

# Effective Management of Organisation Consulting (MBS3012)

Doirean Wilson and Lola-Peach Martins

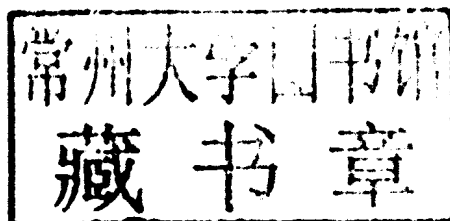


# Effective Management of Organisation Consulting

(MBS3012)

Edited by

DOIREAN WILSON AND  
LOLA-PEACH MARTINS



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# Understanding the Basics of Culture

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DHARM P.S. BHAWUK, DAN LANDIS and  
VIJAYAN P. MUNUSAMY

Learning about cultural differences is important for international managers, because behavioral mistakes and misattribution can lead to dysfunctional relationships and can be a cause of poor organizational performance. There are many definitions of culture, and our goal here is to present some ideas that business practitioners may find useful when thinking about culture. We present seven perspectives that may help practitioners deal with cultural differences effectively.

*I. Culture often entails a knee-jerk response to behavioral settings.*

A teacher walks into a class in South Asia (India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka), and students stand up. This is unlikely in Western societies. The behavior of South Asian students is automatic, and the meaning—that students are showing respect to the teacher—is to be deciphered in further thinking about why this behavior occurred. Another example that Westerners often find amusing is the spontaneous behavior in Eastern cultures of one taking the full responsibility of paying the lunch or dinner bill. The meaning here is that Easterners nurture relationships and view them as long term

where reciprocity is founded in unequal exchange. In short, we may not find the same behavior in every culture, given the same behavioral setting. Thus, culture shapes human behavior. Behaviors are the visible part of cultural practices, and the reasons behind behaviors, which constitute the underlying values and belief systems, are the invisible part of cultures. What people do in a culture can be observed; why they do it needs to be learned by further reflection and often asking questions of people of that culture. Behaviors often offer concrete instances of cultural differences that can be observed and studied, and it is a good place to start the examination of culture.

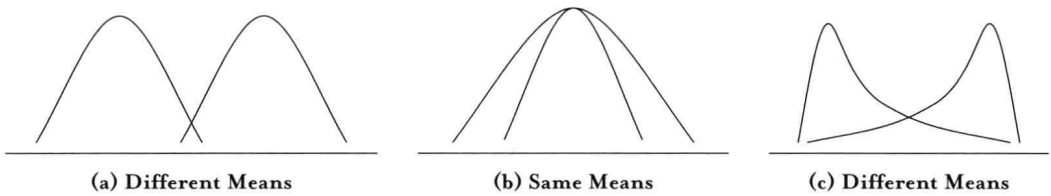
Generally, people act in a certain way or perform a task in a certain way in a culture because it is often efficient to do so. Cultural practices are backed up by years of experience in a given ecology. The type of clothes people wear (cotton versus wool), the food people eat (often directed by what is grown in a certain area), the way houses are constructed (facing south in cold climates, having steep roofs in areas where there is snowfall, etc.), and so forth are guided by environmental conditions and are inherently efficient for the most part. Cultural practices are effective in solving environmental problems and thus help reduce anxiety. Simply put, cultural practices capture years of experience of what works. Thus, people find behaviors that are different as odd and surprising and often disapprove of such behaviors, leading to cross-cultural misunderstanding and conflicts. What works leads people to believe that their way is the best way, and thus all cultures socialize people to become ethnocentric. Accepting that we are ethnocentric makes it easy to learn new behaviors when we visit another culture. The emotional attachment to

one's own cultural behavior can be attenuated by accepting that all cultures are workable systems in their own ecosystem.

## *2. Culture constitutes a distribution of behaviors.*

The mean of any behavior can be viewed as the cultural norm (Triandis, 1994), and cultural differences can be examined by comparing the means (see Figure 2.1). Thus, in one culture the mean of a particular behavior—say, starting a meeting, when men or women get married, when adult children leave their parents' home to start their own home, and so forth—may be higher than what is found in another culture. Not only the mean, but the variance for a particular behavior could also be different across cultures. In some cultures, a particular behavior may have a small dispersion compared to another culture. For example, in some culture most young men may get married around the age of 24 (say 60%), whereas in another culture there may be much more dispersion in when young men get married (say only 20% get married around the mean age of 35). When there is a little dispersion, the culture is called tight, but when there is a lot of dispersion, the culture is said to be loose.

Viewing cultures as having a distribution of behaviors allows us to accommodate for individual differences. For example, even in a country where most people are late, there are a few people who are meticulously punctual, and an international manager would do well by starting with the norm of a culture but then refine his or her understanding by incorporating individual differences in behaviors. It should be noted that it is plausible that a behavior has a skewed distribution in a culture, as also it is possible that a

**Figure 2.1** Culture as a Distribution of Behaviors

behavior has right skew in one culture and left skew in another culture. Interestingly, even in such a situation, it is possible to find some people in either culture who act the same way, allowing for both finding individual differences in behavior within a culture and finding similarity among some people between cultures. This, however, does not minimize the fact that the cultures are quite different in the distribution of such a behavior.

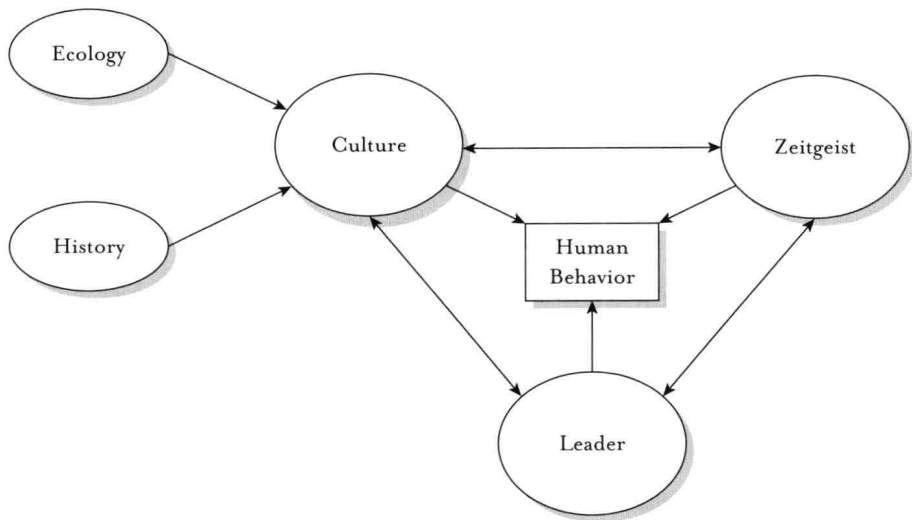
### *3. Culture is the antecedent to all human behaviors.*

Building on the culture and social behavior model presented by Triandis (1994), Bhawuk (2003) presented a general model of creative behavior that can be easily adapted to a general model of culture and behavior (see Figure 2.2). According to this model, culture is shaped by ecology and history. For example, the geographic vastness of the United States (an ecological factor) has led to the development of freeways and the auto industry, with little emphasis on public transportation. The mountainous nature of many countries (e.g., Nepal) has led them to develop air transportation to connect the remote areas since building highways is simply not possible. In the Netherlands, people have developed a complex system of canals to take advantage of their ecology, as the country is below sea level.

Similarly, history shapes culture. For example, people developed a culture of the melting pot in the first half of the 20th century in the United States. This made sense because the immigrants were Europeans who could all become alike by simply accepting English as the means of communication. However, with the immigration of Hispanics, Chinese, Japanese, and others, the melting pot model did not work as well, and the nation has slowly moved away from the melting pot model to include the growing diversity of people. It is plausible to think of the U.S. government adopting a policy of more than one national language in the future like many other countries, which would change the national culture significantly. History of colonization similarly shapes the culture of many countries in Asia and Africa, traces of which can be found in their art, music, literature, food, way of life, and thinking. Thus, ecology and history shape culture, which in turn shapes how people behave in that culture.

Clearly, culture is important in determining behavior, but it also interacts with the zeitgeist (or spirit of a particular time) and leadership to shape people's behaviors. The ecologically and historically shaped culture is often the powerful traditional culture, hidden deep in the heart and mind of culture. However, the zeitgeist is an equally important part of culture, and it has a reciprocal relationship with the traditional

**Figure 2.2** A General Model of Culture and Human Behavior



culture. With economic development, we see growth of urbanization in most parts of the world. Urban culture would constitute a part of the zeitgeist of these cultures. The cultural differences between cities in different countries speak for the interaction between the zeitgeist and the traditional culture. For example, in many cultures people stop at a stop light even at midnight when nobody is on the street, whereas in some cultures people do not do so even during the day if there is no traffic coming from the other direction.

How leaders act in a culture is quite compatible with the culture, and at the same time leaders also create new cultures to bring about change in society. The leadership in Singapore has created a culture of meritocracy and strict discipline, which stands in stark contrast to the culture of its neighboring countries, emphasizing the role of leadership in shaping culture. Gandhi started the culture of *Satyagraha*, or civil disobedience, which did not exist before him and has become a standard tool for protesting by unions and students in

South Asia and many other parts of the world. Thus, leaders go on to shape the zeitgeist and culture in the long term in a significant way. Therefore, it makes intuitive sense that whereas ecology and history serve as the antecedents of culture, culture, zeitgeist, and leaders have reciprocal relationships in shaping human behaviors.

This is particularly important for business managers to keep in mind, because they often have to deal with organizational culture and need to differentiate organizational culture from national culture. Organizations are shaped by the national environment and by the imperatives of the industries in which they operate. For example, when organizations face international competition, they develop procedures, tools, and routines that are different from organizations that do not face international pressure. Organizations that face a turbulent environment are likely to be effective if they are less bureaucratic and allow people who interact with customers to make decisions as needed, whereas organizations that operate in a stable environment

can often afford to be guided by rigid policies. Airlines are likely to be similar in their operation across cultures—in loading cargo, handling passengers, scheduling planes, planning routes, and so forth. However, their human resource practices are often shaped by the national culture of the country in which they are incorporated. Superior–subordinate relationships, leadership practices, hiring practices, and so forth are likely to be influenced by national cultures and laws. Thus, leadership in a particular culture may have commonality across different industries but may be different from leadership practices in other cultures.

It is often useful to think about organizational culture as a microculture, or a third culture, especially when multinationals operate beyond their own cultural boundaries. An example of how microculture operates in real business environment is illustrated in the following example. Federal Express (FedEx) pursued a strategy of global expansion in the 1980s when the U.S. market did not offer the annual growth that the organization desired. As FedEx is in the business of delivering packages to different parts of the world on time, they are meticulous about pickup and delivery times. In the United States, their standard package pickup deadline in most locations is 5 p.m. However, their standard package pickup deadline times did not go over well in countries that do not follow an 8–5 work schedule. In Spain, for example, most businesses close at 8 p.m. As a result, simply following their U.S. schedule led Federal Express to incur heavy financial losses. The lesson here is that culturally blind business strategies and imposing a microculture that is different from the macro culture (e.g. imposing work processes that are successful in the American culture on other cultures) can result in serious business consequences (Herbig, 1997).

In other instances, a multinational may create a hybrid culture that takes elements from more than one culture and is then viewed as a third culture. For example, a company may not fuss about people arriving at a certain time in the morning but may not tolerate late delivery of goods and services to customers, thus synthesizing two opposite values in different behavioral settings, rather than having one value for all behavioral settings. This would be an example of creating a third culture.

*4. Culture provides complex cognitive and affective frameworks that are used to support the behavioral system.*

As noted above, behaviors are visible, but the cognitive and affective systems are not transparent (see Figure 2.3). So when an American manager moves from Los Angeles to Hong Kong, though the person is far removed from his or her native culture, this native culture is right there in the head of the person. If the person has a meeting at 9 a.m., he or she will show up at the venue at that time even though the local managers may come 15 or more minutes late. Can the American manager simply switch to the new practice of coming late to meetings? That is unlikely because the person is hard-wired with certain meetings protocols—arrive a few minutes before time, greet everybody, present an agenda, go through each of the items on the agenda, and finish the meeting on time. The script of the meeting is a part of the larger cognitive framework that is present in the manager's mind (biologically housed in the brain!).

In some cultures, people pay special attention to their relationship with others, and we call these collectivist cultures. In other cultures, people pay attention to themselves without paying much attention to others, and we call these individualistic

cultures. In individualistic cultures, people employ rational cost-benefit analysis and the principle of equal exchange in their social interactions, whereas in collectivist cultures, social interactions are marked by unequal exchange over a long period. In individualistic cultures, people do their own thing and their behavior is guided by attitudes, values, and beliefs. On the other hand, in collectivist cultures people pursue group goals and follow norms. In collectivist cultures people pay much attention to context, but this is not so in individualist cultures. For this reason, collectivist cultures are also referred to as high-context cultures. On the other hand, individualist cultures are referred to as low-context cultures (Hall, 1976). Thus, we can examine and understand the difference in the cognitive schema of people in different cultures by using the theory of individualism and collectivism (Triandis, 1995; Bhawuk, 2001) or other such theoretical constructs.

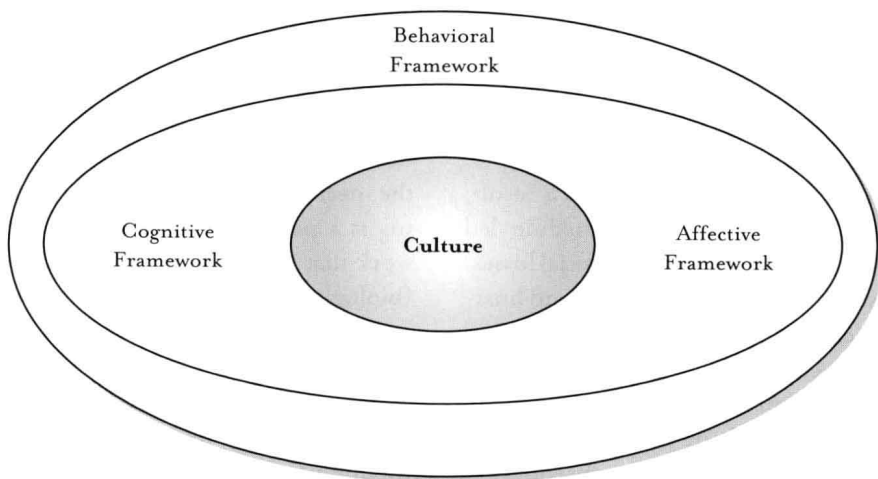
Similarly, cultures provide us with affective frameworks. We know when to get happy, sad, upset, or angry and how to express our emotion. In some cultures, it is acceptable

to express one's anger publicly, but not so in other cultures. Similarly, in some cultures, it is acceptable to show affection in public, but not so in other cultures. Thus, in different cultures people are socialized to carry different cognitive and affective frameworks. To be effective across cultures we have to learn different frameworks and be comfortable in applying them when we are in another culture. Like all behavioral skills, such skills come through hard work and practice.

*5. Culture is characterized by people, space, time, and language.*

At the core of any culture lies a group of people, a populace. Culture deals with people in an ecological context, or people living in a geographical area or space (see Figure 2.4). The space or geography defines the people and their behavior because people have to interact with the environment for sustenance and survival. When people occupy some space or live in a geographic area for a long time, they develop ways of dealing with the environment, and they pass it on to their

**Figure 2.3** Culture as a System of Cognition, Affect, and Behaviors



children, generation after generation. Such knowledge changes with time and space, as the environmental factors change over time—resources are depleted, natural conditions shift rivers and basins, and so forth. Thus, culture does change over time, but rather slowly, as a function of geographic changes. When knowledge is created to be passed on from one generation to another, often specialized languages evolve. Language is one of the most crucial aspects of cultures, so much so that often language becomes the most significant representative of a culture. Thus, culture is what is passed on from generation to generation by people living in a certain geographic area of the world in a certain time period through a common language (Triandis, 1994).

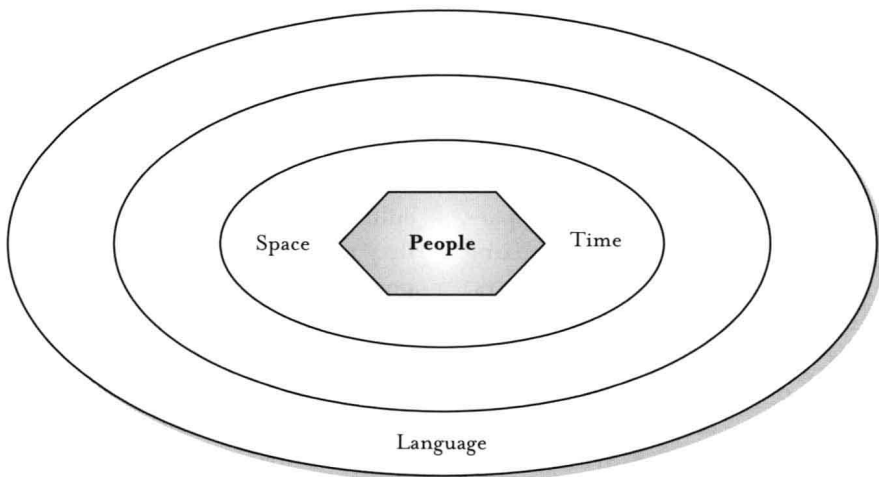
The importance of these elements in the construal of culture can be seen in the destruction of culture. When people are eliminated, either by natural forces or by other people, their culture goes away with them. When people are dispersed from their natural environment, their culture changes, slowly but definitely, because culture is a collective human response to environment.

People in different cultures view land or space differently. For example, in some cultures, land is collectively owned and cannot be bought or sold, but not so in other cultures. When people are forced through legislation to adopt individual ownership of land, which happened during the colonization of many traditional cultures by Western countries, often the original cultures go through major crises.

Time captures many aspects, and one of them is generations of people. If cultural practices are not transmitted from one generation to another, cultures change, often seen in third and fourth generations of migrants. And finally, when people are not allowed to use their language, as happened with colonial powers restricting many native cultures, then people lose much of their cultural knowledge and practices. Loss of culture in marginalized groups of people clearly shows that these elements and their loss lead to the destruction of cultures (Bhawuk & Anbe, 2007).

Language is a crucial component of culture (Hall, 1976), and it makes cultures resilient. When people migrate, they leave

**Figure 2.4** Essential Elements of Culture: People, Time, Space, and Language



their space, but they take their language with them, and with it their cultures get transmitted over time through generations. Language also becomes a bridge across cultures, because people who share a language can communicate effectively. Thus, travel becomes easier for tourists when hosts speak multiple languages and communicate with the tourists in the tourists' native tongue. The French-speaking people across the globe are able to communicate with each other, as are the English-speaking people. Communication gaps or misunderstanding between people who speak the same language—e.g., English, but are from different cultures, such as the United States and the UK, or United States and India—demonstrates that language is an important part of culture, but culture is more than language.

#### *6. Culture is not the same as nation.*

Most nations have several cultures within their borders, even when all citizens speak the same language (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004). For example, even before there was heavy immigration from the commonwealth nations, Britain contained many different cultures. The norms and values of Yorkshire were quite different from that of Londoners. Now, of course, Britain has a large population of Southeast Asians who, while they speak English, are not Christian and are arguably very different in their values and beliefs from most other English people. The borders of nations will be particularly subject to culture change as mixing from neighboring countries occurs. Viewing culture as a composite of subcultures helps us to better understand the subcultures of different social groups (e.g., gender, ethnicity, language, age). For example, the behavioral distribution of minority cultures can be compared with the

behavioral distribution of a majority culture. Recognizing the distinction among various subcultures is important, as what is considered normal behavior may be largely based on norms of the dominant culture. Managers should recognize the heterogeneity in culture within a national boundary and not accept facile generalizations. They should also strive to be aware of the local culture when they are assigned to manage a facility in another country.

#### *7. Culture is ever changing and dynamic.*

Culture is not a static phenomenon. It changes as people from other areas come into contact with different norms, beliefs, and values. It can also change as a result of governmental policies. For example, moral beliefs in China changed as a result of the "opening up" of the country to the rest of the world in 1978. Another example has to do with beliefs of racial superiority, which in the United States have radically changed in the past five decades and in South Africa in the last 20 or so years. However, culture often changes rather slowly and can be viewed as superorganic (Kroeber, 1917). In other words, there may not be significant changes in human behavior in a particular culture in one's lifetime. This is the case in many traditional cultures that have managed to keep away from the economic and technological development found in the West. It is important that managers recognize how cultures change and seek the most current cultural information in the area to which they are assigned. If they remain at their posts for any length of time, they may find significant cultural changes occurring.

We find discussion of the above ideas useful in communicating with others about culture and also in learning about other cultures. We hope that the reader will be able to build on these basic ideas

their understanding of what culture is by organizing their experiences in a complex cognitive, affective, and behavioral systems of framework.

### ◆ Discussion Questions

1. How is culture shaped by ecology and history?
2. What does it mean when one is said to be “culturally programmed” to act in a certain way?
3. Describe your culture and how it differs from other cultures in your neighborhood.
4. How is culture ever changing and dynamic?

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