Mapping Cultures-Strategies For Effective Intercultural Negotiations

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This article originally appeared in Track Two (Vol. 7 No. 1 April 1998), a quarterly publication of the Centre for Conflict Resolution and the Media Peace Centre (South Africa).

March 2004
"We are hopelessly lost!" exclaims the weary traveler. "I don't recognize any landmarks, and without a map we'll never find our route, arrive at a place to stay for the night or ever get home!" How often have adventurers in distant lands repeated this refrain? Lacking familiar landmarks, a map, or a friendly person to help them locate themselves and identify possible routes to their destination, travelers often feel lost and overwhelmed in unknown territory.

Similarly, people interacting with people from other cultures often feel 'lost'. Lacking familiar attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, procedures or structures that shape day-to-day interactions, people in cross-cultural situations often get disoriented, make mistakes and spend time and energy merely surviving rather than understanding and appreciating the differences they encounter. They also often fail to negotiate the most favorable agreements possible or to resolve serious conflicts due to cultural misunderstandings.

Intercultural travelers and negotiators need general principles to guide their negotiation strategies and a culture 'map' that helps them to:

- identify the general 'topography' of cultures - the beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, procedures and social structures that shape human interactions;
- identify potential hazards, obstacles and pleasant surprises that intercultural travelers and negotiators might miss if they did not have a trusty guide;
- select responses that will promote successful interactions and outcomes.

Unfortunately, few analytical frameworks identify, interpret and respond to cultural differences. Few maps describe how different cultures solve problems, negotiate agreements or resolve disputes. This article will help address this gap.

Defining culture

Culture is the cumulative result of experience, values, religion, beliefs, attitudes, meanings, knowledge, social organizations, procedures, timing, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe and material objects and possessions acquired or created by groups of people, in the course of generations, through individual and group effort and interactions. Culture manifests itself in patterns of language, behavior and activities and provides models and norms for acceptable day-to-day interactions and styles of communication. Culture enables people to live together in a society within a given geographic environment, at a given state of technical development and at a particular moment in time (adapted from Samovar and Porter, 1972).

When we think of culture we often think of the national cultures reported in the international media. However, culture is much broader and encompasses the beliefs, attitudes and behaviors of diverse
ethnic groups, clans, tribes, regional subcultures or even neighborhoods. Culture also differentiates people by religious or ideological persuasions, professions and educational backgrounds. Families also have cultures, as do the two largest cultural groups in the world, men and women. Companies, organizations and educational institutions also demonstrate unique cultures. With all of these cultural variables, and significant variations within cultures, how can we develop any common understanding, general hypotheses or conclusions about how a particular person or group from any one culture might behave in negotiations or conflicts?

Yet specific cultures do contain clusters of people with fairly common attitudinal and behavioral patterns. As indicated in Figure I above, these clusters occupy the middle portion of a bell-shaped curve (Trompenaars, 1994).

However, every culture includes outliers - people who vary significantly from the norm. While still contained within the range for their culture, their views and behaviors differ significantly from that of their peers and may even look similar to other cultures. For instance, a businessman or engineer from a developing country who was educated in England may have more in common with his or her peers in Europe than with his fellow countrymen (see Figure II).

For this reason, we must be wary of generalizations about how people from a specific culture may think or act. Rigid notions about a group’s cultural patterns can result in inaccurate stereotypes, gross injustice to the group and inaccurate (and possibly disastrous) assumptions or actions. Common cultural patterns found in a group's central cultural cluster should be looked upon as possible, or even probable, clues as to the ways a cultural group may think or respond. But the hypothesis should always be tested and modified after direct interaction with the group in question. You may well encounter an outlier who seems more similar to us than we ever expected.

Preparing for intercultural negotiations and dispute resolution

The next section will be divided into what can be done to prepare before negotiations begin, and strategies that can be used during actual problem-solving activities to accommodate different cultural patterns.

1. Understand that culture can make a difference and pay attention to it.

People just starting to work across cultures, and even some with extensive experience, often make one of two significant mistakes. First, they assume that all of us are basically the same. Underneath our multi-pigmented skin, exotic clothing and diverse languages and practices we all have identical wants and desires and similar approaches to negotiations and conflict resolution. Those who assert the basic similarity of cultures assume that if "we can just communicate" all problems will evaporate.

While this view is less common than it used to be, it is still frequently found in people with little experience working in diverse cultures. It is also prevalent among those who, when abroad, spend
most of their time in international enclaves or tourist havens, and among members of dominant cultures who have never had to accommodate or adapt to the cultures of other groups.

The second common mistake, currently in vogue, is to romanticize culture and diversity and to treat other cultures as exotic, sacred and deserving of protection from ‘cultural imperialism’. Followers of this approach often overemphasize differences between cultures, try to ‘go native’, make extreme efforts to be ‘culturally correct’ and try hard to avoid unpardonable errors.

Both views of culture hold some truth - there are many similarities between cultures and cultures are unique and precious. However, each view represents an unhelpful extreme; the truth probably lies somewhere in between. Cultural differences are important factors in the success or failure of intercultural interactions, yet there are also many similarities among human beings. We must accept that culture plays an important part in interactions between groups, learn how to identify cultural similarities, build upon them and develop strategies that will help to bridge the important differences.

2. Develop an awareness of how cultural differences influence problem solving and negotiation.

A framework for analyzing the impact of cultural differences on negotiations can be useful for understanding both our own culture and other cultures. The Wheel of Culture Map (see Figure III) identifies cultural factors that shape the ways members of societies bargain for their interests and respond to disputes. The Wheel is structured accordingly:

Fig 3

The Hub

At the center of the wheel are individuals and groups which interact when problems are to be solved, negotiations conducted or disputes resolved. In general cultures can be defined by how much emphasis their members put on the individual, or on groups or collectivities. Some cultural analysts
have described this as the individualism/collectivism continuum (Hofstede, 1982) with cultures falling along a spectrum of orientations.

Cultures oriented toward individuals generally value individual autonomy, initiative, creativity and authority in decision making. Those more oriented toward collectivism generally value and emphasize group cohesion, harmony and decision making that involves either consultation with group members before deciding, or consideration of the well-being of the group over that of the individual. Before entering negotiations it is helpful to know whether a culture is oriented toward individualism or collectivism - in comparison to your personal or organizational culture.

The Inner Rim

The individuals or groups engaged in negotiations each demonstrate:

- situations, issues or problems that must be addressed;
- needs or interests they wish to have met in the outcome of problem solving;
- sources of power and influence.

Each culture significantly affects how its members define the social situations they face, the problems they encounter and the issues or topics that are important to discuss (or not discuss). The situations that members of any given culture have to handle are often quite similar: raising or buying food; securing shelter; obtaining work to support oneself or a family; contracting marriages; purchasing other needed goods; and interacting with peers, subordinates and superiors. However, the meanings and importance which members of a culture place on these situations may vary tremendously. This causes problems when people from diverse cultures attach different meanings or importance to similar situations. An important element of preparation for any negotiation is to develop a clear understanding of how the other party defines the situation and the issues to be discussed.

Needs and interests involve the things individuals and groups require, expect or desire. Needs and interests fall along a continuum ranging from those critical for human survival on one end (such as food, shelter, health and physical security) to identity needs (such as meaning, community, intimacy and autonomy) at the other end (Mayer, forthcoming, 2000). In the process of negotiating, parties naturally advocate for their interests and needs. At times, the extent and manner of meeting the interests involved may be quite negotiable and flexible. At other times, particularly when an individual or group feels that basic survival is threatened or fundamental identity is at risk, they may make rigid demands or intimidating statements.

While all cultures have similar minimal biological needs for survival, they differ significantly as to what they consider to be adequate satisfaction of these needs. So, too, do all individuals have generally similar identity needs, but they differ significantly regarding how and how well these are addressed. Therefore, another critical element of preparation is to develop a tentative understanding or preliminary theory about the needs and interests of the other party - and to become clear about your own.

Power and influence have been defined as “the ability to act, to influence an outcome, to get something to happen (not to happen), or to overcome resistance” (Mayer, forthcoming, 2000). Culture influences the preferred forms and sources of power and influence, and how and when they are used. It also often determines the options available when a party has more or less power than another or is in a superior or subordinate position. A slight to someone’s spouse by an unknown person in some cultures may result in giving the commenter the ‘cold shoulder’ or perhaps a quick verbal retort. Others may consider it an attack on the spouse’s honor that can be righted only by a
physical fight or, in extreme cases, the death of the offender. A follower of Gandhi who believes that his or her rights have been violated may respond with satyagraha, or non-violent resistance - a far different reaction than that of a guerilla fighter who is a member of the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka. Good cultural analysis seeks to identify what forms of power and influence are most likely to be used by whom and in which situations.

The Outer Rim

This section of the Wheel identifies the broad external factors that influence the development of a specific group's cultural approach to negotiations and conflict resolution. These elements include:

- the natural environment;
- history, events, trends and adaptations that have occurred over time;
- social structures - both intellectual and physical - that people create to adapt to or survive in their environment. These three factors continuously interact and influence one another and the individuals or groups who are members of any given culture. In order to understand why people think and act the way they do, it is helpful to understand how the natural environment and history have shaped their values, views, behaviors and social structures.

The Spokes

The spokes of the Wheel represent specific culturally-based patterns of belief and behavior that influence the interactions between individuals and groups. These factors are strongly influenced by the natural environment, social structures and the history of a cultural group, as well as by the specific situations or problems to be addressed.

The spokes include cultural beliefs, attitudes and behaviors concerning:

- Establishing, building and maintaining relationships
  - how established?
  - with whom?
  - activities
  - building/changing factors

- Orientation toward cooperation, competition and conflict
  - acceptability of overt conflict
  - common patterns of conflict behavior

- Appropriate and effective communications
  - direct/indirect
  - explicit/implicit
  - emotional/non-emotional expression
  - one-at-a-time talk vs. overlapping talk
  - non-verbal communication

- Problem-solving or negotiation processes
• role of relationships and trust
• positional or interest-based bargaining styles
• ways of performing negotiation stages

- Preferred outcomes to problems or conflicts

• orientation towards 'winning' or success
• preferences concerning substantive, procedural or psychological emphasis or components of outcomes
• culturally acceptable or sanctioned norms about outcomes

- Roles and functions of third parties

• relationship to parties
• procedures used
• involvement in substance
• partial/impartial

- Management of time and timing

• expectations concerning duration
• timing of activities
• timing allowed for agreement

- Use and set-up of venue and space

• indoors/outdoors
• formal/informal
• space set-up

The Wheel of Culture is an analytical tool that can be used as a guide. It enables the effective negotiator to analyse cultural responses that are considered appropriate in his or her own culture in each of the above areas and to begin to identify cultural norms held by the negotiating counterpart (a potential partner, buyer/seller, authority, opponent or ally).

3. Educate yourself about a new culture.

Once a negotiator has a general understanding of potential cultural similarities or differences in the context of negotiations, it is often helpful to do more detailed research and exploration regarding the other culture and its members. Some of the things that can be done to gain greater understanding about the other culture and to prepare for direct interactions include:

Read a variety of books, magazines, newspaper articles or Internet sources about the culture you plan to engage. Read authors from both the other culture and your own. Compare and contrast the views of different authors. If possible, include novels, which often reveal the most about cultural differences.

See movies or rent videos about and from the culture with which you will be interacting. Visual media can help you anticipate and prepare to operate in diverse settings and situations, acclimate you to hearing another language and present issues, themes and possible common cultural responses.
However, remember that 'Hollywood' treatments do not necessarily present real life; documentaries and movies made in other cultures may come closer.

Find and talk with members of the other culture. One of the best preparations for working with members of another culture is to meet someone from their context prior to conducting negotiations or initiating conflict resolution efforts. Foreign students or faculty at universities are often very willing to talk, and welcome the opportunity to converse with others from another culture. They can be invaluable sources of information and orientation since they have usually encountered both your culture and their own. Also, look for local cultural events sponsored or attended by the cultural group of interest. Go, observe, meet people and get to know some of their cultural behaviors in social settings.

Talk with members of your own culture who have lived or worked in the culture you expect to encounter. Focus especially on people who have had experiences with the other culture that are similar to those you expect in the future.

4. Develop a negotiating plan appropriate to the situation.

Based upon what you have learned in the earlier steps, develop a preliminary plan concerning how you might initiate negotiations, and then respond as the situation evolves. Consider how to:

- establish contacts and build relationships that will be compatible with the other culture and your own;
- develop appropriate forums and formats for interaction;
- comply with their negotiation protocols in a way that is comfortable for all parties;
- start negotiations on substantive issues;
- conduct information exchanges and mutual education;
- decide how you might respond to their more positional approaches or demands;
- develop strategies for encouraging more interest-based approaches;
- manage timing for negotiations as a whole, including relationship building, substantive discussions and timing of offers;
- consider the Wheel of Culture spokes related to problems you might encounter and develop possible strategies for addressing them.

Flexible responses

Following the above aspects of preparation, you will need a flexible approach to your interactions with the other party in the midst of problem solving, negotiations or conflict resolution efforts:

1. Recognize when something different appears to be happening.

Once negotiations have begun, participants need to 'put up their antennae' to observe possible cultural differences that may occur. The categories of the Wheel of Culture Map should make it easier to identify such differences. Some questions to ask yourself include:

- What is similar or different about the setting of the meetings or negotiations than would be found in your culture?
- How are the situation, problems or issues that are being addressed similar to or different from those that might be common in your own culture?
- What behavioral similarities or differences do you see?
• Based upon what they say, do you have any clues about what their beliefs or attitudes are about their relationship expectations or the process being used to address issues?
• Are you interacting with an individual or a group? If the latter, is their behavior concerning who talks, what they talk about, how they express themselves or how they interact with one another different than might be expected in your culture?

2. Analyze and interpret what is happening and develop an appropriate response.

Once you identify that cultural differences are influencing the course of negotiations, figure out why they might be thinking or acting in a particular manner. Apply insights gained from pre-entry study, research and interactions, and:

• clarify what is happening;
• develop a hypothesis about why it is happening and what the beliefs, attitudes and behaviors being expressed may mean to those exhibiting them;
• decide how to respond and develop two or more strategies to try.

We have identified five basic strategies for conducting cross-cultural negotiations. The five strategies are based on the variables regarding your willingness or ability to adapt to the counterpart’s culture and his/her willingness or ability to adapt to yours. The resulting choices are: adhering; avoiding-contending; adapting; adopting; and advancing. We will discuss each of these in more detail.

![Ability & Willingness to Adapt](image.png)

Figure IV illustrates how these choices arise out of interactions between your approach and that of your counterpart. If you have a low willingness or ability to adapt to your counterpart’s culture, two choices result. If your counterpart is more flexible, you can stick to your own way of doing things - the adhering strategy. If, on the other hand, your counterpart is also unable or reluctant to change his/her approach and you want to persist in your cultural approach, the two of you will engage in an avoiding-contending mode. This pattern of interaction is marked either by ongoing competition regarding whose way of doing things will prevail (contending), or by the parties avoiding interaction, with the potential for miscues and misinterpretations.

In a situation where both parties are somewhat knowledgeable about each other’s cultures and fairly compliant towards each other, you may arrive at a strategy of adapting. Each person compromises a
bit, probably adhering in some areas and adopting the counterpart's ways in other matters, resulting in a mixed set of procedures.

If you are willing to adapt to the other culture and know more about it, a different set of choices presents itself. If your counterpart demonstrates unwillingness or inability to move toward your way of doing things, while you are more flexible, you will end up adopting the cultural norms of your counterpart. This is the analogue of the adhering strategy with the roles reversed.

An intriguing fifth option is also available. If you and your counterpart both know each other's cultural norms pretty well and both exhibit real willingness to adapt to another way of doing things, you can move into the advancing mode. In this mode you and your counterpart invent a third way that is based neither wholly in your culture nor in his/hers. This shares some attributes with the adapting model, but goes beyond a series of compromises to advance shared norms for interaction that are completely comfortable for both parties.

3. Select and implement a strategy.

Once you have decided upon a strategy, try it out. Observe the responses of the other party. See if your strategy is effective. If not, try another strategy or go back to your analysis and see if another interpretation of the situation or the difficulty might be more accurate. If so, develop new strategies and try

- use a trial and error process to develop strategies or responses that help achieve your desired ends;
- be flexible and consider using multiple possible responses;
- remain open to doing it their way if it will achieve the results you want, and it does not go beyond your comfort level.

Working across cultures can be frustrating and fascinating. We hope the thoughts presented here regarding preparation and flexible response prove helpful, and that the 'road-maps' offered guide your way to successful cross-cultural interactions.

References:


