Working Across Cultures
and Knowing When to Shut Up

Erin Meyer

Today, whether we work with colleagues in Dusseldorf or Dubai, Brasília or Beijing, New York or New Delhi, we are all part of a global network (real or virtual, physical or electronic) where success requires navigating through wildly different cultural realities.

Unless we know how to decode other cultures and avoid easy-to-fall-into cultural traps, we are easy prey to misunderstanding, needless conflict, and deals that fall apart.

Yet most managers have little understanding of how local culture impacts global interaction. Even those who are culturally informed, travel extensively, and have lived abroad often have few strategies for dealing with the cross-cultural complexity that affects their team's day-to-day effectiveness. Often the cross-cultural challenges that arise could be avoided by learning a few basic principles. For example, the answer to the simple question, "When should I speak and when should I be quiet?" varies dramatically from one culture to another.

I learned this lesson the hard way over a decade ago when, ironically, I was supposed to be coaching a top French executive at the French car manufacturer Peugeot Citroën. He and his wife asked for help with the cultural adjustments they'd need to make in regard to their upcoming move to Wuhan, China. Bo Chen, the Chinese country expert assisting in my meeting with them, arrived early. A 36-year-old Paris-based journalist from Wuhan, Chen was articulate, extroverted, and very knowledgeable. He was to have prepared two or three concrete business examples to illustrate each cultural issue I would be covering.

As I began the session by outlining on a flipchart the cultural issues the Bernards needed to grasp, I was carefully keeping an eye on Chen so I could help facilitate his input.

But Chen didn't seem to have any input. After finishing my presentation of the first main cultural challenge, I paused briefly and looked to him for his examples, but he didn't speak up. He didn't open his mouth, move his body forward, or raise his hand. Apparently, he had no example to provide. Not wanting to embarrass Chen, I simply continued to my next point.

To my growing dismay, Chen remained silent and nearly motionless as I continued through my presentation. He nodded politely while I was speaking, but that was all; he used no other body language to indicate any reactions, positive or negative. I gave every example I could think of. I spoke, shared, and consulted with the Bernards, but still no input from Chen.

I continued like this for three whole hours. My initial disappointment with Chen was turning into full-fledged panic; I needed his input for the program to succeed. Finally, I decided to take a chance. "Bo," I asked, "did you have any examples you would like to share?"

Chen sat up straight in his chair, smiled confidently at the clients, and opened up his notebook, which was filled with pages and pages of typed notes. "Thank you, Erin," he replied. "I do." Chen then began to explain one clear, pertinent, fascinating example after another.

What had happened?

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Since the Bernards, Chen, and I were participating in a cross-cultural training program, I decided to simply ask Chen for an explanation of his actions. "Bo," I exclaimed, "you had all of these great examples! Why didn't you jump in and share them with us earlier?" "Were you expecting me to jump in?" he asked, a look of genuine surprise on his face. He went on to describe the situation as he saw it. "In this room," he said, turning to M. and Mme. Bernard, "Erin is the chairman of the meeting. As she is the senior person in the room, I wait for her to call on me. And, while I am waiting, I should show I am a good listener by keeping both my voice and my body quiet. In China, we often feel Westerners speak up so much in meetings that they do this to show off, or they are poor listeners. Also, I have noticed that Chinese people leave a few more seconds of silence before jumping in than in the West. You Westerners practically speak on top of each other in a meeting. I kept waiting for Erin to be quiet long enough for me to jump in, but my turn never came. We Chinese often feel Westerners are not good listeners because they are always jumping in on top of one another to make their points. I would have liked to make one of my points if an appropriate length of pause had arisen. But Erin was always talking, so I just kept waiting patiently. My mother left it deeply engrained in me: You have two eyes, two ears, but only one mouth. You should use them accordingly."

As Chen spoke, the cultural underpinnings of our misunderstanding became vividly clear to the Bernards—and to me.

The experience was, frankly, rather humiliating for me: this was a cross-cultural training I was supposed to be leading, but I found myself, uncomfortably, in the role of a student. It certainly changed the way I lead meetings. I am now more prepared to recognize and flexibly address the differing cultural expectations around status and communication. When I moderate meetings with Chinese and Western participants, I always make sure to invite those who are quiet to speak. I let the Chinese participants know in advance what topics I will be asking for input on and advise them I'll be calling on them individually so everyone is comfortable and prepared when I do. And if some don't respond immediately, I allow a few more seconds of silence before speaking myself. When I ask questions I go around the table to hear input from each team member in order.

As for the Westerners, I prep them to speak a little less in order to give their Chinese colleagues more space. For me personally, it has become glaringly clear that my Western tendency to fill up quiet space is not a good strategy. When Chinese are in the room, sometimes the best way to get them to contribute is to just shut up.

Knowing when to talk and when to be quiet is just one of many skills any global manager needs to develop, and often those skills are multi-faceted and counterintuitive. Although there's been a great deal of research and writing on the topic of cross-cultural management, much of it fails to present a sufficiently nuanced picture that can be of real use to managers working internationally or with foreign colleagues. As a result, it's all too common to rely on clichés, typecasting cultures

on just one or two dimensions—the Japanese are hierarchical, for example, or the French communicate in subtle ways. This can lead to oversimplified and erroneous assumptions—the Japanese always make top-down decisions, or the French are indirect when giving negative feedback. It then comes as a surprise when your French colleague bluntly criticizes your shortcomings, or when your Japanese clients want buy-in from the cook and the cleaner before reaching a decision.

Often I find that even experienced and cosmopolitan managers have faulty expectations about how people from other cultures operate. The truth is that culture is too complex to be measured meaningfully along just one or two dimensions. To help managers negotiate the complexity of cultural variation, I have built on the work of many in my field to develop a tool I call the Culture Map. It is made up of eight scales representing those behaviors where cultural gaps are most common. By comparing the relative position of one nationality to another on each scale, the user can decode how culture influences day-to-day collaboration.

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The eight scales on The Culture Map are based on decades of academic research into culture from multiple perspectives. To this foundation, I have added my own work, which has been validated by extensive interviews with thousands of executives who have confirmed or corrected my findings. The scales and their metrics are:

→ **Communicating.** When we say that someone is a good communicator, what do we actually mean? The responses differ wildly from society to society. I compare cultures along the Communicating scale by measuring the degree to which they are high-context or low-context, a metric developed by the American anthropologist Edward Hall. In low-context cultures, good communication is precise, simple, explicit, and clear. Messages are understood at face value. Repetition is appreciated for purposes of clarification, as is putting messages in writing. In high-context cultures, communication is sophisticated, nuanced, and layered. Messages are often implied but not plainly stated. Less is put in writing, more is left open to interpretation, and understanding may depend on reading between the lines. In high-context cultures, as seen in the example above with Bo Chen, silence in itself may pass specific meanings, and an effective communicator is able to read the silence in order to manage the interaction effectively. In low-context cultures, communication requires less reading between the lines. If you have some-thing to say, it would be expected that you would state clearly "I have something to add."

→ **Evaluating.** All cultures believe criticism should be given constructively, but the definition of "constructive" varies greatly. This scale measures a preference for frank versus diplomatic negative feedback. Evaluating is often confused with Communicating, but many countries have different positions on the two scales. The French, for example, are high-context (implicit) communicators relative to Americans, yet they are more direct in their criticism. Spaniards and Mexicans are both high-context cultures, but the Spanish are much more frank when providing negative feedback.

→ **Persuading.** The ways in which you persuade others, and the kinds of arguments you find convincing, are deeply rooted in your culture's philosophical, religious, and educational assumptions and attitudes. The traditional way to compare countries along this scale is to assess how they balance holistic and specific thought patterns. Typically, a western executive will break an argument down into a sequence of distinct components (specific thinking), while Asian managers tend to show how each component fits with all the others (holistic thinking). Beyond that, people from southern European and Germanic cultures tend to find deductive arguments (what I refer to as principles-first arguments) most persuasive, whereas American and British managers are more likely influenced by inductive logic (what I call applications-first logic).

→ **Leading.** This scale measures the degree of respect and deference shown to authority figures, placing countries on a spectrum from egalitarian to hierarchical. The Leading scale is based partly on the concept of power distance, first researched by the Dutch social psychologist Geert

Hofstede, who conducted 100,000 management surveys at IBM in the 1970s. It also draws on the work of management professors Robert House and his colleagues in their GLOBE (global leadership and organizational behavior effectiveness) study of 62 societies.

→ **Deciding.** This scale measures the degree to which a culture is consensus-minded. We often assume that the most egalitarian cultures will also be the most democratic, while the most hierarchical ones will allow the boss to make unilateral decisions. This isn't always the case. Germans are more hierarchical than Americans, but more likely than their U.S. colleagues to build group agreement before making decisions. The Japanese are both strongly hierarchical and strongly consensual.

→ **Trusting.** Cognitive trust (from the head) can be contrasted with affective trust (from the heart). In task-based cultures, trust is built cognitively through work. If we collaborate well, prove ourselves reliable, and respect each other's contributions, we come to trust each other. In a relationship-based society, trust is a result of weaving a strong affective connection. If we spend time laughing and relaxing together, get to know each other at a personal level, and feel a mutual liking, and then come to trust each other.

→ **Disagreeing.** Everyone believes a little open disagreement is healthy, right? The recent American business literature certainly confirms this viewpoint. But different cultures actually have very

different ideas about how productive confrontation is for a team or organization. This scale measures tolerance for open disagreement, and views on whether it is likely to improve or destroy collegial relationships.
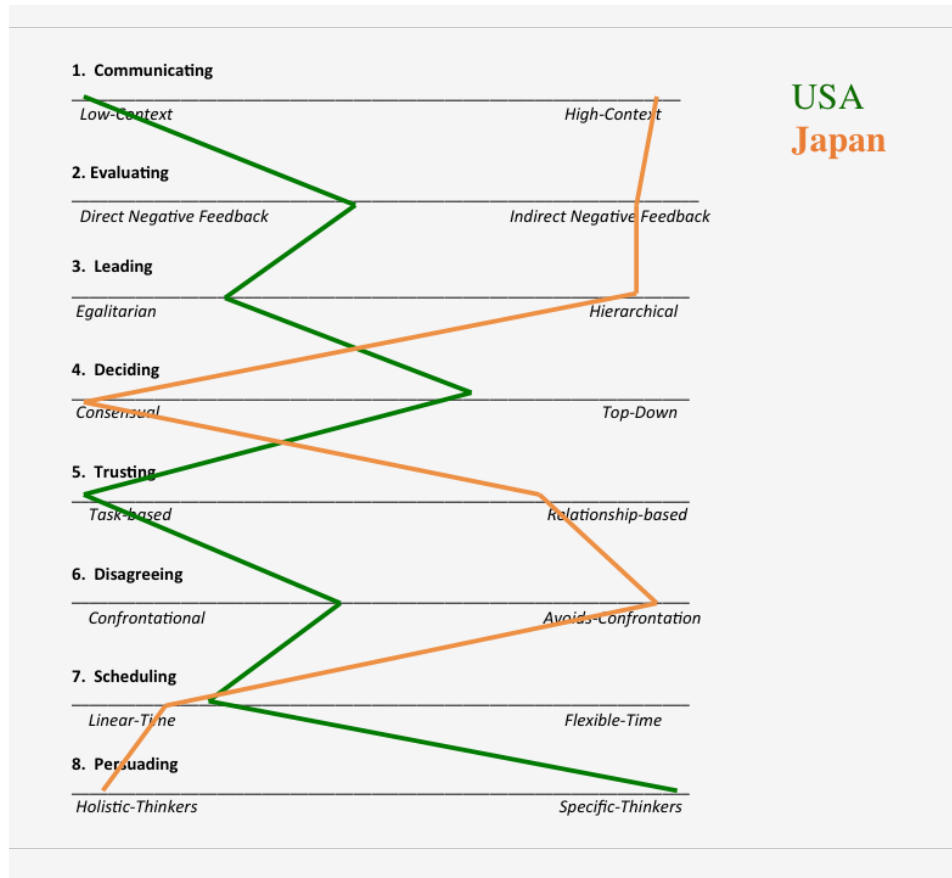
→ **Scheduling.** All businesses follow agendas and timetables, but in some cultures people strictly adhere to the schedule, while in other cultures, people treat it as a suggestion. This scale assesses how much value is placed on operating in a structured, linear fashion versus being flexible and reactive.

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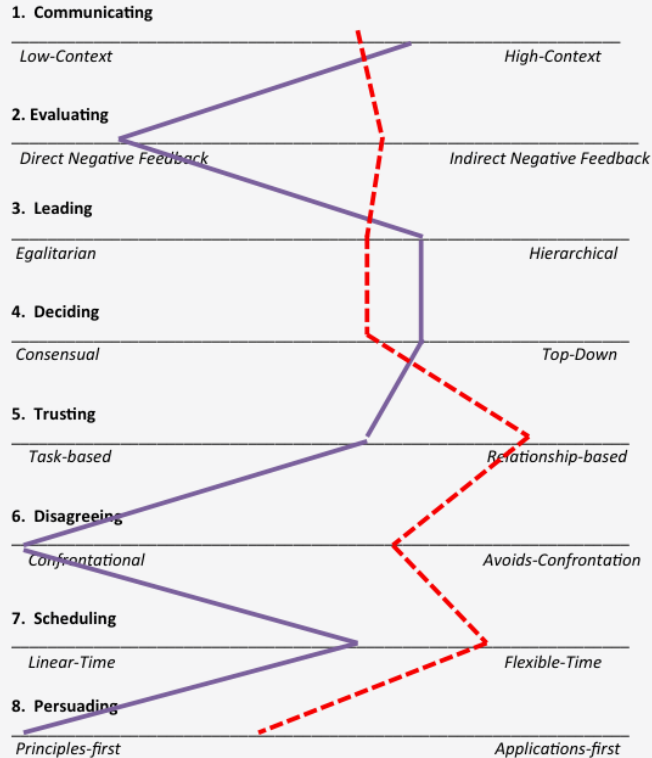
At the heart of the tool, and of my new book *The Culture Map*, is the realization that culture is relative. To succeed in a global business world, you need to understand not just how people from your own culture experience people from other cultures, but also how those cultures perceive one another. Through plotting out how two cultures fall on the 8 cultural dimensions, you can analyze the gaps and similarities and determine where the likely tensions and opportunities will arise with each collaboration.

For example, here is a Culture Map of the American culture plotted against Japanese culture.

Notice how the US and Japan are quite far apart on the Communicating and Persuading scales, yet quite close together on the Scheduling scale.

USA
Japan

1. **Communicating**
   Low-Context — High-Context

2. **Evaluating**
   Direct Negative Feedback — Indirect Negative Feedback

3. **Leading**
   Egalitarian — Hierarchical

4. **Deciding**
   Consensual — Top-Down

5. **Trusting**
   Task-based — Relationship-based

6. **Disagreeing**
   Confrontational — Avoids-Confrontation

7. **Scheduling**
   Linear-Time — Flexible-Time

8. **Persuading**
   Holistic-Thinkers — Specific-Thinkers

For a second example here is a culture map of French culture plotted against Brazilian culture. These two cultures are similar on the Communicating and Deciding scales, yet far apart on the Disagreeing scales.


France
Brazil

1. **Communicating**
   Low-Context — High-Context

2. **Evaluating**
   Direct Negative Feedback — Indirect Negative Feedback

3. **Leading**
   Egalitarian — Hierarchical

4. **Deciding**
   Consensual — Top-Down

5. **Trusting**
   Task-based — Relationship-based

6. **Disagreeing**
   Confrontational — Avoids-Confrontation

7. **Scheduling**
   Linear-Time — Flexible-Time

8. **Persuading**
   Principles-first — Applications-first

Managers have always needed to understand human nature and personality differences—that's nothing new. What is new is that twenty-first century managers must understand a wider, richer array of work styles than ever before. The Culture Map provides a tool for determining which aspects of their interactions are simply a result of personality and which are a result of differences in cultural perspective.

When we worked in offices surrounded by others from our own cultural group, awareness of basic human psychological needs and motivations leavened by sensitivity to individual differences, was enough. **But as globalization transforms the way we work, we need the ability to decode cultural differences in order to work effectively with clients, suppliers, and colleagues from around the world.** ⑆

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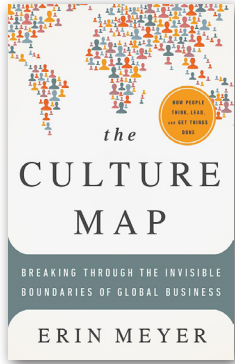
BUY THE BOOK | Get more details or buy a copy of The Culture Map.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Erin Meyer is a professor at INSEAD, one of the world's leading international business schools. Her work focuses on how the world's most successful global leaders navigate the complexities of cultural differences in a multicultural environment. Living and working in Africa, Europe, and the United States prompted Meyer's study of the communication patterns and business systems of different parts of the world. Her framework allows international executives to pinpoint their leadership preferences, and compare their methods to the management styles of other cultures. Her work has appeared in *Harvard Business Review*, *Singapore Business Times*, and on Forbes.com. In 2013 Erin was selected by the Thinkers50 Radar list as one of the world's up-and-coming business thinkers.

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