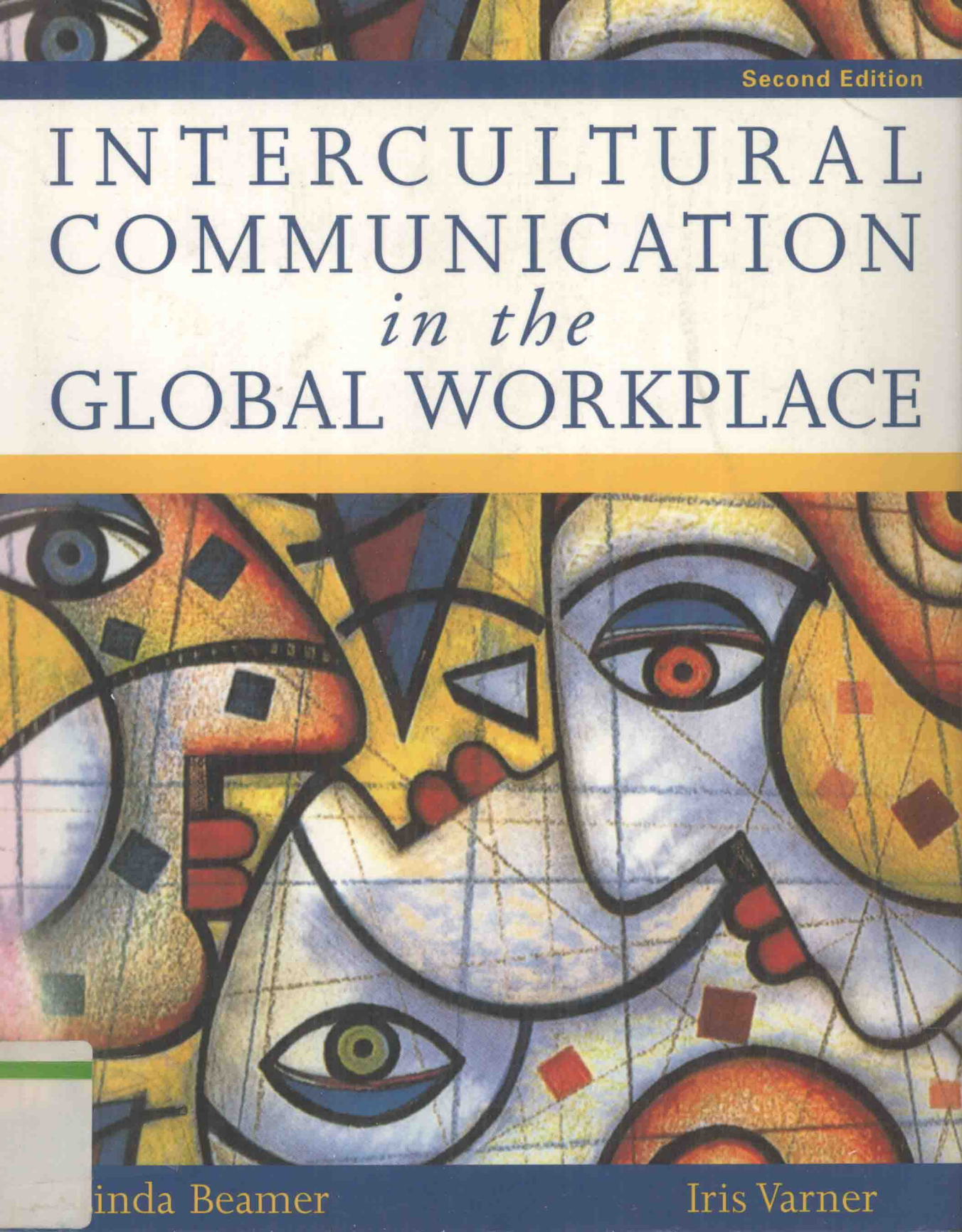




Second Edition

# INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION *in the* GLOBAL WORKPLACE

Linda Beamer

Iris Varner

# INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN THE GLOBAL WORKPLACE

Second Edition

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**For David and Carson**

# Preface to the Second Edition

Welcome to the second edition of *Intercultural Communication in the Global Workplace*. We appreciate the reception of the first edition, particularly the many comments and suggestions users gave us. The second edition has benefited from the incorporation of many of these comments, and we are confident that this book presents a valuable tool in your teaching and research. Finally, we are very grateful to readers for making this book a best-seller among intercultural business communication textbooks.

Globalization and the effects of culture on human behavior are constantly in the news today. The New Economy is active across national and ethnic boundaries in ways we did not begin to anticipate a mere five years ago. Dramatic changes in technology, such as the growth of the Internet and the adoption around the planet of satellite and cellular telephony, make international communication even more commonplace today. Businesses need intercultural communication skills even more than they did when this book was first written. The second edition of *Intercultural Communication in the Global Workplace* has updated discussions of knowledge management, globalization, and technology in business communication today.

What else is new? This second edition also addresses an issue that is ever more present in the increased volume of intercultural interactions today: ethics. Readers will find a new discussion in Chapter 7 of ethical issues across cultures. The discussion of world religions in Chapter 3 has been expanded also. In Chapter 1, brief summaries of intercultural theory help focus the approach of this book, which is understanding cultures through values orientations.

We have added more short cases. Readers will see introductory vignettes to each chapter to illustrate the issues covered in the chapter. Chapter summaries are in bullet outlines, to give succinct overviews of the chapters' contents. New illustrations and examples have been added, often drawn from cultures not mentioned in the first edition. Specific sample communications have been added to Chapters 5 and 10. Finally, the entire book has been improved with more discussions.

Users of the first edition will also notice a difference in appearance of this edition: The text that illustrates chapter key points is printed against a screened background for more emphasis. Key words have been boldfaced and a few new exhibits have been added.

These changes reflect our commitment to offer an accessible source for readers looking for a conceptual basis with practical applications to help readers develop intercultural communication awareness, knowledge, and skills. Books on international business mention the need for intercultural communication skills but tend to emphasize functional areas—

finance, marketing, and management—and to eschew skills development. Training programs tend to favor do's and taboos of international interaction—don't cross your legs and be sure to accept that cup of tea—without an underlying conceptual basis that enables people to interact effectively when they are outside the scripted list of rules. In spite of the numbers of businesspeople who need intercultural business communication skills, few sources exist for a systematic development of competence. This book fills this void.

As in the first edition, this second edition of *Intercultural Communication in the Global Workplace* provides examples of the implications of cultural values for business communication. We explore the relationships among the cultural environment of the firm, the structure of the firm, and appropriate ways to communicate within and from/to firms. Throughout the discussions about specific communication tasks, we concentrate on the underlying cultural reasons for behavior. We confidently believe that this approach, as we asserted in the first edition, will help the reader develop an ability to work successfully within an environment of cultural diversity, both at home and abroad.

We have continued to strive to avoid specific cultural viewpoints in this book, but have come to realize since the first edition that total cultural neutrality is not possible. Nor is it ultimately desirable; every human has some cultural filters through which she or he views the world. Nevertheless, the framework we develop here applies to all readers regardless of their own native cultures. This book is for anyone from anywhere around the globe who wants to develop and improve intercultural business communication skills. Intercultural business communication is an exciting field, and we are proud to be able to contribute to a broader understanding of it.

# Acknowledgements

*Intercultural Communication in the Global Workplace* is the result of many years of work. While this book is based to a great extent on our professional research and our personal experiences, we also want to acknowledge the suggestions and advice we have received from our families, friends, clients, colleagues, and students. We are particularly indebted to the users of the first edition for giving us valuable feedback. Many people were generous in sharing information with us, and we are grateful for their support.

We give special thanks to the reviewers who carefully read the first edition and offered their insights and suggestions.

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Last, but not least, we thank the people at Irwin: Craig Beytien for supporting the second edition; Andy Winston the sponsoring editor, Sara Strand, the editorial coordinator, and Craig Leonard, the project manager. Their work and support made this edition possible.

# About the Authors

**Linda Beamer** is a full professor in the Department of Marketing at California State University, Los Angeles, where in addition to marketing courses she teaches business communication, intercultural communication, diversity in the workplace, and courses in high-performance management and international business in the MBA core.

She has taught and consulted in Britain, Canada, the Middle East, China, Argentina, Hong Kong, and New Zealand. In addition, she and her husband spend as much time as possible in their house in central Mexico.

Her BA is from the College of Wooster, in Ohio (with one year in Scotland at Edinburgh University), and her MA and PhD are from the University of Toronto. The latter led to dual US–Canadian citizenship. Her research, resulting in about two dozen publications, has focused primarily on the effect of culture on communication, with special interest in Chinese communication issues. She serves on the Editorial Board of the *Business Communication Quarterly*, and is Associate Editor of the *Journal of Business Communication*. She served as chair of the Intercultural Committee of the Association for Business Communication for three years and as a member of the Board of Directors for five years. She was voted a Fellow of the International Academy of Intercultural Research at its inception, and is a member of the International Communication Association and the Association for International Business.

Beamer is the recipient of two two-year grants from the Department of Education's program for Business and International Education, as well as a research grant from the C.R. Anderson Foundation. She was honored to receive the outstanding publication award (1995) from the Association for Business Communication, and a three-year Adjunct Professor appointment at UNITEC, Auckland, New Zealand.

**Iris I. Varner** is a professor in the Department of Management and Quantitative Methods, College of Business at Illinois State University, where she teaches the cultural environment of international business, international management, and managerial communication both at the undergraduate and graduate level. Her PhD, MBA, and MA are from the University of Oklahoma. She has the Staatsexamen and Assessorenexamen from the Albert-Ludwigs-Universität, Freiburg, Germany.

Varner has extensive international experience. She grew up in former East Germany, studied in Germany, France, Great Britain, the United States, and Taiwan. She has given seminars and lectures around the globe, including New Zealand, Russia, France, Belgium, Japan, and Germany, and has spent time in many other countries.

Varner is the author of numerous articles in the area of intercultural managerial communication. She is the author of *Contemporary Business Report Writing*, published by the

Dryden Press, and has presented her research at regional, national, and international conventions. She has been honored with the Outstanding Membership Award and the Meada Gibbs Outstanding Teaching Award of the Association for Business Communication. She was named a Caterpillar Scholar and a State Farm Fellow by Illinois State University.

Varner is president of the Association for Business Communication, where she has been a member since 1976. She was chair of the Ethics Committee and an active member of the International Committee. She is a member of the Academy of Management and the Academy for Human Resource Development. She serves as a reviewer for a number of scholarly publications and consults for a variety of national and international firms.

# INTRODUCTION

## The Need for Intercultural Business Communication Competence

What does culture have to do with business? Many business majors and practitioners immersed in questions of financial forecasting, market studies, and management models have turned aside from the question of culture and how it affects business. Unlike the hard data from measurable issues, culture is soft and slippery; you can't really grasp culture in your two hands and understand what you've got.

But more and more organizations are finding themselves involved in communication across cultures, between cultures, among cultures—because they are doing business in foreign countries, perhaps, or because they are sourcing from another country, seeking financing from another country, or have an increasingly multicultural workforce.

In the United States, for example, the percentages of Latinos from Mexico and Central and South America and Asians from Southeast Asia, China, India, and Pakistan, are growing. In Europe, the composition of the population is changing as more and more people immigrate from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. In the Middle East, many workers come from India, the Philippines, and Southeast Asia.

As a result of these migrations, people from diverse backgrounds and different languages are working side by side in many countries. Intercultural communication at work is not the goal of some distant future; it is a real need here and now, and this book addresses that need.

Business communication is intercultural communication. In order to communicate with another culture, you have to come to terms with it somehow. You need to understand it. This book offers an approach to unfamiliar cultures that makes understanding easier and consequently makes business communication with them more effective. This book is based on the idea that intercultural business communication skills can be learned.

At its lowest level, business communication with unfamiliar cultures means simply finding a translator for conducting discussions in a foreign language. However, as more and more corporations are finding out, communication is about meanings and not just words.

In order to understand the significance of a message from someone, you need to understand the way that person looks at the world, and the values that weigh heavily in that person's cultural backpack. You need to understand the meanings that are not put into words, the importance of the words that are used, and the way the message is organized and transmitted. You also need to know what to expect when that other person engages in a

particular communication behavior such as making a decision known, or negotiating a sales agreement, or writing a legal document such as a contract. And you'd be wise to know something about the organization that person works in and how its structure affects communication.

In applying intercultural communication skills to practical business concerns, this book makes an important contribution. Most books about doing business with people from other cultures come from one of two areas: intercultural communication and its near relative intercultural training, or international business. Intercultural communication is grounded in a body of theory, but has little application to business communication. Intercultural training draws from psychology and related fields and specializes in preparing people for sojourns in foreign countries for development work, such as for the Peace Corps for instance, for studying abroad, or for working for an employer in an expatriate posting. This particular training also has little application to business communication.

Books on international business, on the other hand, concentrate on business functions such as finance, management, marketing, shipping and insurance, and accounting. They tend to ignore the importance of the all-encompassing communication tasks and the skills necessary to complete them successfully. They also tend to ignore the different priorities in other cultures that affect the act of communication and its outcomes.

This book connects business communication and understanding of cultural priorities with actual business practices. Of course, business practices themselves, as this book points out, are culturally based.

In combining intercultural communication skills with business, this book helps you become a successful communicator in culturally diverse environments both at home and abroad. As more and more firms are finding out, effective intercultural communication is crucial for success, domestically and internationally.

*acknowledging the cultural diversity*

## INTERCULTURAL BUSINESS COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE AND GROWING DOMESTIC DIVERSITY

All over the world nations are trying to come to terms with the growing diversity of their populations. Reactions range from acceptance to mere tolerance to rejection. As migrations of workers and of refugees have increased globally, some countries are trying to control diversity by establishing strict guidelines for immigration from other countries. Other countries are attempting to develop government policies concerning the rights of immigrants to preserve their own cultures in adopted homelands. Canada is an example of a country where federal and provincial governments have Ministers of Multiculturalism to protect the cultural "mosaic" pattern that immigrants bring to Canada.

The United States historically afforded a home to more people of diverse cultures than any other country. But even in the United States, with its ideals of equality and tolerance, the advantages and disadvantages of acknowledging diversity are hotly debated. Recently some social critics in the United States have voiced opposition to measures that preserve immigrants' cultural differences. They say the insistence on diversity actually separates Americans from one another by forcing them to focus on what differentiates them. Some authors argue that the "melting pot" that describes American culture depends upon the fusing of all other cultural identities into one. They claim that efforts to preserve immigrant

cultures actually divide immigrants into categories, instead of treating them all as one “American” group. They suggest this is contrary to the American ideal of offering equal American-ness to everybody. Furthermore, they warn that multiculturalism may threaten the very characteristic that is so American: the union of one from many.

Today in the United States, a longstanding tradition of tolerance coexists side by side with an aversion to difference. Uniformity (for people of all cultures) is easier to deal with than diversity. Diversity is difficult. Often the impulse to deny cultural differences comes from an embarrassment at focusing on difference, since frequently to be different in the United States is to be excluded. It isn’t polite to point out that someone looks different, talks differently, wears different clothes, or eats different food. So, many times out of a concern to avoid making someone feel uncomfortable, difference is played down.

This attitude may be motivated by a sincere desire for equal behavior toward people, regardless of their ethnic or cultural background, under the all-encompassing umbrella of the ideal of equality. After all, most people who call themselves “American” have ancestors who were immigrants. Today many still have a strong desire to include newcomers in a friendly and tolerant national embrace and to affirm the high priority of equality in American culture.

But the truth is that people from different cultures really are different. That’s a great strength of the human race and a potential source of delight and wonderment as much as of fear and suspicion—the choice is ours. People of different cultures begin with different databases, we use different operating environments, we run different software and process information differently—we may even have different goals. To pretend we’re all alike underneath is wrong and can lead to ineffectual communication, or worse.

While the debate is growing about how much to focus on cultural diversity, in fact cultural diversity is the reality. Businesses must deal with it. Individuals within organizations must also come to terms with diversity. *The way to deal with diversity is not to deny it or ignore it, but to learn about differences so they don’t impair communication and successful business transactions.*

The description of the United States as a “melting pot” is neither an accurate description of the reality nor an ideal that many of the more recent immigrants embrace. Even the European immigrants of a previous century did not totally “melt”; they created a new culture with distinct differences based on cultural heritage. As the new immigrants arrive, the United States culture becomes a “spicy stew.” The potatoes stay potatoes, the carrots stay carrots, the onions stay onions, but all take on certain characteristics of each others’ flavors. This blending creates a unique combination that gains from each ingredient. The United States’ value of tolerance allows immigrants the freedom to keep their own identities while becoming part of a new culture. It is an ideal, but it is also achievable; in fact, it already exists to a degree in some communities in the United States.

Cultural differences don’t prevent us from working with each other or communicating with each other or having productive business transactions. Indeed, we *must* learn to work with each other. The future of any organization depends on it. The reality is that businesses will increasingly be spicy stews of cultures, and so increasingly will the whole globe they inhabit. This fact is one reason why we must all acknowledge diversity and accept it. Another reason is that immigrants can add enormously to a society’s—or an organization’s—culture.

The biggest gain from accepting cultural differences is that cultural diversity enriches each one of us. People around the world and throughout history have developed a stunning variety of social systems and hierarchies of values. As a member of the human race, you can claim your rightful part-ownership of this richness, and you can celebrate the fertility of the human imagination along with its diverse products.

The essential ingredient for a successful cultural stew is skill in intercultural communication. Companies like Hewlett-Packard in the United States have discovered the value of intercultural communication skills and the increased productivity they bring, and they have instituted diversity programs to train employees. They understand that the first step in effective intercultural communication is acceptance of diversity. This means we examine our own values and the values of others, look at the implications of these values for business, determine where the differences lie, and see how we can best overcome the differences and work together.

## CHANGES IN COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY AND POLITICAL STRUCTURES

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The 20th century nurtured an unprecedented change in communication technology. International communication that only a few decades ago took days, if not weeks, now takes seconds. With E-mail, faxes, telephones, and the Web we can contact our international partners at a moment's notice. If we want a more personal exchange, teleconferencing can bring the other person right into our office. And if we want a true face-to-face discussion, jets can take us anywhere within hours. The variety of channels of communication is amazing. The choice of which channel to use in a particular situation is itself influenced by cultural priorities and values.

The changes in technology have facilitated the exchange of ideas, but they also have magnified the possibilities for cultural blunders. It is so easy to assume that the person on the other end of the line communicates just as we do. After all, he or she uses the same technology and maybe even the same business terminology.

In addition to changes in technology, there have been massive political and economic changes in recent years that affect business communication internationally. Countries that once were part of the Soviet Block now struggle to define and realize national goals; China is adopting Western practices and experimenting with a market economy. Small industrialized countries resent being bullied by the big ones. Non-Western countries are becoming more assertive and protective of their cultural values and behaviors and do not quietly accept Western business practices any longer.

These new voices are increasingly powerful. Not long ago an elite of industrialized countries could more or less dictate economic practices. This is changing. Today those first-world countries must take into consideration the cultural values and practices of these new players.

As a result, understanding other cultures is more important than ever. If we consider that people from the same economic, political, and cultural background have problems communicating effectively, we can appreciate the difficulties and challenges that people from diverse cultures face when trying to communicate. Misunderstandings will always be

a part of intercultural communication. One of the goals of this book is to minimize misunderstandings through an awareness of the priorities and expectations of business partners.

## INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS AND CORPORATE RESPONSES

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Many firms around the world have expanded internationally over the past decade. Yet until recently, the implications of intercultural communication skills for globalization were seldom addressed. Managers talked about the need for faster and more efficient communication, as if speed guaranteed effective communication. They paid lip service to the need for good cross-cultural communication, but staffing decisions were typically based on technical knowledge rather than good cross-cultural communication skills.

With growing competition and increasing globalization, that attitude is beginning to change. International experience is becoming more important for making it to the top of the corporate ladder, but it will undoubtedly be more universally valued in the future.

Consider the “world car” Ford produces in Europe and sells in 52 countries worldwide. An international team designed the car, the “Mondeo.” The engines come to Kansas City from Cleveland, Ohio; Chihuahua, Mexico; and Cologne, Germany. Seats are made in the United States and the moon roof is made in Canada. Air-conditioning is made in Charleville, France, and the catalytic converter comes from Brussels, Belgium. Throughout the Ford Motor Company, intercultural business communication takes place constantly to get the job done. Engines and other components come to the Genk, Belgium plant from Britain, Germany, France, Holland, Sweden, Spain, Michigan, Indiana, and Ohio. Ford uses a global sourcing procedure for choosing suppliers of the thousands of smaller parts, through an intense international competition.

Ford produced the global “Mondeo” in order to meet global competition. For the same reason Volvo, the national pride of Sweden, and Renault, a French firm owned largely by the government of France, combined forces to form the sixth largest automobile company in the world. Ford is now a part-owner of Volvo, as well as Mazda from Japan, and Jaguar and Aston Martin from Great Britain. Daimler-Benz, a German firm that produced top quality cars for decades, merged with Chrysler from the United States. The new company, DaimlerChrysler, recently added a share of Mitsubishi from Japan and Hyundai from Korea to the ownership mix.

The trend toward a global business environment is not restricted to the big industrialized countries such as the United States, Germany, Japan, France, Canada, and Great Britain. Nor is it restricted to large cities or, in the United States, the industrial centers on the East and West coasts. It involves geographic locations that just a few years ago were considered to be wholly engaged in domestic business. Many small towns in the landlocked states of Mexico, for example, are involved in international business today.

Local firms may export or import, they may be owned by foreign firms, or foreign firms may establish subsidiaries. People who never dreamed of going into international business may work side by side with recent immigrants from different cultures. The salesperson in a small business in a small town in any one of a hundred countries may have to answer inquiries from around the globe. The salesperson won’t have time to think about how to deal with a foreigner. She or he must be ready to communicate on the spot.

## THE FOUNDATION FOR INTERCULTURAL BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

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The first step in effective intercultural communication is the understanding and acceptance of differences. That does not mean we have to agree with another culture's viewpoint, or that we have to adopt another culture's values. It does mean we and they examine our and their priorities and determine how we all can best work together, being different.

In the process, we will realize that a person entering another culture will always have to adapt to a number of cultural conditions. That doesn't mean turning one's back on one's own culture or denying its priorities. Rather, it means learning what motivates others and how other cultural priorities inform the behavior, attitudes, and values of business colleagues. This approach means adding to one's own culture, not subtracting from it. For example, a businessperson from New Zealand going to Japan must adapt to many Japanese practices, just as a Japanese businessperson going to New Zealand must adapt to a variety of New Zealand practices.

In attempting to understand another culture's perspective, we will be further ahead if we take off our own cultural blinders and develop sensitivity in the way we speak and behave. That is not always easy. We are all culturally based and culturally biased.

For example, people in the United States refer to themselves as "Americans." They often say that they live in "America." Most Europeans use the same terminology. Germans, for example, refer to the country of the United States as *die Staaten* (the States), or as *USA*, but they always refer to the people as *Amerikaner* (Americans). The French call the people of the United States *les américains* (Americans); they refer to the country as *les Etats Unis* (the United States) or *l'Amerique* (America). The Japanese refer to people from the United States as *amerika-jin*. But this is not precisely accurate; it is an example of cultural bias. People from Central America and South America call themselves *American* too. They call people from the United States *Yanquis* (Yankees).

As residents of the United States, accustomed to using the word *American* to refer to people of the United States, we have struggled with the terminology in the writing of this book. We have attempted to distinguish between other Americans and those of the United States. But no exclusive term exists for the people of the United States—such as *Statesians*—comparable to *Mexicans* or *Canadians*. We use *the United States* when referring to the country, and often use the phrase *people of the United States* and *United States businesspeople* to refer to the people. But occasionally, when we feel the context is clearly the United States, we also use the term *Americans* to denote the people.

## ORGANIZATION OF THIS BOOK

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This book has three major parts:

1. An understanding of culture and how to know unfamiliar cultures for business, and culture's impact on communication.
2. The application of intercultural communication skills to specific business communication tasks.
3. The implications of intercultural business communication for the domestic multicultural/international/global firm.

**PART ONE** This section begins with an introduction to culture followed by the first steps in developing intercultural communication skills and a look at the way culture affects communication. Then Chapter 2 examines the issue of language in communication with an unfamiliar culture and discusses the important role of the interpreter. Chapters 3 and 4 present a structure for understanding the dimensions of an unfamiliar culture through posing specific questions in five different categories. These questions cover the priorities or values of any culture that are important for business. Examples show how these priorities affect business transactions.

**PART TWO** This section examines how culture affects business communication. Chapter 5 discusses the influences of cultural values and language patterns on the organization of business messages. Chapter 6 looks at the role of nonverbal communication across cultures. Chapter 7 discusses what happens when people from different cultures encounter one another in specific social contexts that have different meanings for each party, and touches upon ethics across culture. Chapter 8 examines the impact of cultural priorities on information gathering, decision making and problem solving—all activities that involve certain communication tasks. Chapter 9 concludes this section on the application of intercultural communication skills to business negotiations across cultures.

**PART THREE** Chapter 10 explores the legal environment and the communication implications for the international/global manager. Chapter 11 ties intercultural business communication practices to the organization and structure of the international/global firm. A broad variety of examples illustrates the impact of structure on communication. The last chapter discusses the relationship among cultural awareness, the position of the communicator in the firm and the firm's degree of international involvement, and choice of communication channel. Who should communicate with whom? What are the appropriate channels? What is the appropriate level of cultural understanding? In short, how can the communication be carried out most effectively?

In connecting intercultural communication theory and international business concerns, this book presents a unique approach. It probes the reasons for cultural priorities and behavior and identifies the major applications in intercultural business communication tasks. In this process it establishes a framework that will help readers ask the right questions and identify cultural issues so they can communicate effectively in new cultural settings.

This book is based on many years of experience, living and working in a variety of cultures, and of research. As other scholars in this field have pointed out, this is not an exact science. The many examples make the book particularly valuable for anyone who wants to be an effective player in international business.

## NOTES

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