

About Culture

By Omar Zein

The aim of this short extract from CulturePM website, is to demystify culture and diversity, and make clear their nature and implication at work; as has evolved since early globalization up to modern times.

1. Why culture?

Simply because we define what is acceptable and what is not, what is desirable and what is not, what is appropriate and what is not, on the basis of culture. And this has implications that go far beyond social pleasantries and etiquette; impacting every aspect of our life including work.

It is easy to take the style and format of our management, leadership and communication for granted, when in fact what the norm is for one culture is often a 'no-go' for another.

- How often and to what extent must we follow-up on our team?
- How much authority and tolerance should we delegate (or expect to be delegated)?
- How formally, informally or amicably should we behave with our managers, staff and colleagues?
- What motivational incentives and activities should we use?

Lacking cultural awareness and understanding, multicultural initiatives **will** suffer, and often fail altogether. Therefore, when we consider globalization at large and today's increasing multicultural collaborations, coupled with fierce global competition and stricter timescales, the answer to "why culture?" becomes starkly clear.

The good news is, **culture offers as much an opportunity as it does a threat**. That is, being culturally aware not only allows us to avoid the pitfalls when working with diversity, but also to take advantage of that very diversity by understanding its strengths and weaknesses in the various areas of work, and actively utilizing 'strengths' where appropriate, while compensating for 'weakness' where needed.

Managed with cultural awareness, diversity turns into an opportunity right within your reach. Left to its own devices or unskillfully managed, it turns into a threat.

2. Classic Culture Theory

As anthropologists, social scientists and psychologist explored the norms and behaviors of groups and nations, they came to identify certain similarities in the way that societies behave. These similarities are driven by a set of assumptions that the various societies have developed over generations.

To make sense of the information, researchers grouped related behaviors under purposeful categories most commonly know as "cultural dimensions".

With such an approach, research can be conducted to empirically identify the orientation of a group or nation for a specific cultural dimension. Take for example the dimension 'Power Distance' which measures how far a group is willing to accept the dominance of authority and as a result respect the hierarchy.

Generally, as Arab countries tend to score higher on power distance, hierarchy is better structured and respected. At the opposite end of this dimension you have countries such as Sweden with very low power distance resulting in flatter organizations and direct communication across departments without necessarily going through the hierarchy.

Depending on the society itself and the nature of work in question, both modules can be efficient or inefficient. Therefore, no standard module can be claimed as better overall or across cultures.

A cultural issue can arise however, when Swedish and Arab organizations have to work closely together.

*Classic culture theories were developed with the aim of helping groups to actively manage their expectations when working with other groups of a **specific-other** culture.*

In our example, the Swedes to manage their expectations when working with Arabs and vice versa; and use this managed expectation to make the best of the situation at hand for all involved.

3. Today's cultural challenge; Globalization, Diversity and Speed!

Classic culture studies have played a primary role in harmonizing cultural differences during the past decades of globalization. It is no exaggeration to say that without them, international business cooperation and multicultural organizations would not have enjoyed the success that is evident today.

Nowadays however, while these studies, their resulting theories and application remain valid, they are no longer sufficient by themselves; the reasons are 'diversity' and 'speed'.

DIVERSITY

The term diverse simply means a multitude of diverse elements (be they what they may). However, as concerning 'cultural' diversity, I define the term as follows:

A culturally diverse environment is an environment whose members bring a multitude of diverse cultures and practices.

And that is an increasing challenge that we face today when working with diversity as compared to not so long ago, when classic culture theories were developed. For while earlier globalization implied the need to 'collaborate' with other cultures – normally in the form of separate collaborating organizations from different cultures agreeing and coordinating their activities to achieve their purpose – modern globalization with its increasing demographic mix have resulted in an increasing cultural diversity *within* many organizations of all size and types (see figures below).

Figure A illustrates a classic scenario whereby three organizations (or divisions) of three distinct cultures need to collaborate together. An example would be a manufacturing company in the US (X), whose design division is based in Germany (Y) that has a supplier in China (Z). Each of these organizations has a homogeneous culture within, which is dominated by its local national culture and significantly differs from the cultures of the other two organizations.

In our simplified example, *Culture R* is a “US large-manufacturer” culture; *Culture S* is a “German medium-company” culture; and *Culture T* is a “Chinese family-business” culture.

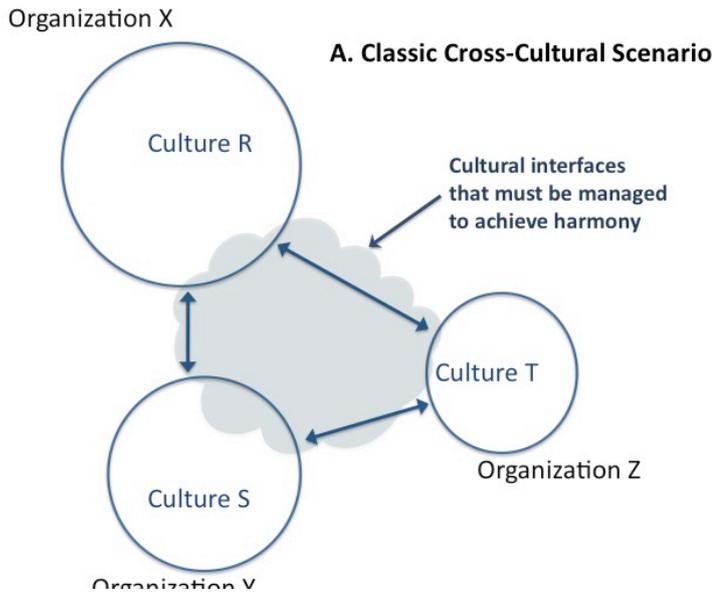
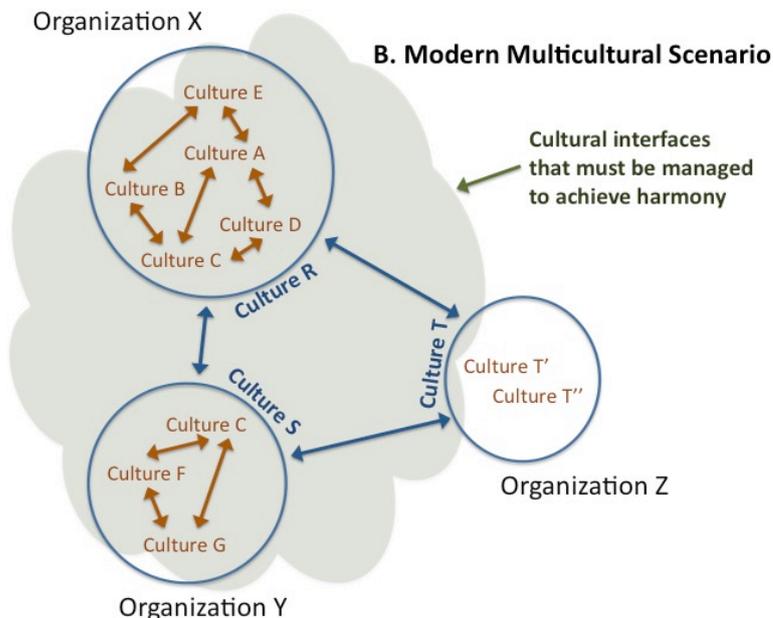


Figure B illustrates a similar scenario but of modern times, whereby two of the organizations are *multicultural in themselves*. Following the same example, we have the US manufacturer (X) employing Americans, South Americans, Indians, Europeans, Chinese, and so on. While the German design division (Y) employs people from Germany, other European countries, Africa, the Far East, the Middle East and so on. For simplicity sake, let us assume that the Chinese organization (Z) to be a small company with a relatively homogeneous culture.



The blue arrows in both figures illustrate the cross-cultural interfaces that can be managed utilizing classic culture theories. That is, identifying the difference between each pair of the main interfacing cultures (say cultures R and S), elaborating possible work implications arising from such differences, and devising a culturally oriented approach to managing and harmonizing these implications.

The brown arrows illustrate the interfaces amongst members of the cultural diversity *within* the organizations, and it should be noted that many members of these organizations are themselves **multicultural**. That is, their personal and professional backgrounds exposed them to a multitude of cultures that in turn shaped their working practices, alongside their cultures of origins. As a result, they do not fit any cultural archetype and cannot be defined or managed through the use of classic culture theories.

It is from such culturally diverse individuals within and across organizations that modern project teams are built and tasked with the planning, coordination and delivery of products and services. This, which once upon a time was considered an exceptional scenario, is what today for many, constitutes the norm.

Although cultural diversity provide a wide spectrum of opportunities for their hosting organization (in terms of diverse skills resulting from the diverse cultures), it does imply that classic culture theories are insufficient by themselves to exploit such opportunities.

SPEED

No mystery there, timescales for delivery are shrinking fast. Drivers being increased competition from the global market, reduced time-to-market thanks to evolving technologies and as an outcome, continuously changing products and services to satisfy an increasingly demanding market. *This change that have become the norm, have resulted in rapidly increasing investments in projects and programs as compared to processes.*

The need to rapidly structure a team tasked with complex delivery within strict timescales adds a clear challenge to any business, and that challenge will multiply if the team is culturally diverse; as is the case with many initiatives today.

My point is this; classic culture theories helps us devise a strategy that allows distinctly identified cultures to understand each other and find a way to harmoniously work together through the participative development of a common working culture. This processes is called ‘assimilation’ and usually take many months or years to fully develop. It is with the help of classic culture theories that many multinationals have succeeded in their ventures and businesses outside their original cultures.

Today however, ‘many months’ is a very long time. And if we consider multicultural project and programs rather than international ventures, then a ‘many month’ period of compromised performance prior to cultural assimilation or harmonization is most likely to spell the utter failure of the initiative.

Most international initiatives today involve both cross-cultural and multicultural work (as in the figures above); and if they are to achieve their optimum potential in success, both cultural interfaces must be managed.

These complexities of our times are exactly what drove me to develop my approach to managing cultural diversity at work.

WITH OPEN AND EXPLICIT PERMISSION BY THE AUTHOR TO DISTRIBUTE AND/OR REPRODUCE THIS PAPER **AS WHOLE WHILE MAKING REFERENCE TO ITS AUTHOR.**
ANY PART REPRODUCTION IS SUBJECT TO WRITTEN PERMISSION