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DECODING HIDDEN CULTURES— A STRATEGIC COMPETENCE FOR VIRTUAL TEAMS AND REMOTE MANAGEMENT

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*Why is the enemy the enemy?
If you don't understand why they're doing it,
it's very difficult to stop.
We don't speak the language enough,
we don't understand the culture enough,
we haven't taken the time to not be blind, deaf and dumb
in areas of the world that matter to us.
—General Stanley A. McChrystal*

Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has forced businesses, governments and other organizations around the world to work through virtual teams, home offices, and remote management. While the virtual team is nothing new, it has become much more dominant in recent years due to the rise of the Internet, low-cost communication and collaboration tools like WhatsApp or Skype, Slack or Zoom, and most recently through quarantine and lockdown policies during Corona that prompted cancellations of office work, conferences, and air travel. This article suggests that telecommuting and telepresence make the ability to stand in the shoes of the other side not merely a nice-to-have diplomatic skill, but an essential strategic competence. The article offers a systematic methodology for decoding culture—understanding the value system of colleagues, customers and even competitors or enemies—in order to meet objectives effectively across silos and borders.

Keywords: culture, leadership, virtual teams, remote management

This exchange between an English-speaking traveller and a Far East hotel staff member appeared in the Far-East Economic Review.

Room Service:	Morny. Rune-sore-bees.
Hotel Guest:	Oh, sorry. I thought I dialed Room Service.
Room Service:	Rye, rune-sore-bees. Morny. Djewish to odor sunteen?
Hotel Guest:	Uh . . . yes. I'd like some bacon and eggs.
Room Service:	Ow July den?
Hotel Guest:	What?
Room Service:	Aches. Ow July den? Pry, boy, pooch . . . ?
Hotel Guest:	Oh, the eggs! How do I like them? Sorry. Scrambled please.
Room Service:	Ow July dee baycome? Crease?
Hotel Guest:	Crisp will be fine.
Room Service:	Hokay. An Santos?
Hotel Guest:	What?
Room Service:	Santos. July Santos?
Hotel Guest:	Ugh. I don't know . . . I don't think so.

Room Service:	No. Judo one toes?
Hotel Guest:	Look, I feel really bad about this, but I don't know what "judo one toes" means. I'm sorry.
Room Service:	Toes! Toes! Why djew Don Juan toes? Ow bow eenglish mopping we bother?
Hotel Guest:	English muffin! I've got it! You were saying toast! Fine. An English muffin will be fine.
Room Service:	We bother?
Hotel Guest:	No. Just put the bother on the side.
Room Service:	Wad?
Hotel Guest:	I'm sorry. I meant butter. Butter on the side.
Room Service:	Copy?
Hotel Guest:	I feel terrible about this but . . .
Room Service:	Copy. Copy, tea, mill . . .
Hotel Guest:	Coffee! Yes, coffee please. And that's all.
Room Service:	One Minnie. Ass rune torino fee, strangle aches, crease baycome, tossy cenglish mopping we bother honey sigh, and copy. Rye?
Hotel Guest:	Whatever you say.
Room Service:	Hokay. Tendjewberrymud.
Hotel Guest:	You're welcome.

Introduction

This fictional example¹ shows how much can get lost in translation when we work across cultures. A similar exchange happens in Sofia Coppola's movie "Lost in Translation" between Bill Murray and a director for a Dewar's advertising clip. The scene brought to mind my own business meetings when I was based in Tokyo three decades ago: the Japanese CEO spoke for a full minute, his fist pounding the desk between us to punctuate each sentence, his face furrowed with angry lines. But the interpreter translated only a snippet: "He is pleased that you are having this conversation." I asked her, "That cannot be all he said. Could you please translate all of it?" The CEO spoke again for a minute. Then she repeated, "Yes, he welcomes this meeting."

Misunderstandings between cultural divides are only compounded by new communication technologies like Zoom, WhatsApp or Skype. At the same time, the capacity to understand the cultural mindset of the other side—whether it is a negotiating opponent, an alliance partner, a colleague or a supplier from another culture—matters even more at a time of home office, virtual teams and remote management.

Leaders and managers of all stripes must decipher quickly any culture, including their own—which can be the trickiest challenge in cross-cultural management. When living in India in the 1980s, I learned a lot about the prevailing mindset in India; but the real eye-openers were about my own Swiss culture, meaning my own unexamined assumptions that ranged from expectations of punctuality to detail-orientation to neutrality and diplomacy.

The model (Sathe, 1985) in this article is designed to assist international managers (and today we all manage internationally, even with the Pakistani taxi driver or the Russian tech support) in decoding cultural preferences (both your own and the target culture's) so that your actions to meet your objectives will be appropriate to prevailing cultural pathways.

Just to be clear at the outset: Understanding another culture does not mean you need to be in agreement with that culture's values or preferences. If, for example, the target culture upholds the practice of oppressing women, let alone female genital mutilation, or beheading a French teacher who shows his students cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad, we need not condone the value-system that gives rise to such barbarian actions. But we need to understand

it. When I met with the faculty of the US Military Academy at West Point immediately after 9/11, I suggested that in order to fight Islamist terrorism effectively, cadets study the Quran and understand the Islamist mindset. So cross-cultural understanding is not a matter of moral relativism—it is a strategic competence. That goes also for business: If Amazon wants to compete effectively against Netflix in the streaming industry, its managers must understand Netflix's mindset and culture.

The Rise of the Virtual Team

For much of history, only a tiny elite ever traveled more than walking distance from where they were born; now the average person has a sense of the nearness of other lands and the world as a whole. The Internet and the deregulation of telecoms have dramatically reduced the cost of long-distance communication. As of 2019, mobile phones outnumbered the world population (Murphy, 2019). Exchange of information with people almost anywhere in the world has become easier, faster, and cheaper than it ever was for previous generations. (Note, though, that most people in the world do not benefit from these lower costs. Three-quarters of Europeans use the Internet, and Internet use in emerging markets has soared by 4,000 percent in the last decade, but only every eighth person in Africa enjoys access.ⁱⁱ)

Because distance is no longer an obstacle, relationships once difficult to maintain are now commonplace. I regularly call colleagues and clients worldwide via Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) phones, or I can Zoom or WhatsApp or Skype (yes, those are now verbs) them for free, using the screen-share feature to collaborate as if they were sitting beside me and looking at my screen. I email them contracts or entire books. One result of these low communication costs is the rise of the virtual team, by which I mean a team whose members rarely, if ever, meet in person.

Virtual teams are not a new phenomenon. In the past, if you were a traveling salesman or a CIA operative, you might work independently in the field and not see your boss for months at a time. As a radio announcer, you might get together with the program director only once a fortnight. (Handy, 1995) But smartphones, the Web and cloud computing allow people to work from home or the beach, and make it possible for programmers in India to telecommute daily to jobs in California's Silicon Valley.

An extreme example of such remote management happened already in September 2001, when a team of surgeons led by Dr. Jacques Marescaux in New York City performed a successful cholecystectomy on a 68-year-old female patient 6,230 km away—in Strasbourg, France.

Now this so-called telepresence is becoming more and more common; not only knowledge workers or doctors, but also storekeepers, field engineers, farmers, mechanics or IT workers work at a site remotely as if they were there.

Another form of telepresence, which we might call remote expertise, allows front-line workers in jobs as varied as data-center maintenance, pharmaceutical production, and petroleum engineering to use smart glasses (for example Vuity or Google Glass) to share what they are seeing with an expert sitting at a desk somewhere far away. The expert, in turn, can speak to them and send images helping them to handle whatever problems they face. In a way, remote expertise is like screen-sharing the real world.

“Glocal”

Already a generation ago, companies like General Electric or British Airways set up supermarket-size phone banks in cities like Bangalore or Haiderabad to handle the huge volume of daily customer inquiries. India was attractive because of its widespread use of

English and its low-cost labor. Today the top call center outsourcing nations include not only India, but also the Philippines, Poland, or Romania.

One American telecom took advantage of VoIP by using customer service reps in Bangalore, India, who posed as Americans with American names, trained to speak in American accents with American customers. “Hi, my name is Susan Sanders, and I’m from Chicago,” a twenty-two-year-old introduced herself with a broad smile and even broader vowels. In fact, “Susan Sanders” was C.R. Suman, a native of Bangalore who fielded calls from customers in the United States. Just in case her callers might ask personal questions, Ms. Suman created a fictional biography, complete with her parents Bob and Ann, brother Mark and a made-up business degree from the University of Illinois. Her training by Customer Assets, the calling center, included listening to sitcoms like “Ally McBeal” or “Friends” without the picture and then reconstructing the dialogue and being quizzed by the trainer, who would pose as a caller, on American movies, sports, and television programs. The point of the pretense was to convince Americans that the person on the other end of the line worked right nearby—not 13,300 kilometers away.

Call-centers serving U.S. and European customers are only the low end of a huge and growing industry of cross-border virtual teams including software developers, transcribers, accountants, web designers, and animation artists. “India is on its way to being the back office for the world,” said Shriram Ramdas, co-founder of Bangalore Labs, which manages Web sites and information networks for companies from the outskirts of Bangalore. While their clients sleep, software writers churn out code, which is then beamed by satellite to customers in industrialized countries.

We used to say, “Think globally, act locally.” Now we use a new word for these cross-border practices: “*glocal* management.”

Lost in Translation

When companies neglect the core principle of *glocal*—standing in the shoes of the other side—the unintended consequences can be amusing. Most of us know the story: When Chevrolet introduced its popular Chevy Nova model in the Latin American market, it was puzzled to find virtually no demand. Too late, the company found out that “Nova” was understood in Spanish to mean *no va*, “does not work.”

Fewer people have heard of other marketing mistakes when cultures collide. When Gerber started selling baby food in Africa, it used the same packaging as in the United States, with the baby on the label. Only later did the Swiss company learn that since most people in Africa don’t read English, companies routinely put pictures on the label of what is *inside* the container.

Colgate introduced a toothpaste in France called Cue, the name of a notorious pornographic magazine.

The U.S. Dairy Board ran into problems when it tried to translate its widely promoted Got Milk campaign for the Hispanic market. “Got Milk” in Spanish came out as *Tienes Leche?* which means: “Are you lactating?”

And my favorite: the Scandinavian vacuum manufacturer Electrolux used as its slogan in an American campaign: “Nothing sucks like an Electrolux.”

When meanings get lost in translation, the misunderstanding is not always so hilarious. A client, a U.S. executive, once called one of his direct reports, a Mexican, a “shifty guy.” Much later it became clear that the co-worker had been trained by his culture to be deferent to leaders by never looking his boss in the eye and never addressing him directly. The U.S. boss had completely misread his behavior as “dishonest.”

In one business meeting in Southeast Asia, one of my colleagues sat down and crossed her legs once the session had begun. She noticed a moment later that the room had

turned eerily quiet and that several participants looked at her askance. It was strange, and she had the distinct feeling that she had done something inappropriate, but no idea what—until one of the local leaders took her aside during the next break and told her she had committed an unpardonable sin: She had shown the soles of her feet, which is a sign of disrespect in Asian cultures, tantamount to sticking up your middle finger in the West.

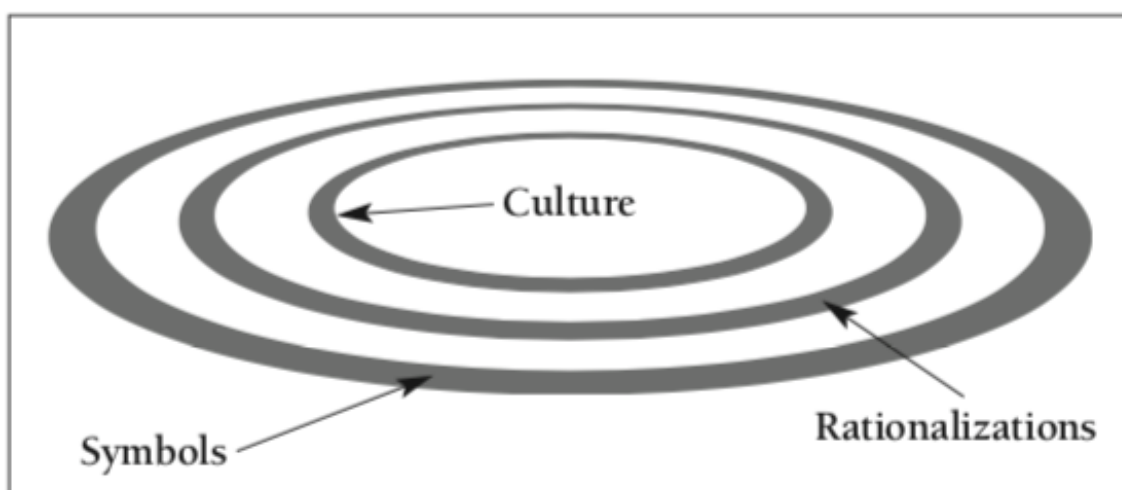
Cross-cultural mistakes can even do strategic damage and run into billions of dollars in lost business. To launch Windows 95 in China, Microsoft had the operating system translated into Chinese. The company made one tiny cross-cultural mistake: failing to stand in the shoes of its Chinese customer, it used programmers in Taiwan to write the software. Chinese government officials who looked at the operating system were in for a shock: the software was programmed to display references to “communist bandits” and to exhort users to “take back the mainland.” Furious with Microsoft, the Chinese government decided to back Linux instead—which was a major setback for Microsoft in the second-largest market in the world. It would take the company a full decade to re-enter China.

The key to avoiding such intercultural fiascos and instead managing successfully across cultures is the ability to read between the lines and stand in the shoes of the other side. But how do you do that?

Decoding Culture: From the Obvious to the Hidden

This tool permits decoding any cultural mindset or value-system, be it of a country or a corporation. We can distinguish three layers of culture. The outer and most apparent layer is made up of the visible and audible signs and behaviors you can readily observe: logos, dress codes, styles, architecture, movies, music, how people eat or how they talk, for example. The middle layer is how people justify and rationalize the outer layer: “The way we do things around here is . . . because . . .” The third and innermost layer is what is truly culture: the past decisions that have become so automatic as to become invisible, automatic, even unconscious. What is it that people don’t even know they don’t know? That is culture.

Fig. 1 Three Layers of Culture (adapted from Sathe, 1985)



Facet 1: The Founders

Now, how do you decode this innermost, invisible culture? An elegant way involves four facets. The first is to understand the ideology and values of the *founders*. The myth of William Tell, who ambushed the Hapsburg vassal Gessler and catalyzed a movement to throw out the Hapsburgs and the *Rütlichschwur*, the solemn oath by a group of farmers from the center of Switzerland who founded Switzerland in 1291, are telling if we want to understand

why Switzerland jealously guards its neutrality, why it joined the United Nations only in 2002, or why it adamantly refuses to join the European Union.

Moving across the Atlantic, Thomas Jefferson and the other founders of the United States enshrined their values of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, still underpinnings of U.S. culture today. By contrast, no European constitution contains such a fundamental right to pursue happiness. The Swiss Constitution, for example, limits freedom with responsibility: “conscious of our common achievements and our responsibility towards future generations, certain that free is only who uses his freedom, and that the strength of a people is measured by the welfare of the weak”ⁱⁱⁱ

To understand the Israeli mindset, you would want to learn about David Ben-Gurion, a founder and the first prime minister; learning about him would tell you a lot about Israel’s core values. Ben-Gurion was once upbraided by Israel’s then-president Chaim Weizmann for appearing at a formal dinner in the typical fashion of Israel’s pioneers, with an unbuttoned collar and no jacket or tie. “How can you show up dressed like this at a state dinner?” Weizmann asked. “Think of all the foreign guests who are here.” “But Winston Churchill,” Ben-Gurion claimed, “gave me his permission.” “What do you mean, Winston Churchill gave you permission?” Weizmann asked. “He’s not even here!” “Well,” Ben-Gurion explained with a smile, “When I last visited London, Churchill said to me, ‘Mr. Prime Minister, in Israel you may dress that way, but not in London!’” This little vignette tells you not only about Ben-Gurion’s sense of humor, but also about the Israeli culture of defiance, its bucking of convention, and its informal style. (Unlike German, French, Italian or Spanish, for example, Hebrew does not know a term like *Sie*, *vous*, *lei* or *usted* that connote polite distance. In Israel, everyone says the informal and intimate *ata* to a man or *at* to a woman: *Du*, *toi*, or *tu*. Everyone is family, for better or for worse.)

Facet 2: The Heroes

A second access to the invisible culture is through its *heroes*. Australia is often, and only half-jokingly, called a “nation of convicts” because the British Empire filled its penal colonies there with rebels and criminals, some of whom went on to found the nation, in addition to shaping some of its core values, including fairness and beating the system. One of Australia’s greatest heroes is Ned Kelly, one of its most wanted men in the late nineteenth century. Ned and his brother Dan were at large in the Australian bush after killing three police officers; at one point the government reward for their capture rose to an astonishing 8,000 pounds (some \$2 million today). Finally, in a legendary battle with police, Ned received 28 bullet wounds to his arms, legs, feet, groin, and hands. But he survived, only to be sentenced to death and hanged in Melbourne at the age of 25, despite protests by thousands of supporters. To this day Ned Kelly lives on as an admired, if infamous, rebel who stood up to authority.

A modern-day hero (and quite the opposite of Ned Kelly) is the Swiss tennis pro Roger Federer. Federer epitomizes Swiss core values like being nice (almost always), diplomacy (praising his opponents even as he beat them mercilessly), neutrality, hard work, discipline, and quality.

Facet 3: The Outcasts

A third access to decoding a culture is to see who are the *outcasts*—in other words, what behaviors are not permissible, even taboo, in the dominant culture. For example, when I visited Cuba, I saw how the Latin macho culture, including the state, ridicules, marginalizes and oppresses homosexuals.

In the U.S. culture, atheism is permissible, but atheists find themselves clearly outside the mainstream, which is suspicious of non-believers. It is rare for atheists to win political

office; as of 2019, not a single member of the U.S. Congress was openly atheist, and only one, Senator Krysten Sinema of Arizona, said she is “religiously unaffiliated.” And when the Secular Coalition of America tried to find how many atheists were among the 500,000 or so elected officials at national, state and municipal levels, it found a total of five (Nugent, 2008).

Facet 4: The Defining Moments

Since culture is shaped over time, through an almost infinite number of interactions, the fourth step is to look through the history of a culture and identify wars and other crises (for instance economic) that are often *defining moments* in shaping a culture. For example, World Wars I and II helped shape the self-understanding in U.S. culture that America is the good guy fighting against the bad guys to save the world. President Woodrow Wilson declared that the United States was fighting World War I to “make the world safe for democracy.” By entering World War II, the U.S. prevented Nazi Germany’s world dominance. Both wars ended the Monroe Doctrine, which had mandated that America stay out of meddling in European affairs. But then came Japan’s 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor; and by 1944, the Roosevelt administration had actively espoused a new role—as the world’s policeman. From then on, the United States saw itself as a benevolent hegemon, ridding the world of Nazism, then Communism, and most recently from Islamist terrorism. Subsequent U.S. administrations imposed democracy in Germany and Japan, underwrote much of the UN system, went to war in Korea and Vietnam (and more recently in the Persian Gulf and Afghanistan), monitored elections in Zambia, and so forth. “We know what is good for the world” had become an unquestioned assumption not only in U.S. foreign policy, but also for many U.S. multinational corporations.

These four facets—founders, heroes, villains, and defining moments—allow for decoding any culture in a simple yet systematic way.

Conclusion: Decoding a Culture Takes a Lifetime—or a Day

Of course, to fully understand a single target culture like France or Russia or China in all its facets might well take a lifetime of study. But for immediate actionable insights into negotiating opponents, merger entities, alliance partners, suppliers, customers or target audiences, the model in this article (or the Global Integrator® and the Global Leader Pyramid® models elsewhere (Zweifel, 2012)) permits systematic analysis in much shorter timeframes.

What is more, streaming services like Netflix allow us to watch movies from a target culture while keeping in mind the model in this article; and online sources like Wikipedia make it easy to map information against the model for any culture—even when you know next to nothing beforehand. For example, before I visited Kazakhstan for the first time to give a leadership workshop for its then-prime minister and cabinet, I searched Wikipedia for Kazakhstan, its history, language, geography, politics, economy, and society. Once I was in the middle of leading the workshop, I asked the assembled cabinet members an open question. No participant dared speak up. For a moment I was dumbfounded, not knowing what to do. The success of the workshop depended on its interactive nature: you cannot teach leadership by lecturing or a monologue to a passive audience. I had to think on my feet—and recalled that the prime minister had entered the room with bodyguards and was sitting apart from the other cabinet members at a special table. I quickly realized that the barrier to open communication stemmed from the presence of the prime minister. The cabinet members were afraid of speaking up, lest they might say something wrong, or lose face, in the prime minister’s eyes. How could I get the participants to participate? I had to think of something quick.

This is when my homework paid off. I had read on Wikipedia that the word “Kazakh” originally means something like “free warrior” or “independent wanderer.” So I told the assembled participants, “Ladies and gentlemen, if I understand correctly, ‘Kazakh’ means ‘free warrior.’ So please do live up to your own name, and communicate openly and without fear.”

What the cabinet members did then came as a surprise. They all rose to their feet and gave me a standing ovation. (Even the prime minister was beaming.) Not because my words had been particularly brilliant, but because their guest had been able to stand in their shoes.

Thomas D. Zweifel is a board member, strategy and performance expert, and author of eight books, including *Culture Clash 2.0*, *Communicate or Die* and *Strategy-In-Action*. From 1997 through 2013 he served as CEO of Swiss Consulting Group. Since 2001 Dr. Zweifel has taught leadership and international management at Columbia University and since 2004 at St. Gallen University (HSG). He lives in Zurich with his wife and two daughters.

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ⁱ See <http://www.snopes.com/travel/foreign/service.asp>. Comedian Shelley Berman claims that this “dialogue never actually took place in any hotel anywhere in the world.”

ⁱⁱ See http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/statistics/at_glance/KeyTelecom.html

ⁱⁱⁱ Switzerland Constitution, adopted by Public Referendum April 18, 1999, in force since January 1, 2000, Preamble.