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Working with Intercultural Teams to Optimize Performance

By Anne Rød

As globalization continues many organization development professionals are asking themselves: How can we develop the cultural competence our leaders need to successfully lead international teams? How can we build a pool of people who are candidates for expatriation/international leadership positions? And how can we support the integration of international and virtual teams?

Many intercultural endeavors are stranded due to a lack of awareness, competencies, and skills among leaders. Ambition and drive is not enough to succeed internationally. One also needs to look at "softer" skills such as adaptability, ability to read verbal and non-verbal signals, active listening, tuning into different styles of communication, being conscious and aware of impact; plus the need to blend in curiosity, a willingness to shift perspectives and learn, and openness to influence. Last, add a touch of stamina combined with a desire to grow as a person, and you have your candidate. In sum, the abilities traditionally associated with Emotional and Social Intelligence in combination with cultural understanding and competence. However, there is another capacity that is proving to be the make or break of intercultural teams, that of systems awareness and intelligence, also known as Relationship System Intelligence. RSI is spearheaded by the CRR Global *(www.crrglobal.com)* and draws upon a wide set of tools and frameworks enabling us to unfold the dynamics of a human relationship system, and create what is needed next. In combination with cultural awareness, this emerging approach is giving intercultural teams a new lease on life as the author has discovered in her work.

RSI focuses on the intercultural team as a system rather than the individual team member. Some of its main underpinnings are:

1. Each team member is a voice of the relationship system, and hence an information carrier of what is happening in that system and how the system dynamics are experienced.
2. By "hearing" all the voices in the system—be it the popular, marginalized, or silent ones—the system begins to understand itself through the extensive and often diverse range of information available.
3. As the human relationship system is revealed to itself and sees itself, it will begin to self adjust, a dynamic known from nature. Focus becomes on moving the system forward and to create alignment in the process.
4. The system is naturally creative and generative, meaning that the system has the answers within itself, and learns to lean into the inherent wisdom and generative capabilities available. From this perspective the team is able to address and successfully meet challenges and navigate changes.

Cultural programming and intercultural differences manifested in the behavior of team members are crucial in understanding a team system, and furthermore, how it impacts overall business performance. Research shows that global leadership is

not easy. In a survey carried out by Price Waterhouse Coopers, US and European senior executives say 65% of the challenges they face when managing across different countries can be attributed to cultural differences. This is only superseded by individuals changing behavior (69% of the challenges). Further down the list we find differences in business practice (52%), remote headquarters, and labor laws both at 41%.

At the outset most teams will not acknowledge the challenges intercultural differences present and how these can impact their work. Normally, these surface after a certain period of time and are not addressed until a project is in crisis. The differences will be attributed to personal conflict, faultfinding, a "we vs. them" dynamic, stereotyping, and other unskillful approaches. The looming deadlines increase pressure and the personal stress team members experience contributes to many of them reverting to the fundamentals of their personal human programming.

How are the challenges addressed at this point? How could they have been avoided en route? What "rules of engagement" should or could have been established, according to which culture? In a team system each member will bring his or her own cultural and interpersonal programming, the sooner we learn to deal with it respectfully and resourcefully, the sooner the business targets can be achieved, in line with everyone`s interest and objectives.

Ina Baum, an intercultural competence leadership expert from Germany, spends her time with large multicultural organizations like the Otto Group, Intelligence, and Cemex, to support the understanding and management of the cultural differences. "The conscious management of intercultural differences is crucial," she explains. "The differences are there whether you like it or not, so we need to understand them and start to manage them intentionally and at an early stage." She continues, "This is not about the color of your socks and how you hold your knife and fork, but about understanding the deep motivations driving the behavior, and how to address those resourcefully."

Before we look at the concrete approach of working with intercultural teams, it is necessary to explore some of the theoretical and practical framework already available to us.

What You See and What You Do Not

Imagine an iceberg, only 10% is visible above the waterline and the remaining 90% below is invisible to the human eye, yet it carries the critical mass. Now compare this to a human being. The first thing that catches our attention in another human is appearance and behavior, verbal and non-verbal, and this is where our interaction with other cultures begins. Our initial response is an emotional one, which we later justify rationally, and we react with like, dislike, confusion, abhorrence, or maybe even frustration. We evaluate, compare, judge, and draw conclusions about the behavior—the 10%—we see in others without exploring the underlying factors precipitating the actions and appearances—the remaining 90%. And then we react; it is often an exaggerated response because few of us are conscious of our own invisible "iceberg" of the critical mass that determines who we are culturally.

At the basis of all human behaviors lie deep conscious and unconscious values. These values determine and govern our attitudes, beliefs systems, and ultimately our behavior. Often we cannot make sense of another person`s behavior because it is so different from our own. We cannot even begin to understand how they feel because the distance between our realities is so vast. This often leads us down the path of judgment and disassociation. Other times we assume we understand someone`s thoughts, attitudes, and actions because —on the surface—they appear very similar to our own. When these turn out not to be true we can end up angry, disappointed, and even feel dejected.

Relying on the fact that we are all human beings with similar thoughts, emotions, and dreams is of course a good guiding principle and often true to a certain extent; however, the way we go about achieving the dreams, emotions, and thoughts we have can be very different.

Cultural Programming

One of the main contributors to the field of cultural competence Geert Hofstede (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010) defines culture as "the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category from another." New-borns are like sponges and absorb nonverbal and verbal cues available in their environment from day one. The purpose is to adapt and assimilate behavior they see, hear, and experience to ensure their own survival. This process is the start of the cultural programming and is filtered and shaped through our gender, our closest groups, and the national culture these groups carry. The family is usually the main influencer in the earliest years, later supported and reinforced by school and other societal institutions. Around the age of 15 years most of our basic cultural programming is in place and we will carry it with us the rest of our lives; sophisticated software that cannot be removed, only modified and added to. Without our being aware of it, this programming of values and embedded beliefs—in combination with what is already present in us through inheritance—will account for, and explain, our attitudes and behaviors.

Many of us will travel and meet, work, and live in different cultures, and as a result we may feel quite culturally savvy. We can adapt to visible cues which makes life in a foreign culture less painful, such as dress code, knowing the language, following local manners and customs, and to some extent reading the non-verbal behaviors. The more culturally competent may also distinguish subtle cues such as status and rank, but what about deeply hidden programs such as morals, beliefs, and values? How do we even begin to understand these and recognize their manifestation in behaviors? And at what point do we run out of curiosity and stamina and revert to our own cultural programming, knowingly or not?

Development Model for Intercultural Sensitivity

Researchers in the field of cultural competence have developed models that act as frameworks to understand the stages we move through as we interact with other cultures and have the opportunity to develop our own cultural competence. The theme of these theories is that in order to succeed, we need to understand and accept that there are cultural differences, to respect and be sensitive to them, and ultimately work with them. Crucial in this is the understanding of our own cultural programming: what makes us who we are. Another Dutch pioneer in the field Fons Trompenaars (1997) sums this up in the three Rs: Recognize, Respect, and Reconcile.

When working with organizations, we have found time again that most do not recognize the cultural differences present despite the fundamental impact the differences are having on the communication and collaboration aspects of organizational performance. Rather, they are ignored until they become major obstacles and by then irreparable damages have occurred, deadlines are not met, contracts lost, and talent left. Working in intercultural organizations and teams requires, like other human interaction, an appreciation for human emotions at work, but at a more subtle level. In other words, we need to tune up our awareness levels and become more sophisticated and conscious in our approach. Milton J. Bennett`s (1993) Development Model for Intercultural Sensitivity is a valuable framework for understanding where a person, a team, or organization is on their intercultural development journey, and what they need to address to increase their intercultural competence.

The first stage is called *Denial of Difference*. A person at this stage will often say things like: "With my experience, I can be successful in any culture without any special effort"; or "I find I can speak my language and get on anywhere in the world." The main challenge here is to recognize that cultural differences actually do exist, and identify how they differ in expression.

The second stage is *Defense against Difference*. At this stage the differences are recognized but often stereotyped and evaluated positively or negatively, from judging to elevating one's own or others` culture. Common statements are: "This is not how we do it at home—this is strange"; or the opposite, "I wish I could give up my own cultural background and come and live here, they really know how to appreciate life."

The third stage is *Minimization of Differences*. Here the differences in superficial and visible cues—the top of the iceberg—are recognized and accepted while the emphasis is on the similarities of human beings and the values we share. At this stage people will say things like: "Just be yourself—we are all the same at the core"; and "At the end of the day we are all human beings who want the same things in life."

The fourth stage, *Acceptance of Differences*, crosses a barrier from a focus on self to relating to others, where we acknowledge that there is a difference. Here we both recognize and appreciate the differences in values and behaviors (the iceberg underneath the surface). At this point learning and knowing your own cultural programming becomes vital and openness and curiosity towards others is increased. This is indicated through statements such as: "I always try to read up on a foreign culture before I go there." "I know my background and I appreciate that we have different life experiences but we are learning to bridge these and work together." Many of the competencies we associate with Emotional and Social Intelligence emerge here.

At the fifth stage, *Adaptation to Differences*, the adaptation process starts and the emphasis is to develop communication skills and behaviors to enable effective and meaningful interaction across boundaries. Reading signals and cues are vital here, both verbal and non-verbal, as is a willingness to consciously shift perspectives and use empathy, thus building Emotional and Social Intelligence. Hence statements like: "To solve this conflict I need to explore new perspectives and change my approach"; or "The more I understand the culture and its underpinnings, the better I get at the language."

The final stage is *Integration of Differences*, where a person is able to fluidly shift cultural worldviews and find truths in all of them. The sense of self is not based on any one culture. While this can lead to confusion of one's own identity, it can also generate great bridge building skills. In this category we find "global nomads" and it is recognized through comments like: "Whatever the situation I can usually look at it from many different cultural viewpoints" (Bennett, 1993).

Trust: the Foundation of all Relationships

Formal and informal organizational cultures often hide the national cultures that exist in a company. Leaders run the risk of relying too much on the notion that we are all humans, without exploring how our embedded beliefs and values, and consequent needs, may manifest differently in our behavior. Most business people will insist that good business relations are about trust. As humans working in an intercultural environment we need to pay constant attention to how we can create credibility and trust in our relationships. What behavior creates trust in one culture compared to another? What do I need to do in order to create that trust; what separates us and how can I build bridges? What do we have in common and how can I leverage that?

It is also important to remember that in human relationships we impact and are impacted continuously—for better or worse, intentionally and not. An easy tool to apply is the American psychologist Carl Roger`s model of *Intention—Behavior—Impact*. We are normally aware of our intention in a given situation (if not endeavor to become more conscious), but this can be hard for others to see and understand. We have little notion of how others experience our behavior, and what the consequent emotional impact is. The variable in this equation that can be altered is our behavior. How can we adapt our behavior to achieve our intention and create the impact we want? If our intention is to create trust and the desired impact is that people have an emotional experience of trust when dealing with us, what

behavior is needed to create it? How can we develop the flexibility to adapt our behavior given different cultural circumstances without losing our essence as a person?

Understanding ourselves and understanding others whether it is as individuals, teams, or organizations is key to creating trust.

Understanding Self

Daniel Goleman`s (2006) concept of Emotional and Social Intelligence is a good starting point as it provides insight, awareness, and consciousness around self. He talks about the ability to identify and understand one`s own emotions, find motivational factors in self and others, realizing the impact one has on others through one`s behavior, and being able to manage these emotions. In addition comes—through social intelligence—the ability to stand in other peoples` perspectives and empathize with them, and to build and maintain positive human relationships.

Working with other cultures is fun and exciting; however it can also be challenging, especially if we have lived in another culture for a long period of time, or go somewhere extremely different to our usual environment. When we are misunderstood, or unable to connect or communicate, we can become frustrated. In certain situations we can even experience that our values are being "stepped on." Our own cultural programming is so strong, and not always visible to ourselves, that our strong response (offended sensibilities) can surprise us. In all of these instances we run the risk of responding inappropriately and overreacting given the context we are in; we call this state "being triggered." So a crucial part of knowing ourselves is also to know our own triggers; in what situations are we likely to be triggered and what strategies can we develop to manage our reactions more skillfully?

Understanding Others

For us to understand the human system we are entering into, we need to know about the 90% of the iceberg that we cannot see. A way to increase our cultural competence

and effectiveness is to explore the cultural values that underpin the societies we operate in. There are numerous theories and approaches to understanding culture and building cultural competence, and research continues in this increasingly important field. Most of us do not have the time or resources to dive deep into this material, and we need to rely on and trust what is already present, proved reliable, and validated through repetitive studies over time—even decades.

One such framework that gives us a good starting point for exploring underly-

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ing values and beliefs systems is the 5D model developed by Geert Hofstede (2010). The 5 D model explores human relationships with respect to value differences between national cultures. Through extensive—and reproduced research, over the last four decades, more than 100 nations have been measured along these five identified dimensions. These dimensions address aspects that reflect key determining factors necessary for survival in human systems; hierarchy, relationships, one's role in society, uncertainty, and virtuousness.

Hofstede defines the five dimensions as:
» **Power Distance Index (PDI)** deals with the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations accept and expect that power is distributed unequally.
» **Individualism/Collectivism.** In Individualist societies people are supposed to look after themselves and their direct family only. In Collectivist societies people belong to "in groups" that take

care of them in exchange for loyalty. The group belonging becomes the lifeline for survival as opposed to the individualistic countries where people need to prove themselves and succeed on their own accord.
» **Masculine/Feminine cultures** deals with one`s role in society. In masculine cultures the dominant values in society are achievement, status, and success. In feminine cultures the dominant values in society are caring for others, quality of life, and societal solidarity.
» **Uncertainty Avoidance** deals with the extent to which people feel threatened by ambiguous situations and have created beliefs and institutions that try to avoid these. Among others, this feeling is expressed through nervous stress and a need for predictability, a need for written and unwritten rules.
» **Long-term Orientation** deals with the extent to which a society exhibits a pragmatic future-oriented perspective rather than a conventional historical or short-term point of view.

Armed with these five dimensions, and an understanding of how they impact the culture we are in, we can develop our cultural competence gradually. We can compare our country score with that of others and assess the differences and what we need to be aware of.

Revealing the System We Are In

By applying Bennett`s approach we can identify our place on the development

model, and discover ways to expand our cultural competence. Hofstede`s 5D model offers insights into the cultural norms of others, helping us to approach intercultural contexts more skillfully. To assess how to work with a human relationship system, we need to understand what is going on, or "reveal" it. Imagine looking at the nationalities present in a global team, how do they differ? How can we normalize the differences? How can we begin to understand the cultural norms and embedded values and the ways they are manifested in daily interactions? What do we need to be aware of, and acknowledge, explicitly and implicitly? What are the strengths this human system has that we all can leverage? How can we build culturally sensitive agreements, or create understandings, that can assist us when challenges occur?

Building Bridges and Working More Effectively

The challenge continues to be our assumptions and judgments, our urge to compare and decide what is right or wrong; or trying to change people, believing that our way is the best. Just being open to the positive intentions behind the behaviors of others is an important starting point. This means that rather than making assumptions, judgments, or trying to change the cultures one encounters, we need to explore and empathize with the emotional stance people in these cultures have. The mental programming is based in the core human emotional need of safety and belonging and is very unlikely to change. It can be a real stretch for us to extend into the emotional sphere and programming of another person, and not something we can maintain for long periods at a time. How long can we extend and explore, without over-extending or losing ourselves?

Prior to meeting a team, we can use the 5D model to compare our personal national cultural scores with those present in the team. What do we need to be aware of? How do we need to adapt our style to meet the team system we are facing? How can we create trust on their terms? Given the intercultural differences, how can we best meet the team system? How can we be

conscious about our intentions and desired impact, what attitude and behavior do we need to tune up/down to realize our aims?

Using the same tool, analyze the intercultural differences in the team. What issues may show up—or linger underneath the surface—of the team system? How can we deal with this (not according to our own culture) but in a way that includes all the cultures present and the team system?

1. **Meet the system:** Use the above insights to create team agreements. Educate on the 5D model exploring what national cultures are present in this team system. Adopt a non-confrontational style to investigate what this poses.
2. **Reveal the system:** Provide context for the application of the cultural insights by exploring where the team system is in the business delivery process.

Help the team see and understand the dynamics within their own system, including the intercultural dynamics, and how this impacts the team as a system. What are the team strengths to leverage and what are the challenges to be addressed? Looking at the team as a unit, what are the resources available to address the challenges? Where is the system on Bennett's model, and what can we do to support the development of the system?

3. **Align the system:** Given the above; what can the system align around to achieve its objectives? What agreements need to be in place to ensure respect and trust across intercultural differences? Who can the team draw upon for what? What adjustments need to be made in behavior and communication styles? How does the team deal with conflict, language difficulties, and other issues that may show up? How does the team ensure a blend of productive and positive relations within the team?

4. **Action:** Moving the system forward with a new awareness, curiosity, and respect. The necessary agreements are in place, as are strategies for dealing with future challenges. And ultimately, what does each team member need to be aware of in him/herself in order to contribute to the success of the team?

This four-step approach will ensure a pedagogic process where systemic voices are heard and included to arrive at productive results for the team system. In the sidebar on the previous page there is a case description, practical steps, and a team cultural analysis, all aimed at providing relevant input for application.

Conclusion

Most large organizations will at one point have international exposure, either through client and distributor interfaces, joint projects, or a long-term presence overseas. In order to minimize costs and increase effectiveness, the organizations need to have a proactive approach to selecting and training leadership potential that can take

on international positions making it a success from the outset, not just by learning the hard and costly way. Traditional leadership qualities are not sufficient in dealing with intercultural issues effectively. Whereas a high emotional and social intelligence will provide a solid starting point, it is not sufficient to succeed long term. Intercultural competence training designed to understand motivation and behavioral drivers is key, as is a deep understanding of self and one`s own personal and unique cultural programming. This will enable the leader to recognize and understand his or her own reactions without judgment of self or others. Familiarity with the Development Model for Intercultural Sensitivity will provide a map for the leader`s personal development process with respect to intercultural work.

Last, but not least, a leader navigating the waters of intercultural work needs to train his or her systems awareness. As humans we are part of human relationship systems wherever we are and wherever we go. Knowing that one always has an impact, regardless of what one says or does, and even more important, what one does not say or does not do. As a leader in an intercultural environment it is a crucial capability to be able to see oneself as part of the human system one is in, knowing what impact one has, stepping back from the system and observing it. By reading the small cues, the subtleties, and the team atmosphere, it is easier for the leader to assess what is going on in the system, use the intercultural competence to explore what is needed next and how to ensure it happens. As one client said about a project abroad:

> I had to get over myself, realize that I was part of the system, and I learnt to stick around and observe the impact of my behavior—not always a pretty sight. Gradually I adopted a bit of cultural *fingerspitzengefühl* [awareness] as the Germans say, which saved the day and the project.

Anne Rød, MA, CPCC, is an Intercultural management consultant and executive coach based in Oslo, Norway. With twenty years in international PR and marketing before entering the field of intercultural coaching and facilitation, Rød has a broad understanding of international business. As a senior trainer with CRR Global, Rød travels extensively to offer team development training in different cultures. She continues to develop and deliver executive coaching, team development and leadership programs for various international organizations. She can be reached at *anne@anne-rod.com.*

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