

Introduction

The practice of international cooperation

Nowadays we often work in international teams, long distance, with people spread across the globe in different time zones and different political, economic, legal, social and cultural contexts. Companies have production units in India, Malaysia, Iran, South-Africa and the United States at the same time. A team of engineers in Europe cooperates with a team of engineers in China. A sales team from one company can include members from South Africa, Japan, Brazil, Canada and the Netherlands and still needs to function as one team. Politicians travel around the world to seal deals for international agreements and trade. Academic researchers and students are ever more part of international cooperation. Societies in many parts of the world have changed over recent decades and diversity has increased.

Internationalization of business, cooperation and cohabitation in general has many advantages and brings new opportunities, but also complexity, misunderstanding and frustration. People from all kinds of backgrounds with their own perceptions are not always aligned in their mutual expectations. Lack of awareness of one's own frame of reference and the potential different points of view of other people one interacts with puts limits to efficient communication, cooperation and to realizing common goals. Clear communication and efficiency are not always easy to achieve.

A crucial step towards decent international and intercultural cooperation is to have a common framework, a common ground, a common vocabulary. Establishing this is often not as simple as people expect. Terms and concepts, such as efficiency, priority, consensus, politeness, decision, and many more that are used in daily international practice and communication are not universal. They get their particular meaning from the context they are framed in. Different cultures have their own logic when it comes to not only communication and organization, but also leadership and ownership dynamics.

At the heart of this book lies my long professional experience working in different business, academic, and governmental contexts in places across Asia and Europe. I combined this with research into cultures, leadership, methods of organization, ownership and more. I was born and raised in Europe, but I have spent many years of my life enjoying the role of an independent observer in different cultural contexts where I was the only European, and where Europe was deemed a distant place, somewhere in the margins of the world. I have worked with people from Europe, China,

Korea, Vietnam, India, Singapore, and Malaysia, and have managed projects in different regions. I have trained people from every continent, in all sorts of contexts and with all levels of professional standing. I love the dynamics of diversity in international groups. When people step out of their own context their world becomes a bigger place and it is wonderful to share a 'third space' or 'third culture', a culture of not belonging here anymore, but neither there. Today more and more people are developing complex identities that cannot be brought back to a single nation. Based on my research and international professional experience I have developed the Cultural Quantum® Five Step Method focusing not only on culture, but also on context, and combining meta-level reflection with a bottom-up approach. I introduce the Cultural Quantum® Five Step Method in this book.

Theorists from different disciplines and backgrounds have studied cultures and formulated theories. The field of culture and cross-cultural cooperation has diversified over the past century. Until today no consensus on a definition of culture has been generally accepted across disciplines. The topic of culture and cross-cultural management is extremely complex and fluid. Views on culture range from essentialist perceptions to versatile definitions.

This book wants to get away from thinking about cultures in terms of nations or other static categories, and from western-centric rhetoric. Managing a project, time, change, conflict, communication and more in cross-cultural contexts is too often approached from a western-centric point of view. Thousands of theories and methods exist about all kinds of management. Seldom have I seen any attention to non-western dynamics in management books. I hope this book can fill that gap.

It can be helpful to talk about cultural differences in terms of dimensions or other abstract categories, but too often this does not make clear how these differences appear in the practice of cooperation. It is not enough to be aware of cultural differences, it is necessary to have tools to work with and to smoothen cooperation in a way that is clear, acceptable and workable. Talking about what the Japanese, the Dutch, the Belgians, the Indians, or the Americans are like, or what the 'do's and don'ts' or 'tips and tricks' are for working in a certain region is far too simple and overlooks a great deal of complexity and diversity. I want to invite the reader to reflect deeply on his or her own background, and on that of others, and to carefully reassess concepts that have until now been used so blithely.

The book can be seen as a manual with practical tools and guidelines for managing cross-cultural cooperation. Cross-cultural management takes place in a field with people from different political, legal, social, and cultural backgrounds. Before we turn to everyday practices, I begin by laying out some cross-cultural management theories and reflections on these. The aim is not to give an exhaustive overview of any theory, but rather to invite the reader to reflect on specific aspects of cross-cultural cooperation that might influence daily practice. The final goal of this book is to help people to optimize management styles in cross-cultural contexts and to harmonize and manage 'vertical' and 'horizontal' dynamics that are not always compatible or easy to deal with. I outline the Cultural Quantum® Five Step Method in the last chapter, although I will use parts of it throughout the book.