Book The Mindful International Manager

How to work effectively across cultures

Jeremy Comfort and Peter Franklin
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Recommendation

Globalization and technology are making a small world even smaller. Yet cultural differences still exist. International managers have to recognize those distinctions and harness them to get the most out of their global employees. Consultant Jeremy Comfort and professor Peter Franklin provide basic pointers on how to become "mindful" of aspects of culture that, if ignored, could derail your business. The authors practice what they preach: Their plainly written guide is free of jargon and accessible to non-native English speakers, and it provides an essential overview of a complex, multifaceted subject. Seasoned international executives may find the book's contents to be old news. Nonetheless, *BooksInShort* recommends its concise and informative tips to frequent business travelers, expatriate employees, managers leading culturally diverse teams and anyone looking to get a better grip on doing business globally.

Take-Aways

- Cultural diversity adds another layer to the already complex job of management.
- "Mindful international managers" use their cultural awareness to guide their teams to greater, better performance.
- Your country, firm, profession and family all represent parts of your culture.
- Cultures are like icebergs: You need to dig below the surface to discover their truths.
- Concepts concerning "power, time, communication, and individualism and group orientation" affect behavior in different cultural contexts.
- Used widely, stereotypes can help managers navigate uncertain, complicated situations.
- Apply "the four *P*s" – "preparation, purpose, process and people" – to manage virtual teams in far-flung locations.
- Executives should understand the importance of networks in status-conscious cultures.
- How much your professional and private worlds intersect depends on whether you're interacting with a sociable "peach" culture or a privacy-oriented "coconut" society.
- Two-thirds of work problems result directly from language and cultural misunderstandings. Take the time to know your colleagues.

Summary

Small World, Big Differences

Understanding the cultural differences among the people you work with is not enough; you also must use those differences to reach your business goals. The ability to move from awareness to performance requires "mindfulness." Derived from Buddhist teachings, mindfulness allows you to recognize and intentionally use the "knowledge, skills and attitudes" you bring to a cross-cultural situation. This self-awareness opens the doors to understanding how others behave and communicate.

> "Accepting behavior and practices that are different from their own is a quality of effective international managers."

"Mindful international managers" share the following characteristics:

- They recognize that "context and process" can be as important as results.
- They help interactions with culturally diverse people flourish by listening, simplifying speech, "paraphrasing," verifying what's said and noticing "nonverbal behavior."
- They acknowledge their own "cultural and individual assumptions, values and norms."
- They understand that different cultures present alternative ways of doing and behaving.
- They notice the culturally diverse aspects of the people with whom they interact.
- They perceive others' perspectives and feelings.
- They allow for divergent viewpoints when considering a response.

> "One of the key competencies of mindful international managers is awareness and understanding of their own cultural icebergs."

Working with culturally or ethnically diverse staff members adds another layer to the already complex task of managing human beings. Assumptions you normally would make when dealing with people from your own culture might need more explanation when addressing people from another environment. For example, an American manager emails her Italian co-worker, "I'd like that report by Monday." She assumes he understands this to be an "urgent request," but he interprets it to be "a wish, not a request." Explicitly and clearly communicate what you need from your international teammates. Don't take anything for granted.

Icebergs, Dead Ahead

Specialists liken cultures to icebergs: You need to venture beneath the surface to discover cultural truths. For example, when you first enter a firm's building, you notice what's "above the surface": Work spaces can be open clusters or private, closed-door offices; staffers may dress informally or in business attire; employees may work all hours, or punch in or out at the same time. "Just below the surface" lie the accepted standards of conduct and corporate philosophy you soon must learn: What is the emphasis on client needs? Is there a team ethos? Do authority figures run the business? Living "deep below the surface," you'll find the widely understood, but rarely verbalized realities that you'll come to know about only with the passage of time. You may find that the firm is an "unstructured, individualistic, flexible" work environment or a "hierarchical, risk averse...bureaucratic" corporate setting.

Know Yourself and Others

Mindful international managers take the time to understand their own cultural background. Your country of origin is not the only factor that defines your culture; the profession you practice, the family you come from and the company you work for all represent cultures to which you belong. They each signify "an orientation system for behavior in the group."

> "People may receive vision and mission statements very skeptically if their management is not sensitive to a range of cultural preferences among its employees."

Consider the traits and customs of the following cultures when assessing yourself and your colleagues:

- **"Religious"** – Adherents may follow special dietary norms or holidays.
- **"Socioeconomic"** – Age, income and social class influence shared beliefs.
- **"Sectoral"** – Employees in particular industries may have common terminologies or dress.
- **"Functional"** – Educational and professional groups profess similarities.
- **"National and ethnic"** – Language, region and clan may distinguish national cultures further.
- **"Organizational"** – Companies differentiate themselves by their business practices and norms.

> "When you meet a Kazak or Brazilian or German for the first time, it is all too easy to think that you now understand something about all Kazaks, Brazilians or Germans and their cultures."

Don't let these perceived differences distract you from your goals as a manager. The "soft skills" of working with people should complement the "hard skills" of your professional expertise. Your ability to grasp and adapt to local cultural conditions can make achieving your business objectives easier.

> "One of the very difficult things to understand when working in a new culture is the basis of the networks that tie people together."

To delve beneath cultural icebergs, investigate the underlying values that determine an individual's or a group's behavior: "power, time, communication, and individualism and group orientation." Power refers to how people feel about hierarchies, structure and authority. For example, the citizens of former colonies Canada and Australia tend toward more casual organizations with minimal respect for authority. In these countries, the rich and powerful fall victim to "the tall-poppy syndrome" that cuts down those at the top. But in France and China, people respect power and esteem hierarchies. Similarly, large organizations tend to be highly structured and multilayered, while smaller entrepreneurial firms share power more equitably. Adapt your management style to each situation.

> "Being attuned to non-verbal signals is an ability of effective international managers."

In "more time-oriented cultures," meetings begin and end punctually, have a set agenda and accomplish a goal; conversely, in cultures where time is less of a controlling factor, expect flexible start times, no schedules and a view that relationship building is a valid outcome. Be attentive to how people communicate. For example, in "direct" countries like the Netherlands or Israel, people come to the point quickly; in Saudi Arabia or Thailand, relationships rule, so messages often can be contextual, and you must read between the lines. "Individualistic cultures" like the US's tolerate people's idiosyncratic and self-centered behavior; in "group-oriented cultures" like Japan's, the ethos centers around networking, getting along and working for the good of others.

Stereotypes

Often, people tend to lump together citizens of different nationalities or cultures according to stereotypes. This typecasting can help managers navigate uncertain, complicated situations involving multicultural teams, because stereotypes provide a shorthand code by which to make quick assessments. As long as you're aware you're labeling someone in a descriptive, but nonjudgmental, way, and you're open to questioning that stereotype, then stereotypes can serve a useful purpose. Pigeonholing others can be tricky. Don't assume, for instance, that the behavior of a quiet, reserved Japanese colleague might reflect cultural influences; he or she simply may be uncomfortable speaking English.

"Direction"

All employees need an idea of their company's goals, vision and mission. Yet different cultures apply their own filters in comprehending and reacting to corporate objectives. Some employees respond to the "big picture" of overarching goals, while others need detailed information to get onboard. Managers either should "push" communication in hierarchical societies that value authority and clear objectives, or "pull" it via dialogue in individualistic cultures that distrust powerful figures. Some cultures have a bottom-line, "short-term orientation": They prefer quick returns for their efforts. Others are more patient. Traditionalist societies place great emphasis on the past; some countries, particularly those that endure chronic war or deprivation, focus strictly on the present, while other cultures tend toward confidence and optimism about the future.

Virtual Management

Increasingly, groups made up of employees in different countries and from disparate backgrounds may come together as virtual teams to work on specific projects.

> "People who nod their heads may seem to understand but they may be doing so more for reasons of politeness than of comprehension."

To lead these diverse groups effectively, remember "the four *P*s":

1. **"Preparation"** – Get ready for your first meeting by communicating clear instructions, missions and outcomes. Use email to set up your first virtual meeting.
2. **"Purpose"** – State up front why the company formed this team. Go beyond what you might normally explain to a group of your own co-nationals and provide detail not "only on the foreground but fill in the background, too."
3. **"Process"** – Be explicit about team deliverables, schedules and procedures. Don't assume everyone shares your priorities.
4. **"People"** – Remember that others might have concerns that go beyond the team's mission. Be aware of mood and sentiment.

One Manager, Many Roles

International executives work both as managers and subject matter experts with subordinates who both are local and distant. These multifaceted roles can introduce enormous difficulties and conflicts. A manager should decide which team members might need a "directive," or hands-off approach and which ones require a more "supportive" approach. Values attached to education, expertise, experience and titles vary. An Indonesian staffer expects more direction and knowledge from a manager than a Swedish worker would. Executives should understand the importance of networks in status-conscious cultures where belonging to a particular tribe or school confers influence and rank. In China, *guanxi* refers to the web of contacts that helps individuals navigate work and social situations: "Having good *guanxi*" confers power and raises an individual's standing in society.

Cross-Cultural Communications

Working with teammates who all possess different mother tongues presents its own challenges. When collaborating in a common language such as English, slow your speech, increase repetition and check often for comprehension. Focus also on body language: "eye contact, physical distance between people, facial expressions and greeting rituals." Some cultures discourage making or keeping eye contact; similarly, appropriate personal space is culturally dependent. Not everyone expresses emotion through facial gestures, and whether you shake hands or exchange kisses on the cheek varies among cultures.

> "One person's conflict is another person's debate."

Listen also for differing speech patterns: Some groups don't consider interruptions rude, others will "overlap" in their talking and still others may pause significantly before responding. Focus on clarifying your statements. Don't just say, "I'd like that report by the end of the day." Explain why: "It's very important for me to have time to read it." Similarly, change "I disagree with you" to "I disagree with you. It's nothing personal. I just think there's a better way to do it."

> "Speaking transparently means not just clearly communicating your message, but also the intention behind it."

Determine whether the culture you're interacting with is a "peach" or a "coconut." People in peach cultures blend their work lives with their social sides. With peaches, expect to socialize outside office hours. Those in coconut cultures draw a distinct line between their private and their professional lives. What may appear to be aloofness is really a "respect for your privacy."

> "Effective international managers are emotionally strong and have a sense of adventure. They look for variety, change and stimulation in life and avoid what is safe and predictable."

Note how your culturally diverse colleagues react to feedback. Avoid direct comments to those from group-oriented cultures. Outright statements may seem threatening to someone for whom saving face is important. Don't single out any such individual within the collective for criticism or praise. Use "blurring techniques" to couch negative comments: Direct your feedback to the group, ask someone else to pass along your comments or create a theoretical situation to highlight what might have gone wrong in reality.

"You have to be careful about giving critical feedback as it may easily offend people."

If you're from an individualistic society and you must handle a disagreement with someone from a group-oriented culture, "be patient," listen carefully and ask collaborative questions: "What do you think we should do?" Conversely, a group-oriented person dealing with an individualist should be assertive and focus directly on the facts.

"'When in Rome do as the Romans do'...You need to consider how far down the road to Rome you go!"

Take time to learn and understand the cultural differences among your colleagues. Research shows that only one-third of the difficulties international managers encounter on the job are work-related; the rest derive directly from language and cultural misunderstandings. Enabling a functioning, multicultural work environment will increase your firm's chances for success.

About the Authors

Jeremy Comfort founded York Associates, UK. **Peter Franklin** is a professor of international management at Konstanz University of Applied Sciences, Germany.