Communicating across Cultures
Aspects of Intercultural Business Communication

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FOREWORD

Communicating across Cultures is an introduction to intercultural communication meant to develop readers' cultural awareness, sensitivity, and competence for effective interaction and performance across cultures, and ultimately for success both on and off the job, in an increasingly multicultural, interconnected world.

This book is based on various authors' insights into the way culture leaves its mark on a social group's worldview, assumptions, perceptions, attitudes, behaviour, communication, and material achievements. My approach is particularly indebted to Edward T. Hall's anthropological thinking on culture understood as a complex, coherent collection of interrelated communication systems, and to his basic tenet that every single aspect of human life, or every type of human activity is fraught with, and conveys, culture-specific meaning. For instance, people's use of language, body language, and paralanguage, their way of organizing space, as well as their treatment of time and relationships send subtle "messages" that need to be correctly decoded by someone from a different cultural environment – a point made (and amply demonstrated) by the American anthropologist, among others.

The book is structured around theories, models and concepts developed by authors with diverse areas of expertise (anthropologists, linguists, communication scholars, social psychologists, sociologists, international management experts, business consultants, engineers, mathematicians) who have made significant contributions to the fields of communication and cross-cultural studies. The information contained in this book is amply referenced, and illustrated by concrete examples, or supplemented by practical guidelines.

The first two chapters provide the general conceptual framework of intercultural communication, including terminological clarifications, as well as descriptions and explanations of structures, processes, functions, and theoretical perspectives necessary for the understanding of culture and communication.

Chapter III deals with cultural differences both theoretically (by integrating a few significant themes of reflection) and practically (by suggesting ways to effectively manage cultural diversity, and turn it into an

asset), thus preparing the ground for the next chapters, dwelling on specific models and classifications of culture, and their relevance to various areas of social life.

Chapter IV focuses on Edward T. Hall's landmark theory (mostly based on fieldwork) of culture and communication, or culture *as* communication, which in many ways has impacted a great deal of subsequent cross-cultural research up to the present day.

Chapters V, VI, and VII are dedicated to three other reputed authors and experienced intercultural consultants (Geert Hofstede, Fons Trompenaars, and Richard Gesteland) whose ideas, theories and models, accompanied by practical guidelines, cases and examples, shed light on various cultural dimensions and culture-specific patterns of thinking and behaviour, while at the same time suggesting ways to deal with, or reconcile, cultural differences, both within and outside the professional environment.

Chapter VIII is intended as a final critical evaluation of the conceptualizations and models of culture and communication across cultures dealt with in the previous chapters, and a conclusion on their proper use. The reader is encouraged to think critically, and view all conceptualizations of culture and intercultural communication as valuable instruments as long as they are used as general guidelines rather than predictors of human behaviour.

The last section consists of an extensive Reference and Bibliography list.

Although most of the intercultural situations described in this book are taken from the business environment, they illustrate patterns of communication that may also apply elsewhere, and human relationships (e.g., superior-subordinate/ male-female/ buyer-seller/ employer-employee) that may be invested with paradigmatic value.

The book can therefore benefit very diverse categories of readers, preparing them to behave adequately in intercultural situations, to avoid blunders and communication breakdown, to minimize culture shock, to deal with cultural differences at both the individual and the institutional level. Since it is largely based on the author's experience of teaching an Intercultural Business Communication course, it is particularly useful to students of economics and business people, providing them with a solid foundation for developing their intercultural competencies as indispensable components of their professional training and expertise. However, other professionals, as well as anyone travelling abroad or coming into contact with people and cultural products from other parts of the world – which practically includes everyone nowadays – may also use it as a guide to

developing a global mindset as a defence against intolerance, narrow-mindedness, ethnocentrism, parochialism, and xenophobia. Language teachers and learners may look at it as a constant reminder that second-language education should always be viewed as a convergence of two factors: language and culture.

Last but not least, by emphasizing the importance of values, the central components of culture underlying people's thinking and behavioural patterns, and by providing examples of other cultures' ways of perceiving, understanding, and "doing things", the book will hopefully stimulate readers to take a closer look at their own culture, reflect critically on its core values, and gain new insights into their cultural identity, which they usually take for granted.

THE AUTHOR

Chapter 1
CULTURE AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT

1.1 The concept of culture

Etymologically, the word "culture" is derived from the Latin noun *cultūra*, which in its turn is formed on the basis of *cultus*, the past participle of the verb *colere*, "to cultivate", or "to till the soil".

Dictionaries mention several meanings that the word may have in various domains and contexts, from "the ideas, beliefs, and customs" shared by people in a society (e.g., Western culture, Japanese culture, etc.) and "the attitudes and beliefs" shared by a group of people or by members of an organization or company, to "activities that are related to art, music, literature, etc.", to "a society that existed at a particular time in history" (e.g., primitive cultures, the Ancient Greek and Roman cultures), to more technical meanings such as "the practice of growing crops" (e.g., rice culture, strawberry culture) or, finally, to scientific meanings, e.g., "the process of growing bacteria for scientific use", and "the bacteria produced by this" (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 1995).

The first dictionary definition of culture mentioned above (and the one relevant to our topic) is the broad, anthropological one, which could be re-formulated as: a shared system of meanings, beliefs, values and patterns of behaviour underlying people's understanding of experience and their way of relating to one another.

The earliest anthropological definition of culture, provided by Edward Burnett Tylor in 1871, broadly equates culture with civilization in terms that are compatible with the etymological sense of the word:

> "Culture or civilization, taken in its wide, ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, morals, law, custom and any other habits and capabilities acquired by man as a member of society." (Tylor, 1871, p. 1)

According to Kroeber and Kluckhohn (who recorded over 160 previous definitions of culture in the early 1950s),

> "Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e., historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, and on the other as conditioning elements of further action." (1952, p. 181)

Edward T. Hall has summarized the previous definitions of culture in the following terms: "For anthropologists, culture has long stood for the way of life of a people, for the sum of their learned behavior patterns, attitudes, and material things" (1959, p. 43); anticipating a more recent definition of culture (as mental programming) fit for the digital age, Hall further notes that "We are… stuck with the program culture imposes" (1989 [1st ed., 1976], p. 219).

The American anthropologist Clifford Geertz understands culture as "a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life" and as "the fabric of meaning in terms of which human beings interpret their experience and guide their actions" (1973, p. 89).

Another definition of culture in the broad anthropological sense is explicitly derived from the etymological sense of the word: since "culture" can be traced back to the Latin verb "colere" (to cultivate, to till the soil), it can be understood as "the way people act upon nature" (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1989, p. 23).

Each historical period has added new nuances to the initial definition of culture, shifting the emphasis from one aspect of it to another, and culminating in the present-day re-definition of this social construct for the use of an increasingly digitized global society: in a way reminiscent of Hall's earlier references to the cultural "program" that controls people's lives, Geert Hofstede looks at culture as a sort of "mental programming" or "software of the mind", by analogy with computer programming, to the extent to which culture consists of a collection of patterns of thinking, feeling and behaviour learned by members of a society in the course of their lives – unlike human nature, which is the "operating system", and personality, which is one's "unique personal set of mental programs" (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 7). The human nature-culture-personality triad represents the distinct levels of an individual's mental programming: human nature, which is universal, or common to all people, culture, which is specific to a social group (e.g., nation, organization) or category (e.g.,

ethnic, gender – male/ female, generational, class, professional/ occupational, etc.), and personality, which is specific to each individual (Hofstede et al., 2010, pp. 6-7). An individual may therefore be (by virtue of his or her belonging to several social groups or categories at once) exposed to several layers of mental programming. Hofstede insists that the broad anthropological meaning of "culture" should be distinguished from (although it includes) the narrow sense in which the word (spelled with a capital C) is commonly used in Western languages, as an equivalent of "civilization" understood as "refinement of the mind" and its results, such as education, art, literature (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 5).

To complete the dictionary definition of "culture", it should be noted that, in addition to a country's national culture, there may also be subcultures (cultures shared by minorities, such as the ones specific to bikers, rockers, rock music lovers, body piercing fans, the military, Star Trek fans), countercultures (cultures shared by people whose beliefs, values, norms, and behaviours constantly challenge those of the main culture – or of the "establishment" – hence the prefix "counter-", which conveys the idea of opposition; for example, the cultures associated with the hippie movement of the 1960s, the green movement, LGBT groups, feminist groups), and micro-cultures (developed around specific common interests, or in specific social settings – e.g., the culture of teams working on projects, the cultures specific to prisons, hospitals, social networking sites, etc.).

As regards the culture of an organization or company also referred to in the above dictionary definition, it is worth mentioning that the terms "organizational culture" and "corporate culture" were used for the first time with reference to the attitudes and codes of behaviour specific to business organizations in the late 1980s, probably by analogy with C.P. Snow's use of the word "culture" in relation to the mindsets and attitudes of people belonging to two different intellectual environments: the distinct cultures of science and the humanities. In his 1959 Rede Lecture entitled "The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution", delivered at the University of Cambridge, the English author (himself both a novelist and a scientist) deplored the "gulf of mutual incomprehension", dislike, and even hostility existing between the two "polar groups" of intellectuals, or the two human "galaxies", the literary intellectuals (as representatives of the traditional culture), and scientists, both indifferent to, and unable to acknowledge, each other's achievements – a divide that he thought was encouraged by an education system too much focused on strict specialization, which could only result in individuals' "self-impoverishment", as well as in "sheer loss" (Snow, 1959) to society as a whole, and to the entire Western civilization. What separated the two groups of intellectuals of the mid 20th century were

their different attitudes, approaches, assumptions, standards, patterns of behaviour, and ways of communicating ideas (more rigorous and widely shared among scientists, and more flexible, loose and diverse among literary intellectuals) – in other words, their different cultures (a conclusion that still holds true today). One of the most divisive "cultural" characteristics was their different attitude to the future: on the one hand, the definite future orientation of scientists (who had "the future in their bones" (Snow, 1959) and were highly optimistic about the future benefits the age of science would bring to humanity), and on the other hand the literary intellectuals' scepticism based on incomprehension, elitist isolation, and incapacity to see scientific progress as the key to solving the various (economic, demographic, security) problems of humanity.

In this book, the word "culture" is used in its broad anthropological sense, and more specifically in the sense of national culture.

1.2 Elements, dimensions, and layers of culture

Culture is a mix of numerous and very diverse elements, such as technology, economic aspects, social institutions (social organizations, education, political structures, etc.), belief systems, language, graphic and plastic arts, music, drama, dance, folklore, to name just a few. According to other descriptions (Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck, 1961), culture includes six basic elements: 1. meanings; 2. values, world views and beliefs (about human nature, man's relationship to nature, time, activity, and relationships); 3. norms; 4. behaviour patterns/ social roles; 5. artifacts, i.e., materials, tools, technologies; 6. techniques, skills, ways of using artifacts. It is the specific historical configuration and re-configuration of these elements under specific circumstances that makes up a culture, hence there will be no two identical cultures in the world. Moreover, the six elements are interrelated (in the sense that a change in one of them will trigger changes in the others, and vice versa – for example, a new technology can reshape people's norms, values or behaviour, in the same way that new ways of thinking and new social norms may facilitate the development or use of new technology). The idea that cultural elements are interrelated is a truism of anthropological studies – e.g., Kalervo Oberg points out the "interrelationship of cultural forms, like technology, institutions, ideas and belief systems" (1960, p. 145); Hall also considers that the many facets of culture are interconnected: "you touch a culture in one place and everything else is affected" (1989, p. 16).

Anthropologists also distinguish between 2 dimensions of culture: a material and a symbolic one. Hall refers to the material products of culture as "extensions" of the human body:

> "Today man has developed extensions for practically everything he used to do with his body. The evolution of weapons begins with the teeth and the fist and ends with the atom bomb. Clothes and houses are extensions of man's biological temperature-control mechanisms. Furniture takes the place of squatting and sitting on the ground. Power tools, glasses, TV, telephones, and books which carry the voice across both time and space are examples of material extensions. Money is a way of extending and storing labor. Our transportation networks now do what we used to do with our feet and backs. In fact, all man-made material things can be treated as extensions of what man once did with his body or some specialized part of his body." (1959, p. 79)

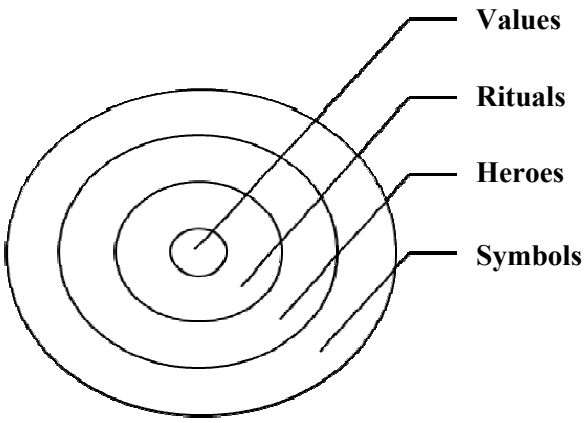
Man is therefore regarded as a "producer of extensions, which in turn mold his life" (Hall, 1989, p. 24). This realization leads Hall to a new definition of culture as a "complex system of extensions" (1989, p. 40). As for the symbolic aspect of culture, Hall understands culture as an all-inclusive "communication framework" (1989, p. 42) consisting of diverse elements such as people's words, tones of voice, actions, gestures, facial expressions, postures, ways of handling time, space and material goods, as well as their ways of working, playing, defending themselves, etc.

Culture is a stratified social construct consisting of both visible and invisible elements, its key components (i.e., values, beliefs, assumptions) being the most difficult to identify as they lie hidden underneath immediately noticeable elements such as manners, communication styles, clothing, language, rituals, architecture, institutions, technologies, eating habits, etc. The latter are only superficial manifestations or reflections of the former. For instance, there are deep cultural underpinnings to the architecture of American cities, and the American use and organization of space (the skyscrapers, the specific "grid" patterning of city space, the division of streets into areas called "blocks", the wide sidewalks, the use of cubicles to physically isolate co-workers sharing the same office), such as the idea of achievement and social mobility, individualism, compartmentalization of activities/ tasks and relationships, etc., specific to the American mindset; an Arab's spatial behaviour (which is marked by the need for human closeness and close interaction understood as a full sensory experience as well) is a reflection of cultural values such as collectivism,

people-orientation, and trust as a foundation of human relations; the indirect communication style, the avoidance of negative expressions and impulsive behaviour, the aversion to excess, conflict, and contention, as well as the low level of expressiveness (or the preference for a balanced, polite, modest demeanour) specific to the Japanese is determined by their deep-rooted, culture-specific need for saving face (and helping others save face as well) by maintaining a harmonious relationship with their fellow-beings in a collectivist society where people are used to showing respect and concern for each other. Such manifestations of culture may be easily misconstrued by people from different cultural environments, who tend to interpret the world from the perspective of their own cultural norms and values.

Graphically, the components of a national culture have been represented with the help of two images, the onion and the iceberg.

The most notable description of culture using the onion diagram to convey the idea of multiple cultural layers is the one given by the Dutch author Geert Hofstede, who identifies four categories of cultural elements, or four "manifestations of culture at different levels of depth" (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 8): symbols, heroes, rituals, and values. The first three (symbols, heroes, and rituals) represent the visible, superficial layers of culture, whereas the fourth group of cultural components (the invisible values) make up the deepest cultural layer.



By "symbols", Hofstede understands "words, gestures, pictures, objects that carry a particular meaning recognized only by those who share the culture" (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 8) – such as the way people dress, hairstyles, status symbols, flags, brands.

Heroes are real persons (dead or alive) or imaginary paradigmatic figures who serve as role models for people's behaviour. Examples of real cultural heroes are founders of companies, TV stars, national heroes, sports champions, etc.; imaginary "heroes" are characters of popular culture, comic book superheroes, or other fictional characters such as Barbie, Batman, Snoopie, or Astérix.

Rituals are understood as "collective activities" that are "socially essential" within a culture and "carried out for their own sake" (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 9) – e.g., ways of greeting/ paying respect to others, social/ religious ceremonies. For instance, business and political meetings serve "ritual purposes" such as offering leaders an opportunity to assert their authority (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 9).

Symbols, heroes and rituals are included by Hofstede into the generic category of "practices", which although visible to any outside observer, have cultural meanings that are difficult to grasp due to the culture-specific interpretation given to them by "insiders" of the culture. For instance, a brand such as Coca-Cola has a certain connotation in its country of origin (where it is associated with traditional family values), which does not perfectly coincide with the connotations attributed to it in other parts of the world.

Values, defined as "broad tendencies to prefer a certain state of affairs over others" (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 9), are placed at the core of culture, and each value has both a negative and a positive pole (evil-good, immoral-moral, dirty-clean, irrational-rational, etc.). They are acquired very early in life, which explains why people are often unaware of them. National values are analyzed by Hofstede along "dimensions".

According to Hofstede, people absorb, mostly unconsciously, information about their own culture's symbols, heroes, rituals, and especially core values from early childhood (during the first 10-12 years of life), after which they learn their culture (focusing on new cultural "practices") in a conscious way.

Fons Trompenaars, who uses the same image to represent culture, explains the culture-onion analogy as follows:

> "Culture comes in layers, like an onion. To understand it you have to unpeel it layer by layer. On the outer layer are the products of culture, like soaring skyscrapers of Manhattan, pillars of private power, with congested public streets between them. These are expressions of deeper values and norms, in a society, that are not directly visible (values such as upward mobility, 'the more the better', status and material success). The layers of values and norms

> are deeper within the 'onion' and are more difficult to identify. […] A problem that is regularly solved disappears from consciousness and becomes a basic assumption, an underlying premise. […] These basic assumptions define the meaning that a group shares. They are implicit. […] What is taken for granted, unquestioned reality: this is the core of the onion." (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1998, pp. 6-7)

In this representation of culture, there are, therefore:

- an outer layer that includes "artifacts and products" such as language, food, buildings, monuments, agriculture, markets, art, fashions, etc. (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1998, p. 21), which are visible, explicit, tangible, or audible – the "concrete factors", or the first things one notices about a new culture. The meaning one attaches to this "explicit culture" is determined by one's own culture;
- a middle layer consisting of invisible "norms and values" – i.e., what is generally considered right and wrong (norms), and good and bad (values). Norms are developed either "on a formal level as written laws" or "on an informal level as social control", and their role is to direct behaviour in society, indicating how people "normally should behave"; they are "related to the ideals shared by a group", pointing to how people "aspire or desire to behave"; they are the criteria people use to choose between "existing alternatives" (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1998, p. 22). Trompenaars points out that a culture's norms may not always be compatible with its values, in which case tensions may appear (e.g., in Communism) that can only lead to "disintegration"; it is only in relatively stable cultures that the norms faithfully reflect the values of society;
- the core, including "basic assumptions about existence", which are implicit and hard to identify from the outside; this "core meaning of life" basically results from man's effort to deal with the natural environment and solve the daily problems raised by it; since the problems are solved naturally, and eventually "automatically", the solutions disappear from people's consciousness. These solutions turn into unquestionable, "absolute assumptions", making up the deepest meaning of life. Therefore, the core meaning of life "has escaped from conscious questioning and has become self-evident, because it is a result of routine responses to the environment" (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1998, p. 24). This way of understanding how everyday problems, once solved, become unconscious assumptions calls to mind Edward T. Hall's idea about culture-specific behaviour patterns which, once learnt, are converted into the "hidden controls" (Hall, 1989, p. 42) residing in the unconscious mind; the two