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Craig Storti, intercultural trainer and consultant,
author of *The Art of Doing Business Across Cultures*

THE CULTURE SOLUTION

How to achieve cultural synergy and get results in the global workplace

Deirdre B. Mendez

Praise for *The Culture Solution*

The Culture Solution has it all: a deep command of the key intercultural concepts, scores of spot-on, real world examples, pages of immensely practical and instantly applicable advice—all in language immediately accessible to the non-specialist reader. This is a book to read and savour, to be sure, but most of all it is a book to be ***used***.

—Craig Storti, intercultural trainer and consultant, author of The Art of Doing Business across Cultures: 10 Countries, 50 Mistakes, and 5 Steps to Cultural Competence

Dr. Mendez's new approach provides useful and practical tools based on real-word situations. I highly recommend this book to anyone considering an assignment overseas.

—Terry B. Kahler, Vice President, Dell, Inc.

The Culture Solution is useful for the novice and expert alike, providing a comprehensive, yet easy-to-use system for diagnosing cultural patterns and using this knowledge to be more effective at creating successful international business partnerships and relationships. I will use it as a key resource in my own work with students, managers and executives.

—Andy Molinsky, PhD, author of Global Dexterity: How to Adapt Your Behavior Without Losing Yourself in the Process

Dr. Mendez postulates that it's important to learn and use the skills of cultural and team dynamic analysis to size up situations and locations effectively. From my own business experience, this is the way it really happens. Do enough intentional business and you will find yourself someplace you know little about, trying to achieve something under circumstances where you could really use a "map." Dr. Mendez's new book, *The Culture Solution*, provides just such a map. In addition to the utility of the approach, this is a fun read, enlightening and even self-illuminating.

—Raymond J. Brimble, CEO Lynxs Group

As a practitioner, I appreciate the fact that *The Culture Solution* is based on analysis of people's actual behavior of and not on aggregated country profiles. The result is specific and tailored coaching—much more useful to clients than generalizations associated with national norms. The book provides links to practical exercises and tools as well!

—Betsy Neidel, Managing Director, Blue Heron Holdings, LLC

I recommend *The Culture Solution* to anyone who leads international teams. Having spent a good part of my career creating and managing international organizations for software development, I know that the topics discussed in this book are a must-read for anybody who needs to accomplish an international mission. This book takes you quickly from understanding to strategy.

—Karl Wimmer, PhD, Director, Design Enablement, GlobalFoundries

The Culture Solution is a crucial guide for those looking to develop an understanding of modern challenges in the global workplace. With her international business acumen and meticulous analysis of eight cultural dimensions, Deirdre Mendez opens the door to success for those navigating the waters of cross-cultural ventures. As a seasoned international consultant who has seen countless collaborations fall apart due to ignorance of cultural protocol, I thoroughly recommend Dr. Mendez's book as a resource for anyone who wishes to execute tactful, culturally-appropriate communication that fosters strong business connections.

—Sharon Schweitzer, JD, author of Access to Asia: Your Multicultural Guide to Building Trust, Inspiring Respect, and Creating Long-Lasting Business Relationships

The Culture Solution

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How to Achieve Cultural Synergy and Get Results in the Global Workplace

Deirdre B. Mendez, PhD

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To my parents

Contents

Introduction

Welcome to the International Marketplace

As his employer's top performer for the U.S. market two years in a row, Peter Chenault was confident that his skills and drive would make him successful anywhere. But six months after the company promoted him to its new international management team, he's less certain. The sales, negotiation, and management techniques he's perfected over the past decade seem not to work overseas.

Peter was delighted when his manager announced that his first assignment would be in São Paulo, Brazil. The companies he visited there greeted him warmly, but after a series of facility tours and excellent meals, he couldn't seem to move his hosts toward serious business discussions. Peter came home feeling guilty about spending so much time and money with so little to show for it. His trip to Berlin shortly afterward was no better. Peter arrived with presentations on the innovative features of his company's new product, which the German customers all but ignored. They seemed more interested in service agreements than in the product itself, and two of his contacts requested annual reports from his employer, expressing skepticism that they'd still be in business three years down the road.

And now it looks like his trip to Seoul has accomplished nothing, despite a promising beginning. When he presented a new marketing strategy for a struggling subsidiary product group, the members of the Korean

marketing team reacted favorably, and he went home feeling optimistic. But although they agreed to send him a revised marketing plan, there has been no follow-through, and his attempts to move things forward since his return have met with polite evasiveness. As the leader of the team, he's insulted by this apparent insubordination, but he also has a feeling that there was something he missed.

His problem in each of the three countries is different, and Peter can't discern a pattern that makes any sense. Although all his contacts seem to understand him, he feels that he hasn't really gotten his message across. He suspects that his problems have something to do with cultural differences, but he can't figure out what's going on.

Thinking back, Peter reflects that his preparatory efforts didn't help much. The books he read on doing business in each target market were generally helpful but had little information on negotiation. He gave up on memorizing the etiquette tips, and various online articles on the "Dos and Don'ts in Country X" only addressed a limited set of situations. Meanwhile, the book he picked up on general cultural awareness was long, theoretical, and mostly irrelevant. Although he gained some understanding of the cultural tendencies of his target countries, his research failed to result in a coherent strategy for each environment. He feels he misread the signals delivered by his international contacts, which prevented him from adapting his approach to their expectations. And he doesn't understand how his experience in each market relates to what happened in the others.

Sorting It Out

Peter is not alone. Many people today are expected to manage intercultural teams, serve culturally diverse customers and communities, and support partnerships with international companies and governments. Diplomatic negotiations, traditionally conducted by seasoned and carefully mentored experts, are increasingly practiced by people who lack this careful training. Those working for organizations with international connections are likely to have at least one intercultural assignment in the course of their careers. If you are one of them, this book is designed for you. It will help you discern the cultural orientation of international contacts, no matter

where they—or you—are from, and understand behavior and expectations in any environment you encounter. It will guide you in creating strategies for managing cultural differences and learning from the approaches of new counterparts. *The Culture Solution* is a practical system that applies straightforward principles to real-life situations.

You don't need to be involved in an intercultural project to begin using the system; you can practice with any person, group, or location—be it that strange new guy in accounting, the off-the-wall community group you meet with each week, or your husband's odd hometown. It applies anywhere you find behavior that is different from what you're used to. And you can create a preliminary profile for regions you haven't had a chance to visit by using the ARC method to analyze descriptions from other sources.

Although cultural differences are often identified as a source of conflict and dysfunction, integrating diversity has benefits that go far beyond solving problems and resolving conflict. Research shows that intercultural groups that successfully integrate their differences actually perform better than monocultural counterparts.[1] Achieving intercultural "synergy"[2] will help you leverage the strengths of diverse approaches and systems.

How to Use This Book

This book is designed to help you adapt to new cultural environments and deal with people from unfamiliar cultural backgrounds. You will develop the skills needed to anticipate challenges and promote your agenda in culturally appropriate ways.

The ARC system will help you create a Personal Profile for eight cultural dimensions that identifies your own cultural orientation. It will also show you how to make one for your "counterpart"—the person, group,

[1] N. Adler, *International Dimensions of Organizational Behavior* (Thomson Learning, Inc., 2008), 148.

[2] Nancy Adler defines cultural synergy as a process that enables organizations to "transcend the individual cultures of their members." (N. Adler, "Cultural Synergy: The Management of Cross-Cultural Organizations," in W. Burke and L. Goodstein, eds., *Trends and Issues in OD: Current Theory and Practice* (University Associates, 1980), 172).

or place you choose to analyze. By comparing the two profiles, you will identify cultural tendencies likely to become sources of confusion and frustration. Based on these specific differences, you can develop strategies for managing problems, explaining yourself effectively, and communicating persuasively. Finally, you'll learn ways to leverage the talents of culturally diverse people and capitalize on the benefits. The more you practice the approach, the faster you'll recognize cultural differences and the more skillfully you'll handle them.

If you don't have much time, don't worry. Once you've identified the differences between yourself and the person or place you're analyzing, you can focus on just those cultural dimensions in each chapter.

This book will take you through the following steps to develop your own intercultural skills and strategies:

- Learn how cultural variation affects business (Chapter 1).
- Create your Personal Profile (Chapter 2).
- Create a Counterpart Profile for the individual, organization, or location you want to study and compare it to your Personal Profile (Chapter 3).
- Identify the critical dimensions for your particular intercultural relationship (Chapters 4–6).
- Review differences between your Personal and Counterpart Profiles and identify potential areas of misunderstanding and conflict (Chapters 7 and 8).
- Predict and solve culture-based problems for your relationship (Chapter 9).
- Confirm your familiarity with cultural tendencies and practice managing intercultural problems (Chapter 10).
- Learn strategies for persuading people with each of the tendencies (Chapter 11).
- Apply cultural knowledge in specific business contexts, including hiring and management, sales, negotiation, team management, and leadership (Chapters 12–16).

- Develop strategies for managing intercultural conflict and achieving cultural synergies (Chapter 16).
- Increase your cultural intelligence (Chapter 17).
- Learn ways to use cultural analysis in intercultural training and consulting (Chapter 18).

The order of the chapters assumes that you're a busy person who needs to get to the bottom line as quickly as possible. If you have more time to read and digest the framework, consider studying the cultural dimensions in Chapters 4–6 before creating your Counterpart Profile in Chapter 3.

Cultural analysis can be helpful for any type of intercultural interaction—be it international business, travel, engineering projects, education, health care, aid programs, conflict resolution, or mediation, to name a few. I use it to help business clients understand their international partners and customers and improve intercultural communication and teamwork. In executive courses, I use it to teach skills in leadership, project management, decision making, and conflict resolution. In management courses, students use it to analyze group strengths and weaknesses, avoid and resolve conflict, and achieve intercultural synergies. International MBA students are using the system to adapt to US employer norms for communication and self-presentation. I hope it will help you manage intercultural difference to meet your goals, whatever they may be.

1

Coming to Grips with Culture

Each of the cultural dimensions in this book identifies a particular facet of culture and the way it affects behavior. For our purposes, culture is *a system of shared values and practices learned through social interaction that shapes people's beliefs, attitudes, expectations, and actions*.[1] All of us participate in cultural groups that share values and practices. Cultural values shape our beliefs, attitudes, expectations, and actions as well as the systems and processes we create.

There are several important things to recognize about cultural variation:

We all operate according to "cultural scripts." We unconsciously replicate the social patterns we learn from exposure to people around us. These cultural scripts, or "recipes for behavior," help us interact smoothly and achieve our social goals. Here's an example from my daily life—getting a cup of coffee in Austin, Texas. When I get to the coffee shop, I park my car within the lines of an available space (probably not as carefully as I would if I were German, but more carefully than I would if I were Egyptian). Once I'm inside the store, I stand behind the last person in line even if

[1] The term "culture" is problematical on many levels, and the way it is used is evolving. Kevin Avruch's book *Context and Pretext in Conflict Resolution:Culture, Identity, Power and Practice* (Paradigm Publishers, 2012) offers a detailed discussion of the way it has been used in professional contexts.

I'm in a hurry (rather than in a group, as I would in Mozambique), and I don't cut in line (as I might in France). I exchange brief pleasantries with the server behind the counter (not taking as long as I would if I were Brazilian, but longer than I would if I were from Hong Kong). These actions are consistent with the expectations of people I encounter. They're easy to understand and respond to, and appropriate to the situation. My cultural scripts work well for me in my home environment.

Following cultural scripts helps make interaction smooth—*as long as our scripts are shared by the other people we deal with*. Imagine what would happen if I pulled into the coffee shop parking lot and straddled two spaces, walked in and cut in line, and then spent five minutes visiting with the server while the people behind me waited. These other customers would be annoyed, to say the least. Yet any of these behaviors would be acceptable, and even expected, in other places. All of us follow cultural scripts all the time, and differences in our scripts can lead to misunderstanding and conflict. While our behavior is appropriate in the environment each of us comes from, it may be inappropriate elsewhere.

We don't realize we're operating according to cultural scripts. Even when we know about them, we're apt to forget that our behavior is shaped by cultural scripts. We see ourselves as individuals with unique personalities and agendas who make our own decisions. We see our own behavior as innately human and "normal." In intercultural interactions, we perceive other people in terms of our own scripts, and they do the same to us.

We tend to misinterpret culturally based behavior as resulting from *personality*. We assume that someone's odd behavior is due to individual quirks or preferences, a tendency known as "attribution error."[2] One of my clients described a problem he was having with some Japanese colleagues by saying, "I know all about that cultural stuff. I majored in Asian studies! But I'm telling you, these people are irrational!" Although he was famil-

[2] L. Ross, "The intuitive psychologist and his shortcomings: Distortions in the attribution process," in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, vol. 10, ed. L. Berkowitz (New York: Academic Press, 1977), 184.

iar with the *concept* of cultural difference, when his colleagues' real-life behavior didn't fit his own cultural script, he failed to look for a culture-based rationale for their behavior. He instead jumped to the conclusion that they were incapable of thinking straight.

"Incompetent," "irrational," "uncommitted," and "malicious" are labels people use when they mistake cultural scripts for individual traits. Knowing your own cultural tendencies and learning to recognize those of others will help you distinguish culturally based behavior from true incompetence, irrationality, lack of commitment, or malice—which you'll want to recognize if you should actually encounter them.

Being "nice" is not enough. It's natural to think that intercultural conflict should be limited to confrontations such as arms negotiations or contract disputes, while collaborative projects should go more smoothly. When people or groups come together with a common purpose, shouldn't cultural differences be easy to resolve as long as everyone is polite and fair? Unfortunately, what seems polite and fair to one cultural group may not be for another. Consider the example of two Japanese software designers sleeping at their desks during a presentation by U.S. colleagues who have traveled to Tokyo to provide important information to their Japanese counterparts. When I discuss this scenario with Americans, the word "disrespectful" quickly emerges. Sleeping while someone presents is rude in the United States, and Americans agree that it would be more appropriate for these two to stay at home and skip the presentation altogether.

We then discuss the fact that these Japanese team members, exhausted from working around the clock to meet a deadline, got up early in the morning, dressed in business suits, and rode commuter trains a long distance, probably standing up, to attend the presentation. They assuredly would rather have slept late at home. So why did they come at all? To show respect. In Japan, it's disrespectful to skip important group activities, so people come to work and sleep at their desks instead. But Americans interpret this show of respect as just the opposite—an insult. When cultural scripts aren't shared, goodwill is just not enough. We need a way to identify and manage the differences.

How Cultural Variation Affects Professional Contexts

The fact that similar terminology is used throughout the world in business and diplomatic contexts masks the fact that the same term can be understood very differently in different places. Consider the following descriptions of a *business meeting*, a forum for discussion, problem solving, and decision making in organizations everywhere:

1. Meetings are planned to begin and end at specified times. They start as scheduled, with everyone arriving before or at the start time. Meetings proceed according to a detailed agenda whose topics are addressed in order. When the end time is reached, if there are topics that haven't been covered, another meeting is scheduled to handle them. When problems are discussed, any participant may suggest a solution, and the pros and cons of each suggestion are debated until a final solution is reached.
2. Meetings may start well after the time specified, with people joining in at any point, and may last as long as it takes to conclude business, sometimes causing later meetings to be postponed. A general agenda will be provided, but topics may be considered in any order, with digressions to a broad range of other issues. To avoid confrontation during the meeting, solutions to important problems will have been discussed and agreed to by the major players beforehand. Discussion during a meeting will be limited to reviewing the preferred solution and agreeing to proceed.

It's easy to imagine the confusion that could result when people from these two traditions attempt to solve a problem together in a "meeting." The same is true of nearly any business term or procedure. No matter where they originated, how they were originally designed, or how widely they are used, terms are understood and applied in different ways in different places.

Play the Right Game

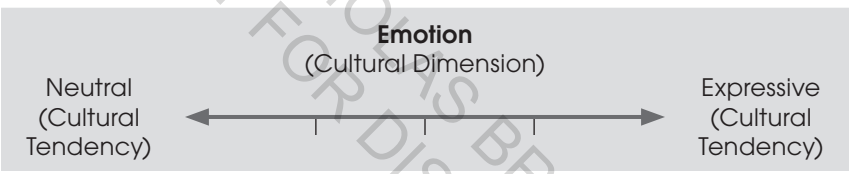
When talking about intercultural interaction, I find it helpful to think of cultural systems as being like athletic games with similar goals but different equipment and rules. For example, baseball and basketball have certain similarities. In both, teams of people compete to earn points by delivering a ball to a specified target, and the team that scores the most points wins the game. But the balls and their targets are different, the rules of play and the number of players are different, and so on. You wouldn't take a baseball bat to a basketball game, and if you did, you wouldn't get far insisting that other players use it. People would be surprised and confused if you swung a bat at a basketball, and if you did, they would be unenthusiastic about having you on their team. As ridiculous as it sounds, this scenario illustrates what happens to people on international assignment when their cultural scripts are at odds with local expectations.

Intercultural interaction often involves people trying to reach their goals using incompatible tools and methods—like two teams showing up for a game, one expecting to play baseball and the other basketball. But there's an important difference between cultural systems and athletics. It would be easy to sort out a baseball/basketball misunderstanding because players of either game probably know something about the other, and differences in gear and uniforms would be easy to spot. But people are usually only vaguely aware of cultural systems and often don't recognize signs of difference. And even when they do, they may be unable to identify one another's cultural scripts. Unlike the rules of athletic games, cultural rules are rarely clear and explicit, even to the people who use them. This book makes these cultural rules explicit, outlines ways to detect cultural difference, and explains how to manage intercultural situations successfully. Using the ARC system is like learning the rules of new games and developing skill at playing them, while teaching your counterparts the pleasures of your preferred game.

Cultural Frameworks

The cultural analysis system used here has its roots in work from the 1950s by the anthropologist Edward T. Hall, who first developed the concept of time as a "cultural dimension" perceived differently in the U.S. and the Middle East.[3] Hall identified other dimensions as well, and later researchers have introduced new ones. Although derived from these, my framework has been modified to make it easier to use in practical analysis and problem solving.

The ARC system includes eight cultural dimensions. One of these is **Emotion**, how much feeling people show when they interact. The poles of this dimension are the cultural tendencies **Neutral** and **Expressive**.



At one end of the continuum are Neutrals, who minimize emotion when they communicate. Their body language and facial expression are restrained, and they don't share their joys and sorrows openly. They talk about emotional matters in private settings, and do so quietly and undramatically. It's hard to tell how Neutrals feel during an interaction just by looking at them, and they offer little feedback during conversations and presentations. Sweden is an example of a country known for Neutral communication.

At the other end are Expressives. It's easy to tell what Expressives are feeling from their tone of voice and body language. They laugh out loud, frown, and use hand gestures to illustrate a point. They may raise their voices when they're angry. They celebrate enthusiastically and talk freely about their problems. Italians are well known for their Expressive tendencies.

[3] Hall, E. T. *The Silent Language*, (Doubleday, 1959).

There's nothing inherently good or bad about either of these cultural tendencies, and neither is better than the other. Each approach works in the environment it comes from, but when people from the two ends of the dimension come together, difficulties can arise. An Italian in Sweden might feel that Swedes are uncommunicative and unfriendly, and maybe that they're not very interesting. A Swede in Italy might find Italians loud and impolite, and possibly a bit out of control. Not everyone is as extreme as Swedes or Italians, of course. People in most countries fall closer to the middle of the dimension.

Although we're all familiar with the idea of cultural tendencies of particular countries, it's important to note that there's tremendous cultural variation *within* any single country due to differences in ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, and other factors. In fact, individuals can be said to have "personal cultures" based on how they've internalized their observations, experiences, and education. Learning the national patterns of Italy and Sweden wouldn't help you deal with an Expressive Swede or a Neutral Italian.

The ARC system will teach you to evaluate people, groups, and places based on their actual characteristics so you don't have to rely on country generalizations. To create a Personal Profile that identifies your own cultural tendencies, chart your answers to questions about your preferences and behaviors for each dimension. For a Counterpart Profile, record the tendencies that you observe in a person, group, or place. It would be awkward to ask people whether they're Expressive or Neutral, but you can answer this question for yourself by watching them interact, conduct meetings, and make presentations.

For the sake of conciseness, I use the term "counterpart" to refer to whatever entity you choose to analyze. You can use the system to understand the unspoken expectations of a new negotiating partner or the best way to motivate a new employee. You might want to assess the cultural orientation of a new work group you've been assigned to, a project team you'll be managing, or a customer you want to attract. Completing a profile of a city will help you work there effectively or negotiate successfully with a group there, and evaluating an acquired company will help you

develop policies to integrate it with yours. Create a Counterpart Profile for any international person, group, entity, or location you would like to understand better.

The Neutral/Expressive distinction is the easiest one to understand and recognize in action. We can't identify most of the cultural tendencies just by watching to see whether people gesture and laugh out loud in conversation, so for each dimension, there's a list of things to look for in public places, homes, and, of course, professional settings and meetings. There are questions to ask a stranger, things to look for in restaurants, ways to interpret annual reports, and many things to observe during social functions, business meetings, negotiations, and institutional visits.

Some Clarifications on the Approach

If you're skeptical about the validity of reducing human variation to eight bipolar scales, you have a point. Any model that divides human behavior into categories is artificial and arbitrary to a degree, and no model captures all the complexities of cultural variation. But this one covers enough to provide useful insight without being too complex to manage.

There is disagreement in the field about the number of cultural dimensions and how they should be characterized. I've selected a group that accounts for most misunderstandings and conflicts in business dealings and diplomacy. It's based on the work of respected researchers in the field of anthropology and cross-cultural business, drawing most heavily on the Trompenaars/Hampden-Turner framework, adapted for hands-on application. An explanation of how it compares with other frameworks is provided in Chapter 19.

Although eight cultural dimensions may seem like a lot to learn, you probably won't work with all eight at once. Any two people or groups usually have at least some cultural tendencies in common, so you will probably focus on just a few at a time. Chapters 4–6 provide a detailed description of each and scenarios showing each pair of tendencies in action to make them easier to learn.

Given that no two people are alike, even within the same family, you might wonder where cultural tendencies end and individual personality

begins. If there are Expressive Swedes and Neutral Italians, are they aberrations, and how do we evaluate their cultural tendencies? The answer is that each of us interprets cultural lessons in our own way, based on our unique personality and experience, so each person has a unique and personal cultural orientation. Cultural analysis will help you recognize and adapt to the way each person you meet acts out the teachings of their cultural environment.