

Working in an intercultural context

- ▶ Let's start with a scene showing partners from different countries working on a common project
 - Take notes during the film
 - What is going wrong ?
 - Why?
 - How could this have been avoided?

 Cultural Misunderstandings



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Sonja: As an introduction to the topic, let us show you a little scene from an intercultural team working on an international, intercultural cooperation project, maybe not very successfully... Try to note down what goes wrong (apart from the bad acting of course) – where do the cultures clash? Where is the cooperation not working ideally?

FILM on cultural differences



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LINK TO FILM for later

Tips and tricks 1: Working in an intercultural context



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Sonja: Now we are coming to the first set of tips and tricks – challenges you may come across when working in an intercultural context. You took some notes during the film, let's see if you identified the challenges we wanted to show ;-)

Tips and tricks 1: Working in an intercultural context

- ▶ Rituals and habits / politeness
- ▶ Language & Non-verbal communication
- ▶ Humour / political constraints
- ▶ Working context
 - Time Management
 - Expectation management
 - Dealing with problems/challenges
 - Hierarchies
 - Decision-making processes



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Sonja: Here are the different fields in which you may encounter challenges when working with people from different cultures. You think you are speaking the same language because you all speak English – or “Globish” as an article in the NY times once called the “international English” used across the globe. But you all have different backgrounds, you were trained in different ways. Globally you can distinguish between two sets of intercultural differences:

- general issues which can also be an issue if you are a tourist, for example
- issues related to the working contexts

Working in an intercultural context: rituals and habits / politeness rules



Sonja: In the film, once Côme had reached my office (I will come back to the introduction part later), the first thing we did was to greet each other. I tried to shake hands with him, the typical German thing to do in a formal context, he immediately kissed me. Greeting is the first thing we do when we meet, and yet there are huge intercultural differences and people can be put off immediately by the way they are greeted (also see cartoon from the beginning of the Webinar). At international conferences you can often observe people who do not know how to greet the others – handshake? Kisses? How many? Starting left or right? Hitting the others back? Embracing? Touching foreheads? Bowing as in Japan and other Asian countries?

TIP: At an intercultural training course we once distributed papers with different greeting rituals and we had to greet the others like this. Some were embarrassing rituals for us as Europeans, such as touching noses, so it turned out that a good trick is to announce in advance what you will do. For example as Frenchman “in France we kiss each other on the cheeks even when we meet people at work”.

Working in an intercultural context: rituals and habits / politeness rules

▶ Habits

◦ Eating habits

- lunch and dinner, when and what to eat and drink
- Work during meals?
- Ristretto or Kaffee und Kuchen?



▶ Politeness

- Example: Presents
- Example: Handing over visiting cards



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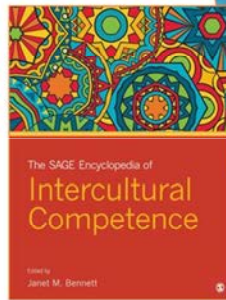
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Sonja: Of course we exaggerated a bit in the film, but there are also a lot of differences in different habits, for example concerning eating and drinking. Many people from Mediterranean countries like drinking wine for lunch, for Nordic people this is often strange. In some countries you can have a sandwich for lunch and maybe drink a glass of milk with it, for other countries it would be an insult to treat your guests like this. In some countries you may eat and work, in others meals should not be used for working purposes. Drinking coffee in Germany can be a one-hour activity in the afternoon and include cake, or it can be a ristretto drunk at the counter in 30 seconds in Italy. And there are many more issues that can be difficult: bringing presents or not, which presents to bring, in which colour to wrap them, to unpack them in front of the others or not, how to hand over a business card, where you put it afterwards (not in your back trouser pocket if you are dealing with Asian people!) etc.

Working in an intercultural context: Rituals and habits / politeness

► Prepare yourself

- Ask colleagues
- Search the Web
- Read a book



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TIP: Before travelling to a country or even when receiving guests from a different country, try to prepare. You can look up specific habits on the internet, ask a colleague who has been to the country or read a book.

Working in an intercultural context: language / non-verbal communication

- ▶ Speaking a common language – or not?
 - Differences in pronunciation / False friends
 - Same word - different meanings in different cultures
- ▶ The danger of using non-verbal communication
 - Same gesture – different meanings in different cultures
- ▶ Direct / indirect communication
 - See next slide



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Sonja: Our film is dangerously playing with clichés, of course – on the other hand the misunderstandings we are using are all misunderstandings which have happened in real life. When looking at the language question, misunderstandings can happen on different levels:

-We showed two examples where pronunciation differences can lead to misunderstandings: “walking and working” or “hungry and angry”

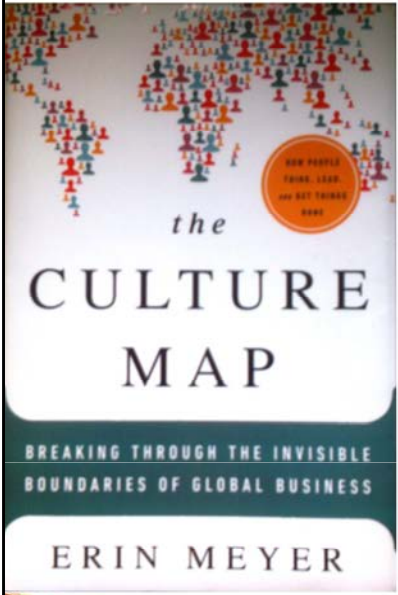
- There are also the so-called “false friends”, words that may look the same in English and another language but have different meanings. “Sensible” is one example – in some languages it means people feel a lot, are easily hurt (which would be sensitive in English), in English sensible means “it makes sense”


- Words can also have a different cultural context in different languages – When a German says “Brot” and a French “pain”, they mean something different. And we once had a long discussion about midwives, with some Germans suggesting midwives would be the perfect persons to convince parents of the importance of singing with for their babies and the British participants protesting that this made no sense – until we could clarify that midwives in England only deliver the children, while in Germany they do courses to prepare the parents and visit them at home after the birth. I also had a discussion about “singing” in Armenia once, which made no sense to us until we learned that there were two different words in Armenian, both translated as “singing” in English. – And last but not least we sometimes use “EU-talk” words that not everybody will understand.


As we demonstrated in the film, **non-verbal communication** can also be dangerous – we sometimes believe that non-verbal communication can be the key to communicating when language does not help, but this is not really true. Apart from the circle sign we used – which is even an obscene gesture in some countries, there are many other gestures that have different meanings in different countries, even the thumbs-up symbol used on Social Media is an obscene gesture in some cultures. And once in China I tried to buy one piece of fruit and never understood why the lady did not give it to me but

FIGURE 2.1. ANGLO-DUTCH TRANSLATION GUIDE

What the British say	What the British mean	What the Dutch understand
With all due respect...	I think you are wrong.	He is listening to me.
Perhaps you would think about...I would suggest...	This is an order. Do it or be prepared to justify yourself.	Think about this idea and do it if you like.
Oh, by the way...	The following criticism is the purpose of this discussion.	This is not very important.
I was a bit disappointed that...	I am very upset and angry that...	It doesn't really matter.
Very interesting...	I don't like it.	He is impressed.
Could you consider some other options?	Your idea is not a good one.	He has not yet decided.
Please think about that some more.	It's a bad idea. Don't do it.	It's a good idea. Keep developing it.
I'm sure it's my fault.	It's not my fault.	It's his fault.
That is an original point of view.	Your idea is stupid.	He likes my idea!



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Sonja: Here is an example of how the same words can be understood in a different way, depending on how you mean and interpret them, how direct or indirect your communication usually is. This is an example from a book I will quote a few more times: The Culture Map by Erin Meyer. It shows communication between British people – who are often very indirect in the way they express themselves, and Dutch people who are rather direct, say what they mean and will thus understand something completely different. A well-known example is when the British say “Very interesting”, they may mean “I don’t like it” but the Dutch may think they are really interested.

Working in an intercultural context: humour / political constraints

- ▶ Humour is not universal
- ▶ Not everybody understands the same humour
- ▶ Political topics can be dangerous ground



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Sonja: In the film *Côme* is making a joke about the Germans related to the 2nd World War – and I react quite strongly to it. Humour is always a dangerous issue – sometimes you may be making fun about something other cultures don't want to make fun about, sometimes it may simply not be understood.

You should also be careful discussing politics – in some countries / cultures it may not be very welcome if guests give their opinion about political matters. At the Opening dinner of the recent Culture Action Europe conference in Rome, one of the hosts, from the British Council, recommended to us not to mention the Brexit.

TIP: Be careful with humour – it is not universal! Carefully check for reactions of the others and apologize if needed. Avoid talking about political issues when you are not sure this will be accepted / ok.

Working in an intercultural context: Issues relevant when working together



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Sonja: Let's turn to the work context. We have said before and will repeat it in the context of the next points, that you walk on thin ice when you want to prepare teams for intercultural differences. Where is the line between explaining cultural differences and reinforcing/underlining prejudices? What can you explain with cultural differences and what are personal character traits? A German individual may, for example, permanently be late even though the "cultural standard" in Germany is rather to be on time. What you can say is that since this person lives in Germany, his coming to late is something people will remark on – while it may be normal in other countries.

Tip: Verbalizing cultural differences (despite the danger mentioned before) can help you avoid bad feelings.

Now we would like to know from you, if you have ever experienced difficulties

It's your turn!



- ▶ We are curious:
Have you ever personally experienced a misunderstanding that was based on intercultural differences?
- Use the chat function to send us some examples



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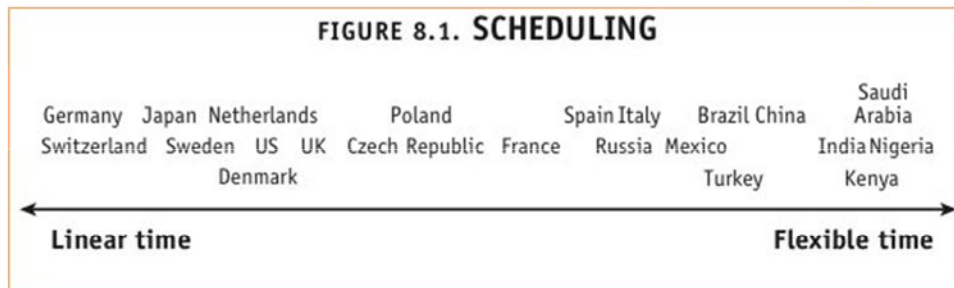
Sonja: Have you ever personally experienced a misunderstanding that was based on intercultural differences?

Working in an intercultural context: Issues relevant when working together

- ▶ Time Management and scheduling

agree

tip



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Sonja: I will now show some more excerpts from the book “the Culture Map”

In this book Erin Meyer shows that all cultural differences are relative and you may have to compare where the different countries “stand” when you are cooperating internationally. Here are some examples.

Our film started with a typical difference in time management. Germans expect people to come to meetings on time, French people will not apologize if they are late 10 or 15 minutes, in Latin America you can be one hour late without the others getting angry and in some African countries time is an even more relative notion. This also means that a Frenchman may seem late for a German but not for a Spanish person. And Swiss people may think that Germans are not very punctual (at least in the train system this is certainly true ;-).

Erin Meyer also speaks about scheduling – which in some countries is “linear”, so you do one thing at the time, one after the other, and deadlines and schedules are important / in other countries there is a more flexible notion of time and you may change tasks as opportunities arise.

Working in an intercultural context: Issues relevant when working together

- ▶ Expectation management / trust
- ▶ Dealing with challenges and problems



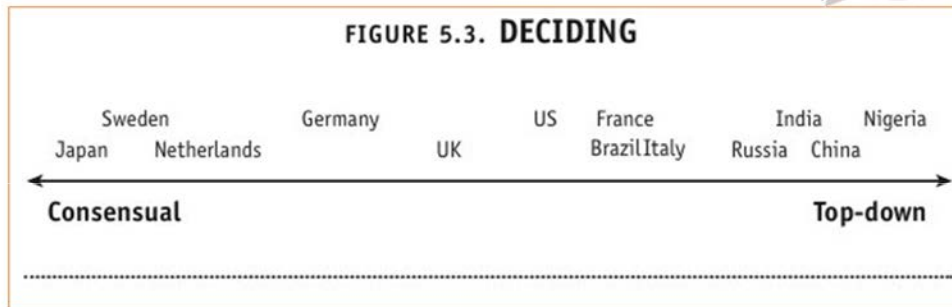
Sonja: In the film, I was expecting Côme to deliver things on time according to schedule, and to share with me if this was not possible due to specific challenges. Some countries like the Netherlands and Germany are used to sharing processes – including problems or challenges – thinking that then solutions can also be discussed and found together, in other countries the aim is to share results and not to talk about problems until you can present the solution to them. Other cultures are more based on mutual trust rather than deadlines, and checking on the results by the others.

Tip: Try to clarify expectations early in the cooperation process and repeat them regularly.

Address the issue of challenges and how to deal with them clearly in your communication – we are working on a common project, so we want to share all of it, not only the success.

Working in an intercultural context: Issues relevant when working together

- ▶ Hierarchies
- ▶ Decision-making processes

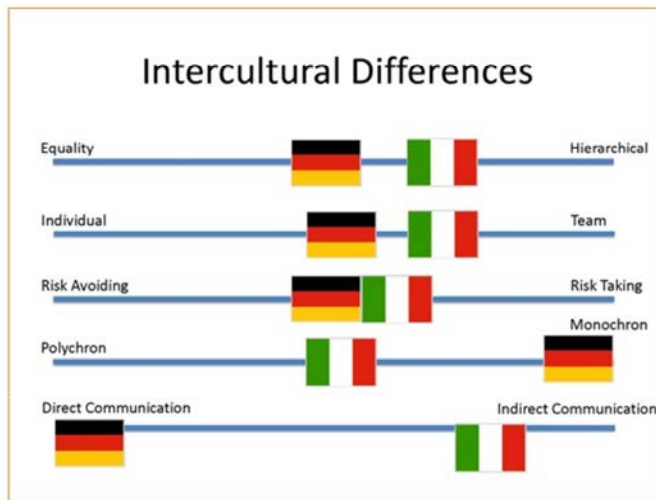


Sonja: Hierarchy is something which is also perceived very differently in different countries, though we did not speak about this in the film. It can especially be important when working with non-European countries, but also partly within Europe. E.g. in the Netherlands hierarchy is not very important, in Russia or in Africa the CEO of a company can lose the respect of his staff because he, as boss, is cycling to work.

This is also often reflected in decision-making process: In some countries decisions have to be taken with a consensus – together, with everybody agreeing, in other countries decision-taking can be more “top-down”, the boss decides....

Tip: If you work in a team with people from different cultures, try to find out what they are used to / expecting, point to the different traditions and clarify how decisions will be taken in the context of this project

Working in an intercultural context:



CONCLUSION

Compare & respect

tip



The key to cross-cultural success is to develop an understanding of, and a deep respect for, cultural differences.

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Tip: So in conclusion: If you work in an intercultural context it can be helpful to compare the different paradigms and verbalize certain issues at the beginning of the cooperation. This drawing for example was done for German-Italian cooperation

Tip: In one sentence, the key to success if you want to cooperate with different cultures is respect and understanding for the cultural differences.