.

Cultural Understanding opening session focuses on the key principles outlined in Cultural Understanding and how it relates to business and language and uses the activities described therein.

3.2. Research

This section covers the theoretical background. It is important to understand the key concepts as applied to understanding culture developed by experts. These include Hall's (1959) concepts of monochronic and polychronic approaches to tasks and high and low context communication, Hofstede et al.'s (2010) six dimensions, Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner's (2012) seven paradigms, Meyer's (2014) eight scales of working relationships and the Lewis (2018) model. The value of having command of the theoretical background is that it gives confidence and shows the trainer knows to a degree what s/he is talking about. It does not compensate for experience and the knowledge of organisational communication and management in different communities, which you need to research and get examples of. One of the ways of doing this is through critical incident analysis.

3.2.1. Critical incident analysis

The founder of Critical Incident Analysis, first cited in 1954, was Robert D. Flanagan, a psychologist with the US Air Force. A critical incident is a summary of an intercultural misunderstanding expressed in a description of five or six lines or a short article. It lacks the depth and comprehensiveness of a case study as it focuses on a single incident or discussion but offers a clear focus for discussion and documents first impressions. Here is an example.

'An English woman was moving house in France and went to a French supermarket to get some empty boxes to store bric a brac ready for the removal van. When she asked for some empty boxes she was surprised and shocked to receive the abrupt answer, 'No'. Angrily she left the store but a friend advised her to go back and ask for customer relations. She did so and explained her situation in more detail. She received the same reply, 'No' but this time an explanation. 'No, Madame, we don't have any deliveries today but come tomorrow and you can take as many as you want.'

This may seem trivial but it affected both the woman's trust and confidence in the supermarket and potentially lost them a regular customer. The

analysis procedure recommended by Flanagan involves four stages: Analysis, Confrontation, Reflection, Commitment (to change) (Collins & Pieterse, 2007).

It is important to choose critical incidents relevant to the industry and where possible to the market you are dealing with in your training. One of the key tasks of a cultural trainer is to build a personal library of critical incidents which can be drawn on when needed.

3.2.2. MBI (Map, Bridge, Integrate)

This is an important tool for helping to understand and resolve cultural misunderstandings. Map, Bridge, Integrate (MBI) was developed by Distefano and Maznevski (2000) and goes through a number of stages to help identify and resolve cultural misunderstandings, as follows.

MAP: What are they doing/saying? What do I normally do/say? What's the difference?

BRIDGE: Why are they doing/saying that? How am I perceived (empathising with their values and perception)?

INTEGRATE: What can I change? What have I learned? What will I do, say and, (above all), think next time?

Applied to our supermarket story above, the English woman learned that by explaining the context she would get a fuller and more useful response than simply making a request.

MBI is a most useful formula, which should be part of any manager's toolkit in dealing with international situations. If you can understand another's point of view you have a far better chance of finding a way to come to an agreement and make the most of the interaction.

3.3. Resources

It is hard to cover a whole community in a single programme but it can be useful to compile a profile of key markets to share with delegates. A useful activity taught by a former BCTC Lithuanian alumnus Laimonas Vykauskas is the Lithuania Quiz. It consists of ten statements of which five are true and five represent common misunderstandings about Lithuania (Table 1).

Table 1

The Lithuania Quiz (Mark these ten statements as true or false in the appropriate column)

	TRUE	FALSE
1. Lithuania is a Balkan country.		X Baltic
2. Its capital is Riga.		X Vilnius
3. There is a statue of US pop musician Frank Zappa in the capital.	X	
4. Lithuania is 5 hours from London by air.		X 2.5
5. Lithuania's population is about 2 million.	X	
6. Vilnius University is the oldest in Central and Eastern Europe.	X	
7. Lithuania was the first country in the region to declare independence from the Soviet Union in 1990.	X	
8. Most Lithuanian business is with Russia.		X Germany
9. Lithuanian currency is the Euro.		X Lita
10. Business in Lithuania is based on written agreements.	X Just like Western Europe	
11. The traditional gift for Lithuanian hosts is vodka.		X They're more beer drinkers.

As you can see, I have printed the answers in what would otherwise be blank columns. The activity proceeds like this.

1. The participants do the Lithuania quiz.

2. In groups they choose a market and make their own quiz. Five statements should be true and five false. The five false statements reflect common misunderstandings about the country described.

3. Groups exchange quizzes and do them.

4. They check their answers with the group that compiled the quiz.

5. Class discussion: what have the groups learned about mistaken impressions and how it influences opinions about different markets?

3.4. Course design

A fundamental error of cultural training is to believe that it is an extension of language training. It isn't. Cultural training in a business environment is an aspect of management training and should be considered and planned as such. Whereas language training tends to be based on hours, manage-

ment training tends to be based on half-days or days – about six contact hours plus breaks and lunch. The payment rate tends not to be hourly but daily, so is higher paid than language teaching and the aim is to improve client confidence and performance in dealing with other business organisations or multinational teams. Most important, perhaps is as a language trainer you assess your students but as a cultural trainer your client assesses you.

The basis of course design is not to plan by the hour, although that is possible, but to plan by the day or half day. In an eight-hour day with a six contact hour programme. A typical way of dividing up the day is to divide it into 90-minute sessions so the day might look like this:

Session 1 (90 minutes) – Break (up to 30 minutes) – Session 2 (90 minutes).

Session 3 (90 minutes) – Lunch (up to 60 minutes) – Session 4 (90 minutes).

The next question is what to include in each session. Going back to 2.5 *Cultural due diligence*,

a one-day programme might be divided up as follows (as per general recommendations).

Session 1 (90 minutes): Introduction, Client expectations, values and attitudes.

Session 2 (90 minutes): Communication.

Session 3 (90 minutes): Management organisation and leadership.

Session 4 (90 minutes): Etiquette and adaptation.

If you only have half a day (3-4 hours), then the most important areas are client expectations and communication styles.

3.5. Meeting client needs

A key requirement of any training course is to meet client needs. But in intercultural training how does a trainer know what the client's needs are? In language training we can do a needs analysis, possibly through a language test supported by an oral interview but in business cultural training we need something different. Here are two ideas.

Need to know. Need to know refers to what the trainer needs to know about the client in order to design and focus the training programme to meet their requirements.

Need to know questionnaire. One way of doing this is through the Need to Know questionnaire, a questionnaire inviting the participants to describe their jobs, their responsibilities and their key challenges. However, this isn't enough. First people may not complete their questionnaires and return them to you and if they do they may not wish to risk disclosing in public the issues they face.

This is why it is important to start any course with a 'Need to know' activity. Here is how it works.

1. Divide the class into groups of four or five. If they are seated 'cabaret style' at tables, then each table can form a group.

2. Thank those who have completed questionnaires, especially if on time.

3. Ask each group to exchange and agree on one key issue they would like to have answers to by the end of the workshop.

4. Each group then agrees on and nominates a rapporteur.

'A key requirement of any training course is to meet client needs. But in intercultural training how does a trainer know what the client's needs are? In language training we can do a needs analysis, possibly through a language test supported by an oral interview but in business cultural training we need something different'

5. After maximum ten minutes each rapporteur states their table's agreed 'need to know' requirement.

6. Write them on a flipchart or whiteboard.

7. This is your agenda. Refer to it throughout the day to confirm that their 'need to know' points have been dealt with.

3.6. Marketing

Once again in planning the marketing of cultural training, especially as a freelancer, it is important to think of yourself not as a language trainer but as a management trainer or business consultant. This means pricing according to a daily rate not an hourly rate and finding out how much management trainers earn and pricing your service accordingly based on experience and qualifications.

Of course, the cultural training market is varied but the following five areas of training dominate the market.

1. Cultures of new markets and clients.

2. Multicultural team building and team working (including VDTs – Virtual Distributed Teams).

3. Diversity management.

4. Leadership and interpersonal management skills. The key most important qualities of an international manager.

5. Relocation and efficient management of culture shock.

Obviously and conveniently, depending on client demand elements of all these areas may be included in training.

'In management training everything must be seen in the context of management expectations, communication and operations management style between and within companies and across markets, which is why cultural due diligence is so important'

3.7. Delivery

Practicality is the key to successful delivery, allowing participants to engage with real life problems, draw the lessons from them and see how to apply them in practice. Using an interactive approach, creating a forum for discussion will give insights into what works and what does not work in the client's operations and allow the trainer to suggest strategies for improving performance. As a trainer you are not just dispensing knowledge but as a facilitator you are helping them find their own strategies for dealing with issues they face.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The key point to take away from this paper is that cultural training is an aspect of management training, not an extension of language training, although understanding something about the language and even speaking it is important in avoiding misunderstandings and communication breakdown. According to Lewis (2018), asking in a presentation, 'Do you understand?' may be seen as patronising in some markets whereas 'Am I clear?' may be much more acceptable.

With native English speakers the difference according to stress and intonation can be even more misleading. For instance, 'Quite good' with stress on 'quite' and rising intonation on 'good' signals the speaker has reservations and is not a positive response, whereas 'Quite good' with stress on 'good' and falling intonation expresses approval. The point is context. In management training everything must be seen in the context of management expectations, communication and operations management style between and within companies and across markets, which is why cultural due diligence is so important.

One final technique of many taught on the BCTC programme is the STAR code (Tomalin & Nicks, 2014). The STAR code is simply what to do when you have a problem. The key is common to all management crises and has six stages. First if you are in trouble or facing a misunderstanding, STOP. Then LOOK and LISTEN to what is happening around you. Also FEEL – is the atmosphere friendly, hostile or just indifferent? Now the most important thing, DON'T ASSUME. When we encounter a communication we're not used to our tendency is to withdraw behind our own walls and to see things through our own filters. Finally, and most importantly, ASK.

Your perception of difference and your willingness to show interest and learn will receive, most of the time, a positive response.

All this takes place in a couple of seconds but the result can be overwhelmingly positive and avoid what might have been a communications disaster with important and damaging management consequences affecting project success and profits.

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