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## Learning cultures on the fly - towards a global mindset

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**LEARNING CULTURES ON THE FLY – TOWARDS A GLOBAL MINDSET**

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# **LEARNING CULTURES ON THE FLY – TOWARDS A GLOBAL MINDSET**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Recent technological advancements have pushed both the pace and complexity of globalization to new heights, making it possible to collaborate—or compete—globally from anywhere in the world, regardless of one’s country of origin or cultural background. This presents important challenges to managers which must deal effectively with a wide variety of cultures. Traditional prescriptions based on adaptation are no longer sufficient given the speed in which new intercultural interactions take place. Newer prescriptions based on developing a global mindset are time consuming and do not address immediate issues facing managers. This paper addresses this conundrum by suggesting global managers must learn to learn cultures in action, that is, “learn cultures on the fly”. Implications are discussed.

*Bangalore, India, 5:30 AM. Adhira Iyengar wakes up early, prepares a cup of tea, and logs onto her computer. As expected, Debra Brown, her business partner in California, is already logged on. “Good morning! I have a few questions about your last report and would like to discuss them with you before I leave for the day.” As they finish their online meeting, Adhira stares at her calendar—it will be a long day. At 10 AM she has a conference call with Mr. Wu, a client in Hong Kong, about some changes in their service contract. At 1:30 PM she has a face-to-face meeting with a group of prospective Australian clients in her office in Bangalore. Before the end of the day, she must finish a report and email it to Mrs. Sanchez, a partner in Mexico City, and she still needs to prepare her trip to Berlin coming up next week.*

This example from a day in the work life of a busy international manager illustrates how recent technological advancements have pushed both the pace and complexity of globalization to new heights (Friedman, 2005). Communication technology makes it possible to collaborate—or compete—globally from anywhere in the world, regardless of one’s country of origin or cultural background. As a growing number of organizations establish increased operations around the world, managers’ exposure to both partners and competitors from significantly different cultural backgrounds has increased at a rate that has surprised both economists and social scientists.

## **CHALLENGES OF WORKING ACROSS CULTURES**

Developing successful relationships with people from different cultures is challenging almost by definition. Several reasons account for this, including people’s tendency to have preconceived ideas about how the world works (or should work), how individuals behave (or should behave), and which behaviors are acceptable or unacceptable. These ideas are largely influenced by our personal experiences and the cultures in which we grew up. We tend to approach intercultural interactions based on our own perceptions, beliefs, values, biases, and misconceptions about what is likely to happen (Kluckhohn 1954; Geertz, 1973; Hofstede, 1980, 1991; Trompenaars, 1993; Schneider and Barsoux, 1997; Steers and Nardon, 2006). As a result, when we engage in exchanges with people from different cultures we often find that the consequences of our actions are different than we expected or intended (Adler, 2002). The results can range from embarrassment to insult to lost business opportunities.

Traditionally, practitioners and scholars have suggested that managers should deal with such cultural conflicts by adapting to the other culture (Earley and Mosakowski, 2004; Earley and Ang, 2003; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1997; Bennet, 1998). Academic and management training programs have long recognized a fairly typical pattern of behavior and accommodation referred to as *culture shock* (Chaney and Martin, 1995). That is, new expatriates initially experience stress and anxiety as a result of being immersed in an unfamiliar environment. Over time, they learn new ways of coping and eventually feel more comfortable living in the culture of the host country. Expatriate managers are able to be effective in dealing with people from another country by learning the foreign culture in depth and behaving in ways that are appropriate to that culture (Bennett, 1998). For example, a manager assigned to work in France for several years is advised to study French language and culture and then begin to make French friends upon his or her arrival in the new location. While this approach to training remains popular, we suggest that the increasing intensity and diversity that characterizes today's global business environment requires a new approach. This new approach is forced upon managers because, unlike in the past, the new global manager must succeed simultaneously in multiple cultures, not just one or two (Berthoin Antal, 1995; Adler, 2002; Friedman and Berthoin Antal, 2005). Gone are the days when a manager prepared for a long-term assignment in France or Germany—or even Europe. Today, this same manager must deal simultaneously with partners from perhaps a dozen or even two different cultures around the globe. Thus, learning one language and culture may no longer be enough as it was in the past. In addition, the timeline for developing these business relationships has declined from years to months—and sometimes to weeks. To us, this requires a new approach to developing global managers.

This evolution from a principally bi-cultural business environment to a more global one presents managers with at least three new challenges in attempting to adapt quickly to the new realities on the ground:

***1. Many intercultural encounters happen on short notice, leaving little time to learn about the other culture.*** Imagine that you just returned from a week's stay in India where you were negotiating an outsourcing agreement.

As you arrive in your home office you learn that an incredible acquisition opportunity just turned up in South Africa and that you are supposed to leave in a week to explore the matter further. You have never been to South Africa, nor do you know anybody from there.

What do you do? While there are many books covering the “do’s and don’ts” of cultures, they are typically helpful guides on how to eat or behave politely and say little about local managers behave (Osland and Bird, 2000; Friedman and Berthoin Antal, 2005).

**2. *It is often unclear to which culture we should adapt.*** Suppose that your company has asked you to join a global project team to work in a six-month R&D project. The team includes one Mexican, one German, one Chinese, and one Russian. Every member of the team has a permanent appointment in their home country but is temporarily assigned to work at company headquarters in Switzerland for this project. Which culture should team members adapt to? In this case, there is no dominant cultural group to dictate the rules. Considering the multiple cultures involved, and the little exposure each manager has likely had with the other cultures, the traditional approach of adaptation is unlikely to be successful. Nevertheless, the group must be able to work together quickly and effectively to produce results (and protect their careers) despite their differences. What would you do?

**3. *Intercultural meetings increasingly occur virtually (by way of computers or video conferencing) instead of through more traditional face-to-face.*** Suppose you were asked to build a partnership with a Korean partner that you have never met and that you know little about Korean culture. Suppose further that this task is to be completed on-line, without any face-to-face communication or interactions. Your boss is in a hurry for results. What would you do?

Taken together, these three illustrations demonstrate how difficult it can be to work across cultures in today’s rapidly changing business environment. The old ways of communicating and doing business are simply less effective than in the past. The question before us, then, is how to facilitate management success in such situations. In the remainder of this paper, we argue that managers need to ‘learn how to learn’ to deal with other cultures and how to make sense of varied environments (Schwandt, 2005).

To this end, we will discuss how individuals learn from experience (Kolb, 1976; Argyris, 1995) and how these theories and models can be applied to intercultural contexts.

## **TOWARDS A GLOBAL MINDSET: LEARNING CULTURES “ON THE FLY”**

In recent years, numerous academicians and global managers have pointed out that, faced with increasing challenges of adapting to a fast-paced, multicultural, and technology-intensive environment, managers need to develop what has been called a *global mindset* (Rhinesmith, 1992; Kedia and Mukherjim 1999; Jeannet, 2000; Maznevski & Lane, 2003; Nummela, Saarenketo and Puumalainen, 2004).

In this paper, we follow Maznevski and Lane’s (2003) conceptualization of global mindset as *the ability to develop and interpret criteria for personal and business performance that are independent of the assumptions of a single country, culture, or context; and to implement those criteria appropriately in different countries, cultures, and contexts*. In other words, global mindset is a cognitive structure or knowledge structure that contains information about several cultures and realities (Chatterjee, 2005). This knowledge allows managers to interpret situations using multiple cultural frameworks and then select the most appropriate action for each particular situation (Rhinesmith, 1992; Maznevski & Lane, 2003).

However, while knowing everything about every culture and using it in the appropriate way is ideal, in reality achieving this level of understanding is difficult, if not impossible, for at least two reasons: first, learning about another culture from a distance is difficult at best and, second, most managers do not have the time to learn about other cultures and develop a global mindset well before they are asked to be effective. As a result, in order to develop a global mindset *and* be effective in the process, managers need to develop the ability to learn how to deal with other cultures “on the fly;” that is, to learn enough about the other and his or her cultural background in the course of the interaction.

We argue in this paper that an intercultural episode is an opportunity for interdependent learning in which managers can often compensate for knowledge gaps by developing personal mastery (Friedman and Berthoin Antal, 2005).



We argue further that developing the ability to learn how to learn' to deal with other cultures and how to make sense of varied environments (Schwandt, 2005) is the best strategy available to managers who want to succeed in the multicultural reality of today's business environment. Finally, we discuss below how individuals learn from experience and how individual learning cycles, if managed correctly, can influence the success of intercultural interactions.

### **Individual Learning: Experiential learning theory**

According to experiential learning theory, knowledge is created through a combination of grasping and transforming experience (Kolb, 1976; Kolb and Kolb, 2005). The learning process is composed of four stages which include the two modes of constructing knowledge: knowledge is grasped through concrete experience and abstract conceptualization and transformed through reflective observation and active experimentation (Kolb and Kolb, 2005). While it may begin in any of the four stages, learning is a process of experience, observation and reflection, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. The experiential learning process is depicted in figure 1.

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Insert Figure 1 About Here

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In order to illustrate how experiential learning theory works, consider the following scenario: Imagine that you come from a culture that values direct and straightforward communication. As you engage in a conversation with another individual, you are likely to think that direct questioning is appropriate and will result in a straightforward answer. Further, imagine that the other individual with whom you are communicating comes from a culture that values indirect communication and "saving face." For this person direct questions are inappropriate and information is exchanged indirectly through subtle suggestions and hints. Now, consider that neither of you are sufficiently knowledgeable to adapt your communication styles to fit the other's culture.

The most likely result of this scenario is that you will ask a direct question and will get what you perceive as an unsatisfactory response. At this point, you are likely to experience an emotional reaction—discomfort, perplexity, offense, or surprise.

The feelings you experience as a result of your actions are referred to as *concrete experience*. In other words, it is your emotional reaction to the results of your actions.

Your experience or feelings may then prompt you to try to understand what is happening. You may engage in *observation and reflection*. Once you recognize that there is a mismatch between what is happening and what you thought would happen, you observe the other person and try to guess why he or she is responding as they are. You may mentally run through a list of possible problems: maybe she did not hear you, maybe she did not understand the question, maybe she does not speak English very well, maybe she is shy, maybe she is not comfortable with the question, and so forth.

You then search for other clues in her behavior and in the context of the situation that can help explain her behavior. In other words, you look for additional information that will help you make sense of the situation.

This observation and reflection forms the basis of *abstract concepts and generalizations*. As you think about it, you develop a theory of what is happening. In other words, you identify a plausible explanation for her behavior and are ready to start searching for alternative solutions to your problem. Let's suppose that you concluded that your partner is uncomfortable with your question. Her body language suggests that she feels embarrassed to answer. Therefore, you theorize that you should pose the question in a different way.

Your newly developed theory will guide future actions you may take to deal with this individual and others from the same culture. As you practice these new actions, you are *testing implications of concepts*. You decide, for example, to formulate your question in a different way, you observe the results, and start a new learning cycle. The cycle continues until you are able to identify successful behaviors.

Learning through experience is a process of trial and error in which we perceive a mismatch, reflect on it, identify solutions, and initiate new behaviors. When we identify successful behaviors, we incorporate them into our theories of how to behave. The next time we engage in a similar situation, we draw on our latest theory for guidance (Kolb and Kolb, 2005; Hogan and Warrenfeltz, 2003).

As the circular pattern of experiential learning theory suggests, we may start our learning process at different points of the cycle, depending on the situation and our learning preferences (Kolb and Kolb, 2005).

For instance, some people have a preference for abstract concepts and generalizations, preferring to go to the library and read about the other culture prior to engaging with its members. These individuals will strive to develop a theory beforehand, and will improve their theory in the course of the interaction. Others have a preference for observation and may choose to watch foreigners interacting prior to engaging with them. In other words, they will fine-tune their theories based on their observations. Still others may prefer to jump to the situation without prior exposure, and draw on their feelings to decide how to behave.

Given our individual preferences for some learning abilities, we tend to emphasize some learning opportunities over others (Kolb and Kolb, 2005). When we rely exclusively on the set of preferred abilities, our capability to learn from situations that do not draw on them decreases. As the circular model suggests, individuals that are able to utilize the four types of abilities are better equipped to learn in the complex environment of intercultural interactions.

### **Interdependent Learning: The Intercultural Interaction Learning model**

While experiential learning theory has remained one of the most influential theories of management learning (Kayes, 2002, 137), it has been criticized for its failure to account for the social aspects of learning (Holman, Pavlica, and Thorpe, 1997). Kayes (2002) addresses this concern, arguing that concrete experience is manifested in an emotional state of need which becomes an internalized representation through observation and reflection. He relates abstract conceptualization to identity which serves to organize experience and equates active experimentation to social interaction through which experiences arise.

Building upon these ideas, the *intercultural interaction learning model* focuses on two or more individuals who are simultaneously experiencing problems, reflecting on them, theorizing about them, and engaging in new corrective actions. In other words, the learning process is interdependent and interactive, not independent or linear (Thomas, 2006; Kayes, 2002; Schwandt, 2005). The learning of one party, leads to an action that will influence the learning of the other party, and so forth. This interdependence is illustrated in figure 2.

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Insert Figure 2 About Here

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Ideally, as these individuals' learning processes interact, better ways of communicating are created. However, if learning is short-circuited, the relationship suffers, and the interaction fails. For instance, if after asking a question and receiving an unsatisfactory answer the person does not stop to observe the other party and reflect on her behavior, he or she may engage in actions that are detrimental to the relationship. In sum, an effective intercultural interaction is the result of a successful interdependent learning process, in which two or more parties learn to work together.

In our view, an *intercultural interaction* is an opportunity for interdependent learning in which individuals *both* learn about the other's culture *and* negotiate effective ways of relating to one another. Building on previous communication research we suggest four main areas that need to be negotiated: identities, meaning, rules, and behaviors.

Each of these negotiating activities is based on a specific learning ability: 1) the ability to *negotiate identity* draws on the ability to engage in concrete experiences; 2) the ability to *negotiate meaning* builds on the ability to reflect and observe; and 3) the ability to *negotiate new rules* is based on the ability to develop new theories; and 4) the ability to *negotiate new behaviors* is based on the ability to take actions. Figure 3, below, integrates individual level process with interaction level processes.

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Insert Figure 3 About Here

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## **1. Negotiating Identity**

An individual's identity is the set of attributes that are central, enduring, and distinctive about an individual (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). In other words, identity is the answer to the question, "Who am I?" Identity is constructed through social interactions, whereby individuals create categories and define themselves in relation to others. This process of categorization influences not only how individuals position themselves in relation to others, but also how people act and feel about the interactions. Our own identity or self-image is closely linked to our interpretations of reality (Schwandt, 2005). In other words, we make sense of the world based on how we see ourselves. Social identification theory suggests that one's actions will be congruent with one's identity. Individuals tend to engage in activities that are

harmonious with their self-concept and to support institutions that embody their identities (Ashforth and Mael, 1989).

It is for this reason that intercultural interactions are potentially challenging. When we engage with others from a different cultural background, our assumptions, values, and beliefs may be questioned. Our perceptions about who we are, our competence, status, and self-worth may be challenged. An intercultural interaction is likely to produce strong feelings associated with our own identity and how we expect to be treated. For these feelings to be positive, individuals must engage in a process of identity management or negotiation (Ting-Toomey, 1988).

The importance of negotiating identity in cross-cultural conflicts has been recognized in the intercultural relations literature (Rothman and Olson, 2001). According to this body of knowledge, conflicts of interests among different groups or individuals are projected on the basis of identity and differences in international conflicts must involve a resolution of the parties' identities. Rothman (1992) suggests that dealing with international conflicts requires first dealing with oneself through reflexive dialogue. In other words, it requires addressing how the issue is reflected 'inside' one's mind and how one's identity is challenged or threatened by it.

Negotiating identity is particularly important in situations in which one culture is perceived to be in a more powerful position than the other. For instance, in global business acquisitions, the managers from the acquiring company are generally more powerful, have greater status, and may try to impose the "right" way of doing things on the people from the acquired company. Individuals from the less powerful group may find that their cultural-based assumptions and values are criticized, considered inappropriate, and may feel that their own sense of self is being challenged. In other words, their position in the social environment is decreased. For instance, a Spanish manager may consider that arriving 30 minutes late to a meeting is normal and acceptable. However, the manager of the recently acquired Polish company may see this as a sign of disrespect, and a sign that she is no longer important to the organization. Having one's identity threatened may close off communication, impede learning, and eventually compromise the success of the interaction. Unless both parties can negotiate an acceptable identity for themselves, the interaction is likely to fail.

The process of identity negotiation involves two identities—our own and the other’s identity (Imahori and Cupach, 2005). For an intercultural interaction to be successful, we need to be able to preserve a satisfactory identity for ourselves while at the same time respecting and preserving the other’s identity.

To preserve our own identity, we need to develop self-awareness (Cant, 2004; Adler, 2002). Self-awareness refers to understanding who we are, what our values are, and what our place in the social interaction is. In other words, we need to understand that we are complex cultural beings and that our values, beliefs, and assumptions are a product of our cultural heritage. When we understand that who we are is heavily influenced by our own cultural experiences, we are better equipped to separate our sense of worth from the situation. For example, the Polish manager above may think “As a Polish manager, I do not like to wait,” rather than “only people that are not important are kept waiting.” The first statement preserves her identity, the second challenges it.

To preserve the other’s identity, it is important to develop empathy towards the other. Empathy refers to the ability to identify and understand the other’s feelings and motives. In other words, empathy suggests an understanding that the other is also a complex cultural being and that their actions—like ours—are a product of deep-seated cultural values and beliefs (Friedman and Berthoin Antal, 2005). In other words, when there is a misunderstanding, competent global managers search for a cultural explanation for the other’s behavior, before judging her behavior. For example, suppose you had asked your Egyptian counterpart if an important report would be ready today, and he had answered yes but did not deliver it. Instead of judging him based on your own culture (perhaps suggesting that he is not dependable, trustworthy, or competent), you empathize with him on the grounds that his behavior is also a product of culture. Maybe he indirectly told you that he could not finish the report, but you did not understand. Maybe your request was not appropriate or time expectations were not clear. Therefore, you assume that he is acting consistently with his own cultural rules even though you do not understand it. You then proceed to understand what happened, trying to identify a possible miscommunication. Managers that are open-minded and willing to suspend judgment are more likely to be successful. Skilled managers empathize with others not based on shared values and assumptions, but based on the common fact that we are complex cultural beings and behave in accordance to a complex web of cultural values and beliefs.

In summary, to negotiate identities effectively we need to understand that we are cultural beings. We need to know our own values, and their relationship with our own culture. We also need to empathize with the other, knowing that he or she is also influenced by culture even if we do not know what it means. With this in mind, we can negotiate acceptable identities in which our own and the other's sense of self are preserved. When our sense of self is preserved, our feelings in the interaction are more likely to be positive and it becomes easier to continue with the learning experience.

## **2. Negotiating Meaning**

Meaning refers to the interpretation we give to things. For example, what does signing a contract really mean? For some cultures a contract means the end of a negotiation, for others it means the beginning of a relationship. New assignments of meaning are based on current and past experience. Jointly understood meaning is constructed through interaction, as individuals exchange information (Berger and Lukeman, 1966). Therefore, when two individuals from different cultures interact, they are likely to start with different understandings about the meaning of the concrete thing they are talking about (for example a contract). However, to be effective, they will need to arrive at a common understanding of the issue. Friedman and Berthoin Antal (2005) refer to this idea as “negotiating reality”. Whereas we build on their ideas, we prefer to call this process *negotiating meaning*, as we believe “reality” is a broader term that involves identities, rules, and behaviors, discussed in other parts of this paper.

Meaning cannot be transmitted from one person to another, only messages are transmitted (Gudykunst, 1998). When we send a message to another we attach certain meaning to it, based on our interpretation of the issue, ourselves, and the other. When others receive our message, they attach meaning to it based on their interpretation of the issue, the message, themselves, and ourselves. For example, when you say, “I am glad we were able to sign a contract,” you may mean “I am glad the negotiations are over and I can go back to business.” However, your Asian counterpart may hear “I am glad we agreed to start a relationship and will continue the negotiations for a long time to come.” A common meaning must be constructed for this interaction to be effective.

Meaning is constructed through interaction, as individuals exchange information. Negotiating meaning involves uncovering hidden cultural assumptions, becoming aware of how culture is shaping perceptions, expectations, and behaviors for all parties involved. Friedman and Antal (2005) suggest that to negotiate meaning effectively individuals must engage in two behaviors: inquiry and advocacy. Inquiry refers to exploring and questioning one's own reasoning and the reasoning of others. In other words, individuals strive to create and accept a new, common meaning, by asking the following questions: How do I/you perceive the situation? What do I/you wish to achieve in this situation? Which actions am I/are you taking to achieve this goal?

Inquiry requires suspending judgment, letting go of a previous understanding, and tolerating uncertainty until a new understanding may be created. Advocacy refers to expressing and standing for what one thinks and desires. Advocacy suggests stating clearly what you think and want, and explaining the reasoning behind your view. When individuals combine inquiry with advocacy they share information about their cultural assumptions, the meanings they associate with the issue, and the reasoning for their thinking. This sharing of assumptions and interpretations creates the basis for a new, mutually acceptable meaning to emerge.

Engaging in inquiry and advocacy is challenging because it requires uncovering our own perceptions, exposing ourselves, being open to listen to the other's perception, and being willing to give up the safety of our own previous interpretations in order for a new culture-free interpretation to emerge. To make matters worse, cultural-based preferences also influence how individuals may go about doing this. For example, in some cultures, individuals prefer to express themselves using open and direct communication, whereas in other cultures individuals are likely to share their assumptions indirectly, making it difficult for direct communicators to fully understand (Hall 1959, 1981, 1990). Some indirect communicators may even feel uncomfortable with direct questioning of their assumptions, which could potentially close communication even further. Additionally, cultural-based preferences may suggest circumstances in which inquiry and advocacy are more likely to be successful. In some cultures it may be during formal meetings, in other cultures it may be late at night over drinks, still in others it may be through informal one-on-one conversations.



Therefore, to negotiate meaning, individuals must gather information in several different ways, relying on the context, body language, subtle cues, and messages. These abilities rely heavily on learning skills associated with observation and reflection: information gathering and analysis (Yamazaki and Kayes, 2004). Information gathering refers to the ability to collect information through various means in order to understand the point of view of others. Competent managers gather information by observing context, body language, face expression, and other behavioral cues, listening to what is being communicated, and asking questions when appropriate, and in a way that is appropriate. Information analysis refers to the ability to interpret this information in light of what is being discussed, the people involved, and the context in which the interaction is happening.

In summary, negotiating meaning requires the ability to explore what lies under the surface of the cultural iceberg by asking questions when appropriate, observing others, testing assumptions, and stretching frames of reference. It requires the ability to gather and analyze information from various sources.

### **3. Negotiating New Rules**

Once individuals agree on acceptable identities and meanings, they need to focus their attention on developing or *negotiating new rules* that will inform their relationship in the future. These rules are akin to theories of action (Argyris, 1995) and overtime creates a common context. For instance, they need to establish rules about acceptable behaviors regarding time. How late is too late? Managers may agree that, for instance, 15 minutes is not considered late, but that further delays should be avoided—or at a minimum deserve an apology. Alternatively, they may agree on a more clear specification of time when making appointments: 8:00 AM Mexican time, means that delays are expected, while 8:00 AM American time means that punctuality is expected. These rules should cover the most important cultural obstacles to the success of the relationship, whether they are about time, use of titles, style of communication, or any other thing.

Over time, these rules will equate to a new shared culture (Casmir, 1992; Klimoski and Mohammed, 1994; Adler, 1991; Earley and Mosakowski, 2000) for the individuals involved. Sometimes, this culture is a combination of the several cultures involved, sometimes it is based on an overlapping culture such as the organizational,

functional, or professional cultures. At other times, it is possible to create a culture that is unlike any other, but that is acceptable to all. Finally, there are times in which one of the parties will embrace the other's cultural rules, and adopt the other's culture as their own. This last scenario is more common when one of the parties has been exposed to the other's culture for a long time and can adapt. To develop new rules, managers must develop the learning skills associated with integration and transformation of information (Kayes, 2002; Yamazaki and Kayes, 2004).

Integration of information refers to the ability to assimilate all the information gathered in the negotiating meaning stage into a coherent theory of action. For example, you noticed that your counterpart looked annoyed when you answered the phone during a meeting, you noticed that he turned his cell phone off, and you noticed that he signaled to the secretary that he should not be interrupted. You integrate all these disparate pieces of information into one theory – your counterpart does not appreciate interruptions.

Transformation of information refers to creating a theory of action based on the information you have. Continuing with the interruption example, you transform your theory about the other in a theory about what you should do – you should avoid interruptions that are not important and always apologize for any interruption that might occur. As these behaviors take place, rules are adjusted and fine-tuned.

In summary, to develop new rules, or common theories of action, managers need to develop the analytical skills to integrate and transform information.

#### **4. Negotiating New Behaviors**

Finally, once individuals develop new theories of action and agree on a common set of cultural rules to guide the interaction, they need to complete the learning loop by *negotiating new behaviors*. For example, if the negotiated rule is that delays of more than 15 minutes should be avoided, you must learn to engage in a new set of behaviors that will allow you to control time, prioritize things differently, and arrive on time. Or, perhaps the new rule suggests that direct communication should be avoided, in which case you will need to learn to engage in a communication style that is more indirect, subtle, and diplomatic.

Engaging in new behaviors requires high levels of behavioral flexibility; that is, the ability of engaging in different behaviors, being able to switch styles, and accomplish things in more than one way (Thomas, 2006). For some individuals it is easy to engage in some behaviors but not others (Kolb, 1976; Kolb and Kolb, 2005). Successful managers are able to recognize which behaviors are challenging for them, and compensate with other behaviors. For instance, for some individuals it is very difficult to communicate indirectly. They recognize this limitation and, to compensate for it, search for opportunities to discuss issues one-on-one - where embarrassment is avoided - and preface their direct statements with an apology.

Additionally, competent managers need to be mindful of themselves, the other, and the interaction (Thomas, 2006; Thomas and Inkson, 2004). In other words, they are constantly paying attention to what they are feeling and doing, what the other is doing, and how the other reacts to what they say and do. In the process of learning about the other and testing ways to interact, individuals are aware of their own behavior and the effect of their behavior on others.

In summary, negotiating behaviors implies the ability to engage in new behaviors that are consistent with negotiated rules, meanings, and identities. It also implies constant mindfulness, or attention, to what is happening in the interaction.

### **Putting it all together: Learning cultures on the fly**

Dealing with foreign partners and competitors is increasingly unavoidable. As the examples throughout this paper suggest, the realities of today's global environment imply that managers often need to do business in several countries and deal with several cultures simultaneously. While the examples in this paper may suggest easy solutions—e.g., when dealing with Spaniards, know they will be late—the reality of intercultural encounters is considerably more complex for several reasons: First, individuals are often influenced by multiple cultures—national, regional, organizational, functional, and professional (Schneider and Barsoux, 1997; Friedman and Berthoin Antal, 2005). Second, in no country are the people monolithic in their beliefs, values, and behaviors. People are different, despite having the same country of origin. Third, our business counterparts are also learning how to deal with foreigners and may deal with us in ways that are not typical of their own culture. And finally, culture itself is very complex and may seem paradoxical for an outsider (Bird and

Osland, 2003). For this reason, simplistic categorization of cultures may be helpful explanations of behavior, or good first guess (Adler, 2002) but they are not good predictors.

To succeed in such a reality, managers are encouraged to develop learning skills that will allow them to learn how to succeed in each interaction by uncovering cultural assumptions and learning how to deal with them. These learning skills are summarized in Figure 4.

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The manager in the opening example has to deal in one day with four or five different cultures. It would be difficult for her to acquire fluency in these cultures, while seating in her office in Bangalore. Instead, she needs to develop learning skills that will compensate for cultural knowledge gaps, helping her to negotiate her interactions.

We have argued that an intercultural interaction involves four types of negotiation relating to identities, meaning, rules, and behaviors. The negotiation of identities relies on strong self-awareness and empathy, so the emotional experience is managed and the learning experience can proceed. The negotiation of meaning relies on information gathering and analysis, which uncovers a new basis of information from which new meanings can be created. The negotiation of rules relies on individual's ability to integrate and transform information into new theories of action. Finally the negotiation of behaviors, rely on behavioral flexibility and mindfulness where managers are able to engage in alternative behaviors, accordingly to the situation.

The prospects of dealing with others from different cultural backgrounds are very challenging, but are also potentially very rewarding. Engaging with others brings the possibility of learning more about ourselves, discovering new ways of doing things, and finding creative solutions to both new problems and old. In this pursuit, learning plays a significant—and often underappreciated—role.

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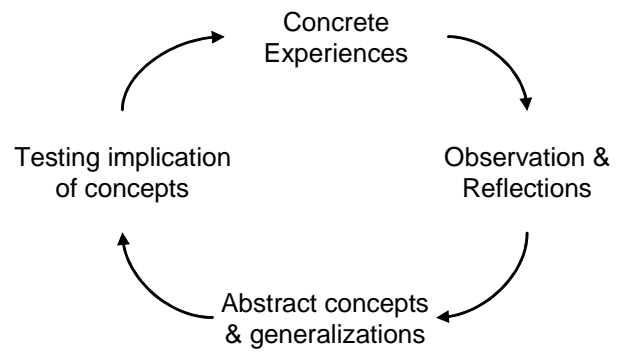
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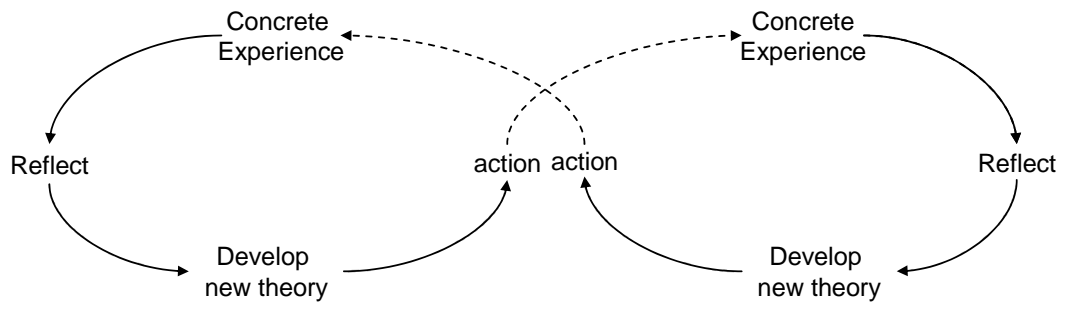
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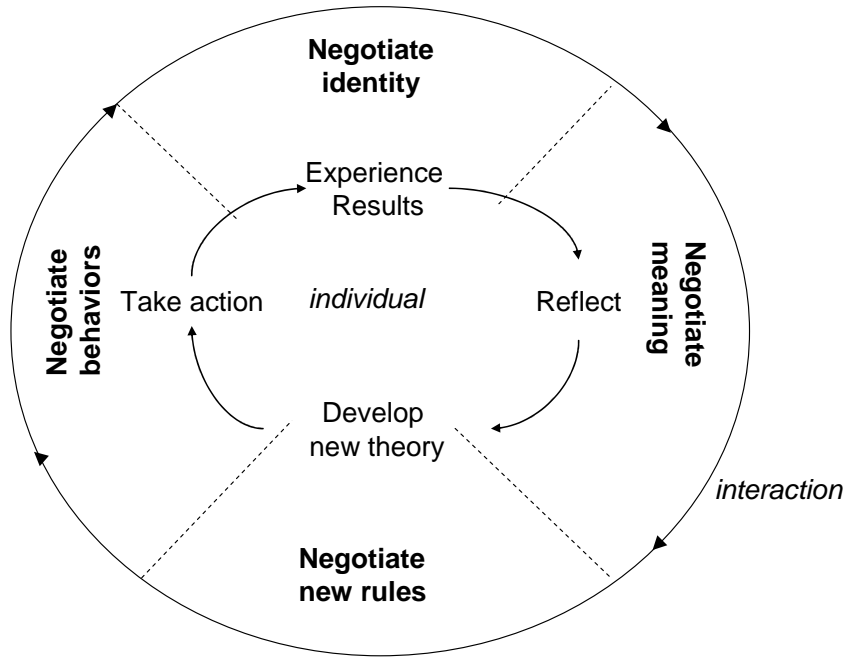
**FIGURE 1**



**FIGURE 2**



**FIGURE 3**



**FIGURE 4**

