Navigating the cultural minefield, by Erin Meyer
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When Aaron arrived in Moscow to take charge of the manufacturing plant his Israeli-owned company had just purchased, he expected to settle in quickly. Although he'd grown up in Tel Aviv, his parents were Russian-born, so he knew the culture and spoke the language well. He'd been highly successful managing Israeli teams and had led a large organization in Canada. Yet six months into his new job, he was still struggling to supervise his team in Moscow. What, specifically, was he doing wrong?

Answering such questions isn't easy, as I've learned from 16 years studying the effects of cultural differences on business success. Although there's been a great deal of research and writing on the subject, much of it fails to present a sufficiently nuanced picture that can be of real use to managers working internationally or with foreign colleagues. As a result, it's all too common to rely on clichés, stereotyping people from different cultures on just one or two dimensions—the Japanese are hierarchical, for example, or the French communicate in subtle ways. This can lead to oversimplified and erroneous assumptions—the Japanese always make top-down decisions, or the French are indirect when giving negative feedback. It then comes as a surprise when your French colleague bluntly criticizes your shortcomings, or when your Japanese clients want buy-in from the cook and the cleaner before reaching a decision.

Time and again, I find that even experienced and cosmopolitan managers have faulty expectations about how people from other cultures operate. The truth is that culture is too complex to be measured meaningfully along just one or two dimensions.

To help managers like Aaron negotiate this complexity, I have built on the work of many in my field to develop a tool called the Culture Map. It is made up of eight scales representing the management behaviors where cultural gaps are most common. By comparing the position of one nationality relative to another on each scale, the user can decode how culture influences day-to-day collaboration. In the following pages, I present the tool, show how it can help you, and discuss the challenges in applying it.

The Culture Map

The eight scales on the map are based on decades of academic research into culture from multiple perspectives. To this foundation I have added my own work, which has been validated by extensive interviews with thousands of executives who have confirmed or corrected my findings. The scales and their metrics are:

Communicating.

When we say that someone is a good communicator, what do we actually mean? The responses differ wildly from society to society. I compare cultures along the Communicating scale by measuring the degree to which they are high- or low-context, a

metric developed by the American anthropologist Edward Hall. In low-context cultures, good communication is precise, simple, explicit, and clear. Messages are understood at face value. Repetition is appreciated for purposes of clarification, as is putting messages in writing. In high-context cultures, communication is sophisticated, nuanced, and layered. Messages are often implied but not plainly stated. Less is put in writing, more is left open to interpretation, and understanding may depend on reading between the lines.

Evaluating.

All cultures believe that criticism should be given constructively, but the definition of "constructive" varies greatly. This scale measures a preference for frank versus diplomatic negative feedback. Evaluating is often confused with Communicating, but many countries have different positions on the two scales. The French, for example, are high-context (implicit) communicators relative to Americans, yet they are more direct in their criticism. Spaniards and Mexicans are at the same context level, but the Spanish are much more frank when providing negative feedback. This scale is my own work.

Stereotyping people from different cultures on just one or two dimensions can lead to erroneous assumptions. Even experienced, cosmopolitan managers often have faulty expectations.

Persuading.

The ways in which you persuade others and the kinds of arguments you find convincing are deeply rooted in your culture's philosophical, religious, and educational assumptions and attitudes. The traditional way to compare countries along this scale is to assess how they balance holistic and specific thought patterns. Typically, a Western executive will break down an argument into a sequence of distinct components (specific thinking), while Asian managers tend to show how the components all fit together (holistic thinking). Beyond that, people from southern European and Germanic cultures tend to find deductive arguments (what I refer to as principles-first arguments) most persuasive, whereas American and British managers are more likely to be influenced by inductive logic (what I call applications-first logic). The research into specific and holistic cognitive patterns was conducted by Richard Nisbett, an American professor of social psychology, and the deductive/inductive element is my own work.

Leading.

This scale measures the degree of respect and deference shown to authority figures, placing countries on a spectrum from egalitarian to hierarchical. The Leading scale is based partly on the concept of power distance, first researched by the Dutch social psychologist Geert Hofstede, who conducted 100,000 management surveys at IBM in the 1970s. It also draws on the work of Wharton School professor Robert House and his colleagues in their GLOBE (global leadership and organizational behavior effectiveness) study of 62 societies.

Deciding.

This scale, based on my own work, measures the degree to which a culture is consensus-minded. We often assume that the most egalitarian cultures will also be the most democratic, while the most hierarchical ones will allow the boss to make unilateral decisions. This isn't always the case. Germans are more hierarchical than Americans, but more likely than their U.S. colleagues to build group agreement before making decisions. The Japanese are both strongly hierarchical and strongly consensus-minded.

Trusting.

Cognitive trust (from the head) can be contrasted with affective trust (from the heart). In task-based cultures, trust is built cognitively through work. If we collaborate well, prove ourselves reliable, and respect one another's contributions, we come to feel mutual trust. In a relationship-based society, trust is a result of weaving a strong affective connection. If we spend time laughing and relaxing together, get to know one another on a personal level, and feel a mutual liking, then we establish trust. Many people have researched this topic; Roy Chua and Michael Morris, for example, wrote a landmark paper on the different approaches to trust in the United States and China. I have drawn on this work in developing my metric.

Disagreeing.

Everyone believes that a little open disagreement is healthy, right? The recent American business literature certainly confirms this viewpoint. But different cultures actually have very different ideas about how productive confrontation is for a team or an organization. This scale measures tolerance for open disagreement and inclination to see it as either helpful or harmful to collegial relationships. This is my own work.
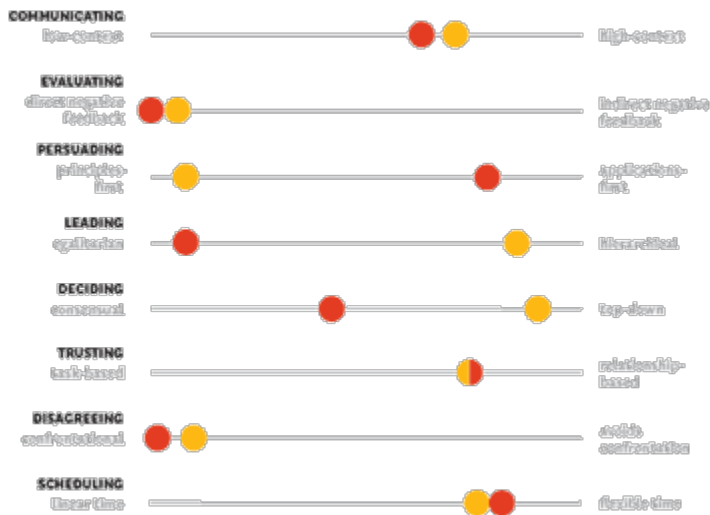
Scheduling.

All businesses follow agendas and timetables, but in some cultures people strictly adhere to the schedule, whereas in others, they treat it as a suggestion. This scale assesses how much value is placed on operating in a structured, linear fashion versus being flexible and reactive. It is based on the "monochronic" and "polychronic" distinction formalized by Edward Hall.

The Culture Map shows positions along these eight scales for a large number of countries, based on surveys and interviews. These profiles reflect, of course, the value systems of a society at large, not those of all the individuals in it, so if you plot yourself on the map, you might find that some of your preferences differ from those of your culture.

Let's go back to my friend Aaron (who, like other managers profiled later, is not identified by his real name). Aaron used the map to uncover the roots of his difficulties managing his Moscow team. As you can see from the "Comparing Management Cultures" exhibit and

companion interactive, there are plenty of cultural similarities between Israelis and Russians. For example, both value flexible rather than linear scheduling, both accept and appreciate open disagreement, and both approach issues of trust through a relationship lens. But there are also big gaps. For instance, Russians strongly value hierarchy, whereas Israelis are more egalitarian. This suggests that some of Aaron's management practices, developed through his experiences in Israel and Canada, may have been misunderstood by—and demotivating to—his Russian team.

Comparing Management Cultures: Israel vs. Russia

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As Aaron considered the large gap on the Leading scale, he began to think about how he'd been encouraged as a child to disagree openly with authority figures in his family and

community—a stark contrast to the Russian tradition of expecting young people to show deep respect and deference to their elders. "In Israel, the boss is just one of the guys," he reflected. "But in Russia, when I try to push decision making down and insist that someone on my team is better positioned to make a decision than I am, it often suggests weak leadership." One of the specific practices getting him into trouble was his tendency to e-mail employees at lower levels of the company without passing through the hierarchical chain or cc'ing their direct bosses; he now understood why the practice made his middle managers so angry.

Sometimes it's fairly easy to bridge the cultural gaps revealed by the mapping process. Aaron found that simply stopping the direct e-mails and going through official channels had a big impact. But some differences are more difficult to overcome, and as you manage across them, it's important to respect the four rules I discuss next. They apply to all the scales, but I'll continue to focus on Leading.

Rule 1: Don't Underestimate the Challenge

Management styles stem from habits developed over a lifetime, which makes them hard to change. Here's a good example: In 2010 Heineken, the Dutch brewing company, purchased a big operation in Monterrey, Mexico, and a large number of Mexican employees are now based at its Amsterdam headquarters. One of these is Carlos, the director of marketing for the Dos Equis brand, who admits that he struggled during his first year in the position:

"It is incredible to manage Dutch people, and nothing like my experience leading Mexican teams. I'll schedule a meeting to roll out a new process, and during it, my team starts challenging the process, taking us in various unexpected directions, ignoring my process altogether, and paying no attention to the fact that they work for me. Sometimes I just watch them astounded. Where is the respect?

"I know this treating everyone as pure equals is the Dutch way, so I keep quiet and try to be patient. But often I just feel like getting down on my knees and pleading, 'Dear colleagues, in case you have forgotten: I–am–the–boss.'"

It's not always easy to bridge cultural gaps. Management styles stem from habits developed over a lifetime, which makes them hard to change.

It didn't take long for Carlos to realize that the leadership skills he had built over the previous decade in Mexico, where more deference to authority is the norm, were not going to transfer easily to the Netherlands. Succeeding would depend on taking an entirely different approach and making ongoing adjustments over the long term. "I realized I was going to need to unlearn many of the techniques that had made me so successful in Mexico and develop others from the ground up," he said.

Rule 2: Apply Multiple Perspectives

If you are leading a global team with, say, Brazilian, Korean, and Indian members, it isn't enough to recognize how your culture perceives each of the others. You need to understand how the Koreans perceive the Indians, how the Indians perceive the Brazilians, and so on, and manage across the map. As you learn to look through multiple lenses, you may see that on some scales the Brazilians, for example, view the Indians in a very different way than the Koreans do.

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Let's return to the case of Heineken. A manager from China who had recently moved to Monterrey assessed the Mexicans this way: "They really think everyone is equal. No matter your age, rank, or title, everyone gets a voice here. They want us to call them by their first name and disagree with them in public. For a Chinese person, this is not at all comfortable." His take on Mexican culture, of course, was nothing like Carlos's and actually sounded like Carlos's view of Dutch culture.

The point is that where a culture falls on a scale doesn't in itself mean anything. What matters is the position of one country relative to another. On the Leading scale, Mexico falls somewhere between the Netherlands (one of the most egalitarian countries in the world) and China (strongly hierarchical), and the distances separating them led to these completely contradictory perceptions.

Rule 3: Find the Positive in Other Approaches

When looking at how other cultures work, people tend to see the negative. Steve, an Australian running the business unit of a textile company in China, admits that when he first arrived in the country, he was deeply critical of local leadership practices. The prevailing view, he found, was that "the boss is always right, and even when the boss is very wrong, he is still right." Having been raised to regard a fixed social hierarchy as an inhumane system, subverting individual freedom, he was uncomfortable in his new environment.

Yet Steve gradually came to understand and respect the Chinese system of reciprocal obligation. "In the Confucian concept of hierarchy," he says, "it's important to think not just about the lower-level person's responsibility to follow, but also about the responsibility of the higher person to protect and care for those under him. And there is great beauty in giving a clear instruction and watching your competent and enthusiastic team willingly attack the project without pushing back."

Carlos at Heineken underwent a similar transformation. He developed an appreciation for his Dutch colleagues' more egalitarian work style when he started to focus on the creative ideas generated and the problems averted because his employees felt so comfortable openly challenging his views.

Sometimes cultural diversity can cause inefficiency and confusion. But if the team leader clearly understands how people from varied backgrounds behave, he or she can turn differences into the team's greatest assets. As Steve explains, "Now that I run a Chinese-Australian operation, I think carefully about how to take advantage of the various styles on the team. Sometimes I really need a couple of experts on my staff to tear my ideas apart to ensure that we get the best solution. Sometimes we are under time pressure and I need streamlined reactivity. My overriding goal is to have a complex enough understanding of the various strengths on the team so I can choose the best subteam for each task."

Rule 4: Adjust, and Readjust, Your Position

More and more teams are made up of diverse and globally dispersed members. So as a leader, you'll frequently have to tweak or adapt your own style to better mesh with your working partners. It's not enough to shift to a new position on a single scale; you'll need to widen your comfort zone so that you can move more fluidly back and forth along all eight.

During his first year in Russia, Aaron invested significant time in watching how the most successful local leaders motivated their staff members. He learned step-by-step to be more of a director and less of a facilitator. "It worked," he said, "but when I returned to Israel, I was then accused of centralizing too much. Without realizing it, I had brought what I had developed in Russia back home." Gradually Aaron got better at adapting his behavior to the individuals and context at hand.

As Aaron, Carlos, and Steve all learned, to navigate cultural differences, you might need to go back to square one. Consider which leadership styles are most effective in disparate localities and with people of diverse nationalities. Check your knee-jerk tendencies—and learn to laugh at them. Then practice leading in a wide variety of ways to better motivate and mobilize groups who follow in different ways from the folks back home. Whether we work in Düsseldorf or Dubai, Brasília or Beijing, New York or New Delhi, we are all part of a global network. This is true in the office or at a meeting, and it is true virtually, when we connect via e-mail, videoconference, Skype, or phone. Today success depends on the ability to navigate the wild variations in the ways people from different societies think, lead, and get things done. By sidestepping common stereotypes and learning to decode the behavior of other cultures along all the scales, we can avoid giving (and taking!) offense and better capitalize on the strengths of increased diversity.

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