



# Reading the World

## Acquiring Cultural Synergetic Intelligence

### in Today's Global Economy

By Maureen Rabotin

Despite the opportunities a flattened world has given us when it comes to technology, global executives have taken on new roles that require new ways of thinking. Unforeseen challenges of aligning virtual teams, leading multicultural team projects across geographical borders and time zones, and negotiating alliances and partnerships around the world have modified communication to an art form that goes well beyond the simple use of words.

It takes a broader perspective, a distinct type of intelligence, and much practice to communicate exactly what you intend across geographical, cultural, and linguistic boundaries. Instead of a list of dos and don'ts, cultural synergetic intelligence is more about pushing one's comfort zones and feeling confident in ambiguous, unfamiliar situations, while recognizing the value each individual brings to the table.

#### **From differences to the intangible**

In trying to enable executives to be more successful when working around the world and around the clock, cross-cultural trainings and global business briefings are offered with hopes that the "us and them" syndrome will dissipate.



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Many of these presentations, however, are focused on the differences as opposed to the added value these differences offer—the core of synergy. Only focusing on cultural differences impedes cooperation. But how do we begin to redirect our understanding of differences as a detriment, to differences as a benefit?

Books and articles abound stating the need to acquire emotional or social intelligence to be a successful global executive. These two terms, brought to the forefront with the publication of two books by Daniel Goleman, state that emotional intelligence is one's ability to handle oneself and one's emotions, as well as recognize others' emotions, and use these abilities to effectively interact with others. Social intelligence, meanwhile, can be defined as being the biology of leadership—the interaction with and tuning into other people, knowing how to read them, and understanding what motivates them.

While this is insightful, managing emotions has been a subject of debate for quite some time. Why? Because it is tricky. Each person is a complex puzzle molded by personality, culturally learned behaviors, and both professional and personal experiences.

In one translation of *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle considers that, “anyone can be angry—that is easy. But to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way—this is not easy.” Within the 10 volumes written about the quest for happiness as he defines it through success and fulfillment, Aristotle proclaims that virtues are learned behaviors in childhood, and vices prevent us from living the “good” life.

This knowledge, based on moral and intellectual virtues, can be defined today as an abstract, intangible combination of emotional intelligence, social intelligence, and the ability to recognize in others how their unique set of experiences and responses contribute to the good of all.

This abstract skill is essential to both learning how differences benefit the team and achieving cultural synergy. The acquisition of this abstract skill

begins with a heightened knowledge of oneself. Only through self-awareness can we hope to more fully understand others in the quest to expand our global comfort zone.

### **Know yourself**

In 1999, Childre and Martin explained that human beings cannot make any cognitive decision without processing emotional information—how we feel about a situation. In fact, to acquire truly global attitudes, behaviors, and perspectives, we each need to understand how our thoughts and feelings influence our behaviors and interactions.

Once we understand that, we become more aware of our own ethno-related behaviors and can experiment, practice, and choose from an enlarged repertoire of acceptable and adaptable interpersonal skills for an intercultural world.

One way of doing this is by living and working in a foreign environment, which requires us to question our accepted ways of doing things and to revise our expectations. This is what cultural intelligence is all about. It increases our self-awareness and the self-assurance needed in uncomfortable situations while our new neural pathways (reinforced by practice) are being formed.

### **Getting to know others**

As hard as it may be for global executives to recognize their own feelings about a situation, it is even more difficult to learn to recognize others' feelings. For example, if their culture has taught them that motivation and recognition is primarily individual (for example, pay for performance), how does that fit with group-oriented cultures where shame and outcasting might be the result of individual rewards?

If managing one's emotions well during a crisis is focusing on the problem and not the person, how well does that go over in teams where subjective management is still an essential part of the hierarchical structure? See the pattern?

The emotional disconnect comes from assuming that we understand our foreign colleagues who are more than likely speaking English as a second or third language, but who, during their

formative years, learned the same shared human values—the need for respect, recognition, reward, and referrals.

These four basic values as are the four primary emotions—injustice, distress, disgust, and surprise are shared by all human beings. However, each person's expectations of acceptable behaviors and the assumptions about how one feels when these values are transgressed are learned in a specific cultural context. All of this, and more, is what lies beneath the intriguing challenges in our search for synergy in teams spread across continents and cultures.

An example of this is when a simple email exchange turns into emotional outrage. A French colleague elegantly describes a critical situation occurring on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean and concludes by stating: “It is obvious.”

His American counterpart's reading this statement may very well interpret this conclusion as something similar to, “You should have known better,” when in fact, in French, his remark translates into, “Following the logical analysis of the situation, we obviously see eye-to-eye; we agree.”

So where is the link between cultural and emotional intelligence? Integrating cultural views and calibrating our differences is an ongoing process; the true glue for multicultural and multilingual teams is based on trusting relationships. It makes sense. We tend to mistrust those who do not emotionally respond to situations as we might expect.

The following example illustrates how a lack of cultural intelligence can negatively impact trust (and team) building. A U.S. national presents to her European counterparts. When introducing the new project, the American tends to expect that the others listening will give constructive suggestions as to how to move the project or proposal forward. Europeans, however, are taught strict critical analytical skills whereby they think their role (as the listener) is to voice each and every way in which the project could stall or fail.

The U.S. perception is that these people are mean-spirited and

negative. The European perspective is that by exhaustively trying to find fault with the project or proposal, they have done their “due diligence” and have eliminated the possibility of failure. If it is the case that their several attempts to find flaws are unsuccessful, and the presenter is consistent in her view of the project, then the proposal is validated and has been properly vetted. The European team will then most likely give their full buy-in. The American, however, is sure to feel frustrated, defeated, and wary of her European teammates if she is not aware of this cultural difference.

### Cultural synergetic intelligence

While many articles have specifically addressed the importance of cultural, emotional, or social intelligence to the successful global executive, a key point is missing—the complexity and value that each individual brings to the project.

Cultural synergetic intelligence (CSI), the ability to work, collaborate, cooperate, and innovate across cultural and linguistic barriers and borders, combines emotional, social, and cultural intelligence by putting the focus on synergy—how we work together, both successfully and creatively.

When that feeling of, “I heard what he said, but I didn’t get what he meant,” strikes you, then it is time to dig deep into your own cultural self-awareness and ask yourself

- What behaviors define my values? When team motivation is the key to success, do I recognize the team leader, his superior, or the team itself? Does my need for time management override the time needed to build relationships?
- What expectations do I have of appropriate interpersonal skills? Do I show respect by being more formal or by being friendly and informal?
- How will my values of direct communication, transparency, and openness be perceived by those whose cultural values appreciate and expect the giving and saving of face?
- How are corporate values of accountability, commitment,

and sense of urgency portrayed in cultures where priority is given to hierarchy and subjective management?

Our cultural values drive our attitudes and behaviors, but it is cultural intelligence that enables us to refrain from moral judgment so that we better interact with others from diverse backgrounds.

As today’s colleagues are no longer just down the corridor or a cubicle away, that early morning email is more and more likely to be misinterpreted, leading to emotional reactions of mistrust, stress, and exasperation. Meanings are interpretations made within one’s own cultural framework and biases.

In today’s world, we must reach out and focus on the added value each individual brings to the table to develop true synergy. After all, defining what separates us isn’t very effective. As a population, we are becoming less monocultural—people are no longer from one specific country.

An example that comes to mind is a polyglot Czech I recently worked with who was responsible for an Italian manufacturing site within a United States-based multinational and who reported to a Dane. The common cross-cultural training session that focuses on two countries by highlighting cultural differences and comparing one to another is no longer effective.

In fact, this type of training will most likely result in reinforcing stereotypes without ever having addressed the fundamental ways of how we can come together and view the same world with multiple perspectives. To understand others, though, one first must understand oneself.

An intercultural training should focus on the development of our first-level awareness—the learned behaviors and cultural influences of our formative years. These behaviors and influences have helped to establish the meaning of what motivates each of us, what is important to us, how we perceive and receive both verbal and nonverbal feedback, and how we may be perceived by others.

A follow-up with a global executive coach who has been professionally

trained to be an active listener, inquisitive bystander, and occasionally, a cross-cultural guide, can assist you as you travel across those linguistic and cultural borders.

As we become more culturally astute, we understand the values and behaviors that not only drive others, but that motivate our individual selves. With this knowledge, we increase our CSI and are better able to culturally calibrate our responses to react in a culturally adaptive way.

The time for stereotypes has passed. The time for defining cultural knowledge through our cultural differences is through. The world has changed, the economy has changed, and the marketplace has changed. Now, we must change. By developing cultural synergetic intelligence, we learn to understand the uniqueness in others and the added value that each of us brings to the table.

At the same time, we learn how to step away from that table and to reflect and reframe instead of judge and complain. We learn to listen with our hearts and evaluate situations mindfully—with our value judgments as opposed to moral judgments.

By learning how to adapt to situations (instead of adopting foreign behaviors), we learn about ourselves and no longer focus on the differences in others. CSI competencies allow us to build trust and to develop the synergy needed such that we can work successfully across continents, time zones, and corporate corridors. **T+D**

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**Maureen Rabotin** is a global executive coach who founded *Effective Global Leadership* in 1996. She has coached and trained more than 450 global leaders representing 125 Fortune 500 companies; [www.effectivegloballeadership.com](http://www.effectivegloballeadership.com).

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T+D is published by the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD)

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