

Working Effectively Across Cultures

Background notes

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Background notes

These background notes provide a practical learning resource to help you understand more about Working Effectively Across Cultures, and about some of the cultural barriers you may face when working in global business.

In these background notes, you will find proven hints, tips, strategies and techniques to help you communicate and work more effectively with international colleagues, clients, and partners.

These background notes are designed to be used in conjunction with the Working Effectively Across Cultures training workshop, which includes a PowerPoint presentation and training handouts.

You can read these background notes either before or after you complete the training workshop.

Contents

There are five sections in these background notes.

Each section deals with a specific component of effective cross-cultural working.

- Section One provides a framework for **recognising** the existence and importance of cultural differences. You will learn a model that describes the type of awareness, understanding and skills needed to be competent in working with international colleagues, clients, and partners. You will also learn the importance of cultural self-awareness and understanding of how your behaviour impacts on others.
- Section Two looks at strategies for **mapping** cultural differences and similarities. You will learn a framework for understanding how cultures differ and develop an insight into some of the cultural values that drive your own behaviours. The section also introduces a handy checklist for identifying and managing cultural differences encountered at work.
- Section Three explores techniques to **bridge** cultural differences in a helpful and effective way. You will learn how to use cultural awareness as a tool for working better with international colleagues, clients, and partners.
- Section Four explores ways of getting the best out of differences you have identified. You will learn some techniques for handling misunderstandings and **integrating** cultural differences.

Feel free to go through each section in turn, or simply choose a section that interests you most, and start there.

Section One - Recognising the existence and importance of cultural differences

What is culture?

'Culture' means different things to different people. Sometimes people think of culture as synonymous with education, art and learning. For the purposes of this discussion culture can best be defined as:

'characteristic values, perceptions, behaviours, or symbols, which become evident in specific situations, and which are exhibited by groups of people differentiated by distinct identities, roles, status, or relative power.'

It might help you understand this definition to think of culture as being like an iceberg.

On the surface of the iceberg you can see visible elements of culture, such as language, behaviours, and non-verbal communication (which includes things like gestures and the way people use their hands when speaking).

Other elements of visible culture include rituals, for example the way people greet each other by shaking hands. Symbols, like flags or the way people dress at work, are also important visible expressions of a culture.



But culture is not just about the behaviours, rituals and symbols that you see around you. Beneath the surface of the iceberg are other much more subjective cultural phenomena that require questioning and interpretation. Look deep enough and you will find that the values and assumptions held by diverse cultures may be very different from each other. It is only when you begin to look beneath the cultural surface, that you can begin address the question of 'why' people behave and communicate in the way they do.

Just beneath the iceberg surface there are cultural characteristics such as communication and listening styles. These styles may not be immediately obvious to people working or doing business in a different culture. But if you ask the right questions, you can generally begin to understand them.

As you go deeper beneath the surface of the cultural iceberg you will encounter shared cultural beliefs; for example, beliefs about things like formality, hierarchy or silence. Different cultural and language groups may have different expectations in each of these areas; expectations which impact on the way people from those groups approach business and working relationships.

Finally, at the deepest part of the iceberg you can find cultural values: the basic 'truths' that cultural groups hold about human identity and purpose; time; social organisation; and of course, ways of communicating. People in some cultures may well have quite different basic beliefs and attitudes from people in other cultures.

Culture and individuality.

Culture is clearly not the only influence on the way each of us think and act.

At a very basic level people respond to influences which are instinctual. Everyone has a range of inherited and learned personality characteristics (for example, things like extroversion or introversion) that exist in all cultures.

Where, then, does culture fit in with personality and instinct to drive individual behaviour and thought? One way of answering this question is to view culture as the organisation, rather than the imposition of uniformity. Culture guides people in understanding the range of acceptable ways of looking at, or behaving in, a situation.

For example, in European countries men tend to shake hands with women colleagues they meet for the first time. In Arab countries men and women tend not to shake hands. The point is that the way people understand what is appropriate, in which situation, reflects what they have learnt from the cultural influences on them. The only way to really know someone as a person is by understanding something about the cultures and social groups to which they belong.

Avoiding first impressions.

In general, first impressions are rarely a good way of coming to a judgement about someone if you do not know much about their background.

For example, in some western cultures people sometimes see silence in a conversation as indicating an absence of communication. It makes them feel uncomfortable. The first impression is that people who are sometimes silent in business meetings are somehow being uncommunicative, or rude. So, they fill the silence with speech. The reality is that in other cultures, for example in many Asian countries, a brief silence can be a polite way of showing attention and demonstrating respect for a conversation partner. Silence does not have the same negative connotations as in the west.

How culture impacts on business.

Until recently relatively few people had to work for long outside their own culture. Now, with globalisation and the IT revolution many people work in global and virtual teams, or with international colleagues, clients, and partners.

your preferred way of running meetings, taking part in conference calls, or writing emails, can be different from those of international colleagues, clients, and partners. These cultural differences can lead to all manner of misunderstandings. But, importantly these differences also represent an opportunity for personal learning and development. Understanding and learning different cultural perspectives can contribute greatly to good decision-making.

The importance of culture in business.

Cultural differences do not, in themselves, make life difficult for people working across cultural and linguistic boundaries. On the contrary, developing an understanding of diverse assumptions, expectations and ways of doing things can be an extremely enriching personal and professional experience.

However, cultural differences can cause difficulty in business if people who work across borders and cultures fail to acknowledge that other people often (although not always) think and work in different ways from them or fail to interpret and respond appropriately to differences. If you manage cultural differences ineffectively they can become a barrier to global success.

What needs to change in response to cultural differences.

Learning more about cultural differences helps you make choices about the type of behaviour that may help get things done more successfully when working with clients in a different culture.

Of course, this does not mean that you need to change everything you do. your priority is to remain true to your own core values and beliefs, and the values of your business as a global

organisation. You must understand the behaviours that for you (and your business) are, and are not, open to change. This will be different for everyone.

Once you know what cannot change, you may choose to adapt some other elements of your work, management and communication styles in response to cultural differences. What is important is that your choices are based on a clear understanding of what those cultural differences are.

Cultural differences in communication.

Cultural differences in communication styles can be seen, for example, in how direct or indirect people choose to be; or how people choose to communicate in situations of conflict; or even how people choose to express courtesy and politeness.

Listening styles can be reflected in the type of business arguments people find persuasive; or the negotiation styles they find influential and credible; or the extent to which colleagues and clients listen for hidden meaning in the words that you use.

If you learn to recognise when culture is having an impact on the effectiveness of your communication with people from different backgrounds, you can choose to communicate more effectively.

How 'not' to respond to cultural differences.

If you want to become more effective in managing cultural differences at work, a good place to start is by recognising some ineffective or unproductive ways of working with people from other cultures.

An American writer called Milton Bennet has identified three typically unproductive ways in which people often respond when confronted with cultural differences at work. He described these in terms of three different personality profiles – *The Missionary, The Expat, and the Global Villager*.

The purpose of describing these three profiles is to identify situations in which performance and cross-cultural effectiveness can potentially be enhanced. The importance of these profiles therefore lies not so much in what they mean, as in the foundation they provide for a structured and explicit strategy for becoming more culturally effective.

The Missionary

Missionaries simply cannot conceive that other people can operate successfully on a completely different value system, or that their different ways of doing things have merit and logic.

When Missionaries see people from other countries or regions doing things differently at work, they do not see the influence of culture. Instead, they make rapid judgements about

the personality flaws of the individuals concerned, or draw on out-of-date, negative and prescriptive stereotypes to describe what they see.

These judgements, based on the Missionaries' own conception about how things 'should' be, often classify other cultures as backward, unsophisticated or uneducated. The Missionary sees their role as educating others in a global business as to the 'right' way to do things.

The Expat

Expats recognize that there are, indeed, other ways of doing things, but in general judge them to be vastly inferior to 'our ways of doing things'. Expats recognise the existence of other sets of cultural values and behaviours but continue to make faulty attributions or interpretations from their own ethnocentric perceptions, often with negative judgements attached.

In the Expats' world, there is limited space for shades of grey and little empathy with other approaches to work or doing business.

The Global Villager

Global Villagers admit to a minimal number of differences between cultures, but only at a superficial behavioural level. They consider that 'underneath, everyone is the same' and are unsympathetic to the idea of deeper-level differences in assumptions and values.

Global Villagers believe that what works in their home country will, with perhaps some simple superficial modifications, work everywhere else. In the Global Villagers' world, cultural differences are side-lined or ignored. Instead, Global Villagers see it as their role to identify similarities. They may even disparage those who talk about cultural variation as being bigoted or prejudiced. The failure of Global Villagers to accept that there may be hidden cultural assumptions and values impacting on their own (and other people's) way of thinking and acting, leads to a shallow view of the importance of culture.

You may (or may not) recognise Missionaries, Expats or Global Villagers in people you work with. These profiles can be viewed as representative of a range of poor responses to cross-cultural differences. Each profile demonstrates behaviours that detract from, rather than contribute to, cross-cultural effectiveness.

The Importance of cultural self-awareness

At first glance, you may well even think that there is not be much wrong with the Global Villagers' contention that 'underneath, everyone is the same'. In fact, so long as people are communicating with others who have been brought up to believe and act in the same way as they have, being a Global Villager creates no problems.

The challenge arises when Global Villagers encounter people from different cultural backgrounds. In such circumstances, the Global Villagers' assumption tends to be that 'underneath, everyone is the same *as me*'. Thus, they assume that the basic beliefs and values that hold true all around the world *are my beliefs*. In other words, 'you may well speak a different language, and wear different clothes, but fundamentally you think the same way *as I do*'.

Unfortunately, when confronted with evidence that other people do indeed believe different things and act in different ways, Global Villagers will tend to interpret these differences entirely as the consequence of other people's personal choices. Thus, their rationale runs, if you choose not to turn up for our meeting at the exact time I expect you to, you are possibly 'lazy', 'discourteous', 'backward' or, in some ill-defined way, simply 'wrong'. After all, if 'underneath, everyone is the same', it is only natural that everyone should share my assumptions about timekeeping.

The core problem is that the Global Villager never addresses the possibility that their own basic assumptions about timekeeping may merely reflect what they have learnt from their own culture. Indeed, the Global Villager may never even have thought about the range of cultural influences to which they have been exposed. The possibility that others may have learnt different basic assumptions about time, and consequently view deadlines and schedules in fundamentally different ways, is not even considered.

A lack of cultural self-awareness *on both sides* lies at the heart of many of the problems encountered during cross-cultural interactions in business. So, the simple message is: before you can truly understand others, you must first understand the range of cultural influences that impact on you and develop an insight into your own basic values and assumptions. To truly 'know others', you must first 'know yourself'.

In practical terms, knowing yourself means recognising and acknowledge the range of influences that impact on your personal ways of thinking and acting. Nationality, region of origin, ethnicity, gender, age, sexuality, profession, job function, organisation, religion and many other things can all (depending on the context) have an impact on who you are.

Self-knowledge allows you to develop an awareness and understanding of your assumptions and expectations about how to work and communicate. This in turn allows you to understand how your behaviour at work impacts on (and may be seen by) your business colleagues, clients and partners from other cultures.

A model of cross-cultural competence

There are four practical steps you can take to manage cultural differences more productively and effectively as you work across borders within your business:

1. *Recognise that cultural differences exist, are important, and can be talked about*

Many of us grow up assuming that, deep down, other people in other parts of the world are much the same as we are. Unless we are exposed to cultural differences, we are often oblivious to the idea that much of what is apparently instinctive or universal in human behaviour is, in fact, peculiar to our group or culture.

It is not hard to understand why we think this way. We have grown up with people who think in similar ways to us. We work with individuals trained in the same professional and academic disciplines as us. We rarely consider the fact that others, far away in different cultures, learn their lessons just as well as we do but that those lessons are not the same as ours. They have ended up with a very different notion from us of how to 'be'.

What is 'natural' to a person from one cultural environment is not necessarily all that natural to someone from a different culture. Understanding and **recognising** that cultural differences exist and are open for discussion and being mindful of their potential impact on us as we work in a global business, is a key first step in building cultural competence.

2. Map cultural differences and understand how your own cultural values and behaviours may be seen by others

The second step in managing cultural differences is to develop a language and framework for comparing one culture with another.

Developing comparative knowledge is a vital element in coming to understand cultural differences. This is because each of us interprets and evaluates what we see in ways that have, at least in part, been conditioned by the cultural environments in which we grew up and now live. As a result, it is impossible to be truly objective when describing either our own or any other culture. Cultures can only ever be understood in comparison, one with another. Mapping out cultural differences within a clear framework helps you to:

- Explore the impact of culture on your own ways of thinking and acting and understand how your behaviour impacts on others.
- Create a shared vocabulary for describing different approaches to doing things in different cultures.
- Understand the context in which you and your international your business clients, partners or team members behave and make choices.
- Understand and explain cross-cultural misunderstandings.
- Identify similarities that can be used to establish common ground.
- Make informed choices about how to overcome cultural barriers.

Section Two of this workbook looks at a framework for mapping cultural differences and develops understanding of how your behaviour impacts on others.

3. Bridge cultural differences in a productive and positive way

The third step in managing cultural differences is to adopt best practices for incorporating your understanding of culture into your own behaviour.

In practical terms, this means taking simple steps to adapt your communication, work, leadership and management styles. This can help get better results when working with clients from different backgrounds. To reiterate, this does not mean changing who you are, it simply means style-switching your way of working and communicating based on an informed understanding of the cultural preferences of your international colleagues, clients, and partners. The outcome will be better results.

Section Three of this workbook explores techniques to bridge cultural differences in a helpful and effective way in your business work environment.

4. Integrate different approaches to add value to the business

The final step in managing cultural differences involves building skills for getting the best out of cultural diversity in your business to add value to the global business.

In practical terms this means recognising, identifying and overcoming cultural misunderstandings in a forward-looking and positive way. Section Four of these background notes explores this theme in more depth.

To sum up

In this section, you have learnt that effective work and communication with people from a different cultural and language backgrounds is not always simple or problem-free.

To work more effectively with your business global colleagues, partners and clients, it is necessary to learn about the cultural styles that you and other people use when they communicate; the beliefs that underpin the way you each work; and the core cultural values that influence how you each do business.

Section Two - Mapping cultural differences and similarities

The previous section of this workbook introduced a framework for understanding cultural differences and recognising their importance when working in your business's multi-cultural, global business.

This section looks at mapping cultural differences and similarities. You will learn about a technique for charting cultural differences and look at a handy checklist for recognising and dealing with cultural difference in some of the other cultures you work with.

Identifying cultural differences and similarities

There are two commonly used approaches to identifying cultural differences and similarities at work. One approach focuses on creating an awareness of the distinct characteristics of any given culture, for example the specific nature of business culture and practices in The Caribbean, South Africa, or Singapore. This approach underpins the country-specific training workshops available for your business employees.

An alternative approach, which is the focus of this section instead provides a framework for comparing many different cultures, one with another.

As outlined in Section One, beneath the level of visible behaviour cultures can be distinguished by the values and assumptions that are, to a greater or lesser extent, shared by individuals within that culture. These values and assumptions drive some of the ways in which people think, and this in turn drives some of the ways in which people behave.

Identifying basic beliefs and attitudes that tend to be held by people in one country, and then comparing these with basic beliefs and attitudes that tend to be held by those in other countries, can be a useful way of mapping a broad range of cultural similarities and differences that impact on business. Drawing on broad cultural comparisons in this way, cultures can be classified as belonging to certain basic 'types', which are consistent over time.

A highly influential Dutch writer and academic called Geert Hofstede conducted research over many years into basic beliefs and attitudes in different cultures. He identified five different cultural dimensions on which he suggests it is possible to compare every country in the world. His ideas have considerable practical value for managing cultural differences in global business.

Hofstede's five cultural dimensions are listed below. You can learn a lot more about them through a Google search on 'Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions'.

Power distance

Power distance reflects the degree to which a society accepts the idea that power is to be distributed unequally through hierarchical distinctions. The more this is accepted, the higher the country's ranking in power distance.

High power-distance cultures can be characterized by a strong hierarchical structure within their organisations. In such societies, managers are respected in and out of the organisation and are rarely publicly contradicted. In contrast, low power-distance societies tend to value notions of empowerment for employees and consensual decision-making at work.

Individualism versus collectivism

Individualism reflects the degree to which individual beliefs and actions should be independent of collective thought and action. In individualistic societies people are more likely to pursue their own personal goals and pay attention mainly to themselves and their immediate families.

Individualism contrasts with collectivism, which is the belief that individuals should integrate their thoughts and actions with extended groups (for example, extended family, or work groups). In collective societies people are more likely to integrate their own goals with those of other group members and tend to avoid putting people in situations where they might lose face. The cohesion of the group is more important than pursuing one's own individual objectives.

Masculinity versus femininity

This dimension relates to essential tension between attitudes towards gender.

Masculinity describes the degree to which the focus is placed on assertiveness, task achievement and the acquisition of material goods. This is contrasted with femininity in which quality-of-life issues such as caring for others, group solidarity and helping the less fortunate are valued.

Uncertainty avoidance

Uncertainty avoidance reflects the degree to which a culture feels threatened by ambiguous situations and tries to avoid ambiguity by formulating rules and refusing to tolerate deviance. It relates to the essential nature of 'truth'. The more a society accepts that truth is 'absolute', the higher it ranks on uncertainty avoidance.

Societies that rank high on uncertainty avoidance have highly structured working environments. Employees and managers pay attention to precise objectives and clear rules, detailed assignments and schedules set up well in advance.

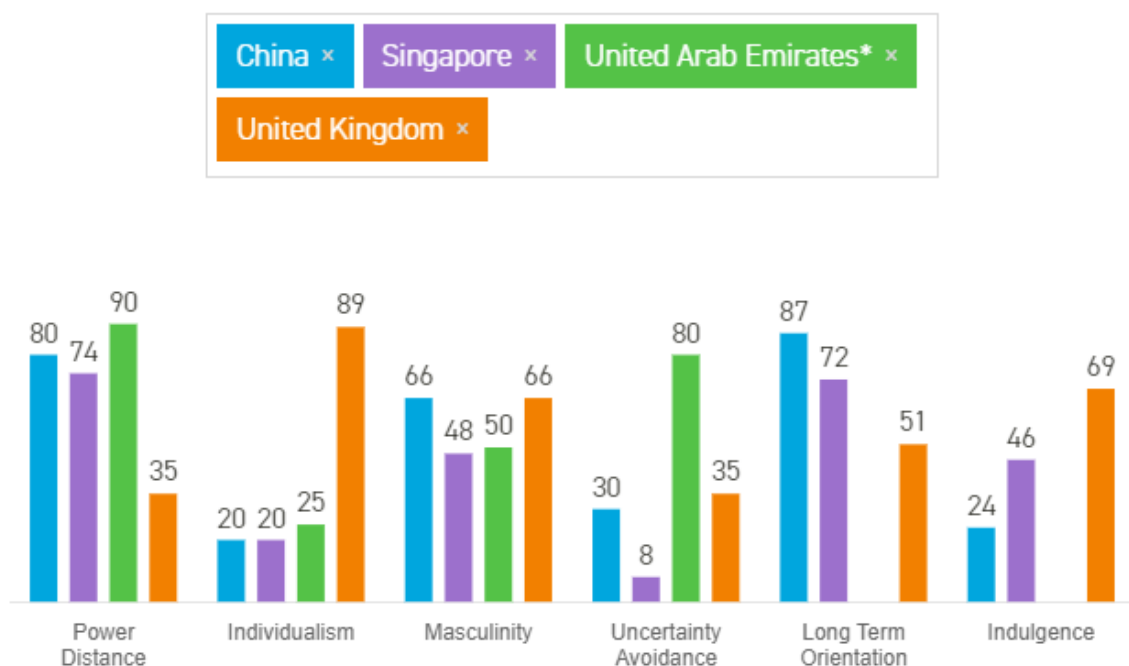
Long-term versus short-term orientation

The essential conflict in this dimension relates to attitudes towards what is, and what is not, considered 'virtuous'. Long-term cultures focus on the distant future and emphasise the importance of saving, persistence and achieving goals that may only come to fruition after an extended period. Short-term cultures emphasise the past and the present, and there is respect for fulfilling social obligations and a consistent understanding of morality.

Finding the relevant data

If you would like to know where your country scores on Hofstede's dimensions, and would like to compare it with another culture you work with, there is a useful online tool at <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/product/compare-countries/>.

A sample comparison of data between the UK and some other sample countries is shown below.



business

(Note - You will notice the online tool shows 6 dimensions. Indulgence versus Restraint is a relatively recent additional dimensions and is less relevant for the purposes of this training programme.)

Points to bear in mind.

The value of Hofstede's dimensions in business situations is that they allow you to identify the ways of thinking and behaving associated with a country or region and compare these to your own ways of ways of thinking and behaving (or those common in your country). You

can then use this map of the similarities and differences on both sides to think about ways of bridging cultural differences. This will help you to communicate and work more effectively across any cultural divide.

There are some important things to bear in mind about Hofstede's cultural dimensions.

- Cultural values are only one aspect of what drives people's behaviour. There are many other factors influencing the way in which people think and act, including their personality, the social context, and the relative commercial or organisational power that different sides hold in a business relationship.
- Cultural values represent generalisations and not hard rules. Individuals are all different and may not always share the values commonly held in the cultures in which they live.
- Cultures can (and do) change over time. What is important is the relative preference for one or other value on each dimension at any given time, or in any given situation.
- Cultural dimensions reflect continuums, not an absolute scale. This means that cultures can only really be understood in comparison with other cultures. The usefulness of Hofstede's approach is that it allows you to compare different values and approaches, rather than come to any fixed and firm conclusions about any given country.
- A preference for one or other pole of each dimension (for example for high or low Power Distance) is not intrinsically good or bad. Differences are only relevant in so far as they help people to understand and reconcile dissimilar approaches. The aim is to find ways of working together that benefit everyone involved.
- Although people who share certain cultural values will generally draw on one or other pole of each dimension as a 'default' approach, this is not prescriptive. Both sides of the behavioural dimension exist in all cultures; it is only the context and frequency of their exhibition that differs.

Practical Applications

Human behaviour results from a range of contextual and personal factors that are more than just cultural in origin. However, Hofstede's model can be useful in a variety of ways as you work across borders at your business. Specifically, it provides...

- A vocabulary for mapping your own, and other people's, cultural values.
- A tool for understanding the context in which you and others make choices about the right way of working, leading, managing and communicating.
- A means for explaining previous cross-cultural misunderstandings.

- Help in identifying potential similarities with others that can be used to establish common ground and shared understanding.
- Help in anticipating potential cultural differences with others.
- A tool for exploring the range of choices you have about how to think and act at work, and what can be learnt from others from different backgrounds.

Handy checklist of do's and don'ts for recognising and dealing with differences

Below you can find a handy checklist of hints for recognising cultural values, and for dealing effectively with some of the countries you may work with at your business.

Remember once again - what is always important is how countries *compare to each other* and not their absolute position. Also remember that these are generalisations only - not all individuals in any country share the same cultural values and behaviours.

Relatively High-Power Distance Countries	Relatively Low-Power Distance Countries
Caribbean, Asia-Pacific, Africa	UK, Australia
<p><i>Tips for recognising</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Powerful leaders make key decisions alone, or with key advisers. • There is a clear distinction between those in charge, and the rest of the organisation. 	<p><i>Tips for recognising</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decisions are made after consultations at a wide range of organizational levels. • There is little distinction between those in charge and those elsewhere.
<p><i>Tips for dealing with</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify the person in charge and focus on them. • Respect your counterparts, even when you question their knowledge or ability. • Use a business title that reflects your influence and status in the organization. • Develop networks to get around formal hierarchies. • Go through formal channels to get the information you need. 	<p><i>Tips for dealing with</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify the group that needs to be persuaded. • Respect your counterparts, even when you question their status in the organization. • Use a business title that reflects what you have achieved for the organization. • Anticipate less need for informal networks. • Anticipate requests for information through informal channels.

Relatively Individualist	Relatively Collectivist
UK, Australia	Africa, Caribbean, Asia-Pacific
<p><i>Tips for recognising</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decisions are made by individuals. • People assume personal responsibility and seek to protect dignity. 	<p><i>Tips for recognising</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decisions are referred to headquarters. • People assume joint responsibility and seek to protect 'face'.
<p><i>Tips for dealing with</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be structured and clear. Say exactly what you mean and mean exactly what you say. • Focus on the deal: relationships follow. • Make it clear when you need flexibility in arrangements. • Anticipate faster decision-making but slower implementation. • Create trust through fairness and equity. 	<p><i>Tips for dealing with</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respect tradition, age and hierarchy. • Allow plenty of time to establish, build and maintain relationships. • Make it clear when you have limited room for negotiation. • Anticipate slower decision-making but faster implementation. • Create trust through personal understanding.

Relatively Masculine	Relatively Feminine
USA, Australia, S Africa	Singapore
<p><i>Tips for recognising</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decisive and assertive managers are expected to battle things out. • Colleagues compete to advance. 	<p><i>Tips for recognising</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intuitive and consensus-oriented managers are expected. • Colleagues cooperate to advance.
<p><i>Tips for dealing with</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek out high performers for special praise. • Give people the freedom to take personal initiative. • Anticipate conflict resolution through confrontation. • Anticipate less feedback than elsewhere. • Anticipate less involvement in decision-making. 	<p><i>Tips for dealing with</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pay attention to team morale and cohesiveness. • Focus on the group and avoid favouritism. • Anticipate conflict resolution through compromise. • Be prepared to justify business decisions more than you normally might. • Be prepared to contribute to decisions — even in areas outside your professional expertise.

Relatively High Uncertainty Avoidance	Relatively Low Uncertainty Avoidance
Asia-Pacific	UK, Australia
<p><i>Tips for recognising</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Professionalism and technical expertise is valued in managers. Precision and punctuality are valued above flexibility. 	<p><i>Tips for recognising</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The ability to communicate and persuade is valued in managers. Flexibility is often valued over precision and punctuality.
<p><i>Tips for dealing with</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Be more explicit and direct than you may normally be. Anticipate a centralized decision-making process with formal forecasting. Be prepared to justify any unplanned changes to strategy. Make explicit when and why your business priorities have changed. Provide more technical data and written information than you might normally. 	<p><i>Tips for dealing with</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clarify ambiguity and avoid mistaking vagueness for ambiguity or disinterest. Look for covert or hidden signs of disagreement. Watch out for suggestions that are really requests. Anticipate a flexible and relatively unstructured planning process. Make clear why deadlines are important. Make explicit the consequences if deadlines are not met.

Relatively Long-Term Orientation	Relatively Short-Term Orientation
Asia-Pacific	UK, Australia
<p><i>Tips for recognising</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is an attachment to longer-term strategic planning. There is a focus on maintaining harmonious and deep client relationships. 	<p><i>Tips for recognising</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> There are rapid, sometimes dramatic changes in business strategies. There is a focus on short-term profit and 'going where the money is'.
<p><i>Tips for dealing with</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Make sure you are dealing with the decision-maker. Be persistent, polite and patient — stay focused on the bigger picture. Anticipate some cross-over between work and private life. 	<p><i>Tips for dealing with</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anticipate quick decisions from relatively junior people. Be direct and assertive to get what you want — stay focussed on how to manage this situation. Anticipate boundaries between work and private life.

The limits of Hofstede's model

Hofstede's dimensions provide a basic framework for comparing cultures. His framework enables you to explore behaviours you may encounter in a country or region and give hints on how to adapt when dealing with people from that country or region.

Of course, Hofstede's framework will not allow you to identify all the important cultural differences between your own country and other countries you work. If you are to work effectively, there are other things you may need to find out about the cultures you deal with.

Areas in business where cultural differences most often become visible.

Experienced international business-people report that cultural differences often cause problems and misunderstandings in the following areas of their work.

Conceptions of work and performance

Ideas about what constitutes good or poor, right or wrong, appropriate or inappropriate work performance can differ between cultures. In multi-cultural work environments, such as project teams, we may bring into the workplace expectations and behaviours that are very different from those of our counterparts.

For example, Northern European attitudes towards precision, perseverance, punctuality and task completion may be seen differently in more socially-oriented cultures, where maintaining cordial relationships with other people takes precedence.

Leadership and management styles

In cultures that value 'Decisive' leadership the expectation, amongst both those who manage and those who are managed, is that the power to influence and make decisions is restricted to those at senior levels. Only those with the necessary authority (whether through role or expertise) make decisions within a certain sphere of influence.

In contrast, cultures which value 'Consensual' leadership expect consultation and discussion about decisions to be extended to a wider range of those affected by the decision. Thus, the expectation is that a variety of individuals and interest groups should be consulted before a decision is reached.

Of course, in any culture both types of leadership behaviour, decisive and consensual, are likely to coexist. These labels do not dictate how any given leader or manager will behave in any given situation; rather, they can be thought of as 'default' settings. They are most likely to apply where there is no contextual or situational information to indicate that an alternative way of leading may be appropriate.

Identifying your own attitudes towards leadership, and then using these as a sounding-board with which to compare yourselves to others, can be useful in selecting the right leadership style for any given situation. For example, if you value decisive leadership, you may find managing individuals with a more consensual preference to contain complexities. Those leaders with consensual values, in contrast, may misperceive other leaders as dictatorial or authoritarian, yet may themselves be seen as weak and indecisive.

Team-working

The amount of planning required for any project; the timescales involved; and the way in which rewards are distributed may be different across cultures. Other cultural differences include the expectations of initiative by team members, and the ways in which control of teams is maintained and decisions arrived at.

Communication

What makes for effective communication at work can differ from culture to culture. For example:

- In some cultures, silence indicates an absence of communication, whereas in others it represents an essential part of communication.
- The degree to which disagreement or conflict that can be openly expressed may differ.
- The level of directness in communication may differ - for example, being direct and frank is often associated with individualist cultures, while being indirect and saving face is often associated with collectivist cultures.
- Who is permitted to talk in any given situation can vary depending on the relative status of the individuals involved.
- In some cultures, particularly those where 'face' is important, explicitly saying 'No' can be considered rude. This can make it difficult to know when agreement about a decision has been reached.

Approaches to relationship-building

In cultures that value a 'Task' focus, business interactions tend to concentrate on achieving a deal that satisfies the practical requirements of both parties. This can be achieved in the absence of any close relationship between the two parties involved. The logic of the deal drives its completion, and considerations of building and maintaining relationships are secondary.

In contrast, in cultures that value a 'Relationship' focus, the aim is to complete deals through good personal and professional relationships. Thus, the logic of the relationship drives the details of any deal.

If you tend towards a task focus you may encounter challenges when working with people who have more of a relationship focus. You may well find it particularly challenging to recognise and manage your counterparts' need for close personal relationships. You may even misperceive others as inefficient or slow, because of their focus on maintaining relationships at all costs.

The challenges of virtual cross-cultural communication

Much of the communication you have with international colleagues, clients, and partners may be in the virtual environment. That is, communication through various forms of technological interface (such as, telephone, teleconferencing and e-mail) that exclude face-to-face or visual contact.

In such circumstances three additional barriers to communication can come into place. These barriers operate regardless of whether virtual communication is cross-cultural or within the same culture, although they are often more visible in cross-cultural situations. It is useful for you consider these when you are involved in virtual contact with international colleagues, clients, and partners.

Absence of non-verbal communication channel

In face-to-face communication, non-verbal behaviours not only repeat, reinforce or add emphasis to words, but also provide a transmission route for relational information (that is, how we 'feel' about something).

In the absence of face-to-face contact, language (either written or spoken) takes the burden of transmitting both relational and content information. This means that relational information may not get through correctly or may be incorrectly understood. This is particularly problematic when individuals from direct cultures (for example, the USA), who assume effective communication should be brief and economical, interact with those from indirect cultures (for example, in Asia), who believe in reading between the lines to gain important relational information. In such circumstances, misunderstandings are common.

Lack of immediate feedback

Face-to-face communication, if effective, involves a continuous cycle of feedback, clarification and readjustment. In virtual communication, particularly e-mails, feedback is delayed and opportunities for transmitting or clarifying information are missing, leading to greater room for cultural misunderstandings.

Loss of inhibition

Face-to-face communication occurs in a cultural context that inhibits too much transmission of negative information. Thus, most of the time we prefer to avoid demonstrably negative non-verbal communication. The e-mail format removes these inhibitions, causing individuals

to escalate conflict to an extent they would be unlikely to replicate during face-to-face interaction.

To sum up

Understanding what you do not know about other cultures is an essential part of developing cross-cultural effectiveness. Armed with this awareness you can focus your cultural information gathering activities towards the right target.

In this section, you have learnt a process for identifying cultural similarities and differences in the work environment using Hofstede's five cultural dimensions. Hofstede's approach allows you to compare many different cultures, one with another, using a practical and robust framework. Developing a process for mapping cultural differences in this way is a key step in building your skills to anticipate, manage and reconcile cultural differences at work in your business.

Section Three - bridging cultural differences in a helpful and effective way.

The previous section showed that if you surface your own cultural values, you can then explore how you may differ from (or be like) those in other cultures with whom you come into contact. Using Hofstede's model in this way allows you to speculate on how to work better with people from different backgrounds.

This section explores some useful, general best practices for bridging cultural differences to work more effectively across cultures.

Separate observation from evaluation and interpretation.

When faced with attitudes or behaviours that are unfamiliar or apparently out of place, it is human nature to try to understand what is happening by referring to your own set of expectations and assumptions. Thus, rather than trying to find cultural or contextual explanations for the apparently illogical behaviours you encounter, you may sometimes be tempted to label the individuals involved as:

- Rude or insulting
- Disrespectful, over-familiar, or lacking in respect
- Bossy or inflexible
- Confrontational or hostile
- Cold, unfriendly or patronising
- Hiding things or not saying what they mean

At this point, it might be useful to identify a work situation in which you have been tempted to use one or more of these labels and reflect on whether cultural factors, rather than personality, might have been involved.

Of course, on reflection you may feel that the labels you applied in this situation were indeed correct. Nevertheless, labelling others with simplistic and negative descriptions sometimes says more about us, and our lack of cultural understanding, than it does about the characteristics of anyone else involved. People you work with may not always be typical of the cultures they come from, but often they are.

A core cross-cultural work skill is therefore to take a step back from automatically interpreting and evaluating your observations. Rushing to judgement about the sometimes-unfamiliar ways in which global colleagues or partners may behave, in the absence of a full understanding of any situation, can close off considerable opportunities for learning.

Move beyond stereotypes

Generalising is a natural pattern of human behaviour that is, in and of itself, neither good nor bad, moral nor immoral. Hofstede's dimensions are generalisations, that can sometimes be useful in creating awareness of where and why cultures differ.

Stereotyping, in contrast, is a pattern of prejudicial behaviour based around inappropriate, out of date or unwarranted generalisations. It occurs when we make unwarranted assumptions about members of our own or another culture. We all stereotype, whether we want to or not. Confront your prejudices and stereotypes directly and openly - only when you recognise and understand them can you hope to challenge them.

Choose when to switch styles

It is worth repeating again - you do not need to change everything you do, or the things that have made you successful. You simply need to consider whether switching, or adapting, some of the ways you work in response to cultural differences will get better results.

Be true to yourself

It is important to be true to your own core values and beliefs. Be yourself and be authentic. Insincerity or lack of honesty comes across clearly, whatever the cultural differences. So, if you believe strongly that things need to be done in a certain way then argue your case. But always try to be aware of how your behaviour will impact on others. Try to communicate your needs in a clear and culturally sensitive way.

Performance matters

Cultural differences can never be an excuse for poor performance. Work always needs to be completed to the right quality standards, at the right time. That is the same whatever background people come from.

Listen actively

Active listening is employed when individuals listen to and then restate their opponent's statements, emphasising the feelings expressed as well as the substance. The purpose is to confirm that the listener accurately understands and acknowledges the key messages. So, always demonstrate interest in what your global business contacts are saying. Acknowledge their comments with your head or voice. Adopt an enquiring attitude. Evaluate the meaning of their words - they mean different things in different places. Listen for what is not being said and always focus on the central message.

Clarify what you hear

Paraphrase what you think you have heard wherever necessary. It is also important to clarify the feelings expressed as much as the substance of the communication. Even if you

do not agree with what has been said, you must confirm that you accurately understand and acknowledge the message.

Summarise regularly

Confirm and reconfirm your understanding of other people's beliefs, arguments and intentions at regular periods in the dialogue. This provides signposts to clarify where others are coming from and creates a shared understanding on which to base your response to others. Effective summarising takes no more than half the time required for the original opinions to be expressed.

Use questions effectively and often

Use simple, straightforward questions and make sure you get the answer to the question you asked. A useful technique is to use open-ended questions to expand the discussion and closed questions (requiring only a yes or no answer) to prompt for specifics.

Questions that begin with 'Why' can sometimes imply judgement or criticism, particularly in cultures where critical feedback is commonly delivered through third parties. In contrast, open, or open-ended, questions that invite others to participate in the discussion as equals are more likely to encourage the expression of constructive and useful information.

Spell things out explicitly

In the absence of a shared cultural and contextual understanding, individuals from different cultural backgrounds can face ambiguity when trying to decipher each other's communication. One way of removing this ambiguity is to formulate and describe informational and relational information a great deal more explicitly than is normal. This means saying exactly what you mean and meaning exactly what you say. Be direct, even when working with indirect cultures.

Be open and friendly

Demonstrating patience, positive feedback and human interest works in any culture. Giving more than the minimum and mirroring your partner's tone will work in most situations. Keeping your language positive, constructive and optimistic always will help turn debate into dialogue. Maintaining culturally appropriate eye contact and body language and making statements that acknowledge the speaker also help.

Invite feedback — don't just expect it

Different cultures have different attitudes towards the acceptability and nature of feedback. You should not assume that individuals from other cultural backgrounds will choose to give feedback under the same conditions, and in the same way, as you. Invite input, rather than simply expecting it.

Look for covert or hidden signs of disagreement

Watch out for suggestions that are really requests. Common assumptions about the best way to express disagreement may contain cultural biases. Feedback is most useful when the receiver formulates the kind of question that the other person can answer, or when it is actively sought. Avoid interrupting to express disagreement, even if you know it is common practice in other cultures.

Make sure your verbal and non-verbal communication agree

The use of gestures, movement, silence, and personal space can either clarify or confuse the meaning of verbal communication. So, it is important to make sure that your body language mirrors your spoken language. All communication channels need to reinforce the same message. Skilful communicators understand the importance of non-verbal communication and use it not only to increase their effectiveness, but also to understand more clearly what someone else is really saying.

Be careful with intonation

In British English, the activity of asking is signalled by rising intonation and ordering is signalled by falling intonation. Other cultures use intonation in directly opposite ways. Our questions can sound to others like an order – and vice versa.

Grade your language to your colleague or partner's level

Finding out your partner's competence in your language is an important element in effective cross-cultural communication - particularly as it is very common to overestimate how well non-natives can speak your language. Strategies for grading verbal communication effectively include the following:

- Speak slowly and carefully.
- Avoid shouting.
- Avoid idioms or sarcasm and take care with humour.
- Build in pauses for understanding.
- Structure your language in a clear and logical way with one idea per sentence.
- Explain complex issues but make clear that it is an explanation and not an alternative message.
- Choose words that are appropriate for each situation.

Use a checklist to explore what you do not know about other cultures, and what you need to find out

A checklist of some of the information you will need to think about when working with specific countries is shown below. You can also find much useful information by searching online resources.

This is quite an exhaustive list (although other questions that are not shown may also be relevant). Not all questions need to be answered, but the checklist is a good place to start building your awareness and understanding. Whatever you do, make a conscious effort to learn.

Cross-cultural Checklist

Business relationships

- Should I anticipate different attitudes towards status?
- Should I anticipate different attitudes towards seniority?
- Should I expect to spend time building up close business relationships?
- Should I expect to invest more time establishing personal networks?

Meetings

- Should I anticipate different attitudes towards small-talk?
- Should I expect a different attitude towards drawing up and keeping to agendas?
- Should I expect a different attitude towards the clarity and explicitness of objectives?
- Should I expect status to have an influence on who I can talk to?
- Should I expect status to affect how free people feel to talk?
- Should I expect to be asked to comment on areas outside my responsibility?
- Do I know how much preparation to expect from my counterparts?

Hierarchies and leadership

- Should I expect different approaches to praising team members or individuals?
- Should I anticipate a team working style that is different from what I am used to?
- Should I anticipate different attitudes towards the importance of saving face?

Appointments

- Do I know how much I can rely on deadlines agreed by email?
- Should I expect different attitudes towards punctuality for calls and conference calls?
- Should I anticipate different attitudes or expectations about urgency?

Privacy

- Should I anticipate different attitudes about the acceptability of asking personal questions?

Persuading

- Should I anticipate different attitudes towards the acceptability of humour and emotions during presentations?
- Do I know what type of argument is likely to be most persuasive?
- Should I anticipate adapting the amount of data and background material I include in materials?
- Should I anticipate different attitudes towards the acceptability of interrupting?

Decision-making

- Do I know how decisions are really arrived at?
- Do I know how quickly to expect a decision?
- Should I expect a different attitude towards delegation?
- Should I expect leaders to share decision-making?

Giving feedback

- Should I anticipate a different attitude towards addressing difficult issues directly?
- Do I know what style of feedback is acceptable?
- Should I anticipate different expectations about the expression of criticism?
- Should I anticipate different expectations about the expression of emotion?
- Should I anticipate different expectations about the formality of feedback?

Dealing with conflict

- Do I know the range of ways in which stress is likely to be exhibited?
- Do I know the range of ways in which disagreement is likely to be expressed?
- Should I expect a different style of conflict resolution?
- Should I anticipate different expectations about the role of experts in a team or organization?

Use of language

- Do I know my counterpart's linguistic ability?
- Should I anticipate different expectations about the use of silence?
- Should I adapt my language in any way?
- Should I anticipate different communication styles to be in use?

To sum up

In this section, you have learnt some general best practices for working more effectively across cultures. Broadly speaking cross-cultural communication is enhanced when people:

- Understand how others perceive reality
- Understand why others perceive reality in this way
- Understand how others express these perceptions
- Understand how these expressions differ from their own
- Take active steps to improve communication

Section Four - handling misunderstandings and integrating cultural differences.

In the previous section of these background notes you learnt useful, general techniques to manage cultural differences in a helpful and effective way.

In this section, you will learn a strategy for handling cultural misunderstandings, and review ways of getting the best out of cultural differences to add value to the work of your business.

Overcoming misunderstandings

No matter how well prepared you may be for working internationally, misunderstandings can occur in any situation where individuals with different values, beliefs and ways of doing things interact. In other words, when your assumptions about how to think and behave are not shared by others, or when others perceive the things you say and do incorrectly, mix-ups can happen. Not all these cross-cultural misunderstandings can be resolved to the satisfaction of everyone concerned. Sometimes misunderstandings snowball out of control into open conflict, with dangerous consequences for all concerned.

The acronym RADAR describes a five-step strategy for recognizing and overcoming cultural misunderstandings during cross-cultural interactions. It is equally useful where one or both sides involved recognise culture as a factor in the misunderstanding - that is, it can be successfully employed when either one or both parties involved in a misunderstanding want to work together to find a mutually acceptable resolution.

The five-step RADAR strategy stands for:

1. **Recognise** the cultural dimension.
2. **Analyse** what caused it.
3. **Decide** what your options are.
4. **Act** on the best option.
5. **Review** what happened.

Recognize the cultural dimension

Because culture is so deeply ingrained we are often unaware that our counterparts from different cultural backgrounds do not share the same assumptions, attitudes and behaviours as us. We always need to be aware that human behaviour is shaped by a complex set of factors including individual personality, context and cultural values. It is only by understanding influences at all three levels that we can hope to understand why the same situation is viewed in different ways by different participants.

Analyse what caused it

To analyse the cause of cross-cultural misunderstandings we need to investigate and gain a clearer understanding of the perspectives of everyone involved. At the end of this period of analysis, it is important to have arrived at an account of the events that led up to the misunderstanding and an understanding of the perceptions of the various participants.

Decide what your options are

Armed with a clear analysis of the root causes of a misunderstanding, it is then possible to identify a range of options for resolving the issue and, where possible, use the misunderstanding as a springboard for learning and development. In this way, cultural misunderstandings are no longer seen as threats or challenges, but instead as opportunities to develop a greater understanding of both oneself and others. This is important because cultural differences provide opportunities to add value to the work of global organisations such as your business, so long as they are managed correctly.

Act on the best option

Once a suitable option (or options) for action has been selected, it must be implemented. However, it is important to ensure that options are enacted sincerely and not simply because they represent the path of least resistance.

Review what happened

Sometimes the options chosen and enacted may not resolve the cultural misunderstanding or may raise further issues that need to be dealt with. For example, you may need to make changes to the type of communication tools your team uses to ensure that cultural misunderstandings are avoided in future. It is therefore important that frequent reviews are built in to explore what works and what does not, and to explore what else might have to change to ensure that everyone involved learns from the misunderstanding.

Using RADAR – a practice activity

1. Read the case study below.
2. Apply the 5 RADAR steps, thinking carefully about each step, in turn. Use the knowledge you have learnt in the previous sections of these background notes to analyse the cultural issues and evaluate the best course of action.
3. When you have finished, compare your ideas with the case study analysis that follows.

Case study

A UK manufacturing company wanted to boost its flagging exports to continental Europe.

Ruud, a young Dutch marketing manager with a lot of experience in the Amsterdam office of the organization was seconded to the company's London headquarters for six months to help with a new marketing project. Ruud spent several weeks researching the marketing department's methods and talking to his counterparts. Eventually, he drew up several clear proposals for boosting European sales, which he intended to present at a senior management meeting. During the meeting Ruud explained what the problems were and what needed to be done to solve them.

At the end of the meeting Ruud asked if anyone had any comments or suggestions and was a little surprised when everyone kept silent. A week later Ruud was transferred back to Amsterdam, even though he still had three months of his secondment to serve. Shortly afterwards, Ruud's manager in Amsterdam received a memo from head office suggesting that he be moved to a 'less sensitive' position in the company where he did not have to deal with clients or senior management.

Case study analysis

Recognize the cultural dimension.

The misunderstanding took place in a situation in which people from different cultural backgrounds came into contact. Ruud felt that he was acting in a courteous and constructive fashion, yet his behaviour was seen in a different way by his British counterparts. This suggests that cultural differences played a part in what happened.

Analyse what caused the misunderstanding.

The misunderstanding occurred because of a presentation given by Ruud. The Dutch tend to value communication that is direct and explicit. In contrast, the British often value communication that does not rock the boat or expresses criticism in quite ambiguous terms. The British may therefore have misperceived Ruud's considered and polite presentation as overtly confrontational and critical.

Decide what options are available.

Ruud could choose not to interact with the British again, or simply change his communication style to suit his audience. Alternatively, he could make differences in UK/Dutch communication styles explicit in his next contact with the UK, and work with his counterparts to find a style of communication that suited everyone concerned.

Act on the best option(s).

The best option in the short term is probably for Ruud to adapt his communication style to suit his audience. This is most likely to enable him to get the response he wants from his communication. In the longer term, addressing cultural differences in the organisation will probably be beneficial.

Review what happened.

Reviewing the response to his next presentation will enable him to decide what effect changing communication style had.

Integrating cultural differences

Of course, depending on the outcome, cultural conflict can be a positive or negative experience for an individual, team or organisation. Conflict, within certain parameters, can spur individuals, teams and organisations into action and lead to improved problem-solving. Open discussion can clear the air and lead to increased self-awareness.

The question then arises as to what personal characteristics are associated with individuals judged to be effective in *integrating* cultural differences to add value to a global organisation like your business. The following suggestions may be helpful:

They recognise and value the feelings of those with whom they work.

Rather than responding directly with denial or defensiveness, those effective at dealing with cross-cultural conflict first acknowledge the obvious: that counterparts are upset, offended, hurt, or are feeling any one of many powerful negative emotions.

Acknowledging powerful feelings implies giving control to counterparts and recognising that they have a concern that is serious to them and deserves to be heard. Making a genuine attempt to understand counterparts in this way allows the focus to move away from conflict and towards a search for approaches that meet everyone's interests. In this way, the goal is for everyone to get from the encounter what they really need, with notions of winning or losing rejected in favour of an 'everyone gains' approach.

They postpone judgement about the causes of conflict until they understand the underlying reasons.

Making premature or incorrect judgements about the motives behind other people's behaviour is a key factor behind the escalation of conflict. Postponing judgement until all the facts and feelings have been aired enables both parties to de-escalate the situation while each side is heard. It also avoids the use of accusatory statements that will further inflame the situation.

They elicit key information and ask questions in a way that avoids inflaming the situation.

Gathering information without implying judgement almost always triggers a de-escalating reaction from those involved in conflict situations: it is very difficult to maintain an intensity of anger towards someone who is clearly trying to understand you.

However, care needs to be taken to avoid using the kind of interrogatory questioning techniques that are likely to provoke, rather than reduce, hostility. People who feel

criticised or defensive, find it difficult to respond constructively. They may either refuse to answer or respond in a way that increases, rather than decreases, the tension. However, used effectively, questioning and summarising techniques not only grant both parties the opportunity for clarification and understanding, but also act as a reality check to ensure that the message sent perfectly matches the one received.

They find non-judgemental ways of describing and making explicit the values, attitudes and behaviours that are in conflict.

People who deal effectively with conflict in cross-cultural situations know and understand their own beliefs and values. They also recognise that others may bring a different set of values and beliefs to conflict situations. Moving beyond accusations of blame and statements of self-justification requires openness on the part of those involved in conflict, together with a willingness to make explicit those areas in which values, attitudes and behaviours are not shared.

They create problem-solving discussions that are participatory and aim for dialogue.

There is always more than one option for resolving a conflict. Whatever option for resolving the conflict is chosen is most likely to succeed when everyone involved participates in the problem-solving process.

They recognise and encourage behavioural choices.

Regardless of how conflict has arisen, people have choices about whether to continue it. Particularly in situations where others have seemingly set the rules for conflict, a legitimate choice can be to refuse to accept someone else's agenda and instead take steps to defuse it. Seeking new perspectives in the face of hostility and following your own agenda can be a highly effective response to conflictive situations.

What next?

As you complete the final section of these background notes, three themes (or key takeaways) should be foremost in your mind. Working effectively across cultures requires you to be:

- Sensitive to cultural influences
- Knowledgeable about cultural differences
- Adaptable in your behaviour

This is not the end of the process of learning. A good way to prioritise your learning is to reflect on your current competence in each of these three areas. This will help identify where you need to develop further.