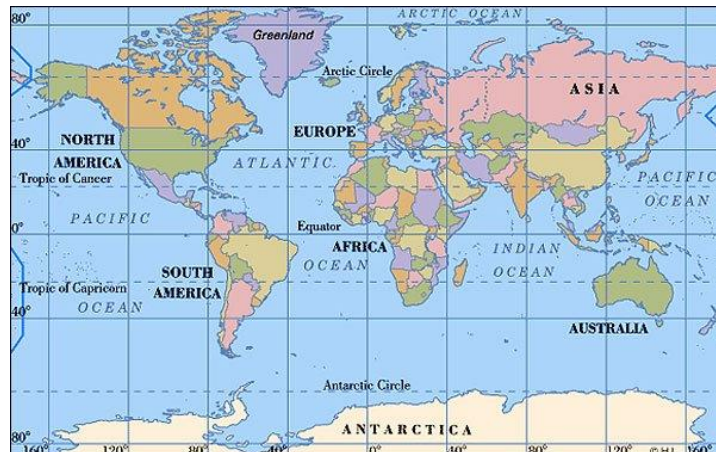


Influencing Across Cultures

OK, where is the centre of the world? Just approximately? Have a go ...



The TV advertisements make it sound so easy - just don't show the soles of your feet in Thailand, and you're half way there. Hmm. With the globalisation of business, and greater diversification in a typical workforce, the ability to work & influence across cultures has become an increasingly important skill set for many managers and leaders. Many businesses now focus on cross-cultural skill and sensitivity **as a core competence in leveraging business performance.**

...oh, and on the map ... most people point to where they are ... that's the problem ...

Influencing across cultures – the real challenge ... you ...

Studies on influencing across cultures consistently report two key points:

1. Whilst there is a significant positive upside to skilful cross-cultural influence, the skill level in business generally at this time is still **largely about avoiding misunderstandings** and unintentional impacts and gaffes. It seems the global village is still a way off.
2. People seem to still carry a **risky 'it'll be OK' attitude** into cross-cultural situations, with a deep rooted 'because were all the same really' or even 'my way works fine'. They continue to work ineffectively despite claiming an intellectual understanding of the issues.

Tune in to others' model of the world – it's NOT the same as yours

Every culture has a different set of values, business ethics, values, and accepted behaviours and protocols – even different facial expressions and gestures. In influence, it becomes important to be even more attentive, and to understand and work with these differences.

Examples are everywhere ... in the US it is common, when addressing groups, to share personal anecdotes to build rapport, but in other countries this is considered tiresome, in others uncomfortable and inappropriate.

A useful 'lens' on National Cultures ... Hofstede's 5 Parameters

A well established and useful 'lens' for understanding culture was developed by Geert Hofstede - a Dutch researcher in the field of organizational studies. He identified 5 parameters that are significant when considering influence across cultures - below with some basic definitions ...

1. **Power Distance:** How far the culture encourages/expects superiors to exert power rather than share power more evenly. When considering push and pull,
2. **Individualism - Collectivism:** The degree to which taking responsibility for yourself (being an individual) is more valued than group-based working.
3. **Masculinity - Femininity:** The degree to which people value performance and status deriving from it, rather than quality of life and caring for others.
4. **Uncertainty Avoidance:** The degree to which people develop mechanisms to avoid uncertainty - how at ease they are with newness, difference and the unknown.
5. **Long-Term - Short Term:** The degree to which people value long-term goals and orientation, as opposed to short term focus.

There are many articles that cover the specifics for each nation. Geert-hofstede.com is a valuable website. There are even emerging even mobile 'apps' (e.g. 'Culture Compass') that can give you a pen-picture of what to expect - compared to your own country.

Illustrative examples - informing your cross-cultural influence style ...

Power Distance	Are you going to 'push' in public, with MD from S.E Asia ? Expect everyone's 'push' ideas to be more welcome in Denmark.
Uncertainty Avoidance	Maybe 'State Your Case' very steadily, step by step in Greece. USA: maybe go for the more Visionary 'Building Commitment' ...
Individualist - Collectivist	Your individual heroics will land better in the US than Venezuela. Building Agreement and Commitment could play well in China.
Femininity - Masculinity	Deepen Your Understanding of the humanistic side in Sweden ... You may need to Stand Your Ground in debate in Switzerland ...
Short Term - Long Term	Why is no-one excited by your 30 year Visioning in Norway ? Demonstrating You've Heard the longer goals, may help in Taiwan.

.. and none of these has a magic bullet - they're purely illustrative of a higher order skillset ...

This about sensitivity - get yourself in the 'feedback loop' ... and pay attention

As with influence generally, the concept is that the influencer is in a feedback loop with the 'influence target'. It is said of skilful influencers that they can change the second half of their sentence, based on the response to the 1st half. The key here is to be aware of the likely cultural parameters, assume very little, and use observational skills (the Words, Music and Dance of the other person). Use 'Pull' to gauge the way - listen, ask, and disclose to check that the task, procedure and working climate/relationships are developing healthily. Go steadily.

Some Generic Top Tips ... (particularly where 2nd languages are involved).

Find out about, and work with, the prevailing etiquette

Cultures have certain etiquette when interacting. It can be helpful to attend some cross cultural awareness training or at least doing some research on the target culture. Handshakes and eye contact may be deliberately firm in the US, not so in Latin America.

Sensitivity NOT Stereotyping

Respectful interaction is at the very heart of influence, and pre-supposing a stereotypical response from 'someone from X' may be a recipe for problems.

Pace yourself (generally means 'slow down')

Even when there appears to be a common language in the situation, pace yourself, and speak clearly with appropriate 'straight forward' vocabulary and grammar. This is not the same as speaking in that condescending tone that you witness on the comedy shows !

Clarity and conciseness particularly helps – as it does anywhere ...

There are no points for showboating with long technical words, using lots of air time, and excessive tortuous detail, espousing masterful nuances and a delivering a second-to-none, tour-de-force of T.L.A's. Just like that. Maybe it's good for the ego, bad for influence.

Ask Distinctly Separate Questions ('clean' Deepening Your Understand)

"Do you want to carry on or shall we stop here, or do you have another suggestion?" is not going to help. Let others hear one clear question at a time.

Avoid Negative Questions

"Aren't you prepared to meet again next week?". In some cultures people will say "Yes". They mean "Yes I am not prepared to meet again next week". Even in Wales "Shall we do this - No ?"

Take Turns Attentively

Cross cultural influence is particularly enhanced by taking turns to talk; making a point and then listening to, and demonstrating you've heard the response. When you 'Push' make it follow the flow.

Write it Down

If you are unsure whether something has been understood write it down and check. This is particularly useful with numerical or technical material.

Check Meanings

When communicating across cultures never assume the other party has understood. Be an active listener. Summarise and paraphrase what has been said in order to verify it.

Avoid Slang and Idiom

"Hi Juan – how's it hanging? ... have you got your ducks in a row for the bun-fight this afternoon ?". Cultures are rich with these constructs and they don't travel well!

Exercise Caution with your Favourite Brand of Humour

In many cultures business is taken very seriously. Professionalism and protocol are constantly observed. The use of humour and jokes may not be appreciated in the business context. E.g. British sarcasm often has a negative effect in other cultures. R-e-a-l-l-y?. (Oops !)

In summary – adopt some pointers/tips, get yourself in the 'feedback loop', pay attention, be sensitive and flexible in your choices of push/pull ... and a good dose of humility helps too ...

References / Further Reading

There's a wealth of information available that can give you pointers ...not stereotypes, or rigid approaches ... pointers ...

1. Website: Geert-hofstede.com
2. Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind, Third Edition: Intercultural Cooperation and Its Importance for Survival. Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov. ISBN-10: 0071664181.
3. Riding the Waves of Culture - Understanding Diversity in Global Business - Third Edition, Trompenaars, F. & Hampden-Turner, C. London, ISBN-10: 1904838383.
4. When Culture Matters: The 55-Minute Guide to Better Cross-Cultural Communication. Indy Neogy. ISBN-10: 0956467253.
5. Mobile Apps: E.g. 'Culture Compass' on Google Play or your local App Store.