

## A bridge requires a gap

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“With Alitalia the failure was not caused by cultural differences. On the contrary, we talked about those from the start – they needed getting used to our cheese sandwiches with milk, and we to their habit of mobile phoning during meetings. The break was due to tensions between Milano and Brussels.”

“We (Air France and KLM) have agreed that culture is not a decisive criterion. Can I work better with the French or the English, culturally speaking? – it is not a sensible criterion.” (translation gjh)

Leo Van Wijk, CEO of KLM Royal Dutch Airlines, in NRC-Handelsblad 4 juni 2003

“The simplicity which characterizes the thought processes of men of action has often seemed to me excessive.”

Sir Geoffrey Vickers, in Pugh, D.S. (ed, 1984) *Organisation theory*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

## Gap? What gap?

Many leaders do not wish to acknowledge the possibility of a cross-cultural communication problem in international dealings. If negotiations go wrong they blame the others or (less likely) themselves, never the culture gap. Leo van Wijk’s quote about the failed merger with Alitalia is an example of blaming a third party, the Italian government. There probably is some truth in this. Yet his comments about culture differences do not impress the reader through their depth. If all that is required is getting used to one another’s practices, reconciliation should be easy enough: the Dutch would not strongly object to Italian lunches, and the Italians could get mobile phone breaks during meetings, and this would satisfy everyone. Van Wijk’s statement may be a case of simplicity of thought of a man of action as Vickers calls it. The problem with this pattern of thinking is that even if cultural problems are part of the causes of failure, they will never be diagnosed as such and no learning about them takes place.

Part of the problem is the fact that culture is never a proximate cause. Leo van Wijk blames a proximate cause: the interference of Rome (government) in the affairs of Milano (Alitalia). Yet if one thinks deeper, culture is one of the factors influencing the proximate causes. The relationship between Milano and Rome differs from the relationship between Den Haag and Amsterdam. i.e. between the Dutch government and KLM. This difference mirrors the differences in culture: in Italy, national pride is more important than in the Netherlands and politics is more intertwined with business.

Along a line of reasoning that looks at proximate antecedents to an event only, culture will never surface as a possible cause of failure because it is not something that happens. It is more like the unconsciously learned set of rules of the social game. These implicit rules are not about practices such as what to have for lunch or whether one can take mobile phone calls in the presence of others. They are about basic values in interpersonal life. Practice-related explicit rules derive from these values. It is not straightforward to find out how the link lies between values and practices. Why do the Dutch eat sandwiches with milk? The causes are a complex mix of historical and symbolic reasons, including value pattern tending towards egalitarianism and not wanting to show off, as well as the availability of milking cows. Why do the Italians use their mobiles during meetings? Again, there are historic and cultural explanations, among which a value pattern tending towards group loyalty and wanting to show off status symbols. These value differences cause the problems, not the sandwiches or the mobile phones. But the value differences are not visible – at least not without cross-cultural experience or schooling. The same cultural attributes that cause institutional differences between countries also cause seemingly superficial

differences in practices between negotiators on both sides. Yet they are not taken seriously since the relationship between cultural values and negotiation outcomes is so indirect.

In negotiations this blind spot causes misattributions. In a cross-cultural negotiation it is hard to tell with which intention your opponent makes a certain proposal. If they offer you a bland, unsavoury lunch, is this a way to tell you off? If they keep making mobile calls during a meeting, is this a way to show disrespect? Without cross-cultural skills it is very hard to tell.

A factor that makes it even worse for leaders in Anglo-type cultures is unwillingness to recognize the influence of group-level characteristics at all. US leadership theory and management literature is all about individual heroism. US-type diversity programmes are all about individual differences. Group-level differences are simply considered irrelevant. Add to this a can-do attitude about business processes and it becomes evident that for a leader with a strong personality and a mindset close to US leadership literature, talking about cultural gaps is for the weak of purpose. A strong leader will not be held back by any silly group rule.

## **Leadership skills needed**

How to change this state of affairs? After all we cannot appoint philosophers or anthropologists to be CEOs of multinationals. Men and women of action are needed. We need leaders who will know the intention behind the behaviour and who will not break up negotiations for the wrong reason. Better still, who will know when to not even start negotiations because the gap is likely to cause failure.

Two types of skills are needed. Cross-cultural knowledge, but also cross-cultural intuition, or empathy if one will, are one of them. The best is for leaders to be cross-cultural themselves through their personal life history. For instance, new business ventures in Eastern European countries are often started by locals who spent many years in Western European countries. These people know how to negotiate in both cultural settings, and they can appreciate the local political and institutional environment.

For successful negotiation, social skills are obviously a prerequisite too, regardless of cultural differences. Jean-Cyril Spinetta of Air France and Leo van Wijk of KLM were Corsican and Dutch, respectively, without too much experience in other countries. But Spinetta showed remarkable social skills when he rapidly learned to pronounce Van Wijk's name and the name of Schiphol Airport correctly.

## **Role of HR in hiring**

Cross-cultural life experience and social skills can be arguments when hiring a negotiator. But who hires them? Consider the following anecdote, taken from Hofstede, Gert Jan, Paul Pedersen and Geert Hofstede (2002, *Exploring Culture: Exercises, stories and Synthetic Cultures*. Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press), about how the values of HR personnel influence company culture. Rebecca Dooley, an American consultant, was travelling on a consulting assignment for a U.S. high technology company from London to Amsterdam. Accompanying her was the head of HR (human resources) for all European operations, who was Irish and who had been in his position for 16 years. They got onto the subject of understanding and doing business with different cultures, when he suddenly leaned over and said earnestly in his Irish lilt, "Whatever you do, you don't want to be doing business with the Dutch!" She asked him why not, and he proceeded to explain.

"I very nearly hired a Dutch to become a director of marketing. He had all the right skills, experience, and references; and had impressed all the other directors of the region during our multiple interview process. Just as we were in the final stages of hiring him, he asked if it would be possible to work 48 hours per week, within *four* days of the week. I was aghast, and told him that this would be inconceivable, and quickly ended the hiring process then and there. I realized it would be impossible to get the kind of total commitment to the company from him we expected with that kind of attitude. He was only 33 years old, for goodness sakes – what would such a young man do with three days off?! Not only that, but whenever I've negotiated an opportunity with a potential Dutch candidate, they always have to first go home and talk everything over with their wives and family before giving an answer. With me, I make the business

decisions and *inform* my wife – she trusts my judgement to be in the best interest of all of us. Not in Holland! The wives have the power to veto any opportunity at any time. I tell you it's the *women* who wear the pants around here! The point is that with all this going on, you'll never get anything done if you work with the Dutch!"

As they were landing and admiring the ingenuity and organization of the tulip beds and greenhouses stretching for miles and miles below them, she commented that they certainly seemed to accomplish quite a lot anyway. Later, in the Amsterdam office, she observed that of the management population at that site, indeed only one was Dutch. Unfortunately, she was unable to meet him because he was on extended holiday.

It looks like, from the point of view of cross-cultural consultants, we have a vicious circle: Leaders do not recognize the existence of culture gaps, so these gaps are never found out, and hiring policy perpetuates this state of affairs via the values of HR personnel. Almost every sentence uttered by the Irish HR manager speaks of the typical kind of misunderstandings that occur between people from two countries that differ on the cultural dimension of masculinity mainly: the Irish are performance-oriented or masculine, whereas the Dutch are cooperation-oriented or feminine. The Irishman did not interpret the Dutch applicant's request as culturally embedded. Instead he used his own frame of reference to interpret them and concluded that the candidate was not committed to the job. That led him to discard an excellent candidate. The Irishman imposed his own criteria for commitment and performance on all cases. This was his error. When behaviours are interpreted outside their cultural context, those behaviours are usually inaccurately interpreted resulting in misunderstanding and inappropriate intervention. Actually, four-day management jobs are not common in Holland, but they do occur, and the economy seems none the worse for it. As for this particular firm, with such a hiring policy in place since 16 years it is no wonder that there were hardly any Dutch managers to be found. This shows how the hiring process can make corporate culture follow national culture, even in multinational firms.

## Showing the gap

However, the existence and growth of the profession of cross-cultural trainers, and of initiatives such as dialogin, shows that things may not be so bleak. What can cross-cultural trainers do to improve cross-cultural competence among leaders who operate across cultures? Books may not reach men of action. The trainers have to trick the leaders into tripping into the gap, but in a setting where no harm is done.

One approach is to stage simulation games set in realistic contexts. Such simulation games are accepted elements of leadership training curricula. So a good way to increase intercultural competence in leaders may be to make them play games in which they are faced with cross-cultural negotiations that are realistic enough to provide sensations of culture shock and misattribution, and yet simple and safe enough to be debriefed successfully. This is precisely the aim of many cross-cultural simulation games. It is not realistic to get leaders at CEO level to play such games – but their successors, who are now in junior positions or who are studying still, can be reached. Hofstede et al (2002) contains numerous cross-cultural simulations that involve negotiation.

Simulation games require skilful facilitators. This is the important challenge facing the professionals of cross-cultural training. For the process of cross-cultural training itself is much affected by culture differences. For the trainer this is both a challenge and a possible source of learning. For instance, in a society of large power distance it is hardly possible to stage a simulation game in which hierarchical roles are changed, unless there is a very trusting and safe atmosphere. Both superiors and inferiors feel threatened by an enacted status inversion. Personal dignity is at stake.

Cultural values are also related to average personality characteristics, as pointed out by Hofstede & McCrae (Hofstede, Geert and Robert McCrae 2004, 'Personality and culture Revisited'. Accepted for publication in *Cross-Cultural Research*). Thus a strong uncertainty avoidance at societal level is correlated with higher average neuroticism at the personal level. This results in more anxiety with

participants to simulation games from countries of strong uncertainty avoidance. Strong uncertainty avoidance thus increases inhibitions to cross-cultural learning through simulation gaming. Focus groups can be an alternative or a precursor in such a case, since strong uncertainty avoidance is also associated to a preference for argumentation and truth finding.

Thus we find that with participants from societies of large power distance and strong uncertainty avoidance it is harder, and sometimes not advisable, to play cross-cultural simulations. These two dimensions are also the ones affecting organisation structure according to Mintzberg's 'structure in fives' framework (see Hofstede, Geert and Gert Jan Hofstede 2004, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. New York: McGraw-Hill, chapter 6: Pyramids, Markets, Machines, Families). It turns out that organisation structure and ways of organisational learning are closely related. For cross-cultural trainers the message is: it is just as important to assess who you carry out a training programme with as it is to determine what the contents are. One size does not fit all.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the problem with culture gaps is that leaders tend to not perceive them. Hiring practices can perpetuate this state of affairs. Raising awareness among leaders, and particularly among HR people, about the possibility that a culture gap can contribute to failing negotiations is perhaps the most important challenge for cross-cultural trainers. But trainers could stumble into the gap themselves if they disregard differences in cultural appropriateness of learning approaches. Simulation games, notably, imply a willingness to change one's social role for the duration of the game, and therefore may not succeed in groups that consist preponderantly of people who are not used to small power distance, uncertainty tolerant social settings.