THE
CULTURE MAP

BREAKING THROUGH THE INVISIBLE
BOUNDARIES OF GLOBAL BUSINESS

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To view complete culture maps for many countries not included in this book, and to compare one culture map to another, please visit the tools page of www.erinmeyer.com.

Navigating Cultural Differences and the Wisdom of Mrs. Chen

When dawn broke that chilly November morning in Paris, I was driving to my office for a meeting with an important new client. I hadn't slept well, but that was nothing unusual, since before an important training session I often have a restless night. But what made this night different were the dreams that disturbed my sleep.

I found myself shopping for groceries in a big American-style supermarket. As I worked my way through my list—fruit, Kleenex, more fruit, a loaf of bread, a container of milk, still more fruit—I was startled to discover that the items were somehow disappearing from my cart more quickly than I could find them and stack them in the basket. I raced down the aisle of the store, grabbing goods and tossing them into my cart, only to see them vanish without a trace. Horrified and frustrated, I realized that my shopping would never be complete.

1

After having this dream repeatedly throughout the night, I gave up trying to sleep. I got up, gulped a cup of coffee and got dressed in the predawn dark, and wound my way through the empty Paris streets to my office near the Champs Elysées to prepare for that day's program. Reflecting that my nightmare of ineffectual shopping might reflect my anxiety about being completely ready for my clients, I poured my energy into arranging the conference room and reviewing my notes for the day ahead. I would be spending the day with one of the top executives at Peugeot Citroën, preparing him and his wife for the cultural adjustments they'd need to make in their upcoming move to Wuhan, China. If the program was successful, my firm would be hired to provide the same service for another fifty couples later in the year, so there was a lot at stake.

Bo Chen, the Chinese country expert who would be assisting with the training session, also arrived early. Chen, a thirty-six-year-old Paris-based journalist from Wuhan, worked for a Chinese newspaper. He had volunteered to act as a Chinese culture expert for the training, and his input would be one of the most critical elements in making the day a success. If he was as good as I hoped, the program would be a hit and we would get to conduct the fifty follow-up sessions. My confidence in Chen had been bolstered by our preparatory meetings. Articulate, extroverted, and very knowledgeable, Chen seemed perfect for the job. I had asked him to prepare two to three concrete business examples to illustrate each cultural dimension I would be covering during the program, and he had enthusiastically confirmed he would be ready.

Monsieur and Madame Bernard arrived, and I installed them on one side of the big glass rectangular table with Chen on the other side. Taking a deep, hopeful breath, I began the session,

outlining on a flip chart the cultural issues that the Bernards needed to grasp so their time in China would be a success. As the morning wore on, I explained each dimension of the key issues, answered the Bernards' questions, and carefully kept an eye on Chen so I could help facilitate his input.

But Chen didn't seem to have any input. After finishing the first dimension, I paused briefly and looked to him for his input, but he didn't speak up. He didn't open his mouth, move his body forward, or raise his hand. Apparently he had no example to provide. Not wanting to embarrass Chen or to create an awkward situation by calling on him when he was not ready, I simply continued with my next point.

To my growing dismay, Chen remained silent and nearly motionless as I went through the rest of my presentation. He nodded politely while I was speaking, but that was all; he used no other body language to indicate any reactions, positive or negative. I gave every example I could think of and engaged in dialogue with the client as best I could. Dimension after dimension, I spoke, with the client as best I could. Dimension after dimension, I spoke, Dimension after dimension—and dimension after dimension, there was no input from Chen.

I continued for three full hours. My initial disappointment with Chen was spilling over into full-fledged panic. I needed his input for the program to succeed. Finally, although I didn't want to create an awkward moment in front of the client, I decided to take a chance. "Bo," I asked, "did you have any examples you would like to share?"

Chen sat up straight in his chair, smiled confidently at the client, and opened up his notebook, which was filled with pages ents, and pages of typed notes. "Thank you, Erin," he replied. "I do." And then, to my utter relief, Chen began to explain one clear, pertinent, fascinating example after another.

In reflecting on the story of my awkward engagement with "Silent Bo," it's natural to assume that something about Chen's personality, my personality, or the interaction between us might have led to the strained situation. Perhaps Chen was mute because he is not a very good communicator, or because he is shy or introverted and doesn't feel comfortable expressing himself until pushed. Or perhaps I am an incompetent facilitator, telling Chen to prepare for the meeting and then failing to call on him until the session was almost over. Or maybe, more charitably, I was just so tired from dreaming about lost fruit all night long that I missed the visual cues Chen was sending to indicate that he had something to say.

In fact, my previous meetings with Chen had made it clear to me that he was neither inarticulate nor shy; he was actually a gifted communicator and also bursting with extroversion and self-confidence. What's more, I'd been conducting client meetings for years and had never before experienced a disconnect quite like this one, which suggested that my skills as a facilitator were not the source of the problem.

The truth is that the story of Silent Bo is a story of culture, not personality. But the cultural explanation is not as simple as you might think. Chen's behavior in our meeting lines up with a familiar cultural stereotype. Westerners often assume that Asians, in general, are quiet, reserved, or shy. If you manage a global team that includes both Asians and Westerners, it is very likely that you will have heard the common Western complaint that the Asian participants don't speak very much and are less forthright about offering their individual opinions in team meetings. Yet the cultural stereotype does not reflect the actual reason behind Chen's behavior.

Since the Bernards, Chen, and I were participating in a cross-cultural training program (which I was supposed to be

leading—though I now found myself, uncomfortably, in the role of a student), I decided to simply ask Chen for an explanation of his actions. "Bo," I exclaimed, "you had all of these great examples! Why didn't you jump in and share them with us earlier?"

"Were you expecting me to jump in?" he asked, a look of genuine surprise on his face. He went on to describe the situation as he saw it. "In this room," he said, turning to M. and Mme. Bernard, "Erin is the chairman of the meeting." He continued:

As she is the senior person in the room, I wait for her to call on me. And, while I am waiting, I should show I am a good listener by keeping both my voice and my body quiet. In China, we often feel Westerners speak up so much in meetings that they do this to show off, or they are poor listeners. Also, I have noticed that Chinese people leave a few more seconds of silence before jumping in than in the West. You Westerners practically speak on top of each other in a meeting. I kept waiting for Erin to be quiet long enough for me to jump in, but my turn never came. We Chinese often feel Americans are not good listeners because they are always jumping in on top of one another to make their points. I would have liked to make one of my points if an appropriate length of pause had arisen. But Erin was always talking, so I just kept waiting patiently. My mother left it deeply engrained in me: You have two eyes, two ears, but only one mouth. You should use them accordingly.

As Chen spoke, the cultural underpinnings of our misunderstanding became vividly clear to the Bernards—and to me. It was obvious that they go far beyond any facile stereotypes about "the shy Chinese." And this new understanding led to the most important question of all: Once I am aware of the cultural context that

shapes a situation, what steps can I take to be more effective in dealing with it?

In the Silent Bo scenario, my deeper awareness of the meaning of Bo's behavior leads to some easy, yet powerful, solutions. In the future, I can be more prepared to recognize and flexibly address the differing cultural expectations around status and communication. The next time I lead a training program with a Chinese cultural specialist, I must make sure to invite him to speak. And if he doesn't respond immediately, I need to allow a few more seconds of silence before speaking myself. Chen, too, can adapt some simple strategies to improve his effectiveness. He might simply choose to override his natural tendency to wait for an invitation to speak by forcing himself to jump in whenever he has an idea to contribute. If this feels too aggressive, he might raise his hand to request the floor when he can't find the space he needs to talk.

In this book, I provide a systematic, step-by-step approach to understanding the most common business communication challenges that arise from cultural differences, and offer steps for dealing with them more effectively. The process begins with recognizing the cultural factors that shape human behavior and methodically analyzing the reasons for that behavior. This, in turn, will allow you to apply clear strategies to improve your effectiveness at solving the most thorny problems caused by cross-cultural misunderstandings—or to avoid them altogether.

* * *

When I walked into Sabine Dulac's second-floor office at La Defense, the business district just outside of Paris, she was pacing excitedly in front of her window, which overlooked a small footbridge and a concrete sculpture depicting a giant human thumb. A highly energetic finance director for a leading global

energy company, Dulac had been offered a two-year assignment in Chicago, after years of petitioning her superiors for such an opportunity. Now she'd spent the previous evening poring over a sheaf of articles I'd sent her describing the differences between French and American business cultures.

"I think this move to Chicago is going to be perfect for me," Dulac declared. "I love working with Americans. *Ils sont tellement pratiques et efficaces!* I love that focus on practicality and efficiency. *Et transparent!* Americans are so much more explicit and transparent than we are in France!"

I spent several hours with Dulac helping her prepare for the move, including exploring how she might best adapt her leadership style to be effective in the context of American culture. This would be her first experience living outside France, and she would be the only non-American on her team, twin circumstances that only increased her enthusiasm for the move. Thrilled with this new opportunity, Dulac departed for the Windy City. The two of us didn't speak for four months. Then I called both her new American boss and later Dulac herself for our prescheduled follow-up conversations.

Jake Webber responded with a heavy sigh when I asked how Dulac was performing. "She is doing—sort of medium. Her team really likes her, and she's incredibly energetic. I have to admit that her energy has ignited her department. That's been positive. She has definitely integrated much more quickly than I expected. Really, that has been excellent."

I could sense that Webber's evaluation was about to take a turn for the worse. "However, there are several critical things that I need Sabine to change about the way she is working," Webber continued, "and I just don't see her making an effort to do so. Her spreadsheets are sloppy, she makes calculation errors, and she

comes to meetings unprepared. I have spoken to her a handful of times about these things, but she is not getting the message. She just continues with her same work patterns. I spoke to her last Thursday about this again, but there's still no visible effort on her part."

"We had her performance review this morning," Webber said with another sigh, "and I detailed these issues again. We'll wait and see. But if she doesn't get in gear with these things, I don't think this job is going to work out."

Feeling concerned, I called Dulac.

"Things are going great!" Dulac proclaimed. "My team is terrific. I've really been able to connect with them. And I have a great relationship with my boss. *Je m'épanouis!*" she added, a French phrase that translates loosely as "I'm blossoming" or "I'm thriving." She went on, "For the first time in my career I've found a job that is just perfect for me. That takes advantage of all of my talents and skills. Oh, and I have to tell you—I had my first performance review this morning, I'm just delighted! It was the best performance review I have had since starting with this company. I often think I will try to extend my stay beyond these two years, things are going so well."

As we did with the story of Silent Bo, let's consider for a moment whether the miscommunication between Webber and Dulac is more likely a result of personality misfit or cultural differences. In this case, national stereotypes may be more confusing than helpful. After all, the common assumption about the French is that they are masters of implicit and indirect communication, speaking and listening with subtlety and sensitivity, while Americans are thought of as prone to explicit and direct communication—the blunter the better. Yet in the story of "Deaf Dulac," an American supervisor complains that his French subordinate lacks the sophistication to grasp

his meaning, while the French manager seems happily oblivious to the message her boss is trying to convey. Faced with this seemingly counterintuitive situation, you might assume that Webber and Dulac simply have incompatible personalities, regardless of their cultural backgrounds.

So you might assume. But suppose you happened to be speaking with twenty or thirty French managers living in the United States, and you heard similar stories from a dozen of them. As they explained, one by one, how their American bosses gave them negative feedback in a way they found confusing, ambiguous, or downright misleading, you might come to the correct conclusion that there is *something* cultural driving this pattern of misunderstanding. And in fact, such a pattern does exist—which strongly suggests that the case of Deaf Dulac is much more than a matter of personality conflict.

This pattern is puzzling because Americans often *do* tend to be more explicit and direct than the French (or, more precisely, more "low-context," a term we'll explore further in a later chapter). The one big exception arises when managers are providing feedback to their subordinates. In a French setting, positive feedback is often given implicitly, while negative feedback is given more directly. In the United States, it's just the opposite. American managers usually give positive feedback directly while trying to couch negative messages in positive, encouraging language. Thus, when Webber reviewed Dulac's work using the popular American method of three positives for every negative, Dulac left the meeting with his praise ringing delightfully in her ears, while the negative feedback sounded very minor indeed.

If Dulac had been aware of this cultural tendency when discussing her job performance with her new American boss, she might have weighed the negative part of the review more heavily

than she would if receiving it from a French boss, thereby reading the feedback more accurately and potentially saving her job.

Armed with the same understanding, Webber could have reframed his communication for Dulac. He might have said, "When I give a performance review, I always start by going through three or four things I feel the person is doing well. Then I move on to the really important part of the meeting, which is, of course, what you can do to improve. I hate to jump into the important part of the meeting without starting with the positives. Is that method okay for you?"

Simply explaining what you are doing can often help a lot, both by defusing an immediate misunderstanding and by laying the foundation for better teamwork in the future—a principle we also saw at work when Bo Chen described his reasons for remaining silent during most of our meeting. This is one of the dozens of concrete, practical strategies we'll provide for handling cross-cultural missteps and improving your effectiveness in working with global teams.

INVISIBLE BOUNDARIES THAT DIVIDE OUR WORLD

Situations like the two we've just considered are far more common than you might suspect. The sad truth is that the vast majority of managers who conduct business internationally have little understanding about how culture is impacting their work. This is especially true as more and more of us communicate daily with people in other countries over virtual media like e-mail or telephone. When you live, work, or travel extensively in a foreign country, you pick up a lot of contextual cues that help you understand the culture of the people living there, and that helps you to better

decode communication and adapt accordingly. By contrast, when you exchange e-mails with an international counterpart in a country you haven't spent time in, it is much easier to miss the cultural subtleties impacting the communication.

A simple example is a characteristic behavior unique to India—a half-shake, half-nod of the head. Travel to India on business and you'll soon learn that the half-shake, half-nod is not a sign of disagreement, uncertainty, or lack of support as it would be in most other cultures. Instead it suggests interest, enthusiasm, or sometimes respectful listening. After a day or two, you notice that everyone is doing it, you make a mental note of its apparent meaning, and you are able henceforth to accurately read the gesture when negotiating a deal with your Indian outsourcing team.

But over e-mail or telephone, you may interact daily with your Indian counterparts from your office in Hellerup, Denmark, or Bogota, Colombia, without ever seeing the environment they live and work in. So when you are on videoconference with one of your top Indian managers, you may interpret his half-shake, half-nod as meaning that he is not in full agreement with your idea. You redouble your efforts to convince him, but the more you talk the more he (seemingly) indicates with his head that he is not on board. You get off the call puzzled, frustrated, and perhaps angry. Culture has impacted your communication, yet in the absence of the visual and contextual cues that physical presence provides, you didn't even recognize that something cultural was going on.

So whether we are aware of it or not, subtle differences in communication patterns and the complex variations in what is considered good business or common sense from one country to another have a tremendous impact on how we understand one another, and

ultimately on how we get the job done. Many of these cultural differences—varying attitudes concerning when best to speak or stay quiet, the role of the leader in the room, and what kind of negative feedback is the most constructive—may seem small. But if you are unaware of the differences and unarmed with strategies for managing them effectively, they can derail your team meetings, demotivate your employees, frustrate your foreign suppliers, and in dozens of other ways make it much more difficult to achieve your goals.

Today, whether we work in Düsseldorf or Dubai, Brasília or Beijing, New York or New Delhi, we are all part of a global network (real or virtual, physical or electronic) where success requires navigating through wildly different cultural realities. Unless we know how to decode other cultures and avoid easy-to-fall-into cultural traps, we are easy prey to misunderstanding, needless conflict, and ultimate failure.

BEING OPEN TO INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IS NOT ENOUGH

It is quite possible, even common, to work across cultures for decades and travel frequently for business while remaining unaware and uninformed about how culture impacts you. Millions of people work in global settings while viewing everything from their own cultural perspectives and assuming that all differences, controversy, and misunderstanding are rooted in personality. This is not due to laziness. Many well-intentioned people don't educate themselves about cultural differences because they believe that if they focus on individual differences, that will be enough.

After I published an online article on the differences among Asian cultures and their impact on cross-Asia teamwork, one

reader commented, "Speaking of cultural differences leads us to stereotype and therefore put individuals in boxes with 'general traits.' Instead of talking about culture, it is important to judge people as individuals, not just products of their environment."

At first, this argument sounds valid, even enlightened. Of course individuals, no matter their cultural origins, have varied personality traits. So why not just approach all people with an interest in getting to know them personally, and proceed from there? Unfortunately, this point of view has kept thousands of people from learning what they need to know to meet their objectives. If you go into every interaction assuming that culture doesn't matter, your default mechanism will be to view others through your own cultural lens and to judge or misjudge them accordingly. Ignore culture, and you can't help but conclude, "Chen doesn't speak up—obviously he doesn't have anything to say! His lack of preparation is ruining this training program!" Or perhaps, "Jake told me everything was great in our performance review, when really he was unhappy with my work—he is a sneaky, dishonest, incompetent boss!"

Yes, every individual is different. And yes, when you work with people from other cultures, you shouldn't make assumptions about individual traits based on where a person comes from. But this doesn't mean learning about cultural contexts is unnecessary. If your business success relies on your ability to work successfully with people from around the world, you need to have an appreciation for cultural differences as well as respect for individual differences. Both are essential.

As if this complexity weren't enough, cultural and individual differences are often wrapped up with differences among organizations, industries, professions, and other groups. But even in the most complex situations, understanding how cultural differences

affect the mix may help you discover a new approach. Cultural patterns of behavior and belief frequently impact our perceptions (what we see), cognitions (what we think), and actions (what we do). The goal of this book is to help you improve your ability to decode these three facets of culture and to enhance your effectiveness in dealing with them.

EIGHT SCALES THAT MAP THE WORLD'S CULTURES

I was not born into a multicultural family to parents who took me around the world. On the contrary, I was born outside of Two Harbors, Minnesota, most famous among drivers on the road leaving Duluth as the home of Betty's Pies. It's the kind of small town where most people spend their entire lives in the culture of their childhood. My parents were a bit more venturesome; when I was four, they moved the family all of two hundred miles to Minneapolis, where I grew up.

But as an adult I fell deeply in love with the thrill of being surrounded by people who see the world in dramatically different ways from me. Having now lived nearly half of my life outside of the United States, I've developed skills ranging from learning to eat mopane worms for an afternoon snack while teaching English to high school students in Botswana, to dodging cows, chickens, and three-wheeled rickshaws during my morning run while on a short-term executive teaching stint in India.

Today, married to a Frenchman and raising two children in France, I have to struggle with cross-cultural challenges daily. Is it really necessary for an educated person to fold lettuce leaves before eating them, or would cutting the lettuce also be acceptable? If my very kind upstairs neighbors kissed me on the cheeks when I passed them in the hall yesterday, would it be overkill

for me to kiss them on the cheek the first time I pass them every single day?

However, the lessons in this book emerged not from discussions about lettuce leaves or mopane worms (interesting as these may be), but from the fascinating opportunity to teach cross-cultural management in one of the most culturally diverse institutions on earth. After opening the French branch of a cross-cultural consulting firm, where I had the pleasure of learning from dozens of culture specialists like Bo Chen on a daily basis, I began working as a professor at INSEAD, an international business school largely unknown in Two Harbors, Minnesota.

INSEAD is one of the rare places where everyone is a cultural minority. Although the home campus is located in France, only around 7 percent of the students are French. The last time I checked, the largest cultural group was Indian, at about 11 percent of the overall student body. Other executive students have lived and worked all over the world, and many have spent their careers moving from one region to another. When it comes to cross-cultural management, these global executives are some of the most sophisticated and knowledgeable on the planet. And although they come to INSEAD to learn from us, every day I am secretly learning from them. I've been able to turn my classroom into a laboratory where the executive participants test, challenge, validate, and correct the findings from more than a decade of research. Many have shared their own wisdom and their tested solutions for getting things done in a global world.

This rich trove of information and experience informs the eight-scale model that is at the heart of this book. Each of the eight scales represents one key area that managers must be aware of, showing how cultures vary along a spectrum from one extreme to its opposite. The eight scales are:

- *Communicating*: low-context vs. high-context
- *Evaluating*: direct negative feedback vs. indirect negative feedback
- *Persuading*: principles-first vs. applications-first
- *Leading*: egalitarian vs. hierarchical
- *Deciding*: consensual vs. top-down
- *Trusting*: task-based vs. relationship-based
- *Disagreeing*: confrontational vs. avoids confrontation
- *Scheduling*: linear-time vs. flexible-time

Whether you need to motivate employees, delight clients, or simply organize a conference call among members of a cross-cultural team, these eight scales will help you improve your effectiveness. By analyzing the positioning of one culture relative to another, the scales will enable you to decode how culture influences your own international collaboration and avoid painful situations like the one in which Webber and Dulac found themselves caught.

PUTTING THE CULTURE MAP TO WORK

Let me give you an example of how understanding the scales might play out in a real situation. Imagine that you are an Israeli executive working for a company that has just purchased a manufacturing plant in Russia. Your new position requires you to manage a group of Russian employees. At first, things go well, but then you start to notice that you are having more difficulty than you did with your own Israeli staff. You are not getting the same results from your team, and your management style does not seem to have the positive impact it did at home.

Puzzled and concerned, you decide to take a look at the position of Russian business culture on the eight scales and compare it

FIGURE I.1.
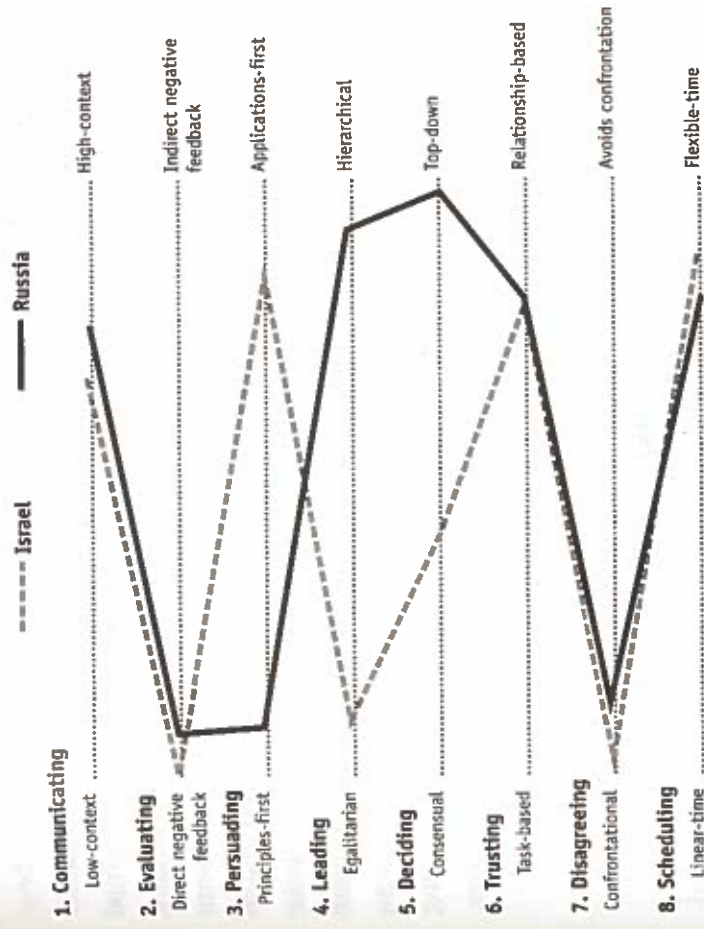
with Israeli culture. The result is the culture map shown in Figure I.1—the kind of tool we'll explore in detail in the chapters to come. As you review the culture map, you notice that Russian and Israeli business cultures both value flexible scheduling rather than organized scheduling (scale 8), both accept and appreciate open disagreement (scale 6), and both approach issues of trust through a relationship orientation rather than a task orientation (scale 6). This resonates with your experience. However, you notice that there's a big gap between the two cultures when it comes to leading (scale 4), with Russia favoring a hierarchial approach, while Israel prefers an egalitarian one. As we'll discuss in more detail later, this suggests that the appreciation for flat organizational

structures and egalitarian management style so characteristic of Israeli businesspeople may be ineffective in Russia's strongly hierarchical environment.

Here is a clue to the difficulties you've been having. You begin to reconsider the common Israeli attitude that the boss is "just one of the guys." You realize that some of your words and actions, tailored to the egalitarian Israeli culture, may have been misunderstood by your Russian team and may even have been demotivating to them. In the weeks that follow, as you begin to make adjustments to your leadership style, you find that the atmosphere slowly improves—and so do the bottom-line results. This is an example of how we use the eight scales and the culture mapping process to effect genuine, powerful changes within organizations, to the benefit of everyone involved.

HOW DID MY COUNTRY GET PLACED THERE?

Each of the following chapters is devoted to one of the eight culture map scales. Each scale positions twenty to thirty countries along a continuum and guides you in applying the scale to dozens of situations commonly arising in our global business world. Because what is important on the scale is the relative gap between two countries, someone from any country on the map can apply the book's concepts to their interactions with colleagues from any other country.

Some may object that these scales don't give adequate weight to cultural variations among individuals, subcultures, regions, and organizations. Understanding how the scales were created may help you see how such variations are reflected in the scales, as well as how you can most accurately apply the insights that the scales provide.

As an example, let's look at the placement of Germany on the Scheduling scale, which reflects how people in various cultures tend to manage time. The first step is interviewing mid-level German managers, asking them to speak about the importance of being flexible versus organized when it comes to scheduling meetings, projects, or timelines. Of course, individual responses vary, but a normative pattern emerges. A bell curve illustrates the range of what is considered appropriate and acceptable business behavior on the scheduling scale in Germany, with a hump where the majority of responses fall. It might look like this:

FIGURE I.2.

Germany

Extreme A   Extreme B
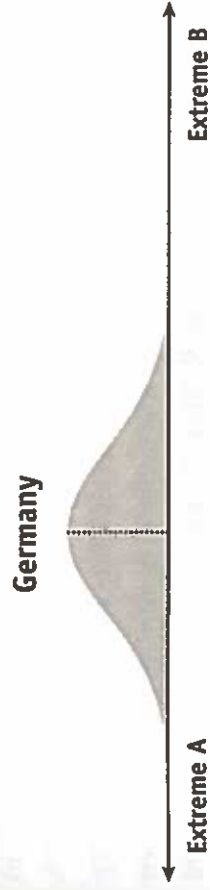
Of course, there are probably a few outliers—a handful of Germans who fall to the right or the left of the hump—but their behavior, judging by the average German's opinion, would be considered inappropriate, unacceptable, or at least not ideal in German business culture.

It was through this type of analysis that I began to map the country positions on each scale. I later adjusted the positions based on feedback from hundreds of international executives.

When you look at the scales depicted in this book, you won't see the hump for each country, but simply a point representing the normative position of the hump, as shown in Figure I.3. In other words, the country position on the scale indicates the

FIGURE I.3.

Germany

Extreme A   Extreme B
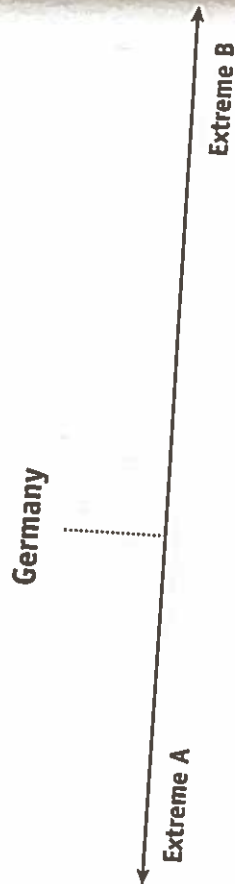
mid-position of a range of acceptable or appropriate behaviors in that country.

When you look at the scales, keep in mind that both cultural differences and individual differences impact each international interaction. Within the range of acceptable business behaviors in a given culture, an individual businessperson will make choices in particular situations.

For example, consider the Evaluating scale (see Chapter 2), which deals with whether it is better to be direct or indirect when giving negative feedback. There is a range of acceptable ways to give negative feedback in the Netherlands, and a Dutch businessperson can comfortably make a choice that falls anywhere within that range. Similarly, there is a range of appropriate ways to give negative feedback in the United Kingdom, and a British businessperson can choose a specific approach from any place within that range (see Figure I.4). The culture sets a range, and within that range each individual makes a choice. It is not a question of culture *or* personality, but of culture *and* personality.

If you compare two cultures, you may find that portions of their ranges overlap, while other portions do not. So some Dutch people might employ feedback styles that are appropriate in the Netherlands as well as in the United Kingdom, while others may use techniques that seem acceptable in the Netherlands but would

FIGURE I.4.

Dutch range

British range

Direct negative feedback   Indirect negative feedback
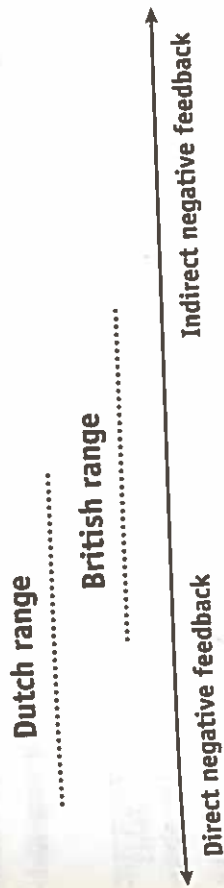
be considered inappropriate, blunt, and offensive in the United Kingdom. The eight scales can help you understand such differences and evaluate individual choices within a broad cultural context.

THE CRUCIAL PERSPECTIVE: CULTURAL RELATIVITY

Another crucial factor in understanding the meaning of the eight scales is the concept of cultural relativity. For an example, let's consider the location of Spain on the Trusting scale (Figure I.5), which positions cultures according to whether they build trust based on relationships or on experience of shared tasks.

Now ask yourself a simple question. Is Spain task-based or relationship-based? If you are like most people, you would answer that Spain is relationship-based. But this answer is subtly, yet crucially, wrong. The correct answer is that, if you come from France, the United Kingdom, Sweden, the United States, or any other culture

FIGURE I.5.

Spain

Task-based   Relationship-based

that falls to the left of Spain on the scale, then Spain is relationship-based *in comparison to your own culture.* However, if you come from India, Saudi Arabia, Angola, or China, then Spain is very task-based indeed—again, in comparison to your own culture.

The point here is that, when examining how people from different cultures relate to one another, what matters is not the absolute position of either culture on the scale but rather the relative position of the two cultures. It is this relative positioning that determines how people view one another.

For example, consider what happened when the British consulting group KPMG created several global teams to standardize the implementation of management software systems developed by enterprise software developer SAP. One global team was composed primarily of British and French consultants, and throughout their work the British complained that the French were disorganized, chaotic, and lacked punctuality. "They take so many tangents and side routes during the meeting, it's impossible to follow their line of thinking!" one British team member said.

On another team, made up of mainly Indians and French, the Indians complained that the French were rigid, inflexible, and obsessed with deadlines and structure to the point that they were unable to adapt as the situation around them changed. "If you don't tell them weeks in advance what is going to happen in the meeting, in which order, it makes them very nervous," one Indian team member said.

Why such contradictory perceptions of the French team members? A quick glance at the Scheduling scale (Figure I.6) shows that the French fall *between* the British and the Indians, leading to opposite perceptions from those two outlying perspectives.

When I described this experience to a group of Germans and British collaborating on another global team, one of the Germans

FIGURE I.6.

Germany	UK	France	India
Linear-time			Flexible-time

laughed. "That's very funny," he told us. "Because we Germans always complain that the British are disorganized, chaotic, and always late—exactly the complaint the British in your example lodged against the French." Note the relative positions of the Germans and British on the Scheduling scale.

So cultural relativity is the key to understanding the impact of culture on human interactions. If an executive wants to build and manage global teams that can work together successfully, he needs to understand not just how people from his own culture experience people from various international cultures, but also how those international cultures perceive *one another.*

WHEN CULTURAL DIFFERENCES ARE INSIDE US

I recently had occasion to place a phone call to Cosimo Turroturro, who runs a speakers' association based in London. Simply on the basis of his name, I assumed before the call that he was Italian. But as soon as he spoke, starting sentences with the German "ja," it was clear that he was not.

Turroturro explained, "My mother was Serbian, my father was Italian, I was raised largely in Germany, although I have spent most of my adult life in the U.K. So you see, these cultural differences that you talk about, I don't need to speak to anyone else in order to experience them. I have all of these challenges right inside myself!"

I laughed, imagining Turroturro having breakfast alone and saying to himself in Italian, "Why do you have to be so blunt?" and responding to himself in German, "Me, blunt?! Why do *you* have to be so emotional?"

While most people spend most of their lives in their native lands, the scales in this book have an extra level of interest for those with more heterogeneous backgrounds. If you've lived in two or more countries or have parents from different countries, you may begin to notice how multiple cultures have helped to shape your personality. You may find that part of your personal style comes from the culture where you spent the first years of your life, another from the culture where you attended college and held your first job, another from your father's culture, and still another from your mother's culture. The following pages may not only help you become more effective as a businessperson; they may even help you understand yourself more fully than ever before.

TASTING THE WATER YOU SWIM IN

Culture can be a sensitive topic. Speaking about a person's culture often provokes the same type of reaction as speaking about his mother. Most of us have a deep protective instinct for the culture we consider our own, and, though we may criticize it bitterly ourselves, we may become easily incensed if someone from outside the culture dares to do so. For this reason, I'm walking a minefield in this book.

I promise that all the situations I recount are drawn from the stories of real people working in real companies, though I've changed names, details, and circumstances to maintain anonymity. Nonetheless, you may find yourself reacting defensively when

you hear what others have said about the culture you call your own: "It isn't true! My culture is not a bit like that!"

At the risk of pouring oil on the fire, allow me to repeat the familiar story of the two young fish who encounter an older fish swimming the opposite way. He nods at them and says, "Morning, boys, how's the water?"—which prompts one of the young fish to ask the other, "What the hell is water?"[1]

When you are in and of a culture—as fish are in and of water—it is often difficult or even impossible to *see* that culture. Often people who have spent their lives living in one culture see only regional and individual differences and therefore conclude, "My national culture does not have a clear character."

John Cleary, an engineer from the United States, explained this phenomenon during one of my courses for executives.

The first twenty-eight years of my life I lived in the smallish town of Madison, Wisconsin, but in my work I traveled across the U.S. weekly, since my team members were scattered across the country. The regional differences in the U.S. are strong. New York City feels entirely different than Athens, Georgia. So when I began working with foreigners who spoke of what it was like to work with "Americans," I saw that as a sign of ignorance. I would respond, "There is no American culture. The regions are different and within the regions every individual is different."

But then I moved to New Delhi, India. I began leading an Indian team and overseeing their collaboration with my former team in the U.S. I was very excited, thinking this would be an opportunity to learn about the Indian culture. After 16 months in New Delhi working with Indians and seeing this collaboration from the Indian viewpoint, I can report that I have learned

a tremendous amount . . . about my own culture. As I view the American way of thinking and working and acting from this outside perspective, for the first time I see a clear, visible American culture. The culture of my country has a strong character that was totally invisible to me when I was in it and part of it.

When you hear the people quoted in this book complain, criticize, or gasp at your culture from their perspective, try not to take it as a personal affront. Instead, think of it as an opportunity to learn more not just about the unfamiliar cultures of this world but also about your own. Try seeing, feeling, and tasting the water you swim in the way a land animal might perceive it. You may find the experience fascinating—and mind-expanding.

* * *

When I arrived back in my apartment in Paris after the session with the Bernards and Bo Chen, I thought back to the advice from Bo's mother. I Googled her words, "you have two eyes, two ears, and one mouth and you should use them accordingly," expecting the quotation to begin with "Confucius says" or at least "Bo Chen's mother says." No such luck. The ancient Greek philosopher Epictetus seems to have said something similar, but as far as I know he never lived in China.

That night, instead of dreaming about fruit disappearing from my shopping cart, I lay in bed thinking about why Bo Chen didn't speak up and why I kept speaking in the face of his silence, while—irony of ironies—I was running a session on cross-cultural effectiveness. I thought again about Mrs. Chen's advice and wished that I had followed her suggestion that morning.

Mrs. Chen's advice is sound, not just for Chinese children, but also for all of us who hope to improve our effectiveness working

across cultural barriers. When interacting with someone from another culture, try to watch more, listen more, and speak less. Listen before you speak and learn before you act. Before picking up the phone to negotiate with your suppliers in China, your outsourcing team in India, your new boss in Brazil, or your clients in Russia, use all the available resources to understand how the cultural framework you are working with is different from your own—and only then react.

1

Listening to the Air
Communicating Across Cultures

When I arrived at my hotel in New Delhi, I was hot and, more important, hungry. Although I would spend that week conducting classes for a group of Indian executives at the swank five-star Oberoi hotel, the Indian business school hosting me put me up in a more modest and much smaller residence several miles away. Though quiet and clean, it looked like a big concrete box with windows, set back from the road and surrounded by a wall with a locked gate. This will be fine, I thought as I dropped my bag off in my room. Staying in a simple hotel just steps from the bustle of workaday New Delhi will make it that much easier for me to get the flavor of the city.

Lunch was at the top of my agenda. The very friendly young man behind the concierge desk jumped to attention when he saw me approaching. I asked about a good place to eat. "There is a great restaurant just to the left of the hotel. I recommend it highly," he told me. "It is called Swagat. You can't miss it."

It sounded perfect. I walked out to the road and looked to the left. The street was a whirlwind of colors, smells, and activities. I saw a grocery store, a cloth vendor, a family of five all piled onto

one motor scooter, and a bunch of brown-speckled chickens pecking in the dust next to the sidewalk. No restaurant.

"You didn't find it?" the kind concierge asked in a puzzled tone as I re-entered the hotel. This time the young man explained, "Just walk out of the hotel, cross the street, and the restaurant will be on your left. It's next to the market. There is a sign. You can't miss it," he said again.

Well, apparently I could. I tried to do exactly as instructed, crossing the street immediately in front of the hotel and again looking to the left. As I saw no sign of the restaurant, I turned to the left and walked a while. It was a little confusing, as the street was jam-packed. After a minute or so, I came to a small side street full of people, food stalls, and women selling sandals and saris. Was this the market the concierge mentioned? But after careful examination of what I felt to be all possible interpretations of "on your left," I began to wonder if I was being filmed as a stunt for some type of reality TV show. I headed back to the hotel.

The concierge smiled kindly at me again, but I could tell he was thinking I really wasn't very smart. Scratching his head in bewilderment at my inability to find the obvious, he announced, "I will take you there." So we left the hotel, crossed the street, turned to the left, and then walked for nearly ten minutes, weaving our way through traffic on the bustling sidewalk and passing several side streets and countless heads of cattle on the way. At last, just beyond a large bank, perched quietly over a fruit store on the second floor of a yellow stucco building, I spotted a small sign that read SWAGAT.

As I thanked the concierge for his extreme kindness, I couldn't help wondering why he hadn't told me, "Cross the street, turn left, walk nine minutes, look for the big bank on the corner, and, when

you see the big fruit store, look up to the second floor of the yellow stucco building for a sign with the restaurant's name."

And as this question floated through my mind, I could tell that the kindly concierge was wondering, "How will this poor, dim-witted woman possibly make it through the week?"

As my search for lunch in New Delhi suggests, the skills involved in being an effective communicator vary dramatically from one culture to another. In the United States and other Anglo-Saxon cultures, people are trained (mostly subconsciously) to communicate as literally and explicitly as possible. Good communication is all about clarity and explicitness, and accountability for accurate transmission of the message is placed firmly on the communicator: "If you don't understand, it's my fault."

By contrast, in many Asian cultures, including India, China, Japan, and Indonesia, messages are often conveyed implicitly, requiring the listener to read between the lines. Good communication is subtle, layered, and may depend on copious subtext, with responsibility for transmission of the message shared between the one sending the message and the one receiving it. The same applies to many African cultures, including those found in Kenya and Zimbabwe, and to a lesser degree Latin American cultures (such as Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina) and Latin European cultures (such as Spain, Italy, Portugal) including France.

The fact is that the hotel concierge provided all of the information necessary for someone from his own culture to find Swagat. An Indian living in the same Delhi cultural context would likely have figured out quickly where the restaurant was by the clues provided; she would have been eating her lunch while I was still wandering wearily around the streets.

My quest for the Swagat restaurant illustrates that being a good listener is just as important for effective communication as being a

good speaker. And both of these essential skills are equally variable from one culture to another.

* * *

It was springtime in France, where I had been living several years, when I was asked to give a presentation at a human resource conference in Paris sponsored by Owens Corning. A leading global producer of residential building materials, Owens Corning is headquartered in Toledo, Ohio—a good eleven-hour drive from my home state of Minnesota, but still within the tribal boundaries of my native midwestern American culture.

When I arrived at the conference, I found fifty human resource directors assembled in a typical Parisian hotel space with high ceilings and sunshine streaming through floor-to-ceiling windows. Thirty-eight of the participants were from Toledo; the rest were from Europe and Asia, but all had been working for Owens Corning for at least a decade. I took a seat in the back corner of the room just as the presentation preceding mine was beginning.

The speaker would be David Brown, the company's CEO. Relaxed and unimposing, wearing a blazer but no tie, David strolled into the room wearing a warm smile and greeted several of the attendees by their first name. But from the hush that descended when he stepped to the podium, it was obvious that this group of HR directors considered him a celebrity. Brown spent sixty intense minutes describing his vision of the company's future. He spoke in simple words, repeating key points and reinforcing his messages with bullet-pointed slides. The group listened carefully, asked a few respectful questions, and gave Brown an appreciative round of applause before he departed.

Now it was my turn. My job was to talk about the subject I know best—cross-cultural management. I worked with the group

for an hour, explaining in detail the Communicating scale and its value as a tool for understanding how various cultures convey messages. As if to reinforce my theme, Kenji Takaki, a Japanese HR executive who had lived for two years in Toledo, raised his hand and offered this observation:

In Japan, we implicitly learn, as we are growing up, to communicate between the lines and to listen between the lines when others are speaking. Communicating messages without saying them directly is a deep part of our culture, so deep that we do it without even realizing it. To give an example, every year in Japan there is a vote for the most popular new word. A few years ago, the word of the year was "KY." It stands for *kuuki yomenai*, which means "one who cannot read the air"—in other words, a person sorely lacking the ability to read between the lines. In Japan if you can't read the air, you are not a good listener.

At this point one of the Americans broke in, "What do you mean, 'read the air'?"

Takaki explained, "If I am in a meeting in Japan and one person is implicitly communicating disagreement or discomfort, we should be able to read the atmosphere to pick up on that discomfort. If someone else doesn't pick up the message we say, 'He is a KY guy!'"

The American chuckled, "I guess that means we Americans are all KY guys!" Takaki offered no comment, which I read as an indication that he agreed. Then Takaki continued:

When Mr. Brown was giving his presentation, I was working hard to listen with all of my senses—to make sure I was picking up all of the messages that he was trying to pass. But now as I am

listening to Erin I am asking myself: Is it possible there was no meaning beyond Mr. Brown's very simple words? And with all of you in this very room, whom I have worked with for so many years, when I read the air during our discussions, am I picking up messages you had not intended to pass?

This was a very astute question—and a very disturbing one. The group fell silent, with a few jaws hanging slightly agape, as Takaki quietly read the air.

* * *

The contrasting styles of communication represented by the managers from Toledo and their colleague from Japan are often referred to as *low-context* and *high-context*, respectively.

In order to understand some of the implications, suppose you are having a discussion with Sally, a business colleague, and you both come from a culture that prefers low-context communication. People from such cultures are conditioned from childhood to assume a low level of shared context—that is, few shared reference points and comparatively little implicit knowledge linking speaker and listener.

Under these circumstances, it's highly likely that, while speaking with Sally, you will explicitly spell out your ideas, providing all the background knowledge and details necessary to understand your message. In low-context cultures, effective communication must be simple, clear, and explicit in order to effectively pass the message, and most communicators will obey this requirement, usually without being fully conscious of it. The United States is the lowest-context culture in the world, followed by Canada and Australia, the Netherlands and Germany, and the United Kingdom.

Though cultural norms are transmitted from one generation to the next through means that are generally indirect and subliminal, you may remember receiving some deliberate lessons concerning appropriate ways to communicate. I certainly received such lessons as a child growing up in the United States. My third-grade teacher, Mary Jane, a tall, thin woman with tightly curled hair, used to coach us during our Monday morning circle meetings using the motto, "Say what you mean and mean what you say." When I was sixteen, I took an elective class at Minneapolis South High School on giving effective presentations. This is where I learned the traditional American rule for successfully transferring a powerful message to an audience: "Tell them what you are going to tell them, then tell them, then tell them what you've told them." This is the philosophy of low-context communication in a nutshell.

I received lessons in low-context communication at home, too. Like many siblings, my older brother and I argued constantly. In an effort to reduce our squabbling, Mom used to coach us in active listening: You speak to me as clearly and explicitly as possible. Then I'll repeat what I understood you to say as clearly and explicitly as I can. The technique is designed to help people quickly identify and correct misunderstandings, thereby reducing (if not eliminating) one common cause of needless, pointless debate.

Childhood lessons like these imbued me with the assumption that being explicit is simply good communication. But, as Takaki explained, good communication in a high-context culture like Japan is very different. In Japan as in India, China, and many other countries, people learn a very different style of communication as children—one that depends on unconscious assumptions about common reference points and shared knowledge.

For example, let's say that you and a business colleague named Maryam both come from a high-context culture like Iran. Imagine that Maryam has traveled to your home for a visit and arrived via a late-evening train at 10:00 p.m. If you ask Maryam whether she would like to eat something before going to bed, when Maryam responds with a polite "No, thank you," your response will be to ask her two more times. Only if she responds "No, thank you" three times will you accept "No" as her real answer.

The explanation lies in shared assumptions that every polite Iranian understands. Both you and Maryam know that a well-mannered person will not accept food the first time it is offered, no matter how hungry she may be. Thus, if you don't ask her a second or third time, Maryam may go to bed suffering from hunger pains, while you feel sorry that she hasn't tasted the chicken salad you'd prepared especially for her.

In a high-context culture like Iran, it's not necessary—indeed, it's often inappropriate—to spell out certain messages too explicitly. If Maryam replied to your first offer of food, "Yes, please serve me a big portion of whatever you have, because I am dying of hunger!" this response would be considered inelegant and perhaps quite rude. Fortunately, shared assumptions learned from childhood make such bluntness unnecessary. You and Maryam both know that "No, thank you" likely means, "Please ask me again because I am famished."

Remember my confusing encounter with the concierge in New Delhi? If I had been an Indian from Delhi with the shared cultural understanding of how to interpret implicit messages, I would have been better able to interpret the concierge's directions. Lacking those assumptions left me bewildered and unable to find my way to the restaurant.

THE INTERPLAY OF LANGUAGE AND HISTORY

Languages reflect the communication styles of the cultures that use those languages. For example, Japanese and Hindi (as spoken in New Delhi) are both high-context languages, in which a relatively high percentage of words can be interpreted multiple ways based on how and when they are used. In Japanese, for instance, the word "ashi" means both "leg" and "foot," depending on context. Japanese also possesses countless homonyms, of which there are only a few in English ("dear" and "deer," for example). In Hindi the word "kal" means both tomorrow and yesterday. You have to hear the whole sentence to understand in which context it has been used. For this reason, when speaking Japanese or Hindi, you really do have to "read the air" to understand the message.

I work in English and also in French, a much higher-context language than English. For one thing, there are seven times more words in English than in French (500,000 versus 70,000), which suggests that French relies on contextual clues to resolve semantic ambiguities to a greater extent than English. Many words in French have multiple possible meanings—for example, *ennuyé* can mean either "bored" or "bothered" depending on the context in which it's used—which means that the listener is responsible for discerning the intention of the speaker.

The French language contains a number of idioms that specifically refer to high-context communication. One is *sous-entendu*, literally meaning "under the heard." To use a *sous-entendu* basically means to say something without saying it. For example, if a man says to his wife, "There are a lot of calories in that toffee ice cream you bought," his *sous-entendu* may be "You have gained some weight, so don't eat this ice cream." He has not explicitly said that

she is getting fat, but when he sees her reach down to throw a shoe at him, he will know that she picked up his *sous-entendu*.

I once asked a French client, who was complaining about an incompetent team leader, whether he had described the problem to his boss. The client responded. "Well, yes, but it was a *sous-entendu*. I made it known so that he could see it if he wanted to see it." The same expressions exist in Spanish (*sobrentendido*) and Portuguese (*subentendido*) and although less common, they are used in much the same way.

A similar French expression refers to saying something at the *deuxième degré* (literally, "the second degree"). I may say one thing explicitly—my first-degree message—but the statement may have an unspoken subtext which is the second-degree meaning.

The use of second-degree messages is a feature of French literature. Consider the seventeenth-century writer Jean de La Fontaine. At the first degree, he wrote simple children's tales, but if you understand the contemporary context within which the stories were written, you may pick up his second degree of meaning—a political message for adults. For example, La Fontaine's famous fable of the grasshopper and the ant conveys a straightforward moral that most children understand: It's important to economize to prepare for difficult times. But only sophisticated adult readers of his own day recognized La Fontaine's second-degree message—that King Louis XIV should stop spending so much money on rerouting the Eure River to supply water to the Versailles fountains.
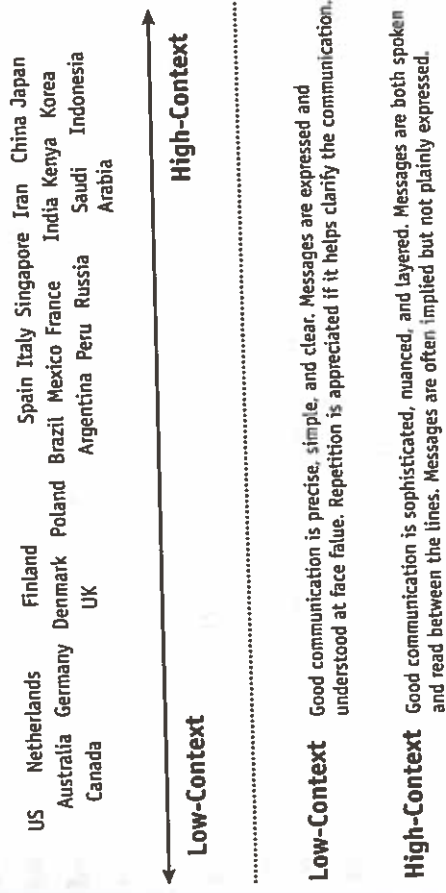
In France, a good business communicator will use second-degree communication in everyday life. While giving a presentation, a manager may say one thing that has an explicit meaning that everyone understands. But those who have some shared context may also receive a second-degree message that is the *real* intended meaning.

English, then, is a lower-context language than the Romance languages descended from Latin (French, Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese), while the Romance languages are lower context than most Asian languages. However, a look at the Communicating scale and its ranking of cultures from most explicit to most implicit shows that language is not the whole story (see Figure 1.1).

The United States is the lowest-context culture in the world, and all Anglo-Saxon cultures fall on the left-hand side of the scale, with the United Kingdom as the highest-context culture of the Anglo-Saxon cluster. All the countries that speak Romance languages, including European countries like Italy, Spain, and France, and Latin American countries like Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina, fall to the middle right of the scale. Brazil is the lowest-context culture in this cluster. Many African and Asian countries fall even further right. Japan has the distinction of being the highest-context culture in the world.

As you can see, language only gives a partial indicator as to where a culture will fall on the Communicating scale. The gap

FIGURE 1.1. COMMUNICATING

US Netherlands Finland   Spain Italy Singapore Iran China Japan
    Australia Germany Denmark Poland Brazil Mexico France India Kenya Korea
    Canada   UK   Argentina Peru Russia Saudi Indonesia
                                                             Arabia

Low-Context ————————————————————————————————→ High-Context

Low-Context Good communication is precise, simple, and clear. Messages are expressed and understood at face falue. Repetition is appreciated if it helps clarify the communication.

High-Context Good communication is sophisticated, nuanced, and layered. Messages are both spoken and read between the lines. Messages are often implied but not plainly expressed.

between the United States and the United Kingdom, both Anglo-Saxon countries, is quite large, as is the gap between Brazil and Peru, both Romance-language countries.

Beyond language, the history of a country strongly impacts its position on the Communicating scale. For an example, just think for a minute about the histories of the two bookend countries on the scale, the United States and Japan.

High-context cultures tend to have a long shared history. Usually they are relationship-oriented societies where networks of connections are passed on from generation to generation, generating more shared context among community members. Japan is an island society with a homogeneous population and thousands of years of shared history, during a significant portion of which Japan was closed off from the rest of the world. Over these thousands of years, people became particularly skilled at picking up each other's messages—reading the air, as Takaki said.

By contrast, the United States, a country with a mere few hundred years of shared history, has been shaped by enormous inflows of immigrants from various countries around the world, all with different histories, different languages, and different backgrounds. Because they had little shared context, Americans learned quickly that if they wanted to pass a message, they had to make it as explicit and clear as possible, with little room for ambiguity and misunderstanding.

So within each language cluster you may notice a pattern (see Figure 1.2). First, countries are clustered by language type. On the left, you see the Anglo-Saxon cluster, followed by the Romance language cluster, and finally, furthest to the right, is a cluster of countries speaking Asian languages. Then within each cluster, you might notice how length of history and level of homogeneity impact the

FIGURE 1.2. COMMUNICATING

Low-context   High-context
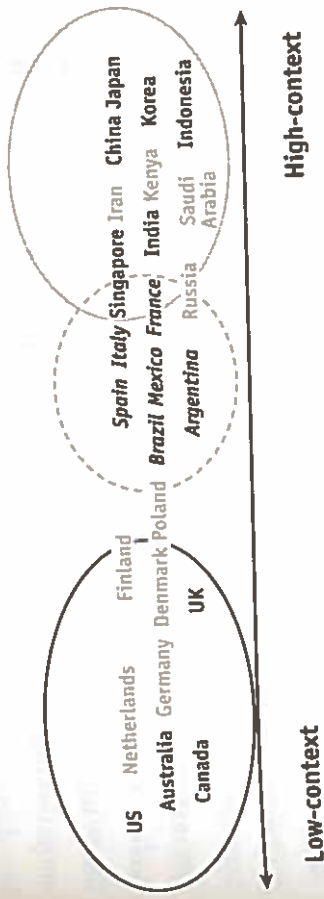
communication style. For example, within the Anglo-Saxon cluster, the United States has the most linguistic and cultural diversity and the shortest shared history. This helps to explain why the United States is the lowest-context of the Anglo-Saxon cultures. In the Romance cluster, Brazil has the most diversity and is the lowest-context culture. The same pattern holds with Asia, where the lower-context countries like Singapore and India have the most linguistic and cultural diversity.

The American anthropologist Edward Hall, who originally developed the concept of low- and high-context communication while working on Native American reservations in the 1930s, often used the analogy of marriage to describe the differences between high- and low-context communication. Imagine what happens when two people are married for fifty or sixty years. Having shared the same context for so long, they can gather enormous amounts of information just by looking at each other's faces or gestures. Newlyweds, however, need to state their messages explicitly and repeat them frequently to ensure they are received accurately.[1] The comparison to countries with longer or shorter shared histories is obvious.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD COMMUNICATOR?

In everyday life, we all communicate explicitly sometimes, while passing messages between the lines in other situations. But when you say someone is "a good communicator," what exactly do you mean? The way you answer this question suggests where you fall on the scale.

A Dutch executive in one of my classes noticed his country's low-context positioning on the scale and protested, "We speak between the lines in the Netherlands, too." But when asked whether a businessman who communicates between the lines frequently would be considered a good or a bad communicator, he didn't have to think long. "Bad. That's the difference between us and the French," he said. "In the Netherlands, if you don't say it straight, we don't think you are trustworthy."

If you're from a low-context culture, you may perceive a high-context communicator as secretive, lacking transparency, or unable to communicate effectively. Lou Edmondson, an American vice president for sales at Kraft who travels around the world negotiating deals with suppliers in Asia and Eastern Europe, put it starkly: "I have always believed that people say what they mean and mean what they say—and if they don't, well, then, they are lying."

On the other hand, if you're from a high-context culture, you might perceive a low-context communicator as inappropriately stating the obvious ("You didn't have to say it! We all understood!"), or even as condescending and patronizing ("You talk to us like we are children!"). Although I have lived and worked outside the United States for many years, low-context communication is still my natural style. I'm embarrassed to admit that I have

been subjected to both of these accusations more than once by my European colleagues.

A few years ago, a New York–based financial institution that I'd worked with previously asked me to do a cultural audit of their organization. Since corporate culture is not my specialty and I lacked the time necessary to do this project justice, I approached an Italian colleague whom I'll call Paolo about collaborating with me.

Paolo greeted me cheerfully when we met in his office. Twenty-five years my senior, Paolo has a well-earned reputation as an exceptional researcher and writer. He gave me a copy of his newest book and listened with interest as I described the collaboration opportunity. I started by explaining that my work, family, and writing commitments provided very little time for this project. Paolo nodded, and then the two of us explored the opportunity in more depth, discussing the client company and the specific issues that needed to be addressed. Still feeling a bit anxious about my time limitations, I repeated that Paolo would need to do 80 percent of the work (and would of course receive 80 percent of the compensation). Then we returned to exploring the needs of the client and possible approaches, but after a few more minutes, I once again slipped in my concern about time.

Paolo laughed impatiently: "Erin, I am not a child. I was not born yesterday. I understand very well what your point is." I felt myself blushing with embarrassment. Paolo is quite used to reading subtle messages; he had grasped my not-so-subtle point the *first* time. I apologized, wondering whether Paolo often reacted this way when speaking with the dozens of American faculty members at INSEAD who clarify and repeat themselves endlessly.

The moral of the story is clear: You may be considered a top-flight communicator in your home culture, but what works at home may not work so well with people from other cultures.

One interesting quirk is that in high-context cultures, the more educated and sophisticated you are, the greater your ability to both speak and listen with an understanding of implicit, layered messages. By contrast, in low-context cultures, the most educated and sophisticated business people are those who communicate in a clear, explicit way. The result is that the chairman of a French or Japanese company is likely to be a lot more high-context than those who work on the shop floor of the same company, while the chairman of an American or Australian organization is likely to be more low-context than those with entry-level jobs in the same organization. In this respect, education tends to move individuals toward a more extreme version of the dominant cultural tendency.

IT'S ALL RELATIVE

As we've noted, when considering the impact of cultural differences on your dealings with other people, what matters is not so much the absolute positioning of a person's culture on a particular scale, but rather their *relative* positioning in comparison to you. The examples that follow illustrate how this principle applies to the Communicating scale.

Both Americans and British fall toward the low-context end of the Communicating scale. But the British speak more between the lines than Americans do, a tendency particularly apparent with British high-context humor. Many British people are fond of delivering ironic or sarcastic jokes with a completely deadpan face. Unfortunately, this kind of humor is lost on many Americans; they

may *suspect* the British person is joking but they don't dare laugh, just in case he is not.

As a result, the British often say that Americans "don't understand irony." However, a more precise explanation is that Americans are simply more low-context than the British. So when Americans make a joke, especially in a professional setting, they are likely to indicate clearly through explicit verbal or physical cues, "This is a joke," something totally unnecessary when one British person is speaking to another. In their higher-context culture, if you have to tell us it was a joke, then it wasn't worth the breath you used to tell it.

Alastair Murray, a British manager living in Dubai, offers this example:

I was participating in a long-distance bike race across the UAE desert with hundreds of participants. In order to be collegial, I took a turn riding in front of another biker in order to break the headwind for him and help him save a little energy. A stranger had recently done the same for me.

A little later the biker peddled up next to me and said in a thick American accent, "Thanks very much for your help!"

I replied, "Oh, sure! But I wouldn't have done it if I'd known you were American."

To someone British it would have been clear that this was a joke, and even a sort of gentle reaching-out of friendliness. But as I delivered it straight-faced and with a serious voice, the American didn't seem to get it. He rode next to me in silence, beginning to pull slightly to the side.

So then I thought about how often Americans say "just kidding" after a joke. So I gave it a go. I told him, "Oh, hey, just kidding!"

And he responded, "Oh! All right! Ha ha! That *was* a good one. Where are you from?"

Oh, gosh, I thought. . . . these literal Americans!

The British may be more high-context than Americans—particularly where humor is concerned—but in comparison with Latin Europeans such as Spain and Italy and including the French they are very low-context.

I once worked with Stuart Shuttleworth, the CEO, owner, and founder of a small British investment firm that had grown over thirty years from a one-man shop into a company with one hundred employees. Two years earlier, he had begun expanding the business internationally. Shuttleworth explained to me the cultural quandaries this expansion had created for him:

Every day, as I see how my new counterparts work in Spain, France, and Italy, I am asking myself if it is possible that what is obvious common sense to me may not be common sense in those environments. Take, for example, the simple process of recapping a meeting. In the U.K., it is common sense that at the end of a meeting you should verbally recap what has been decided, which is most frequently followed by a written recap, including individual action items, which we send out to all meeting participants. Clarification, clarification, clarification—in the U.K. this is simply good business practice.

I attended a meeting the other day in Paris with a group of my France-based employees and one of our Parisian clients. As the meeting was clearly winding down, I awaited the final "Here's what we've decided" recap of the meeting. Instead, one of the clients announced dramatically "Et voilà!" [There it is!] as if everything had been made clear. The others all stood up patting

one another on the back and shaking hands, stating words of appreciation and future collaboration.

I couldn't help but wonder, "But voilà what?" It seems that my French colleagues simply *know* what has been decided and who should do what without going through all of the levels of clarification that we are used to in the U.K.

Shuttleworth was also confused by the e-mail etiquette he encountered:

In the U.K., as in the U.S., if you send someone an e-mail and that person doesn't have the answer at their fingertips, both common sense and etiquette call for the receiver to respond within 24 hours saying something like, "I got your message and will get back to you on Wednesday." In other words, even if you have nothing to say, you should spell out explicitly in a low-context way when you *will* have something to say. Lack of explicit communication signifies something negative.

Now, I send an e-mail to our Spanish supplier—who I know does high-quality and on-time work and has a very good level of English—and I may not hear back from him or any of his colleagues for three or four days. I am biting my nails assuming all sorts of problems with my request that prevent a speedy reply . . . either that or the entire staff has fallen ill or the building has burned down so that no one can read their e-mails.

And then three days later, I receive an e-mail telling me that they have done exactly as requested and everything is under control. Why couldn't they have said that in the first place?!

French, Spanish, and Italian are markedly more high-context than Anglo-Saxon cultures. But the cultures of Asia are even

more high-context than any in Europe. As the center of the business world tilts towards China, understanding the communication patterns typical of Chinese culture becomes increasingly critical.

Elisabeth Shen is a consultant who splits her time between Shanghai and Paris, helping Europeans work effectively with the Chinese. This can be quite challenging, since, as Shen observes, "China is a huge country with strong regional differences. In many ways it is difficult to categorize Chinese business culture, given its wide generational gaps and differences between private and public sectors." However, it's safe to say that Chinese culture in general is very high-context in comparison with the cultures of the West. Shen explains:

When Chinese vaguely express an idea or an opinion, the real message is often just implied. They expect their conversational partner to be highly involved and to take an active role in deciphering messages, as well as in mutually creating meaning. In Chinese culture, *pang qiao ce ji* [beating around the bush] is a style that nurtures an implicit understanding. In Chinese culture, children are taught not to just hear the explicit words but also to focus on *how* something is said, and on what is *not* said.

I collaborated with Shen to conduct interviews with dozens of European managers from various business sectors who had spent significant portions of their careers in different regions of China. They had varying opinions on how to succeed in a Chinese environment. In one of these interviews, Pablo Díaz, a Spanish executive who worked in China for a Chinese textile company for fifteen years, remarked, "In China, the message up front is not necessarily the real message. My Chinese colleagues would drop hints, and I wouldn't pick them up. Later, when thinking it over, I

would realize I had missed something important." Díaz recounts a discussion he had with a Chinese employee which went something like this:

Mr. Díaz: It looks like some of us are going to have to be here on Sunday to host the client visit.

Mr. Chen: I see.

Mr. Díaz: Can you join us on Sunday?

Mr. Chen: Yes, I think so.

Mr. Díaz: That would be a great help.

Mr. Chen: Yes, Sunday is an important day.

Mr. Díaz: In what way?

Mr. Chen: It's my daughter's birthday.

Mr. Díaz: How nice. I hope you all enjoy it.

Mr. Chen: Thank you. I appreciate your understanding.[2]

Díaz laughs about the situation now. "I was quite certain he had said he was coming," Díaz says. "And Mr. Chen was quite certain he had communicated that he absolutely could not come because he was going to be celebrating his daughter's birthday with his family."

Díaz has learned from experience how to avoid falling into these communication snafus:

If I'm not 100 percent sure what I heard, shrugging my shoulders and leaving with the message that I sort of think I heard is not a good strategy. If I am not sure, I have to take the responsibility to ask for clarification. Sometimes I have to ask three or four times, and although that can be a little embarrassing for both me and my colleague, it is not as embarrassing as having a production line set and ready and waiting for Mr. Chen, who is contentedly singing happy birthday somewhere else.

STRATEGIES FOR WORKING WITH PEOPLE FROM HIGHER-CONTEXT CULTURES

As you can see, communicating across cultures can be fraught with invisible difficulties. Whether you consider yourself a low-context or high-context communicator, it's quite likely you will one day find yourself working with a colleague, client, or partner positioned further to the right on the scale. So being an agile communicator, able to move adroitly in either direction, is a valuable skill for anyone in business.

When considering strategies for improving your effectiveness, one crucial principle to remember is that communicating is not just about speaking but also listening. Pablo Díaz has learned this from experience. "It isn't just that my Chinese employees speak between the lines," he says. "They are also always trying to find out what is behind a comment. This type of listening is not natural for Westerners, who take everything at face value."

So when you work with higher-context colleagues, practice listening more carefully. "The best advice I can give," Díaz says, "is to learn to listen to what is *meant* instead of what is said. This means reflecting more, asking more clarifying questions, and making an effort to be more receptive to body language cues." By searching for implicit cues, you can begin to "read the air" a little more accurately.

Think back to the dialogue between Mr. Chen and Mr. Díaz above. In this dialogue, Mr. Chen says "yes," but he simultaneously indicates that the real answer is "no." Saying "no" between the lines is common throughout Asia, including China, Japan, and Korea, and especially when speaking to a boss or a client. If you work with a supplier or a team member from one of these countries, you'll discover that "no" can come in many guises. A question like "Can

you complete this project by next week?" may be greeted by a sharp sucking-in of breath or a noncommittal answer: "It will be very difficult, but I'll do my best," "We'll think about it," or "It will be hard for these reasons, but let me consider it."

With practice, you can learn to read the "no" between the lines. For verification, ask open-ended questions rather than backing the person into a corner that requires a yes or no response. For example, Mr. Díaz could have asked an open-ended clarifying question such as, "How difficult would it be for you to get away from the party to come to work for a few hours?" With persistence, more information will emerge.

"It is important not to form opinions too quickly," Díaz suggests, "to listen more, speak less, and then clarify when you are not sure if you understood. You might need to work through another local person in order to get the message deciphered. But if you feel confused, work to get all the information you need to pick up the intended message." One of the biggest mistakes lower-context managers make is assuming that the other individual is *purposely* omitting information or *unable* to communicate explicitly. Most often, the higher-context person is simply communicating in the style to which he is accustomed, with no thought of confusing or misleading you. Simply asking for clarification can work wonders. After a while, you may find you don't have to ask so many times for clarity, as your counterpart also learns to adapt to you.

If you are the one sending the message, you may find there is less need to repeat yourself endlessly when speaking with high-context colleagues who listen between the lines. Before repeating yourself, stop talking. Wait to learn whether saying it once is enough. You can always come back to the topic later if you're not sure whether the message got through.

When you find yourself stymied or frustrated by misunderstanding, self-deprecation, laughing at yourself, and using positive words to describe the other culture are always good options. For example, when I was searching for the Swagat restaurant in New Delhi, I could have mentioned to the concierge that I come from a country with small towns, few people, and lots of signposts: "Indian people have a knack for finding things that I do not have. Please be so kind as to draw me a map marking every landmark or street I will see on the way to the restaurant." Or I might have said, "I am really bad at finding things, and this city is totally new to me. Could you please make me a simple drawing that a young child could read, marking exactly what I will see on each step of my way and each road I will cross? If you could include exactly how many minutes it will take me to walk for each part of the journey, that will help, as I do have a poor sense of direction." Self-deprecation allows you to accept the blame for being unable to get the message and then ask for assistance.

STRATEGIES FOR WORKING WITH PEOPLE FROM LOWER-CONTEXT CULTURES

Having consulted frequently with Western companies outsourcing to India, I was quite used to hearing the comments, "When I explained what needed to be done to my Indian team, there were no questions. Later, I realized they hadn't understood my instructions. Why didn't they ask for clarification?"

Later, when the Indian Institute of Planning and Management organized a multiple-city tour where I was to work with executives in four Indian cities, I experienced more of this high-context communication. As I prepared for the trip, I frequently found myself

communicating by both phone and e-mail with the university organizers, asking questions like, "Who exactly will be attending my sessions? What kinds of international experience do they have? Why are they interested in hearing from me? What sorts of questions should I anticipate?" Unfortunately, the responses I received were so high-context that I often felt more confused than before I asked. The names, backgrounds, and specific business needs of the attendees remained vague and unknown to me until I arrived in the classroom.

These experiences prepared me well for a question that one of the class participants asked me during a lunch break. "Madam," he said politely, "what you have taught us this morning is very important to my daily job. I have never traveled outside India, but I work every day by phone and e-mail with American, Australian, and British clients. What is the best way to build trust with these colleagues and customers?"

Thinking back to my difficulties of a few weeks earlier as well as previous experience working with Western companies outsourcing to India, I had a ready response:

Be as transparent, clear, and specific as possible. Explain exactly why you are calling. Assert your opinions transparently. Show all of your cards up front. At the end of the phone call, recap all the key points again, or send an e-mail repeating these points straight afterwards. If you are ever not 100 percent sure what you have been asked to do, don't read between the lines but state clearly that you don't understand and ask for clarification. And sometimes it would be better to not be quite so polite, as it gives the impression of vagueness or uncertainty.

With a little effort and practice, someone from a higher-context environment can learn to work and communicate in a lower-context way. Focus on recognizing when you are expecting the other person to read your intended message between the lines and get in the habit of conveying it more explicitly. Start the conversation by stating the main idea, make your points clearly, and at the end of the discussion recap what has been decided and what will happen next. If you're not sure whether your ideas have been absorbed, then feel free to ask, "Am I clear enough?" Follow up with an e-mail clarifying anything that might still be a bit vague and stating the main conclusions in writing.

I've come across people from high-context cultures who have gotten so good at switching their styles that they become as low-context as the American on the other end of the phone line.

STRATEGIES FOR MULTICULTURAL COLLABORATIONS

What if you have a blend of many cultures all on one team—Americans who recap incessantly and nail everything down in writing, Japanese who read the air, French who speak at the second degree, British who love to use deadpan irony as a form of humor, and Chinese who learn as young children to beat around the bush? Where do you suppose the greatest likelihood of misunderstanding will arise? Consider three options:

A. One low-context person communicating with someone from another low-context culture (for example, a Dutchman communicating with a Canadian)

B. A high-context person communicating with a low-context person (for example, a Spaniard communicating with a Dutchman)

C. One high-context person communicating with someone from another high-context culture (for example, a person from China communicating with a Brazilian).

Many people assume that the answer is choice B—a low-context/high-context conversation. The correct answer is choice C. On a multicultural team, most misunderstanding takes place between people who come from two high-context cultures with entirely different roots, such as the Brazilians communicating with the Chinese.

High-context communication works beautifully when we are from the same culture and interpret cultural cues the same way. When two Japanese people communicate, the shared contextual understanding makes it easy for them to read the air. Time is saved (no need to repeat an idea three times), relationships are maintained (no need to tell you a direct "no" when I can hint at it and you can pick up the message), and group harmony is preserved. But when team members come from different cultures, high-context communication breaks down. The speaker may be passing a message between the lines, and the listener may be actively focused on scanning for meaning. But because the two individuals come from completely different cultural contexts, the message received is different from the message sent, and the likelihood of misunderstanding multiplies.

Fortunately, if you are leading a multicultural team, there's no need to count the number of team members from the left and right hand of the scale and multiply by the number of members to figure out what to do. There is just one easy strategy to remember: *Multicultural teams need low-context processes.*

Pedro Galvez, a Mexican manager at Johnson and Johnson, attended my weeklong program on managing global virtual teams. He found himself managing a team that included both Mexicans

and Saudi Arabians—representatives of two very different high-context cultures. Galvez recalls:

The Saudis had a different way of passing and interpreting messages from the Mexicans, and we quickly began misunderstanding one another. Following a miscommunication between one of my Mexican team members and his Saudi colleague, I spoke with each of them about what had happened. The Mexican told me, "I made it known, so he could see it if he wanted to see it." I could see that with this kind of misunderstanding occurring, we might be headed for serious trouble.

After that incident, I brought the team together and we set ground rules. I spoke about the likelihood of misunderstanding given our different languages, our different cultural backgrounds, and the fact that both of our cultures have a tendency to communicate implicitly and pass messages between the lines. I asked the group to come up with solutions for minimizing misunderstanding, and in small groups they developed a process for how we would work together.

The list of ground rules developed by Galvez's group was simple but effective. Three levels of verification would take place at the end of any meeting:

- One person would recap the key points orally, with the task rotating from one team member to another.
- Each person would summarize orally what he would do next.
- One person would send out a written recap, again on a rotating basis.

A similar system of explicit recaps and summaries would be used after one-on-one conversations or phone calls. The purpose—to catch and correct any misunderstandings or confusions.

If you have members from more than one high-context culture on your team, lay out the issue and have the team develop their own solutions, as Pedro did. Don't wait until problems arise. The best moment to develop the processes is when the team is forming, *before* miscommunication takes place.

And one more point. Galvez's team added to their list of rules the following statement: "This is our team culture, which we have explicitly agreed on and all feel comfortable with." Galvez knew that making everyone comfortable with the explicit, written agreement was both important and challenging. Putting things in writing may signify a lack of trust in some high-context cultures. So when he asked the group to begin putting things in writing, he made sure to lay some groundwork.

WHEN SHOULD YOU PUT IT IN WRITING?

The more low-context the culture, the more people have a tendency to put everything in writing. "That was a fine meeting—I'll send out a written recap." "Thanks for the phone call—I'll send you an e-mail listing the next steps." "You're hired—here's your written job description and a formal offer letter." This explains why, compared with European and Asian companies, American businesses tend to have more:

- Organizational charts (showing on paper who works for whom)
- Titles (describing exactly who is at what level)

- Written objectives (explaining who is responsible for accomplishing what)
- Performance appraisals (stating in writing how each person is doing)

By contrast, many high-context cultures—particularly those of Asia and Africa—have a strong oral tradition in which written documentation is considered less necessary. The tendency to put everything in writing, which is a mark of professionalism and transparency in a low-context culture, may suggest to high-context colleagues that you don't trust them to follow through on their verbal commitments.

"This happened to me!" Bethari Syamsudin, an Indonesian manager working for the multinational automotive supplier Valeo, told me. "My boss is German, but my team is all Indonesian. In my culture, if we have a strong relationship and come to a spoken agreement, that is enough for me. So if you get off the phone and send me an e-mail recapping in writing everything we have just decided, that would be a clear sign to me that you don't trust me." Bethari was willing to adapt her style in deference to the wishes of her German superior. She recalls:

My boss asked me to do what I could to make the communication more transparent in our office. He complained that he often didn't know what decisions had been made and wanted a higher level of clarity. So he asked me to send a written recap of our weekly Bangkok team meeting to him and all participants in order to boost the clarity.

I will never forget the reaction of my Indonesian team when I sent out the first recap putting all of them on copy. My good friend and colleague called two minutes after the recap was sent

out and said, "Don't you trust me, Bethari? I told you I would do it in the meeting. You know I am good on my word." She thought I was being "political"—which is what we often say about the Europeans. I was caught between the culture of my boss and the culture of my staff.

At the next team meeting, Bethari explained carefully to the team why she was putting everything in writing and asked for their indulgence. "It was that easy," she says. "Once people understood I was asking for a written recap because the big boss requested it, they were fine with that. And, as I explained that this was a very natural way to work in Germany, they were doubly fine with it. If I ever need my staff to behave in a non-Indonesian way, I now start by explaining the cultural difference. If I don't, the negative reactions fly."

If you work with a team that has both low-context and high-context members, follow Bethari's lead. Putting it in writing reduces confusion and saves time for multi-cultural teams. But make sure to explain up front why you are doing it.

* * *

Now, let's return to my adventures in New Delhi, from the beginning of the chapter. After a delicious lunch of palak paneer I left the Swagat restaurant and returned to the hotel. The same friendly concierge smiled warmly as I approached. After telling him how much I enjoyed my lunch I explained that I hoped to visit the Qutab Minar ancient ruins that afternoon. He looked a little nervous, perhaps weary after my difficulty finding the restaurant just down the street. "Could you please map out for me step-by-step exactly what I need to do at every moment in order to find the ruins? As you have witnessed I'm not used to such a busy city."

Perhaps now certain of my inability to maneuver anywhere, let alone to the busy ruins in the middle of town, he said to me, "Don't worry Madam. I will organize everything. We have a driver who will take you right to the entrance and pick you up in the same spot. In the meantime I will provide you with a map with the address of the hotel clearly marked and every landmark between here and the ruins. And please take this card with my phone number on it. If you get lost and can't find the driver I will come and find you myself." And thus began a marvelous afternoon in New Delhi.

2

The Many Faces of Polite

Evaluating Performance and Providing Negative Feedback

Sabine Dulac, the finance director we met in the introduction, leaned back in her chair and let out a frustrated sigh. Managing Americans was proving much more difficult than she could have ever imagined. Her new American boss, Jake Webber, had reported to Dulac that several of her team members had complained bitterly following their first round of performance reviews with Dulac. They felt she'd been brutal and unfair in her feedback, focusing heavily on the negative points and hardly mentioning all their hard work and accomplishments.

Dulac was dumbfounded. The way she had provided feedback was the same style she'd used successfully with dozens of French employees with great success. Where were these complaints coming from?

Dulac was particularly confused because she'd expected American culture to be very direct. "In France, we frequently talk about how direct and explicit Americans are. Subtle? Hardly. Sophisticated? Not at all. But transparent and direct—we all know this to be true."