The Concept of Cross-Cultural Fluency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Timeframe</th>
<th>Minimum of 25 hours</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Learning outcomes  | • Reflect critically on and explain the need for cross-cultural intelligence  
                    • Examine the concept of cultural universals and how these change in different cultural settings  
                    • Discuss the various approaches used to analyse cross-cultural differences  
                    • Explain why cross-cultural cultural fluency is a strategic competence |
| Section overview   | In this opening section the focus is on exploring the broad concept of cultural universals, one’s own attitude to cultural intelligence, and the many approaches to identify and compare cross-cultural differences. The section ends by highlighting the importance of placing cultural fluency on the strategic agenda. |

What is “Cross-Cultural Fluency”?  

Culture is considered to be the driving force behind human behaviour everywhere – internationally, regionally, nationally, provincially, and in systems such as the organisation. As the world becomes more interconnected and interdependent, managers are becoming increasingly alert to the need for cross-cultural fluency. This is particularly evident in their attempts to enter new markets, form partnerships, and acquire companies, attempts that have not always been successful, largely as a result of poor cross-cultural intelligence and fluency (Moran et al, 2014:12-13).

We use the term “cross-cultural intelligence” as opposed to “cultural intelligence” to emphasise this intelligence as being between cultures and multi-directional. Other authors might refer to “intercultural competence” and “cross-cultural communication”. While it might be important for a manager to know the host culture, it is just as important for the manager to recognise the perceptions that the host culture has of his or her own culture and how this might impact on the thoughts, feelings, and behaviours of both parties. Further, in more complex situations, it may be necessary to recognise and work with multiple cultures and recognise the combined effect of these on the intended goal.
To be inter-culturally effective a person needs to understand the complex dynamics between multiple cultures. Consider a South African-based engineer who works for a managing director based in Frankfurt (responsible for European, Middle Eastern, and African regions). The engineer is in Ghana negotiating a partnership with a local construction company to develop the harbour. The client is American.

Culture has been defined by many authors perhaps most notably by Hofstede (1991) who labelled it the "software of the mind". Earley, Ang, and Tan (in Rehg, Gundlach and Grigorian, 2012) later defined it as "patterned ways of thinking, feeling, and reacting to various situations and actions".

**Social intelligence – a pre-requisite for cross-cultural intelligence**

One can argue that social intelligence is a prerequisite for cross-cultural intelligence. Socially competent people select and control behaviours in pursuit of any given goal (set by them, or prescribed by others) within a given context (Prins, van Niekerk and Weyers, 2011). The diagram below shows this social competence as the combined effects of thinking, feeling, and behaving on social tasks and outcomes in pursuit of a goal. This implies that social intelligence "assumes that people are knowledgeable about themselves and the social world in which they live" and that they continually regulate their own thinking, feeling, and behaving to accommodate new sets of circumstances in pursuit of these goals (ibid).

![FIGURE 1: SOCIAL COMPETENCE IN THE ATTAINMENT OF GOALS](image)

Perhaps one of the most difficult behaviours to regulate is cultural bias. We usually have a superficial awareness of our biases that does not attend to deep-rooted and subconscious bias. Livermore (2014) draws our attention to the following:

1. Reflect critically on your possible “blind spots” (blind spots are the portions of your mind that houses hidden biases, eg these are typically ingrained from early childhood by family, social, religious, and educational influences);
2. Train yourself to think differently (look for where bias emerges in your thinking and decision-making; check yourself when resorting to previously held assumptions); and
3. Create practices to prevent bias (devise strategies that prevent you from resorting to default preferences, eg pursue a range of media articles and authors that provide different viewpoints).
Livermore (2014) emphasises being wary of your gut (instincts) when decisions involve people and situations from different cultural backgrounds – rather draw on research-based findings, and consult with others.

**Cross-cultural intelligence (CCQ)**

Cultural intelligence was first conceptualised in 2003 by Earley and Ang and has been identified as critical to success in cross-cultural interactions. (Rehg, Gundlach and Grigorian, 2012)

“Emotional and social intelligence competencies are found to represent a practical and theoretically coherent, reliable and valid approach to assessing and developing individuals in diverse cultures.”

(Emmerling and Boyatzis, 2012)

Developing on the idea of social intelligence, consider that cross-cultural intelligence (or cultural intelligence) is composed of the following (Konanahalli et al, 2014):

- **Cognitive ability**, which enables a person to “properly map the social situation and to function efficiently within that [new cultural] environment”. May require him or her to “let go of [suspend] those personal beliefs which conflict with the host culture”;
- **Meta-cognitive or high-order mental capabilities**, to “think about personal thought processes, to anticipate the cultural preferences of others, and to adjust mental models during intercultural experiences”;
- **Motivational capability**, to “direct attention and energy towards learning about and functioning in intercultural situations” (confidence and an intrinsic interest to do so); and
- **Behavioural aptitude**, to exhibit behaviour that is “receptive to other cultures” (ability to “create positive impressions and develop cross-cultural relationships”).

**FIGURE 2: CROSS-CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE**

(Adapted from Konanahalli et al, 2014)
Consider the following excerpts from Earley and Mosakowski (2004) and Livermore (2010):

“Occasionally an outsider has a seemingly natural ability to interpret someone’s unfamiliar and ambiguous gestures in just the way that person’s compatriots and colleagues would, even to mirror them. We call that cultural intelligence or CQ … a person with high cultural intelligence can somehow tease out of a person’s or group’s behavior those features that would be true of all people and all groups, those peculiar to this person or this group, and those that are neither universal or idiosyncratic.”

(Earley and Mosakowski, 2004)

“Leaders with high cultural intelligence understand how to encounter new cultural situations, judge what goes on in them and make appropriate adjustments to understand and behave effectively in those otherwise disorientating circumstances. They have repertoires of strategies and behaviours for orientating themselves when they encounter unfamiliar behaviours and perspectives, so they can discern whether a seemingly bizarre behaviour is explained by culture or is unique to a particular person or organisation. Such discernment is critical in, for instance, cross border negotiations, understanding new markets, unifying dispersed leadership teams and developing global marketing plans.”

(Livermore, 2010)

What this tells us is that persons can map a situation – distinguish from typical and atypical behaviours, and are motivated to rapidly adjust their mental models to develop cross-cultural relationships.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questionnaire</th>
<th>Yes/No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 I can map social situations in new cultural environments with relative ease?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 I can let go of personal beliefs that might conflict with a host culture?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 I think about my own cultural thought processes in anticipation of understanding others?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 I adjust my mental models during intercultural exchanges to reflect new knowledge acquired?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 I am interested in learning about and functioning in new cultural settings?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 I feel confident to do so?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 I can establish cross-cultural relationships with relative ease?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Answering no to any one of these questions highlights potential areas for improvement. For example, you might feel inexperienced in the mapping of social situations and consider researching cultural dimensions more extensively (we refer to cultural dimensions in Section 7.2 of this study guide).

From our discussion thus far, we see that the first step toward becoming cross-culturally fluent is a deep and self-reflective one. The next step is to develop cross-cultural knowledge of the many and significant cultural differences that exist across societies, and consequently businesses, and the approaches one can take to analyse and understand these.
To be culturally fluent requires:

1. Self-reflection (one’s own cultural intelligence)
2. Cross-cultural knowledge (about other societies and how these play out in business)
3. Several approaches (techniques) to analyse and better understand cross-cultural factors

The sections that follow are designed to raise an awareness of the extent of the knowledge required and approaches used to increase cross-cultural fluency.

**Broad Determinants of Cross-Cultural Differences**

The 10 categories listed below are cited as broad determinants used to detect and analyse cross-cultural differences. These, with the short example that follows, provide a useful and insightful starting point when looking at what might assist cross-culturally fluency (Moran *et al*, 2014):

1. **Sense of self and space (proxemics):**
   a. Self-identity – we draw a major part of our sense of self from the cultural group in which we grew up. However, consider strong and weak cultural identities. For example a person may have grown up in several regions of the world (eg a person may have been born in China where there is a strong sense of collectivism, but spent his or her teenage years in America where individualism features more strongly).
   b. Comfort derived from physical distance between persons – this relates to the proximity of people in conversation and physical workspaces. The English, for example, prefer more physical distance when in conversation than say an African from Nigeria. The Chinese dislike being touched by strangers.

2. **Communication and language:**
   a. Communication systems include verbal and non-verbal communication. In some cultures what is not said may be as important as what is verbally communicated. Consider that in China people who are sitting have the right to take charge of others (the leader sits and the employee stands).
   b. Dialects, accents, slang, jargon and other variations in each language, eg in the Japanese language you can be extremely rude to someone simply by using a different ending to a verb.
   c. Cultural semiotics includes signs and symbols that exhibit hidden cultural codes or rules (how meaning is communicated). In China dragons are symbols of cosmic chi (energy) and good fortune – a positive omen (associated with good luck) – unlike in Scandinavian countries where the dragon is a powerful symbol of war. Cultural semiotics is in evidence in texts, art, and the media including advertising and offers many clues to the subtle nuances of a culture.
3. **Dress and appearance**:  
   a. Garments and adornments, eg turbans are mandatory for adult male followers of Sikhism. Like semiotics, these offer clues to cultural groups and preferences.  
   b. Body decorations (eg skin and hair) – people across the globe use their bodies to express cultural identity including community status and religious affinity.  
   c. The significance of colour, eg in China black borders around photographs mean that the person pictured is dead; purple in western culture signifies military honour (eg Purple Heart), royalty and other high ranking positions of authority.

4. **Food and consumption habits**:  
   a. Selected, prepared, presented, and eaten, one person's pet might be another's delicacy. Consider too that food and consumption habits convey social status, degree of ethnicity, and cultural subtleties eg French food epitomises the French penchant for quality rather than quantity (le meilleur – the best). While a common conversation in the America might be diet and fitness, in Europe it will be about traditional dishes and wine regions. Some cultures are likely to scorn a long lunch break whereas in other cultures it is expected (eg siesta).

5. **Time and time consciousness**:  
   a. Exact or casual – the values of a country affect the perception of time, eg countries with individualistic type cultures are said to move faster than those that stress collectivism. In Japan, working is everything, but their workday does not have rigid starting and ending times (Marukhnyak, nd).  
   b. Speed eg the time taken to complete a process and the link to productivity.

6. **Relationships**:  
   a. Determined by age, seniority, gender, status, degree of kindred, wealth, power, and for wisdom. In some cultures a relationship may be deemed more important than the task (eg in Chinese culture).  
   b. Family unit, community, and ethnicity (eg in Brazil families are usually large and even the extended family is close, providing each other with help and support whenever necessary).

7. **Values and norms**:  
   a. Acceptable standards for membership, eg how business is transacted.  
   b. Generational differences eg "by 2020 the average Indian will be only 29 years of age compared with 37 in China and the US, 45 in Western Europe, and 48 in Japan (Nandkeolvar, 2014).  
   c. Respect for authority or lack of it , eg lack of respect for authority in Nigeria (Ojo, 2014).  

8. **Beliefs and attitudes**:  
   a. Religions and religious practices, eg holidays and dietary preferences.  
   b. Important facets of life including ceremonies and routines (eg daily prayer).

9. **Mental process and learning**:  
   a. How people organise and process information eg how logic is defined (eg scientific logic in many western cultures vs philosophies in many eastern cultures).  
   b. Priorities eg leisure time, fitness, and personal development (spiritual and academic).
10. **Work habits and practices:**
   a. Dominant types and division of work, eg agriculture, manufacturing, research and development (mental vs physical).
   b. Work practices, eg variations in labour law and contract law as a consequence of history.