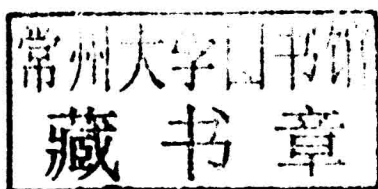# The International Manager

A Guide for Communicating, Cooperating, and Negotiating with Worldwide Colleagues

Frank Garten

The International Manager

A Guide for Communicating, Cooperating, and Negotiating with Worldwide Colleagues

Frank Garten

CRC Press
Taylor & Francis Group
Boca Raton   London   New York

The International Manager

Foreword

Why a book on how to manage, communicate, and cooperate across cultures?

These days we all face international connections in our everyday lives. Whether we buy raw materials from a supplier in Australia, sell end products to a client in Brazil, or form a joint venture with a company in the United Arab Emirates, we have to connect with people from other cultures. Privately and professionally we deal frequently with people who think and act differently from the way we do. And most of the time we rely on our intuition and experience to handle our interactions with others. Often this is successful, but just as often, we feel a degree of tension: unclear communication, misunderstandings, and lack of trust. All too frequently I see that cultural barriers and poor communication stand in the way of achieving great results.

This can be avoided, and I believe that this book will help clarify and resolve many of these problems.

In Borealis, I see the importance of strong cross-cultural cooperation. We are an international company where people maintain daily contact between European innovation centers and manufacturing facilities in Austria, Finland, Sweden, and Belgium. Our Borouge facility is a joint venture with the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC) in the Emirates, and we run compounding units in Brazil, the United States, and Italy. We recently acquired a French company, and our 6,000+ employees represent many different nationalities. Our global operations are strong: we operate in more than 120 countries.

We take pride in the things we realize with so many different people. This reflects one of our core values: respect. We are one company, building on diversity.

I remember one of the first times I went to the Emirates. I had to learn that whereas we believe that "time is running" and "time is money," they believe "time is coming"—so the sense of urgency is completely different. You need to understand this if you want to be effective.

Frank Garten knows our company, and has been a facilitator in one of the leadership programs for our multinational talents. Some of the topics we deal with in the context of that program resound in this book: open

and honest communication, conflict resolution, motivation and evalua-tion of people, and change management are all daily activities for many Borealis managers. And doing all of that against a backdrop of a variety of cultures is a challenge. It is a challenge we are delighted to accept.

I like this book, for the reason that it reveals the critical communication steps that are essential in building up successful international cooperation:

- The willingness to invest in a long-term relationship of mutual trust (we-dimension)
- The openness to really listen to what is going on in the life of the other person (you-dimension)
- The clarity to express your own contributions and intentions (I-dimension)

The book convinces the reader that in order to work successfully across cultures, you need to understand the other culture and invest time in decoding a different way of working. But knowledge is not enough. A solid basis of communication skills helps to navigate cultural barriers smoothly. The first part of the book deals with this topic. The book ends with four chapters dedicated to what managers in my company face on a daily basis: managing teams, managing performance, managing change, and negoti-ating across cultures.

The title of the book is well chosen; it's very human to blame external factors for the things that are not going well in our lives. And when cul-tural difficulties come up, our own superiority drives us into the mode of "I'm right, so the other person must be wrong." Managing others effec-tively across cultures requires a manager to look in the mirror, and find the tools in himself to deal with the problems that emerge.

Although well researched, the book is mainly practical; 100 concrete tips help the reader to apply effective measures in his or her daily work. These tips actualize the options: they are reflective, yet practical.

I recognize that this book has been written by someone who under-stands the international business context, and who has worked in the field himself. It is my pleasure to recommend *The International Manager*, and I wish the reader every success in applying the useful tips in his or her own international ventures.

Mark Garrett
CEO Borealis

Introduction

It was during one of my travels for Philips in South Korea that I missed my flight back to the Netherlands. Rather than spend an extra day in the hotel in Seoul, I booked a day trip to the border with North Korea. The next day, I was standing at the frontier with this mysterious and inaccessible country, in the village of Panmunjom in the middle of the demilitarized zone. The border is drawn on the ground. Stepping forward and crossing the line was unthinkable. At that moment, my challenge became to return to that same spot, at some point in my life, but to approach it from the north on that occasion. Because that seemed impossible. And because I was fascinated by North Korea that, in spite of all the negative things we hear about it in the news, is also a beautiful country.

A few years later this became reality. It had been a fascinating trip through the mysterious, closed, but also intensely beautiful *Chosŏn* (as the North Koreans refer to the whole of Korea). Standing at the same border as a few years earlier—but now on the other side of the line—was unreal. It was in that period of time that I knew that cross-cultural work would become the focus of my professional life. The experience of traveling through North Korea reinforced what I knew already: my truth is only my truth, and another person growing up in a different culture has a different truth. My truth is based on what others have told me. In the same way, North Koreans have also been told certain things, and these things form their truth. They have been told that South Korea has been occupied by the Americans (the "U.S. imperialist aggressor") since 1953. We know better. But only because we have been told differently. And we think that is better.

Reading stories like this often leads unwittingly to moral judgment: better rather than different. Our way of doing things is what has become natural to us, and other ways of doing things are quickly qualified as inefficient, irrational, or simply stupid and wrong. As Lewis says in his splendid book *When Cultures Collide* (Lewis 2006): "These various manners and mannerisms cause us great amusement. We smile at foreign eccentricity, congratulating ourselves on our normality."

For any global company, internationally dispersed teams are commonplace these days. Employees in different countries and different time zones work in project teams, their success relying on smooth cooperation

between the members of the team. Even when the language barrier can be overcome, the different time zones and dissimilar cultures can easily cause the team to function in a nonoptimal manner. And even if your company itself does not have globally dispersed teams, almost all companies these days work with suppliers, customers, and partners from other cultures. This trend will further intensify in the years to come: the professional of the future does not work in an office, but works office-free in a network of other professionals, connected online, independent of the time zone and culture in which they all reside. The success of a company increasingly depends on the ability to coordinate its activities across a connected network of professionals.

Problems do arise in this context. My experience is that difficulties with cross-cultural work can often be prevented. It all starts with the willingness to understand the other person who is so very different. The Korean manager is part of one or multiple interconnected groups. The Russian engineer works in a strictly hierarchical context. The West African salesman relies on strong interpersonal relationships. And the Hungarian project manager has grown up with typical masculine habits like competitiveness and assertiveness. We can hope that the Korean, Russian, West African, and Hungarian professionals will change their behavior and become more like us, but this is unlikely to happen. Fortunately. But what can change is our willingness to understand them, and the behavior we choose to adopt in our response to them.

This rationale became the basis of a model I use in every intercultural awareness program I run. It relies on a three-step approach:

1. Look in the mirror. Understand the impact of your own behavior— whether determined by your culture, your organization, or your personality—on others.
2. Understand the other person. Develop understanding of the other culture you deal with.
3. Make a conscious choice. Take personal responsibility for the behavioral choices you make. Decide to adjust to the other culture. Or decide not to. As long as this is a conscious choice, you have acted responsibly and constructively.

Many companies—when dealing with intercultural difficulties—organize an "intercultural awareness" training for their employees. These trainings often deal only with step 2: theoretical knowledge about other

cultures. I believe that a more advanced approach yields better and lasting results, as becomes clear from the three steps described above. This has also become the focus of this book: understand your impact on others, learn about the others, and make a conscious choice.

Many people hope they can rely on the experiences they have previously gained when working with other cultures. As S.P. Verluyten states in the book *Intercultural Skills for International Business and International Relations* (Verluyten 2010): "But there is still the naïve idea that intercultural skills are easily acquired 'on the spot' through travelling and experience. But there is ample empirical evidence that simply exposing people to different cultures does not automatically lead to mutual sympathy and improved understanding."

When adjusting to the other—different—person you have to step out of your own frame of reference, and accept that the frame of reference of the other person is different. Not better, not worse: just different. Not strange, not irrational: just different. To step into this unknown frame of reference enriches your world, and prevents hasty judgment and an unjustified—and occasionally cruel—exclusion of others who are not like us.

SETUP OF THE BOOK: READING TIPS

The International Manager starts with a reflection on your own communication style: Chapters 1 and 2 describe models of influencing and methods to breach ineffective communication patterns. Having examined the nonverbal part of interpersonal communication in Chapter 3, we subsequently address personal preferences in Chapter 4. These four chapters form the basis of *The International Manager*: looking in the mirror and becoming aware of the effect of your own communication, and building up a toolbox to communicate effectively in difficult situations (step 1 in the above three-step approach).

Only in Chapter 5 do we activate the dimension of culture. After describing what culture is and the general characteristics of culture (Chapter 5), we become acquainted with the dimensions of culture as defined by Hofstede et al. (2010) in Chapter 6. We see how people in different countries have been programmed differently, and we examine these mental programs through the lenses of the five independent dimensions of culture. Chapter 7 takes this one step further, and describes the most relevant

cultural characteristics of several countries with which a lot of business interactions take place.

The last part of the book applies this knowledge to specific job aspects that every manager has to deal with. The models for performance management, team management, change management, and negotiation are discussed against a backdrop of different cultural programming. Here we see that most management models find their origin in Western (predominantly American) culture. These models only become meaningful in a global context once the manager looks in the mirror, recognizes where his own models no longer apply, and then adopts a flexible attitude to adjust his approach where needed.

This book targets managers in companies whose business takes place in a global context. The insights and tips are of benefit to any manager, regardless of cultural programming. The last four chapters of the book, in particular, come to life most of all when you continuously translate the insights to your own cross-cultural experiences. This should benefit globally operating product and marketing managers, engineers, project leaders, program managers, change managers, and specialists. The book benefits professionals at all levels, from the boardroom to the workfloor. Two subgroups can be identified within the overall target group: managers who steer intercultural teams consisting of members from multiple nationalities, and managers who manage their company's interaction with suppliers, customers, and partners from other cultures.

I have assumed that the reader will start at page 1 and systematically proceed to the last page. But that assumption is based on my own preferences of handling tasks orderly and systematically (my cultural programming). The chapters can also be read independently, and accordingly, the amount of cross-references between the chapters has been limited. Appendix A helps the reader to move through the chapters without consistently having to refer back to the definitions of culture given in Chapter 6 (which presents the Hofstede classification of cultures), and is a good reference when reading Chapters 8–11.

Each chapter contains a number of practical tips that can be applied immediately in your own work environment. The tips also challenge you to question the effectiveness of your own interpersonal and intercultural communication. The tips add up to the nice round number 100. Most of the tips invite you to look into the mirror, and to study the effect of your own cultural programming on others. I trust these tips will make your business communication more successful when cultures meet.

The examples I have used throughout the book have originated from my own international experiences. But I realize that my experiences are just that—mine. Therefore, I have asked some people from completely different professions and industries to share their experiences with cross-cultural cooperation. These "Sharing Experiences" sections can be found throughout the book, and also contain practical advice for the international manager.

A book about culture inevitably contains generalizations, which can be countered by specific personal experiences that differ from such generalizations. I invite you to think about these personal experiences, to critically examine them, and compare them to what I state in the book. My intention is not to write "the ultimate truth about culture"; rather, I intend to help you to look at other cultures in a constructive way, and provide you with effective communication tools that help you navigate cultural differences more effectively. When your own cultural observations contradict those described in the book, I would very much welcome your feedback. I will respond.

Frank Garten
Utrecht, the Netherlands

REFERENCES

Hofstede, G., Hofstede, G.J., and Minkov, M. (2010). *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind: International Cooperation and Its Importance for Survival.* New York: McGraw-Hill.

Lewis, R.D. (2006). *When Cultures Collide: Leading across Cultures.* London: Nicolas Brealey International.

Verluyten, P.S. (2010). *Intercultural Skills for International Business and International Relations: A Practical Introduction with Exercises.* Louvain, Belgium/The Hague, the Netherlands: Acco.

Contents