Successful Global Collaboration
- Cross-Cultural Interaction

To be successful working internationally, each of us need to be well equipped with deep knowledge of cultural differences and on how to successfully deal with those differences in the international business interaction.

The following reading material consists of two parts:
- Key cultural differences “which make a difference” in a global business environment. What are the most important cultural differences, when working internationally/globally?
- What attitudes and world-views, and strategies will help us successfully collaborate and interact across cultural differences in a business context?

Cultural Differences
Which Make a Difference

In the business context, we refer to cultural differences as “the way we work”, or “the way we do things around here”. Certain behaviors and values in a community are taken for granted by the rest of the group. They are regarded as self-explanatory by the group and hence are seldom verbalized or written down, they are automatic and implicit. Moreover, people tend to regard their cultural values and norms as preferable over other alternatives. They are seen as better ways of doing things, than any of the alternatives in other cultures.

The above characteristics are also the central challenges of culture. When you regard your own culture as self-evident you do not feel the need to explain it to outsiders. You expect them to know and you follow your own expectations to “correct” behavior when you are with them. And you may not even be aware of it. Given the implicit nature of cultures, different expectations around behaviors and values are rarely verbalized until a conflict or misunderstanding has already occurred. This underlines the importance of being well prepared for cultural differences ahead of the interaction with your international business counterparts, and of having knowledge about their cultures.
Examples of Key Cultural Differences in International Business

There are many ways to outline examples of cultural differences and many anthropologist, psychologists and sociologist have researched and defined what they believe to be the essential differences. We have chosen 10 dimensions for you. 10 differences which make a big difference, in international business interaction with colleagues and counterparts around the world. The dimensions reviewed in this document are, in other words, just one way to carve out essential differences between business cultures. These are inspired by a vast amount of research.

The 10 key cultural differences are:
1. Communication Style (direct / indirect)
2. Risk Propensity (High certainty / high risk)
3. Locus of control – (Take initiative / await direction)
4. Work Propensity – (relationship-oriented / task-oriented)
5. Decision Making (Autocratic / Consensual)
6. Emotions (Unemotive / Emotive)
7. Work Approach (universalism / particularism)
8. Reasoning – (Inductive / deductive)
9. Silence in communication (High comfort with silence / Low comfort with silence)
10. Identity (Individualism / Collectivism)

Each of the ten dimensions will be presented below in details. We will look at some of the potential conflicts or surprises that can form when opposites meet; and we will briefly indicate where in the world you will tend to encounter cultures which each of the preferences.

1. Communication Style

Communication is an essential part of all human cultural interaction, and a good place to start. Many differences in style can be explored but one of the most essential of these concern the degree to which people believe that ideally when communicating information, you should either rely on what is communicated in the spoken or written words (direct style), or meaning should be inferred from how things are said (indirect style). Essentially this difference is about how much of communication is about passing on information and how much is it about caring for relations and protecting peoples face, honor and sense of harmony? From this difference in communication style we get a continuum ranging from direct and confrontational to indirect with avoidance of confrontation.

Direct style:
Some people are very direct, characterized by a straight-to-the-point (confrontational) style where honesty is placed above courtesy. If direct communicators give feedback, they will say what they like and say what they dislike, directly. When they ask questions, they ask freely and directly. When they want to know something or if something is not clear, they ask directly. Direct communicators excel in building credibility through clarity and by a strong focus on the sincerity and truthfulness. This directness works through the separation between the speaker (the person) and the opinion being voiced.
**Indirect style:**
Indirect communicators seek ways to convey (challenging) messages tentatively and “between the lines” and indirectly. Significant effort is taken in order to preserve harmony and relationship between the people interacting to make sure people avoid confrontation and “save face”. They excel in avoiding statements or questions that can potentially disrupt the relationship. There is no or little separation between what is said and the person saying it, if you criticize parts of my work, you criticize me.

**How they view each other:**
The direct people can, at times, view the indirect as dishonest, conflict averse, and imprecise. They fear communication is going to be misunderstood because it is relying too much on guesswork. On the other hand, indirect communicator can view the direct communicators as blunt and aggressive, even as disrespectful and rude.

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### 2. Risk Propensity

This second dimension focuses on how colleagues respond to situations of uncertainty, ambiguity, and risk. Among other things this applies directly to the clarity of your role in your company; the preparation before the meeting with you; the process of pre-planning you go through before making changes; etc. The questions we explore with this dimension is how much risk a colleague feels comfortable with in a given situation; what this means in decision making; and how much information a colleague need or require from another colleague before he/she can feel there is trust in the relationship.

**High Certainty**
People with a preference for high certainty view diligent planning and preparation as professionalism and a way to minimize the potential for mistakes, misunderstandings, undesired developments, etc. They usually require or expect large amounts of data/facts before feeling comfortable taking decisions or committing to anything. Getting it right the first time, is typically rather important.

**High Risk**
Colleagues that prefer an orientation toward high risk may take faster decisions with less research and analytics, they may exercise a “trial and error” approach which they view as taking “calculated” risks and moving faster in the market. They feel rather comfortable returning to a decision later on again to change things if needed. It doesn’t necessarily have to be perfect the first time.

**How they view each other:**
This dimension has a huge influence on how projects, decisions and task are viewed and carried out. The high-risk takers might see the people with preference for high certainty as insecure, slow, and maybe even unprofessional or not strong enough. On the other hand, people from high certainty cultures could view risk takers as being not serious, unprofessional, or not well grounded, since they often do not seem to hold
facts and analysis in as high regard as they do. They view the high-risk-takers as impatient, while they themselves are viewed often as much too slow.

3. **Locus of control**

Are you typically among the first to take initiative in different areas at work? Are you typically expected in your job to “show initiative” even if this involves a risk? Are you typically waiting to see if others point you in the best direction first? Do you typically “await direction” because it is too risky to take initiative and it would disrupt the hierarchy? Or are you typically pro-active in seeking out the alternatives and suggesting a direction yourself first? These alternatives deal with how much you expected to be led into and through a task, and how much you are expected, yourself, to be in control of a task.

**Taking initiative:**
A culture which stimulates, supports, and rewards high initiative is inherently based on an ideal of proactiveness, inventiveness, creativity, imagination, and a lot of ownership. This places a lot of the responsibility on the individual (possibly on the group). It is even a culture which will err on the side of trying many things, even if we know it is partly outside of our control (or even influence). It is a culture which celebrates taking ownership to create better solutions/outcomes.

**Await direction:**
In cultures which supports the “awaits direction” profile, in contrast, people carefully balancing what each individual can and should do with what is possible within a given business environment. Most often in international business, this is “awaiting direction” from rather hierarchical and autocratic leaders, or with a certain level of fatalism in place. Here it is often viewed as disrespectful not to “await direction” – as someone who is rocking the boat and making it difficult for others (disturbing the harmony).

**How they view each other:**
If you are used to taking initiative, you may see people with more of an “await direction” cultures as lacking in personal commitment, imagination, ownership, and courage. They can sometimes be seen as very interdependent (or dependent) and even “robotic” in the need they have from instruction by their managers. On the other hand, those who prefer to await directions might see the other side as reckless or too disorganized and sometimes also as too independent from the group.
4. Work Propensity

Do you tend to primarily and first focus on the work that needs to be done (the agenda, the objectives, the task)? Or do you tend to first and in general spend a larger percentage of time on building the personal relationships with the people involved, knowing that this will then increase your ability to work effectively together and will reduce the risk of working with someone you do not know?

This dimensionality between task-orientation and relationship-orientation is, in essence, a difference between collaboration as a set of tasks to be coordinate and achieved through a problem-solving process where positions are defined in terms of tasks and functions in contrast to a “social” view of the organization as a collective of people where relationships is the most important success-factor.

Task oriented
Task-orientation refers to a somewhat instrumental view of doing business by predominantly (or at least initially) focusing on the task at hand. Personal relations are not that important and people here are comfortable with conducting business with strangers.

Relationship oriented
In contrast, a more social view is included in the relationship-orientation, where the view of doing business predominantly (or at least initially) focuses on establishing and nurturing the relationship. Trust in relationship oriented cultures tends to relate to how well people know each other. A stranger is not necessarily trusted to deliver, tell the truth, or stick to a promise.

How they view each other:
People relying heavily on relationships in business tend to view the task-oriented counterparts as cold, shallow, socially disinterested or naive. They can be viewed as overly impatient and lacking in social skills. If you are task-oriented, you might view counterparts from relationship-oriented cultures as unprofessional because they are viewed as unable to separate work and more social and personal matters.

5. Decision Making

This dimension addresses the stark contrast associated with how important colleagues feel the status difference between you and them is. It leans on how important it is for manager to take the lead and make decisions vs. decisions be made through consensus in collaboration with all. This dimension also takes into account a belief system where power and status is earned through various means or a belief system where everyone has (and should have) somewhat equal power and status.

Hierarchical/Autocratic
In cultures which value hierarchies and autocratic leadership, decisions are usually taken top-down. Also the most senior person should be a subject matter expert and is expected to have “the right answer” to
most questions the team is faced with. In hierarchical cultures, it is expected and accepted that power is distributed unequally with a high degree of stratification of status. The society has many layers of dominance and authorities do not need to explain their decisions to subordinates, let alone agree on these decisions with subordinates.

**Egalitarian/Consensus**

Colleagues in egalitarian cultures desire a more symmetrical or equal distribution of power. Consensus and free input from everywhere in the organization is expected and highly valued and authorities rarely give orders, but must explain their decisions to create buy-in first. Authorities are not expected to be subject matter experts but have more of a strategic responsibility and an organizing role.

**How they view each other:**

In egalitarian cultures an autocratic leader can be viewed as despotic and his presumably “power-hungry” motives might be called into question. Reversely the egalitarian leader might be viewed as indecisive, weak and even irresponsible by people expecting the hierarchical leader to know it all and confidently take the decision on behalf of the group.

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6. **Emotiveness**

Do you allow yourself to show emotions (passion, excitement, anger, and happiness) in the business environment? Is it considered dramatic if a person raises his or her voice in a discussion, while at the same time using an animated body-language and a strongly varied voice intonation? Is colorful, flowery, expressive, eloquent, and exaggerated language a natural part of a business presentation? This dimension focus on the emotiveness (and expressiveness) of individuals in the business interaction.

**Unemotive/Neutral**

Unemotive (neutral) cultures stress the importance of controlling expressions of emotion in a work situation, detach oneself from the subjects, and not “get personal”. All so that issues can be handled objectively. Individuals from unemotive/neutral cultures tend not to permit showing immediate gratification but instead focus mainly on controlling the expressions of emotion.

**Emotive/affective**

Emotive (affective) cultures, in contrast, expect and celebrate more open emotional expression of feelings and thoughts while at work. They allow for enthusiasm and engagement. Individuals from emotive / affective culture, tend to permit himself/herself, in a certain situation, to take advantage of an opportunity for a given type of immediate gratification and not to renounce this gratification for evaluative reasons.

**How they view each other:**

The neutral cultures might view the emotive cultures as “drama queens”, “hysterics” and even misjudge their emotional hype and excitement as unprofessional, or even as signs of aggression or anger. They can
feel very embarrassed when people openly show their emotions. Reversely the more emotional and emotive cultures could see the neutral cultures as “cold” and “boring” with a lack of personal engagement, viewing the world with disengaged detachment.

7. Work Approach

Another key cultural difference in international business explains whether one’s prime allegiance is to general rules and rule-bound classifications (universalism), or to the particular, exceptional, unique circumstances (particularism). Some colleagues tend to search for coordination and consistency by applying rules, processes, and procedures universally regardless of specific circumstances. Other colleagues tend to focus on the unique and exceptional set of circumstances for each situation, in general arguing for flexibility and adaptation to the context through a strong case-by-case logic.

Consistency (Universalism)
In general, people from universalistic cultures believe that the same rules (should) apply for everyone, and that procedures, processes, standards, and rules are here to create consistency, certainty and predictability in human interaction. For instance, a general rule in the organization should be followed by all, regardless of their level in the organization; and regardless of where in the world one is. A leader in this type of culture is typically considered to be “below” the rule, process, procedure, SOP, in most cases.

Case-by-Case Logic (Particularism)
Particularists believe that every situation is unique and requires much more than just adherence to “inflexible” rules and procedures. The person in question, the relation, status, time and place are all ‘particular’ instances that make universal procedures obsolete. First you look at the person and the situation and then you (might) apply the procedure. A leader in this type of culture is typically considered to be “above” the rule, process, procedure, SOP, in most cases.

How they might view each other:
For the particularists the universalist approach might seem inflexible, rigid and bureaucratic. While the universalists will feel that the particularist view is unpredictable, ‘messy’ and sometimes even somewhat ‘corrupt’.
8. Reasoning

A very deep and hidden cultural differences exists within the cognitive styles of inductive and deductive reasoning. This deals with how people make sense of their reality and how they end up with the conclusions that they make. What carries weight in a decision and how do people resolve a conflict? How valid are different “types of arguments” considered to be and what pushes a decision towards a conclusion in different cultures all according to these differences in cognitive style?

Inductive
Inductive reasoning is closely related to observable and measurable “facts”. The focus here is on the objective reality and, therefore, concrete examples and empirical ways of knowing are emphasized. This starts with observable, empirical facts, and then applies conclusions (induction) from these.

Deductive
In contrast to this, deductive reasoning tends to stress abstract reasoning through coherent theorizing. Axiomatic logic is self-evident based on fundamental truths. Based hereon action steps can be deduced. A discussion will be conceptual at first, seeking agreement on general principles, and then applying those principles to the case at hand to come to practical conclusions.

How they might view each other:
People who enjoy deductive reasoning might view their opposites as without principles and as relativists who only look at things from case-to-case, rather from a logic, coherent framework. On the other hand, those following the inductive steps to conclusions and arguments can view deductive reasoning as merely “abstract” and “pie-in-the-sky” focused on irrelevant considerations.

9. Comfort with Silence (in Communication)

This dimension deals with the use and meaning of silence in communication. For some people, silence is seen as a space for reflection and showing careful consideration to what is being said. For others, silence can be seen as a sign of communication breakdown or closing down a discussion. Another component to this dimension is that some people prefer conversational overlaps, talking simultaneously as a norm while for others talking over one another may be perceived simply as impolite interruptions.

High Comfort with Silence
In general, a high comfort with silence is used to signify that colleagues are carefully listening to others and that what is being said is fully understood correctly. They allow others to finish their sentences and explanations, with little or no interruption. Colleagues who come from cultures who have a “high comfort
with silence” carefully consider what is being said and carefully considers a reply. And they make sure to finish their sentences and “paragraphs”, so as to let others into the conversation again.

**Low Comfort with Silence**

In general, colleagues who have a low comfort with silence expect, and appreciate, a significant amount of overlap in communication. For example, when one person is talking, a second person may also start speaking. Within these cultures, it is not uncommon for two (or more) people to be talking at the same time as a norm

**How they might view each other:**

From the perspective of someone with a “high comfortable with silence”, a colleague who is using overlaps in communication may be perceived, at best, as someone who interrupts a lot, does not express empathy and does not care to listen to others. More likely they are being perceived as not be engaged, rude, aggressive and not skilled at collaborating. Reversely, from the perspective of the colleagues who enjoys a conversation filled with talk through a “low comfort with silence”, a colleague who is waiting for “space” to speak, or waiting to be “invited” into the conversation may be perceived as having to have little to offer, not being confident, not adding as much value, or low in energy!

**10. Identity**

Do you focus on your own needs for success with the assumption that others are doing the same? Is everyone responsible for their own success? Or are you almost unconscious of your own individual needs, since your needs are linked to the overall needs of the group? Is the group in focus before and over the individual? Overall, this is one of the most widely agreed-upon and most fundamental cultural dimension.

In its core, this dimension is broadly the dilemma of whether one permits oneself to pursue a given goal or interest with or without regard to its impact on the interests of a collective of which one is a member. Individual independence from the organization with a focus on the individual’s personal accomplishment versus personal dependence on the collective.

**Collectivism**

Colleagues and counterparts coming from collectivist cultures emphasize group membership more in social identity, than individual identity. Who you are is very much depending on your relationship with a group, be that family, organization or community. Everything you say and do affects the collective you are a part of, so it is expected to follow the norms of the group. Collectivism is not altruism, but rather a form of in-group egoism: in a collectivist society, a poor relative can be expected to be helped, but not necessarily a poor stranger.
**Individualism**
In individualistic cultures, individuals focus on personal identity. Related to this is the strong concept of autonomy and independence. Who you are rely on how you define yourself and is less dependent on the group you are a part of. Individualistic societies are not selfish societies, but societies where people choose the groups to be a part of more than they inherit them from others. In individualistic cultures your failure and success doesn’t ‘rub off’ on the group you are a part of the same way as it does in collective societies.

**How they might view each other:**
If you have a collectivist way of working, individualism might seem a very “lonely” and “selfish” way to live your life. Reversely, the individualists look at the collectivist as “unfree” and “constrained” in everything that they do. The individualists look like they are constantly trying to provoke the norms of the group by standing out too much, while the collectivist seem ruled by conformity.

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**Successfully Dealing with Cultural Differences**

Imagine a meeting with people from many different cultural backgrounds. They need to get through the typical agenda of a typical meeting. Preparations, introduction, presentations, discussions, negotiations, decision-making, conclusions, follow-up, etc. But many, many components of how they work in the team are highly depending on the cultural background and cultural preferences of the participants.

The cultures with a low risk profile, for example, might prefer both agenda and pre-reading documents and data before the meeting, while people from high risk cultures are more ready to speak up and address any topics in the meeting itself. The autocratic cultures do not see the point of ‘discussions’ since the senior most leader should ultimately decide anyway, so they see it rather as a chance to give “input” for the leader. Furthermore, people with a strong relationship focus might spend the first many minutes on small-talk and relationship-building, while the task-oriented people prefer to go straight to business. And of course communication and conversations patterns highly influence whether or not people feel that this meeting is leaving any space for them to contribute and participate. And so forth! So how can we now best work together across our cultural differences and individual preferences?

**What is a global mindset and world view?**

For this to be a successful meeting, all participants need to develop strong international (intercultural) sensitivity and flexibility, making it possible for them to allow for different preferences and approaches in the meeting, recognizing the difference and finding ways to bridge it. To do this you need to be able to develop your mindset and approach to social situations from one of denial of differences to one of integration of differences.
This change in “world view” can be described in many ways. For example, in these steps by the sociologist Milton Bennett:

1: Denial of difference
   • Individuals experience their own way of working as the only “real” way.
   • Other ways are misunderstood (at best) or only understood in an undifferentiated, simplistic manner.
   • General lack of interested in differences in how other’s do business around the world (global cultural differences).
   • When confronted with difference their seemingly benign acceptance may change to aggressive attempts to change it, avoid it, or eliminate it.

2: Defense against differences
   • One’s own ways of working are experienced as the most “evolved” or best ways.
   • Other ways of working are considered wrong or “not as good”.
   • Dualistic “us versus them” thinking.
   • Good versus bad comparisons dominate.
   • Overt negative stereotyping.
   • Likely to be acting aggressively against different approaches.

3: Minimization of difference
   • The experience of similarity outweighs the experience of difference.
   • People recognize superficial cultural differences (in food, customs, etc.), but they emphasize human similarity in physical structure, psychological needs, and/or assumed adherence to universal values.
   • Likely to assume they are no longer ethnocentric + overestimate their tolerance.

4: Acceptance of difference
   • One’s own culture is experienced as one of a number of equal worldviews.
   • Accept the existence of culturally different ways of organizing, although not necessarily like or agree.
   • They can identify how culture affects a wide range of human experience
   • They have a framework for organizing observations of cultural difference

5: Adaptation of difference
   • Individuals are able to expand their own worldviews to accurately understand other cultures and behave in a variety of culturally appropriate ways.
   • Effective use of empathy, or frame of reference shifting, to understand and be understood across cultural boundaries.
   • Shifts rather smoothly from one cultural worldview to another.

6: Integration of difference
   • Helps other individuals and teams facilitate and mediate complex cultural situations
   • Has strategies for continuously reconciling different perspectives
   • Proactively manages cultural differences in international interaction
   • One’s experience of self expanded to include the movement in and out of different cultural worldviews.
   • Has ways of integrating and re-integrating solutions.
Denial of difference is the default programming: For most people, knowledge about other groups is somewhat “sketchy” and usually based on stereotypes and hearsay. To get to the next stage this knowledge need to become more solid, but because it is still under moral (cultural) scrutiny and lacks deeper understanding the other culture is still considered “backward” or even immoral. It is only when you start to realize that cultural differences are “arbitrary”, not a matter of right or wrong but simply just different, you can move to the third and fourth step and realize that there are more things in common between you and the other cultures than what separates you.

Finally, this will lead to changes in behavior in step 5 where you realize that you gain more from sometimes accommodating other people in other cultures and you also understand the deeper reasons behind their way of viewing the world. In the final stay you are able to use that knowledge to mediate cross-cultural situations, “translate” culture and find solutions based on a combination of cultural preferences.

Which competencies are needed?

The development of this world view on social interaction is challenging. We tend to feel more comfortable in a group of likeminded people than in a group where interpreting people’s behavior seems harder because we are not familiar with their “code book” of culture. Looking at the competencies needed for successful international (intercultural) business interactions covers the ability to understand the perspectives of others, through a knowledge about the differences, an ability to accept it and appreciate it and contextualize it (understanding that it is a matter of culture and not of specific persons) as well as an attitude of curiosity and humbleness about one’s own cultural preferences.

The competences of Cultural Intelligence (CQ) can be broken down to four components:

- **Knowledge**: Individuals with high CQ-Knowledge have a rich, well-organized understanding of culture and how it affects the way people think and behave. They possess a repertoire of knowledge of how cultures are similar and how they are different. They understand how culture shapes behavior.
- **Strategy**: Individuals with high CQ-Strategy think about intercultural interactions before and after they occur. They plan ahead, check their assumptions and expectations during interactions, and reflect on their experience later. This refines their mental maps and enhances strategies for effective interactions.
- **Drive**: Individuals with high CQ-Drive are motivated to learn and adapt to new and diverse cultural settings. Their confidence in their adaptive abilities influences the way they perform in intercultural situations.
- **Action**: Individuals with high CQ-Action translate their CQ-Drive, CQ-Knowledge, and CQ-Strategy capabilities into action. They possess a broad repertoire of verbal behaviors, nonverbal behaviors and speech acts which they can apply to fit a specific context. They know when to adapt and when not to adapt.

Let us now turn to other prerequisites for handling cross-cultural situations in business successfully.
Creating Awareness

A starting point for successful intercultural collaboration is the awareness that “my” way of working in some situations can be somewhat different from the way my international colleagues are working. In our home environments, we learn a range of behaviors and ways of working which are appropriate and successful in other business environments. Yet it may not be the best way to work with people from another culture. And their perception of us might be very different from what we intend it to be.

We must therefore strive to move from a state of unconscious incompetence (not acting competently with others, yet not being aware of it) towards a state of consciously or unconsciously acting competently with international colleagues based on strong awareness of what works best with them.

Awareness of this in and of itself, however, is often not sufficient. We also need a solid understanding of the why behind the behavior of our colleagues, as well as respect and appreciation of a different approach to conducting business. Only by becoming aware of such fundamental and somewhat systematic differences between how others work, we may come to realize that we do not always apply insights/skills needed to successfully work with them. This document includes a list of some of the most fundamental, key differences to navigate in this way.

Realizing how much of your own behavior and your preferences are really shared with the people of the culture you are a part of can be a challenging task because we are either used to looking at our own preferences as very particular and individual or simply see them as the “right” choice: a product of reasoning and rationality.

To investigate your own culture, you sometimes need to talk to people from other cultures than your own, because only they have the look of the ‘outsider’. But also try to investigate the particularities of your own culture through books or simply sit down and reflect on how ‘foreigners’ probably see your own culture. It is not that hard to do, but most people seldom do it anyway.

Realizing which part of your own behavior and values are heavily influenced by culture is a prerequisite for high cultural intelligence. You cannot work successfully within other cultural differences without realizing what it is that you bring to the table.

Feel the Fear … and Do It Anyway!

From this basis of awareness, understanding, and appreciation we can move into action. Move into changing behavior and/or communication in some cases. Or at least changing our understanding of what we observe.

Some of the actions we need to take, when taking into consideration the relevant differences, we may at first feel uncomfortable to take (or be afraid to take). But that could be relevant or even necessary for successful collaboration. Hence, “feel the fear … and do it anyway”. We learn to behave in different ways.
with different people. We sometimes learn these ways by simply observing others and/or knowing the “acceptable ways of behaving”. For example, we probably all behave differently with our peers/friends than we would with our grandparents – we adjust and adapt to what is “acceptable” and appropriate. Sometimes these adjustments are easy to make, and sometimes they are not.

We may find that the required repertoire of behaviors and interaction styles, which we may choose only to use in interaction with colleagues from certain cultures or age groups, seem awkward and unnatural – at times almost counter intuitive. To be able to develop a skill set working effectively across cultures, we must engage in an ongoing learning process of experimenting with new ways, and with debriefing what works well and what could be better. When we adopt a process of test and learn, and expand the options for how we operate in a given situation, we increase our chances of being successful and building greater shared understanding and trust with the colleagues who are most different from ourselves. There is no one “right way” when it comes to working across our differences, so the more agile we are to move into doing things outside of our own natural, automatic tendency the more we grow our global capabilities.

Strategies for successfully dealing with the differences

Let us end with describing a few of the strategies than can be helpful in bridging the cultural differences and maybe even improve the collaboration because allowing for a more diverse work environment also can expand horizon of the group and thereby allow for more creative and new approaches to problem solving.

Bringing it up explicitly
In a group bringing up relevant and accurate descriptions of cultural differences can be seen as a strategy for dealing with cultural difference. If culture is not something ‘kept in the closet’ but something people can openly discuss in a group, the misunderstandings due to implicit assumptions can be significantly reduced.

Making common ground rules
A group can successfully establish a common language or rules of conduct and in that way try to cut through the differences by establishing a new shared set of rules which are not a preference of any culture in particular. This can relate to meetings, decision making, feedback and many other areas of collaboration.

Checking for understanding
We follow this mindset in order to learn to constantly check for understanding of what others intend to communicate to us as well as other’s understanding of what we intend to communicate to them. This explicitly means phrases like “Did I understand you correctly that you said ...?”, “The reason why you are saying this, I assume, is ...?” and “So are the consequence of what you are saying that...?”.

Cultural disclosure
It is important that you and your colleagues develop a habit of being able to disclose your own culture: Explicitly saying and recognizing that you yourself have culturally enforced behaviors that other might misunderstand. A person from a culture with a confrontational, direct communication style communicating with a person from a mirror culture might successfully apply this strategy by saying, “I do not mean to sound hard now, please understand me in the best possible way, but I actually disagree. I really mean it in the best intentions.”