Working Across Borders: How Hard Can it Be?

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As Thomas Friedman has been telling us, the world in now flat. We live in a global economy, with instant communication, online translations, amazing tools, and the capability of live visual communication with people on the other side of the world. While competition is clearly international, it is still a western world when it comes to business. Many, if not most, global partners learn English at an early age. English is usually the standard language when the English speakers are among the participants in a business endeavor, and for the majority of technical tools. Given all that, how hard can it be to manage subordinates and suppliers, serve customers or supervisors, or work with other partners from around the world? As it turns out, like many of those tasks that we naively undertake, a whole lot harder than it looks.

Western managers are commonly are unaware of the significant differences in values, perspectives, and work habits of people raised in different cultures, speaking different native languages, and working in very different organizations. Even when awareness dawns, as it invariably does when one experiences being the foreigner in the work environment, many US managers find it difficult to move beyond blaming their foreign colleagues to making changes in their own behavior.

This difficulty is not surprising. The professionals asked to manage foreign subordinates, work with foreign colleagues, or serve foreign customers are successful people. They are the products of successful companies with strong cultures expressed through a set of distinctive leadership and communication behaviors. These professionals believe these behaviors and the appropriate responses to them are simple common sense. When people don't respond as expected, it's not surprising that they find fault not with the behavior but with the people who respond differently.

A majority, although by no means all, of these managers ultimately learn to adapt to the requirements of working with people in other cultures. The problem is their learning process is haphazard and expensive. Managers working with foreigners learn on the job through trial and error, making costly mistakes both in terms of time and in terms of relationships. During the learning process, inexperienced managers often confuse, frustrate, insult, and sometimes even abuse, their foreign colleagues. They miss valuable feedback, provide misdirection, and fail to recognize critical needs for confirmation, redirection, and clarification—needs that they respond to immediately and intuitively in their home environments.

The paper attempts to argue for replacing current on-the-job methods for developing cross-cultural management competence with a more disciplined process. The sections that follow each begin with a statement that argues against a need for such a process. Following each statement is a discussion of the veracity and applicability of the argument.

1. **They are our subordinates or suppliers. They need to learn our language and our way of work. We don't need to learn theirs.**

There are compelling reasons for subordinates and suppliers to learn the language and culture of their supervisors and customers and most try very hard to do that. The problem is in the difficulty of the task. Working across significant differences in language and culture is a complex process involving intellectual and emotional challenges. A strong desire to make it work is not sufficient. It takes education and exposure to accurately interpret the vagaries of communication in all cultures. It takes trust in a relationship to ask for clarification and explanation, sometimes repeatedly, when you are unsure of what is meant. Indeed, the more Americans demand that our foreign suppliers and subordinates understand us, the more we lessen the likelihood that that they actually will.

One of the best stories on this point is about a US manager trying to insure that the alarm on his company's Korean factory was in working order. He came in personally to test it, pushed on the door, and heard only silence. He explained very clearly, in very precise terms that "when… I… push… on… this… door, …the… alarm… is …to… go… off." The deferential Korean employees apologized profusely, saying "we fix, we fix." He returned the next day and they went through the whole episode again. The manager explained more vociferously and with tedious repetition, what he wanted; the Koreans again apologized and promised to correct the problem. This went on for four days, with the US manager's blood pressure approaching stroke level and his Korean employees continuing to apologize. Finally, one of the braver Koreans decided to risk disagreeing with the "big boss," saying, in a very quiet voice: "Mr. Boss—it is off."

All languages have idiosyncrasies of meaning that can't be found in a translation dictionary. Assuming that you and your foreign colleagues understand each other is a common, and frequently costly, mistake. These mistakes create problems that are very hard to correct or even identify as related to the misunderstandings or confusion that created them. Learning to manage across borders involves learning both the means and discipline to accurately assess the current level of shared understanding in business and social communication and then take the action necessary to increase it. If you think that easy, you just haven't tried it.

2. **The American way is the way of business around the world. People want to learn our way, not for us to learn theirs.**

People around the world certainly want to emulate American business success and several of them seem to be doing it quite well. As Kareem Abdul Jamar said about his team's efforts to hold onto the Lakers' long held NBA championship: "It's not that we're not getting better, it's just that they're catching up faster than we're getting better." Toyota and Honda, Infosys and Wipro are all new champions in the business world, sucking up US customers and moving US companies down the rankings on stock price and market share. These companies have succeeded by emulating selective aspects of American business practices and by exploiting the strengths of their own cultures. It's no accident that the Japanese attention to detail, and discomfort with risk, resulted in cars with longer life cycles. It is also likely that the Indians' soft spoken competence and group orientation contributed to their ability to establish hugely successful IT services firms. Had they simply adopted American practices, as opposed to altering them in ways that exploit their own strengths, it is hard to believe that they could have achieved their current success.

Tim, who works in an oil field in the Middle East, has some experience with this. His company implemented hiring and promotion practices that are typical in the US and much of the western world. That is, they asked their supervisors to interview and recommend whom to hire as their subordinates. They also asked that they recommend employees for promotion. The system seemed to work well, until US management discovered that the supervisors were accepting financial incentives from the people they recommended.

The oil company was horrified. They felt betrayed by their supervisors and busily began creating a test to determine who should be hired and promoted. That solution may solve part of the problem, but the larger issue, which often gets lost in these situations, is how best to select and retain a skilled and committed work force in the Mid East. Processes implemented in other cultures need to be assessed first in terms of the core purpose for which they are created. Once that is clear, an informed decision can be made about if, and how, that process should be implemented in another culture. Implementing prior to cultural awareness, even with the consent of management, often redefines the US managers experience with unintended consequences.

3. People are pretty much the same everywhere.

This statement is true at some level. That level, however, argues for, not against, learning the perspectives, preferences and ways of work of colleagues or customers in other cultures. People perform best when they feel understood, respected, and appreciated. When you simply assume that values, ways of interacting, and approaches to work are the same-or worse, unimportant, you disregard who I am and misunderstand what I seek to communicate.

A colleague tells of hosting a group of Vietnamese customers for dinner at her home. She escorted them through her house, showing off the treasures she had collected from around the world. Her guests commented on the beauty of each piece and then asked: “How much did you pay for it?” This behavior was repeated each time they encountered another treasure. Our hostess was embarrassed and offended. She was only enlightened when she finally visited Vietnam, where prices are never posted and negotiating skills are as valued as golfing skills are in the US. Her charming Vietnamese guests were trying to provide their hostess with the opportunity to re-live her success as a negotiator and to celebrate it with her friends.

This kind of misunderstanding is typical in doing business across borders—and happens both ways. You may well offend a customer or a colleague from another culture by behaving in ways that are perfectly appropriate, even complimentary, in your own culture. You may also be offended, and respond with anger, to a behavior that meant as an indication of affection or respect.

4. I’ve been working with people from a variety of cultures for years. It’s not a problem for me. I can work with anybody.

Experience working with local people from other cultures is extremely valuable. Recognize, however, that foreign born, US-residing colleagues are typically experienced adaptors. They have responded well to the dominant culture in which they find themselves. Unless you’ve taken time to get to know them and their cultural background, you may know very little about their beliefs, values, or preferences. If they are working here, they have learned to know how to survive in the American workplace. Typically, that doesn't involve much discussion of differences in values or in personal work preferences, especially from those clearly in the minority.

Working with people who are living and working in their native country, surrounded by members of their own culture, requires an entirely different level of adaptation. Alan, an American project manager assigned his first Indian team, learned this the hard way. Eager to start right with his new project members, Alan set up an individual conference call with each of them. He always made these calls with new US team members, including those born in India, and found them informative, interesting, and conducive to team cohesion

To his surprise, Alan's calls with his Indian team members, who spoke excellent English, were awkward and frustrating. The team members seemed to avoid answering any direct questions and acted as if they couldn't wait to get off the phone. Alan hung up frustrated and a little insulted. After all, he had taken time out of his busy schedule to talk with each one of them, and they acted as it they didn't want to be bothered. His first thought was: "What is wrong with these people?"

If Alan had discussed his plans with his US-based Indian team member, he may have skipped or at least postponed the call. He would have learned that Indians are typically very group-oriented and very deferential to their immediate manager. Many of them will be uncomfortable offering an individual opinion without being able to talk it over with their fellow team members. Summarily, a one-on-one phone call with a new boss, especially one who may outrank their local supervisor, is likely to make them highly uncomfortable.

The more varieties of people you work with and enjoy, the better able you will be to adapt to a cross-border management role. Just remember that the "when in Rome" maxim has been around for more than 500 years for a reason: people do things differently in different places, and that rule applies to work as well as to everything else. Learning the work culture and values of your international partners is always time well spent.

5. We have been an international company for over 75 years. We know how to work with people in other cultures.

Companies with a history of international work do have a distinct advantage. These companies typically have a number of employees who have lived and worked in other countries. They also have a number of immigrant employees who have an appreciation of the challenges and rewards of cross-cultural work efforts. If the knowledge and understanding of these individuals is adequately disseminated and applied, these companies enjoy a significant competitive advantage in cross-border work.

There are two reasons, however, why additional learning about the culture and language of foreign partners is critical for these companies. The first is that the strategies and perspectives work across borders, and they differ for different cultures, are typically not disseminated. The people with the expertise continue to use it, but rarely is that expertise used to teach others. In addition, much of the knowledge people have is about personal preferences, not about how the American and other work cultures can best adapt to work together efficiently and effectively.

A second and even more pressing reason for active learning around managing across borders is that international companies are increasing both the complexity of the work and their interdependency with their international partners. Manufacturing and supply arrangements are morphing into the interdependent worlds of lean manufacturing and managed supply chains. They are integrating IT systems, developing new markets, and creating new and increasingly more complex products in cooperation with their cross-border customers, suppliers, and partners. Each of these activities requires new ways of working together—ways that often differ significantly from those found in any of the participating cultures.

A recent article in PRTM's Insight magazine (Peolina, Leu, and Chinn, 2005) on implementing lean manufacturing in China illustrates this point. Mr. Peolina and his colleagues list several differences between Chinese and American manufacturing plants that represent barriers to establishing lean manufacturing practices. Examples include: 1) an acceptance of disorder or "mess" in the workplace; 2) a "disposable worker" system that doesn't educate or work to retain a committed workforce; 3) a management system and history that discourage employee empowerment; 4) managers and workers who are uneducated in work process identification and refinement; and 5) a set of relationship values around business partners called *guanxi* that makes it difficult for a plant manager to make American-like demands for accountability to his suppliers.

These barriers can be overcome, and the benefits of implementing lean manufacturing with Chinese and other partners make it well worth the effort. The same is true for integrating IT systems, creating breakthrough products, and the other examples of complex, more closely coupled work listed above and still to come. Decisions about when, how, and with whom to implement this new work are best guided by a sophisticated understanding of the cultures across which this work will take place. Even companies with a long history of international engagement will find their flexibility and adaptability challenged as they cross into new territory dependent on colleagues from very different worlds.

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