

A FRAMEWORK FOR AN INTERCULTURAL BUSINESS COMMUNICATION TRAINING PROGRAMME

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Abstract

This article presents the cultural business model introduced on the Grundtvig-funded Cultural Trainers Certificate Course organised by International House London in October 2009. The cross-cultural training framework comprises (1) introduction of key concepts in intercultural communication, (2) ingredients of cultural training, namely cultural knowledge, cultural behaviour and cultural values and expectations, and (3) cultural adaptation.

The application part is a demonstration of how the model can be implemented. It describes the activity “Cultural profile of Romania” based on the organisation of the cultural information provided by my 2nd year students in international relations in their essays entitled “Advice to a foreign friend about to open a business in Romania”. Further, my students’ perception of the Romanian cultural style is compared with R. Lewis’s findings.

The conclusions highlight the core methodological principle of the course, namely the emphasis on giving trainees skills through an inductive learning cycle and providing them with frameworks, models and structures where they can put their own experience.

Key words: cultural awareness, cultural knowledge, cultural style, cultural adaptation, cultural briefing, inductive learning

Introduction

One of the dominant trends in today’s world of work is international mobility, which results in an ever increasing cultural diversity in the workplace. This implies that, in order to become effective intercultural communicators, members of a culture coming into contact with people of a different cultural membership will need to step out of their ethnocentrically biased way of thinking and learn to decipher the behaviour of the cultural other.

Cultural awareness building is a gradual process of transition from a national to an international mindset. Bennett (1999) speaks about the ability to depart from an ethnocentric viewpoint and slip into an “ethno-relative” one. This shift in perspective will allow us to identify those cultural differences that explain differences in behaviour and further adjust our communication style to suit the other. Tomalin and Nicks (2007) explain that intercultural awareness involves not only an outward process of integrating your cultural style into the new cultural environment but also the simultaneous inward process of a change in your personality: “... if you become a culturally aware international manager, your personality effectively changes. Some of your characteristics become enhanced and others reduced” (2007: 74).

The ensuing sections describe the stages included in the intercultural training working model imparted by Barry Tomalin,¹ our instructor on the Cultural Trainers Certificate Course. The aim of the course was to demonstrate to the trainees how to research, design and implement a cross-cultural training programme. Culture in this business training model is defined in operational terms, that is, the way in which business is viewed and done in a country, organisation or by a certain individual. So there arises the need for a system of paradigms of cultural variation along which to describe how the system works in a certain culture.

Paradigms of cultural variation

In every culture, there is a set of preferred value orientations related to a limited number of existential problems that human beings have had to deal with. Among these are human relationships and the temporal focus of human activity.

To help trainees understand cultural diversity and get to grips with it, they need to be introduced to some fundamental concepts in cultural theory that are instrumental in characterising and classifying cultures. Out of a multitude of studies on intercultural communication, our trainer recommended the work of E. T. Hall, G. Hofstede, F. Trompenaars, J. Mole, and R. D. Lewis. Further on the course, he demonstrated how the variables of cultural orientation they introduced can be applied in cross-cultural education for the description of cultural behaviour in business.

¹ Barry Tomalin is a cross-cultural consultant and the Director of Cultural Training at International House, London. He is writer on the ‘Diverse Europe at Work’ project and runs the Business Cultural Trainers Certificate and the Intercultural Certificate in Diversity Training.

The earliest framework for the analysis and comparison of cultures was constructed by E.T. Hall (1999 [1959]), an American researcher who studied European managers in the sixties. He describes *high-context* and *low-context* communication styles and *monochronic* and *polichronic* working styles. In high-context cultures, stress is laid on the exchange of facts and information and on meanings expressed explicitly, while in low-context cultures there is a high degree of allusion and indirectness as it is assumed that listeners understand the context. *Single-focus* cultures display concentration on one task at a time and commitment to agendas, schedules and deadlines, while *multi-focused* cultures lay emphasis on attending to different tasks simultaneously with a strong commitment to relationship building rather than task accomplishment and the observance of deadlines.

G. Hofstede (1994) classifies cultures by taking into account five dimensions: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism and collectivism, masculinity and time orientation. Low-power distance managers encourage individual autonomy, initiative and participation in decision making and are therefore perceived as consultant figures rather than authority. With high-power managers, power and authority are centralised and the hierarchical levels are tightly controlled.

High-uncertainty avoidance employees dislike risk and want job stability and order, while in low-uncertainty avoidance cultures people are more pragmatic, accept risk and have high job mobility. Individualistic managers value personal initiative and encourage self-reliance and competitiveness, while collectivist ones, being primarily concerned with relationships, emphasise the value of social network and team loyalty. High-masculinity managers place value on competitiveness, assertiveness, performance and accumulation of wealth, whereas high-femininity managers value relationships and quality of life. Short-term oriented managers aim at quick results, are flexible and avail themselves of opportunities as they arise, while long-term oriented managers are willing to trade short-term gain for long-term results.

F. Trompenaars and C. Hampden-Turner (2003), partners in Trompenaars Hampden-Turner Consulting, a firm focused on intercultural management, have also developed a set of variables to assess business cultures. They identify these five dimensions of how we relate to other people: individualism vs. collectivism, universalism vs. particularism, ascription vs. achievement, specific vs. diffuse and neutral vs. emotional.

Individualistic cultures value individual identity and independence and encourage self-reliance and competitiveness, while collectivist cultures tend to subordinate individual interests to group interests and emphasise shared benefit. Universalists focus on abstract rules before relationships and emphasise societal obligations, while particularists give weight to changing circumstances and bend rules to suit personal obligations. In achievement cultures, managers rise through competitive promotion, while in ascription cultures status is given because of social status or personal loyalty. These two different attitudes will influence the promotion, recruitment and contract awarding policies of an organisation. With specific behaviour the job comes first, while with diffuse behaviour an overlap between the two is accepted, which affects the work/life balance. Emotional managers are relation-centred and have an emotive and personal communication style with a high degree of subjectivity. Neutral managers have an unemotional and impersonal communication style with a high degree of objectivity and stress on task achievement.

J. Mole (1998) has assessed the business styles of the EU member countries in terms of two paradigms: individual/group leadership and systematic/organic organisation. Individual leadership emphasises hierarchical distance by virtue of seniority, qualifications and expertise; in such organisations, managers keep their distance from subordinates and the top management develops the strategic plan and makes the important decisions without the consultation of those affected. In group leadership, managers make an effort to be participative and sensitive listeners and to engage everyone concerned in the decision-making exercise. In a systemic organisation management, functions and responsibilities are logical and trust and relationships are built on your job ability; job descriptions are accurate, goals and targets are specific, procedures are strictly followed, appraisals are carried out regularly, people adhere to the agendas of meetings and punctuality is highly valued. Conversely, in an organic type of organisation, individual power dictates and contacts are more important than what you are capable of; flexibility and improvisation are common in management and, as a rule, decisions are not accompanied by specific and detailed action plans and time frameworks.

R. D. Lewis (2006), Chairman of Richard Lewis Communications plc., an international institute of language and cross-cultural training, and founder of the quarterly magazine *Cross-Culture*, is famous for the iceberg theory of culture and the classification of cultures into three categories: linear-active (L), multi-active (M) and reactive (R) – the LMR cultural types model.

For simplification, Tomalin uses the parallel labels of scheduled, flexible and listening business cultures. In linear (scheduled) cultures, business people plan ahead methodically, are guided by timetables and deadlines, follow correct procedures, confront with logic, are job-oriented and unemotional; those of multi-active (flexible) cultures are extrovert, impatient, plan grand outline only, do several things at once, change plans and juggle facts and confront emotionally; members of reactive (listening) cultures are introverted, patient, thoughtful and silent, avoid confrontation and do not interrupt, protect face of others and plan and react slowly.

In conclusion, an overview of the categorisation of cultures is obviously useful, as it will equip us with conceptual tools to assess a business community's cultural profile and allow us to predict a culture's behaviour, understand why people behave the way they do, avoid loss of face to our interlocutors, and, above all, to perform successfully in intercultural work-related situations.

The ingredients of cultural training

The framework of cultural training demonstrated on the Cultural Trainers Certificate Course by our instructor is founded on three ingredients: *cultural knowledge*, *cultural behaviour* and *cultural values and expectations*. With knowledge and information about the target culture where we are about to operate, we can move on to a description of our personal *cultural style* and compare it with that of the new business partner. This comparison will help us identify some similarities and gaps between the two approaches and anticipate potential problems, which will take us to the final stage, namely *cultural adaptation*, at which we decide in what way and to what degree we will need to change or determine our partner to do so. Each component of this cultural training model, which Tomalin entitles the *Five C's*, will be described in what follows.

Becoming familiar with the basic information about the target culture, with people's attitudes and the core values that have shaped their behaviour, will build our confidence and help us orient ourselves in the daily patterns of the new environment. In a cross-cultural encounter, it is crucial for the participants to build trust. Tomalin explains that trust building relies on rapport and credibility. Depending on whether the culture under study is achievement-centred or people-oriented, relationship building starts either through work or through socialising, respectively, as a condition of doing business. Credibility is generated by harmonising your communication style with your interlocutor's.

Stereotypes and generalisations have a great role in decoding a culture and Tomalin warns us that, while the former are dangerous because they “fix people”, the latter are useful as long as we remember that there may be a lot of factors that can modify them, such as region, company culture, personal experience, race, religion, generation or gender. National generalisations should therefore serve as a foundation for a deeper understanding of your new interlocutors, which will be facilitated through unmediated personal experience.

As for the cultural values and attitudes that shape cultural behaviour, Lewis (2006) explains how we are culturally conditioned. Our mental programming is made up of three layers: the base is *inherited* and is common to mankind; the following layer is the national collective programming and it is *learned*; and the tip of the pyramid allows for personalities with deviant particularities. The national or regional culture is gradually instilled into our minds by various factors of influence, such as parents, educators, social environment, religion, history and media, and will create in us values and expectations that will guide our behaviour. Lewis warns that for a correct understanding of a foreign culture we need to realise the subjective nature of our ethnic or national values and assumptions. Distancing ourselves from our culture will help us grasp what makes our counterpart view and do things differently from us, which is part of developing intercultural sensitivity.

Tomalin separates cultural values and attitudes into the following constituent elements: core values, cultural fears, motivation in its main forms – money, status, power and security – and attitudes to personal space and to time. This is a useful breaking down of cultural expectations, as it will help trainees get insights into what makes a culture tick. These insights will, in their turn, assist them in easing their way into the new professional community and in performing successfully. Once we have learned about a culture and become familiar with its values and attitudes, we can understand how they influence behaviour and business practices in the target culture.

To portray cultural behaviour we can resort to some of the cultural orientations introduced at the initial stage of the cultural awareness programme. For illustration, I will present the international communication matrix made up of six two-vector paradigms. These are: (1) Direct/Indirect, (2) High context/Low context, (3) Concise/Expressive, (4) Formal/Informal, (5) Neutral/Emotional, and (6) Fast paced/Slow and measured.

Business practices can be described in terms of the following six cultural differentiators: (1) Relationships (relationship-centred vs. system-centred), (2) Respect for authority (institutional respect vs. functional respect), (3) Decision making (individual vs. collective), (4) Attitudes to time (on time vs. in time), (5) Organisation (flexible vs. scheduled), and (6) Leadership (top down vs. consultative).

After the trainer explains the paradigms, trainees are asked to mark their comfort zone with each and then to try and describe the default position of the target market. Next, they compare the two styles and finally discuss how they will adapt their approach to communication and business.

Identifying our own cultural preferences is an important stage in the cultural awareness programme since deciphering another culture implies understanding first and foremost our own cultural style. For this, we were asked to complete a chart that lists ten areas of business life, with a word or phrase designating an attitude at the two ends of a row of ten squares. Depending on how we evaluate our own style, we mark a cross in one of the squares and then join the crosses with a line. Here are the ten categories, which by now our students will have become familiar with: (1) Communication Style (Direct vs. Indirect), (2) Working Style (Formal vs. Informal), (3) Discussion Style (Fast-moving vs. Slow and measured), (4) Business Attitude (Progressive vs. Traditional), (5) Leadership Style (Flat vs. Vertical), (6) Business Relationship (Relationship vs. Task), (7) Decision-making Style (Individualistic vs. Collective), (8) Basis for Decision-making (Facts vs. Instincts), (9) Attitude to Time (Scheduled vs. Flexible), and (10) Work/Life Balance (Live to work vs. Work to live).

In their book about “how to unlock” the world’s cultures, Tomalin and Nicks (2007) ask questions, describe the specifics for each type of attitude in the ten areas of the business process and provide illustrative case studies and relevant anecdotes to help trainees identify their cultural preferences. The chart can be used not only for the description of one’s personal cultural preferences but also for the evaluation of a country or a company. For exemplification, here is the description of Communication Style (2007: 61):

<i>Direct</i>	<i>Indirect</i>
Gets to the point	Encircles the point
Criticises	Saves face
Faces disagreement	Avoids disagreement
Addresses issues directly	Addresses issues sideways-on

This exercise is repeated on the same chart with the evaluation of the other culture according to your perception of it. There will be now two lines traced on the page that will be closer in some points and more distant in others. Next, the trainees compare the two profiles and deal with those areas where the lines diverge, that is, where there is potential of communication problems. So the questions to ask would be if you or your partner will need to change and, if the answer is yes, then, how much you will need to adapt and exactly how.

The trainer drew our attention that not all problems arise from national differences, so we need to determine if the nature of the problem is personal, procedural or cultural. If the gap between the two styles is of a cultural nature, then we are advised to “activate” the RADAR, an acronym that helps us to identify the (potential) communication problems and determine the way to counterbalance them. It reminds us of the steps or actions towards cultural adaptation: (1) *Recognise* that you have a communication problem, (2) *Analyse* the problem, (3) *Decide* on how to change your behaviour, (4) *Act* as you have decided, and (5) *Review* the outcome (Tomalin and Nicks 2007: 72-73).

As for how much to change our behaviour, we are referred to the Pareto Principle² or the 80/20 rule, which states that 20% of our effort generates 80% of our results. In our case, it follows that we will have to focus on the critical 20% to produce 80% change in our counterpart’s attitude: “To put it even more simply, if people see that you’re making a bit of an effort, they will react much more positively. (...) The trick is to know which way to move: – 20% more or 20% less” (ibid.: 71).

The question to ask now is: Which are the personal characteristics and skills to train in our students to allow them to reach the stage where they consciously work on a cultural adaptation action plan? The National Centre for Languages in the UK led the Intercultural Competences Assessment Project (a continuation of the earlier EU-funded INCA project) and elaborated a suite of national occupational standards for working with people from different countries and diverse cultures, which were approved by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills in September 2008. These skills are described on three levels: underpinning personal qualities, performance outcomes, and knowledge and understanding (of cultural influences, communication and language, and working relationships). These are the attributes and attitudes

² Wilfredo Pareto, the Italian economist who in the early 1900’ formulated the 80/20 rule, according to which 20% input produces 80% output. The principle is said to hold true in relationships, business, finances, time, etc. It reminds us to focus on the critical 20% that adds the highest value to our activities.

which people with different cultural experiences working together may need: tolerance of ambiguity, behavioural flexibility, communicative awareness, knowledge discovery, respect for otherness and empathy. These qualities represent “what people who are well disposed to intercultural working may aspire to and grow towards” (Tomalin and Nicks 2007: 71).

Implementation: Cultural profile of Romania

Cultural diversity experts and consultants in intercultural business communication have scored and assessed behaviour in different cultures over a number of dimensions and have produced country cultural profiles based on questionnaires, interviews, fieldwork, as well as their personal experience. The most generous study in terms of the number of cultures described is Richard Lewis’s *When Cultures Collide*, whose third edition includes 66 countries, among which Romania. As a rule, these cultural briefings are structured as follows: historical background, cultural values, concepts of status and leadership, communication style, advice for empathising with the locals, and aspects of etiquette.

The cultural profile of Romania by Lewis will be compared with the data provided by my 2nd year students in their essays on the subject “Advice to a foreign friend about to start a business in Romania.” For this purpose, I have organised the information in the two sources into the ECOLE format introduced on the training course. This acronym stands for *Expectations, Communication, Organisation, Leadership and Etiquette*.

The essay assignment was part of the examination given at the end of a semester during which we covered the theme *Management of cultural diversity*. The subject was inspired by the concerns about Romania’s unfavourable image abroad, which were voiced by the students in our class discussions. The task was therefore meant to give students the chance to write freely about how they perceive their national culture and how we should be viewed by others. Their essays turned out to be a natural source for compiling a cultural portrait of Romania. Obviously, the students’ comments on the Romanian management and leadership style are rather scanty given the fact that they lack work experience. Instead, their writings abound in information about our geography, history and cultural values in general, and in tips for helping foreigners to integrate themselves in our culture.

Below is a summary of the traits of our national character as described in Lewis's study (2007: 324-329) and in the students' essays.

	<i>R. Lewis</i>	<i>Students</i>
<i>Overview of Romanian values</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -obsession to survive -evasive techniques of action: (opportunism, volatility, apostasy, unpredictability) -maverick behaviour (pride in being a Balkan anomaly, self-importance); social corruption and nepotism -national persecution complex (suspicion = a national habit) -incredible ethnic diversity -impressive storehouse of manners, customs, traditions, folklore and folk art - beauty of language, scenery, churches, monasteries -85% Orthodox Romanians -appreciation of erudition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -sense of survival – smart nation -ability to handle difficult situations -pride in Latin descent -tendency to blame others -cultural and ethnic diversity -regional peculiarities -country's natural beauties, pristine way of life in rural areas -Christian principles -solid education (multilingual)
<i>Expectations</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -desire for spiritual closeness, confidences and exploration for human feelings -epicurean -tendency to converse at length -admire erudition, delicacy of expression, intuition, compassion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - desire to bond; like to socialise, view people as potential friends -treat foreigners with warmth -enjoy talking -appreciate erudition, do not like to be offended
<i>Communication</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -oratorical and sophisticated in discourse -lengthy presentations and arguments -long and complex answers -attentive but suspicious listeners -personal style of address <p><i>Meetings & negotiations</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -skilled diplomats and negotiators -30-45 minutes late -extensive small talk -comfortable with ambiguity -no sense of following through 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -long boring speeches -polite and indirect -talkative -curious and eager to get close -informal/personal style -skilled speakers of foreign languages <p><i>No comments</i></p>
<i>Organisation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -bureaucracy and corruption -influence of the political apparatus -little knowledge of speed, urgency, integrity -poor sense of accountability -third parties often involved in deals and expecting bribes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -ineffective and chaotic -slow pace in decision making -not punctual -deadlines not observed -cult for "little crime"

	<i>R. Lewis</i>	<i>Students</i>
<i>Leadership</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - (Italian style) autocratic and paternalistic, using emotion as a manipulation tool - spontaneous and original ideas in a crisis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - adoption of Western model - appeal to both mind and heart
<i>Etiquette</i>	<p><i>Ice breakers:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - acknowledge R's special history - admire beauty of lg, scenery, churches, monasteries - show willingness to help - elicit info indirectly - indulge in small talk and politics but do not "intervene" - accept their lavish generosity and reciprocate it - understand that business and social life are intertwined <p><i>Ice makers:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - causing loss of face - praising Hungarians and their qualities - reference to the country's backwardness, inefficiency and corruption - aggressive questioning - brusque behaviour 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - formal dress - insistently hospitable (show enthusiasm!) - love to give and receive gifts on every occasion - do not like to be offended

One can remark that the students' essays broadly confirm the core values, fears, complexes and motivating factors identified by Lewis. It stands to reason that students should be more emotional and even passionate when it comes to their reaction to how Romanians are viewed abroad. In fact, they strongly express their frustration and anger at the negative stereotypes that circulate about Romania: "We are not a communist country but a European Union member with equal chances/uneducated and incompetent/dangerous/thieves/a land of gypsies/lazy/underdeveloped/living in tents or trees; We do not scratch our backs for flees!" These forceful protests against the negative image of Romania lend validity and relevance to Lewis's advice against references by foreigners to Romania's "backwardness, inefficiency and corruption" (2006: 329). The students' defensive attitude against the way Romanians are portrayed outside also confirms what they themselves identify in Romanians as a tendency to blame others.

The essays provide little description of the Romanian management style, but still enough to contradict Lewis's categorisation of it. It may well be the case that our leadership style is undergoing a process of transformation and adaptation to the profile of the global manager, especially among younger business people, who do business (intercultural) communication courses in faculty and attend training sessions where they learn that management is not only about technical expertise but also about communication competences.

Conclusions

The framework for a cultural awareness programme described herein is a very practical and flexible working model that can be tried out and adapted to the profile of our trainees and the format of our courses.

The key methodological principle of the course, which in fact was a demonstration of how to implement it, was that there is no training without implementation. The course laid less emphasis on theoretical information and more stress on the provision of frameworks, models and structures where trainees can put their own experience. The core objective of the course was to give us skills by taking us through an inductive learning cycle made up of the following stages: Activity, Debriefing, Conclusions and Implementation. It follows that trainers should always ask themselves what sense an activity or some information makes to the trainees and how they are going to use it.

This cultural training formula allows trainers to tailor the course to the trainees' express needs. Obviously, clients with work/business experience will be more aware of what their cultural training needs are than undergraduate students. The former will have a clear idea of the need-to-know aspects about the target culture they will be in work-related contact with, in which case the trainer's mission will be to focus on the target market and discuss potential communication challenges and how to approach them. With the latter category of students, the

trainer's objective will be to stir their interest in learning about their own and others' cultural behaviour and to provide them with frameworks for the organisation and interpretation of cultural knowledge.

By studying other cultures and by experiencing intercultural encounters, our own behaviour is exposed and challenged. In other words, such knowledge will highlight and challenge assumptions about our own behaviour and as a result will reduce ethnocentrism and help the cultural others to be perceived as less strange and less difficult to cooperate with.

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