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Cross-Cultural Collaborative Change: Discovering Common Ground

We can live together without agreeing on what the values are that make it good to live together; we can agree about what to do in most cases, without agreeing about why it is right.

---Kwame Anthony Appiah.¹

Introduction

Culture is the entirety of explicit and implicit rules that help us act in an accepted or familiar way.² It is about how we are used to doing things, in our family, organization, our country, or our part of the world. The whole-system methods have been designed to be as non-discriminating as possible. They are cross-cultural by nature, and there is evidence that they can work in every culture on every continent provided that they are applied in the right way.³ This chapter is about how the right way is viewed differently in different cultures. We will explore eight dimensions of culture as developed by Erin Meyer,⁴ and connect them to the basic principles and general success factors of whole-system collaborative change, derived from practice-based research. This will sharpen your insight into the basic principles for every trajectory for collaborative change and how the process can be adapted before, during and after an event when working cross-culturally.

Why pay specific attention to culture?

“Of course it is important to see people as individuals, no matter their cultural origins. We are all the same, we are all different. Culture does matter. Cultural patterns of behavior and belief frequently impact our perceptions (what we see), cognitions (what we think), and actions (what we do).” (Erin Meyer)

The Change Handbook provides a wealth of methods for engaging whole systems of stakeholders for change. Engaging the whole system is by definition cross-cultural. The ‘system’ is defined by a diversity of stakeholders, with people from different levels of power, disciplines, and experience. The whole-system methods have built-in mechanisms to enable all stakeholders to work constructively. Yet the way of working before, during, and after the whole-system events has to be adapted to the specific needs of participants, to enable them to become engaged. Some of these needs can be *personal*, others are defined by *cultural* values.

Culture is about what we value, it determines what is familiar and acceptable in a family, organization, region, or country. When something feels familiar, you can easily see the positive aspects; when something is unfamiliar, we tend to see the negative aspects. Talking about culture is like talking about your family. Most of us have a deep protective instinct for the culture we consider our own, and though we may criticize it bitterly ourselves, we can become easily incensed if someone from outside the culture dares to do so⁵. We may call it stereotyping or labeling, while forgetting that we view the world through our own cultural lens and judge things accordingly. Knowing more about the underlying values of whole system

methods and more insight in our own cultural values will help us as practitioners of whole system collaborative change.

The eight dimensions of culture

Erin Meyer developed eight scales for mapping cultures, based on extensive research. Each scale sets a range for what is valued as good behavior regarding a dimension of working and organizing. In her book “*The Culture Map*”, she focuses on mapping the cultures of countries, but in practice the values of the cultural dimensions will also serve you as a practitioner not working on an international level. Figure 1 presents an overview of the eight cultural dimensions, with the scores for seven countries as examples. It must be emphasized that mapping is not to be used for stereotyping countries or absolute positions. The cultural *relativity* is important: where does a country (or region or another level of organization) fall on the scale *compared to your own culture*? We are often blind to our own culture, like fish that can’t see the water they swim in. It is not about how we see *ourselves*, but how *others* see us compared to their culture. This results in two important rules for working cross-culturally: be aware of possible cultural differences, and be aware of your own cultural preferences. Of course there is much internal variety on every level

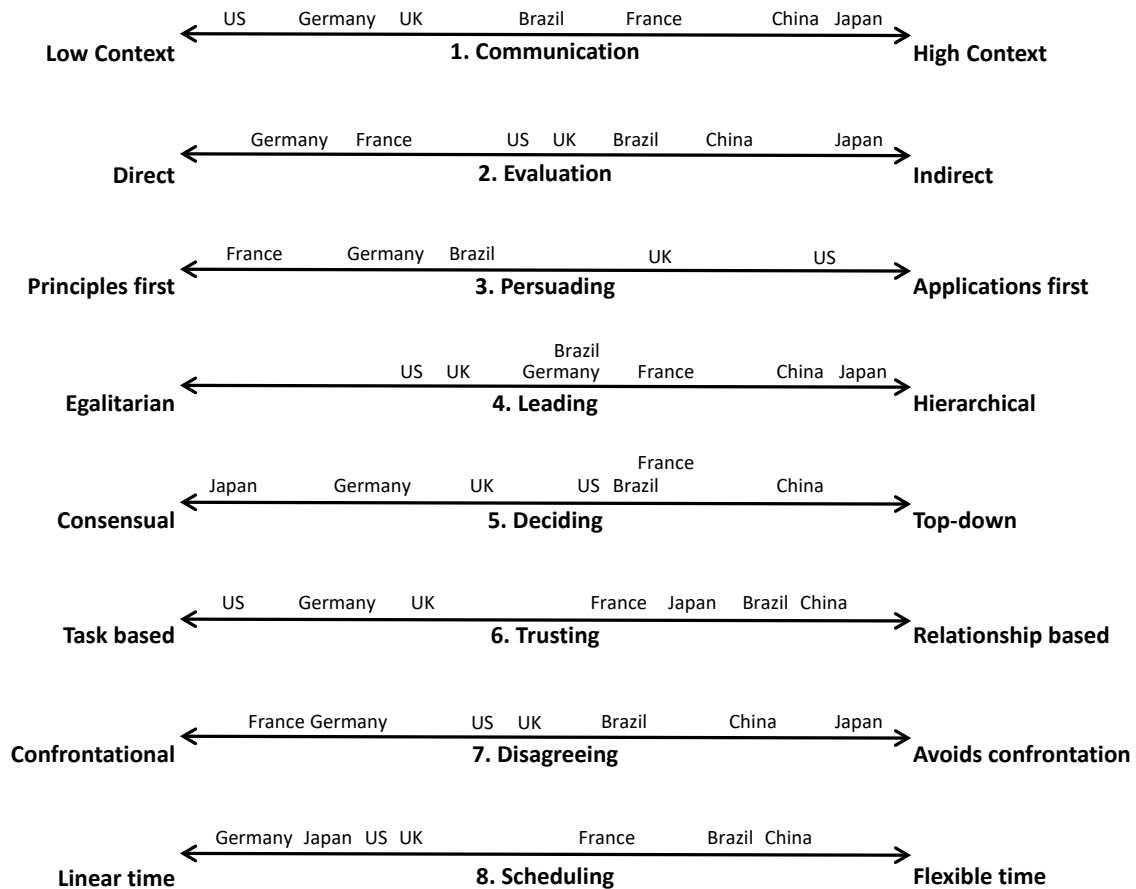


Figure 1: Eight dimensions of culture and how seven countries fall on every scale

Cultural dimensions and built-in principles for WSCC

The Introduction of this book contains a description of the essential fundamentals for all whole-system methods. Change is a process, and the events are part of the whole-system collaborative change approach (for practical reasons, abbreviated as ‘WSCC’ several times in this chapter). It is also known as the Large Scale Interventions approach. Figure 2 shows a set of basic assumptions underlying WSCC principles, and also how these principles produce a web of working elements⁶. These elements form the general ‘built-in’ success factors of the

change process. The more you have to compromise on these elements, the lower the yield will be.

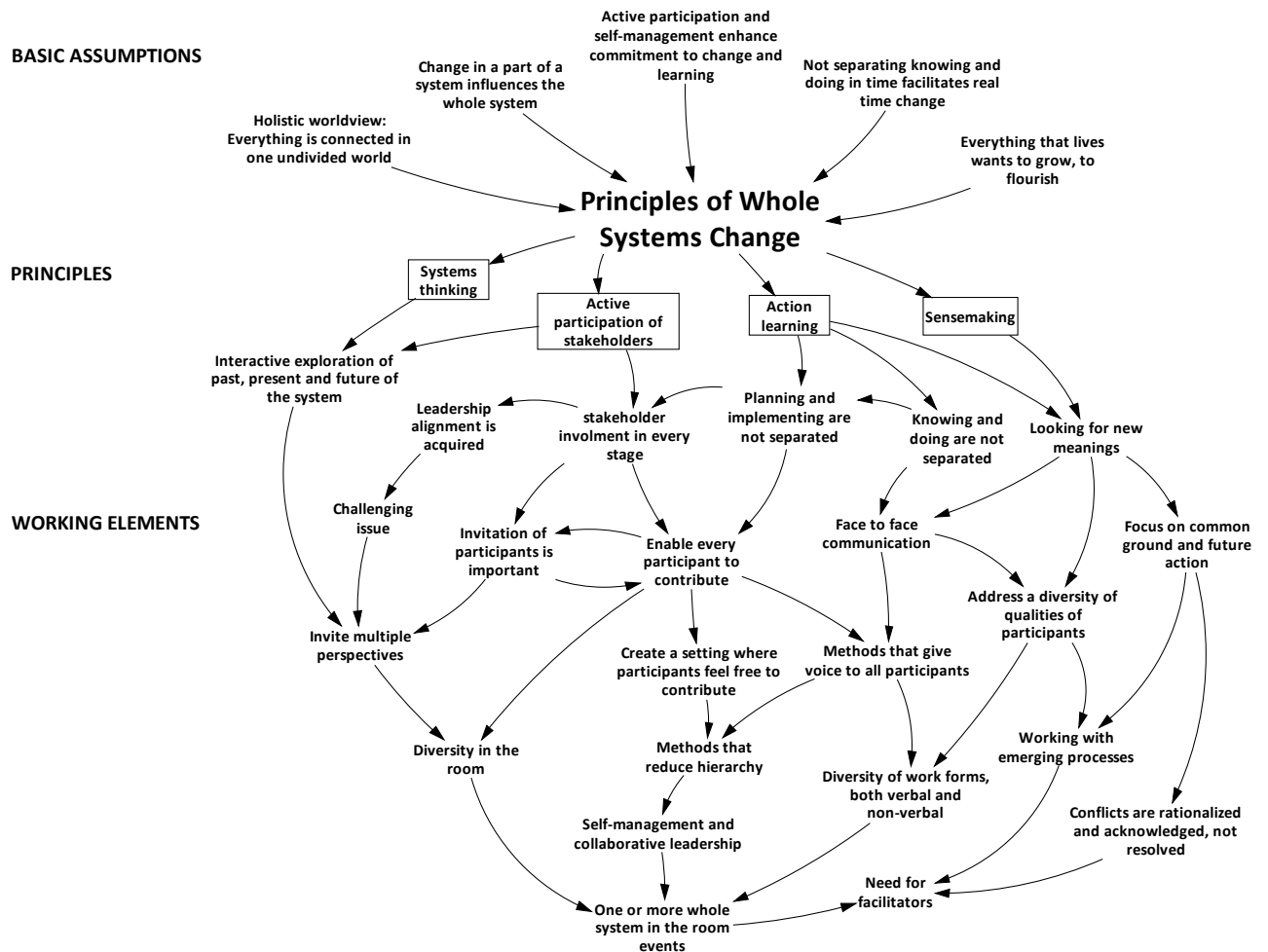


Figure 2: How principles of Whole-Systems Change produce the working elements of the process

We will first describe briefly the eight cultural dimensions developed by Erin Meyer and how they relate to the values and basic built-in principles of whole-system change derived from research by Tonnie van der Zouwen. The next section contains a table with more details of

what can be done before, during, and after events in the bigger change process to meet specific cultural needs as best as possible.

1. Communication scale: Low context - High context

In low-context cultures, like the US, good communication is precise, simple, and clear. In high-context cultures, like China, you have to know the context to get the message.

Sophisticated, nuanced messages are valued. They require a shared understanding of the context, and you have to read between the lines. A rule of thumb is: The longer the shared history of a country or organization and the higher the homogeneity, the more high-context and relationship-oriented the culture is.

In whole-system change, we work with low-context communication. All procedures have to be simple and very clear, so everyone who wants to will be able to contribute. We try to address as many qualities of people as possible: what cannot be put into words may be expressed in other forms. Use a variety of work forms of both verbal and nonverbal communication: talk, writing, signs, touch, silence, movement, music, drawing, play.

2. Evaluation scale: Direct – Indirect negative feedback

People from all cultures believe in ‘constructive criticism’. Yet what is constructive in one culture may be viewed as destructive in another. In direct-feedback cultures, criticism is given frankly, honestly, and even in front of a group. Often absolute descriptions such as ‘totally inappropriate, completely unprofessional’ are used. In cultures at the other end of the scale, indirect negative feedback is valued. Criticism is given softly, diplomatically, using softening

words like ‘sort of inappropriate, slightly unprofessional’. Indirect negative feedback cultures give all feedback individually, never in front of a group. The feedback is given slowly, over a period of time. Use food and drink to blur an unpleasant message. Mention the good parts and leave out the bad. When you don’t know how to give your feedback, ask someone who understands the subtle rules that separate what’s appropriately frank from what is highly insensitive⁷. A direct-feedback culture often goes together with low-context communication and vice versa, but not always. For example, Israel appreciates direct feedback and high-context communication. The US values medium-direct feedback and low-context communication.

In WSCC, no direct negative feedback is given in the whole-system event. We don’t evaluate individuals or contributions, only systems, procedures, and collective results. For leaders, evaluating structures may feel as personal criticism. That is why as facilitators we try to relate evaluations to the context of the whole system and invite participants to do the evaluating.

3. Persuading scale: Principles first - Applications first

Principles-first cultures use holistic thinking, with the focus on connections. Applications-first cultures use specific thinking, with the focus on the parts, the details. Western philosophy in general uses specific thinking, implying that you can remove an item from its environment and analyze it separately. Eastern philosophy uses holistic thinking. With the focus on interdependencies and interconnectedness, an item can never be analyzed without its environment. When you want to persuade people from an applications-first culture, show what could happen, *how* it works, and follow inductive reasoning to the principles. With people

from a principles-first culture, start with the principles, explain *why* this will work, and follow deductive reasoning to the applications. When working cross-culturally, be patient and flexible. Try to understand and adapt to one another's behaviors.

In WSCC, holistic thinking is invited. This can be difficult for people educated in the Western specific way of thinking, with a focus on separate details. Provide both the big picture and the details.

4. Leading scale: Egalitarian - Hierarchical

This scale is about leading and power distance, about how much respect and deference is shown to an authority figure. In egalitarian cultures, the ideal distance between the boss and a subordinate is *relatively* low. Communication can skip hierarchical lines. In cultures at the hierarchical end of the scale, the ideal distance between the boss and a subordinate is high. Status is important. Communication follows hierarchical lines, and level hopping is not allowed. Just remember that it is all about cultural *relativity*. In a specific organization, the rules regarding hierarchy can be totally different from the general country culture, and unwritten rules can prevent people from admitting that their culture is relatively hierarchical. So be very careful with your assumptions about hierarchy.

In WSCC, we try to create a setting that reduces hierarchy, and we use procedures that promote distributed leadership and self-management. Thus, everyone who wants to can contribute. Facilitation is done in a 'hands-off' mode; we don't address behavior directly ('hands-on', as in training, therapy, coaching), but create spaces and structures that invite new

behavior. Nevertheless, participants have to feel comfortable with how respect is paid to high-status people, and special attention may be needed. If you sense that leaders are not willing to share any power, collaborative change is not the right approach.

5. Deciding scale: Consensual – Top-down

In consensual cultures, decisions are made in groups through unanimous agreement.

Consensual decision-making takes time, It delivers a decision with a capital 'D', The consensus process builds support and shared responsibility, so implementation can go faster, but it is time-consuming and the decision is not flexible for adaptation. In Top-down cultures, decisions are made by individuals, mostly in the top management. Top-down decision-making is quick. It delivers a decision with a lowercase 'd', often flexible for adaptation, but it may take longer to create support for implementation. Most cultures that fall as egalitarian on the leading scale also believe in consensual decision-making, and vice versa. But not all. The US values a more top-down approach to decision-making combined with an egalitarian ethos. Germany combines a more consensus decision-making culture with a hierarchical leading style. Japan values consensual decision-making per level and hierarchical leading.

In WSCC, we strive for *consent*, a good enough level of agreement, as a common ground for action. Decision-making is not top-down or bottom-up, but involves the whole system of stakeholders. The boundaries of the playing field are discussed with the formal decision-makers beforehand. Expectation management is important, and when setting the boundaries of the playing field, the no-go areas must be made clear upfront.

6. Trusting scale: Task based – Relationship based

In task-based cultures, trust is built through task-based activities. Head (thinking) and heart (feeling) can be separated. In relationship-based cultures, trust is built through affection in social activities like sharing meals, drinks, visits. Heart and head are connected. Task-based relationships are built and broken easily. Affection-based relationships are built slowly and not dropped easily. In some countries, for instance China, business relationships ARE personal relationships. Investing time in building relationships is especially important in countries with less reliable legal systems. Personal relationships form your contract for the process in hand, and will also save you time on future projects. Trust is like insurance: It's an investment you need to make upfront, before the need arises⁸.

WSCC is task-based. In a whole-system event, participants often meet each other for the first time. Trust is built by working together on a task they all feel passionate to accomplish. Commitment to the task can be built by developing personal connections in the invitation process and getting the right people in the room. If possible, choose long enough meetings allowing people to stay over for two nights (or more), so there will be time for social activities to build personal relationships.

To give a personal example of this dimension: Coming from the Netherlands, a very task-based culture, I tend to get right to the point. What I learned from my Israeli colleague Tova Averbuch is that I have to start my emails with a few sentences to make a personal connection. I now do so, but it still feels a bit unnatural for me. Why can't we get to the point right away?

7. Disagreeing scale: Confrontational – Avoids confrontation

In confrontational cultures, debate and open disagreement are positive, people love debate.

Disagreement can be seen as a valuable intellectual exercise, and the opinion is separated from the person. In a culture that Avoids confrontation, harmony and collective face are valued.

Open disagreement is avoided, and people hate debate. A confrontation feels like disapproval not only of my idea, but also of me personally, implying loss of face for me and also for my group.

In WSCC, debate is avoided. Conflicts are rationalized and acknowledged, not resolved. If necessary, we agree to disagree. Participants are invited to look for common ground for future action, working on a shared purpose. Participating and contributing are done voluntarily; no one has to stand out who does not want to.

8. Scheduling scale: Linear time - Flexible time

In a linear-time culture, scheduling is done by the clock. Promptness and good organization are valued over flexibility. For those on linear time, a meeting follows a single, straight time line. Managing should be done one thing at a time and in a proper order. Any behavior that distracts from the predefined task at hand is not appreciated. In a flexible-time culture, scheduling is done by 'event'. Adaptability is valued over prompt organization. The agenda of a meeting is like the trunk of a tree. The meeting will branch off from the trunk, subgroups may form, growing in unpredictable ways. Many things are managed at the same time. Both sides of the scale think the other side is inefficient and stressful. Again, remember that the

position on the scale should be considered in *relative* terms. The Germans may complain about the lack of punctuality of the French, while the Chinese may feel the French are rigid with their schedules. See also the position of Germany, France, and China on the Scheduling scale in figure 1.

In WSCC, scheduling is discussed in the planning group, to make a good match between the programming and the needs of stakeholders. In general, most whole-system methods will work when you keep time and are clear about why. Ask every participant to become a timekeeper.

Matching the change process to cultural values

Cultural relativity

Where a given country (or other level of organization) falls on the scale matters less than where two cultures fall relative to one another. Is another culture positioned to the right or to the left on the scale in figure 1 compared to yours? Try to step in without judgement. The more unfamiliar a culture is to us, the more difficult this will be. Try to find a guide in this unknown territory. In any case, an open attitude is required. Avoid stereotyping such as Eastern and Western world. Notice, for example, the differences between Japan and China on the scheduling scale. While they are both relationship-based and prefer high-context communication, Japan is at the consensual end of the deciding scale and on linear time of the scheduling scale. Don't jump to conclusions based on one cultural dimension, take all eight dimensions into account. Although you can never know all details of all cultures, table 1 offers

an overview with some practical guidelines. Navigate with curiosity by asking humble questions when you don't know what to do.

Adapting the change process before, during, and after an event

Table 1 provides a summary of the eight cultural dimensions and how they relate to the built-in values and working elements of WSCC. For every dimension, there are suggestions for adapting the change process to meet cultural needs before, after, and during a whole-system event. With special thanks to Sandra Janoff, Marvin Weisbord, and Erin Meyer, as the table draws heavily on their work.

Table 1: Culture Dimensions and applying Whole-System Collaborative Change (WSCC)

| Culture Dimensions and built-in WSCC principles | Before and after a whole-system event: Work with client, planning group, invitation process | During a whole-system event: Design and facilitation |
|--|---|--|
| <p>1. COMMUNICATION SCALE</p> <p><u>Low Context</u> <u>High Context</u> Precise, simple, clear Sophisticated, nuanced, layered</p> <p>WSCC working elements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low-context communication in all procedures, so everyone can get the message • Develop together a clear process of working together | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain why you are doing things • Multicultural planning team • Take the blame yourself for people not getting the message • Ask for clarification: open-ended questions and listen carefully • Make infographics • Explore the past together, where are we coming from? What are the historical tensions between cultures? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Natives' as co-facilitator • Explain the way of working, setting clear rules of the game • Be sure that everyone understands what you mean • No long presentations • Take time to understand each other • Don't use jokes, humor often does not translate well to other cultures |
| <p>2. EVALUATION SCALE What is polite?</p> <p><u>Direct</u> <u>Indirect</u> Negative feedback is given frankly, honestly Negative feedback is given softly, diplomatically</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Test the waters before speaking up • When you don't know what to do, don't try to do like them, ask someone who might know • Invest time and energy in building good relationships | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learn to know your 'weak spot' as a facilitator, practice containing anxiety • Let participants be responsible for evaluation |

| Culture Dimensions and built-in WSCC principles | Before and after a whole-system event: Work with client, planning group, invitation process | During a whole-system event: Design and facilitation | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|--|----------------|----------------|-------------------|-------------------|----------------------|------------------|--|---|
| <p>WSCC working elements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accept people as they are, not as you wish them to be • The topic is important for stakeholders, they feel passionate about it | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be careful with giving negative feedback in the planning team <p>For cultures with High context combined with Indirect feedback, blurring the message is necessary:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give all feedback individually, never in front of a group • Give feedback slowly, over a period of time • Use food and drinks to blur an unpleasant message • Express the good and leave out the bad | | | | | | | | | |
| <p>3. PERSUADING SCALE</p> <table border="0"> <tr> <td><u>Principles first</u></td> <td><u>Applications first</u></td> </tr> <tr> <td>(Why it works)</td> <td>(How it works)</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Holistic thinking</td> <td>Specific thinking</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Focus on connections</td> <td>Focus on details</td> </tr> </table> | <u>Principles first</u> | <u>Applications first</u> | (Why it works) | (How it works) | Holistic thinking | Specific thinking | Focus on connections | Focus on details | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide big picture AND details, work with large timelines and/or mind maps • When sending emails: Start with connecting, make a personal intermezzo, and be clear on procedures, use low-context communication • Build awareness of differences by explaining the persuading scale • Look for a 'cultural bridge', people who have significant experience in different cultures • With high-status clients: start with their preference for Why or How • In mixed groups: cycle back and forth between theoretical principles and practical examples • Do a pilot, a try-out, involve decision-makers and people with influence • Call it an experiment • Say NO to conditions where you are not likely to succeed; offer an alternative that meets the principles better • Don't promise more than you can deliver • What tangible results might there be? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Think about the objective: for simple speed and efficiency, pick people who are good at details. For creativity, pick people who are good at seeing the bigger picture • Explore the whole, provide both details and the big picture |
| <u>Principles first</u> | <u>Applications first</u> | | | | | | | | | |
| (Why it works) | (How it works) | | | | | | | | | |
| Holistic thinking | Specific thinking | | | | | | | | | |
| Focus on connections | Focus on details | | | | | | | | | |
| <p>WSCC working elements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A leader with an itch to scratch is a condition for success • Holistic thinking is invited • Acknowledge that people learn differently • Manage expectations regarding the purpose and nature of the process • Experiencing how it works is the most effective way, presenting or talking about it does not work • Invite systems thinking and interconnectedness | | | | | | | | | | |
| <p>4. LEADING SCALE</p> <p>How much respect do leaders want?</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conversations with client and planning group: frame no-go areas | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pay proper respect to high-status people; should something formal be done first? | | | | | | | | |

| Culture Dimensions and built-in WSCC principles | Before and after a whole-system event: Work with client, planning group, invitation process | During a whole-system event: Design and facilitation |
|--|---|--|
| <p><u>Egalitarian</u> <u>Hierarchical</u></p> <p>Allows level hopping No level hopping</p> <p>Relatively low power distance High power distance</p> <p>Relatively low respect for status High respect for status</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Match status levels. Preliminary workshops for design team, management team, or logistic team might be needed • Develop ownership with as many stakeholders as possible • Use symbols in venue and work forms that show respect for status and culture • What message do the location, room setup, and atmosphere convey? Create a safe and comfortable environment for everyone • Match the pace of the process, take it slowly or speed up • If needed, take small steps in guiding people with little power to contribute, for example with coaching sessions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opening by the ‘champion’, the highest boss or authority as sponsor of the process • Start with building connections, getting to know each other in small groups • Give people time to express themselves, to own the situation and take responsibility • As a facilitator, be as invisible as possible, so participants can do more • Agree on a dress code |
| <p>WSCC working elements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a setting that reduces hierarchy and promotes distributed leadership and self-management • Conduct with humility and without judgement • Let people be responsible | | |
| <p>5. DECIDING SCALE</p> <p>Who decides and when?</p> <p><u>Consensual</u> <u>Top-down</u></p> <p>Collective decisions Decisions by the top</p> <p>Commitment is valued, takes time, not open for adaptation Fast, often flexible for adaptation</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss and agree upon a process of decision-making • Discuss the boundaries of the playing field with decision-makers • Create a common language: Is it a decision with a small ‘d’ (open for adaptation) or with a big ‘D’ (not open for adaptation) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be clear about the playing field and the process of decision-making • Create a common language • Strive for consent, a good enough level of agreement for action • Make a list of unsolved issues, what we agree to disagree on |
| <p>WSCC working elements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look for common ground, consent: good enough to continue productively • Frame the playing field clearly • Get everybody on the same page before asking to problem solve or decide | | |
| <p>6. TRUSTING SCALE</p> <p><u>Task-based</u> <u>Relationship-based</u></p> <p>Head and heart separated Head and heart connected</p> <p>Trust built through Trust built through</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invitation process: Weaving a web of relationships before the event • Discuss the invitation strategy with the planning group • Choose communication media wisely. For task-based, all are okay; for relationship- | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For task-based facilitators hosting more relationship-based cultures: put more time and effort into organizing meals • Keep the task front and center, looking for common ground for future action • Strive for a design with ‘sleeping twice’, |

| Culture Dimensions and built-in WSCC principles | Before and after a whole-system event: Work with client, planning group, invitation process | During a whole-system event: Design and facilitation |
|---|---|---|
| <p>task activities social activities</p> <p>WSCC working elements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Holistic approach: Invite head, heart, hands, and soul • Task-based process with long enough meetings to build relationships; think about the amount of time for social activities around the task | <p>based, choose face to face or ask for an introduction by a mutual friend</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Match people to the task • Discuss in the planning group how intensive and how long the program for the day should be • Build both relationship- and task-based trust. Invest time in building affective relationships, look for common interests • Translate what you call a method or action to culture. For example: A World Café or a Camp Fire or a Tapas Bar? • Don't underestimate logistics, what it takes for participants to travel to another country, for housing, meals, materials, translation, reporting, etc. | <p>take time for meals and spending the evening together</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When in trouble: make a circle and talk, use sub-grouping techniques; look for what we share and acknowledge our differences |
| <p>7. DISAGREEING SCALE</p> <p><u>Confrontational</u> <u>Avoids confrontation</u> Debate and open disagreement are valued Harmony and collective face are valued</p> <p>WSCC working elements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Debate is avoided in WSCC, we agree to disagree; differences are acknowledged, not solved • As a facilitator you don't debate • Participating and contributing are voluntary, no one has to stand out if he or she does not want to | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are you the right person to hold the space or should someone more indigenous do so? • Conduct meetings before the event, make a casual call, schedule pre-meetings • Be explicit about your own culture and style regarding disagreement • Say: Let me play devil's advocate • Adjust your language, avoid upgraders (totally), employ downgraders (sort of) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Separate the person from the contribution. Use work forms where participants can contribute anonymously • People have the right to say NO, to hide their hidden agendas • Deflect direct attacks, for instance by asking 'who else thinks.....' • At the beginning: Agree on the rules for what participants do and what facilitators do |
| <p>8. SCHEDULING SCALE</p> <p><u>Linear time</u> <u>Flexible time</u> Schedule by the clock Schedule by 'events' Promptness and good organization are valued Adaptability is valued</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be flexible, be aware of what you are asking from people, considering their values regarding time and planning • Discuss in the planning group how to deal with time • Take extra time for meetings, use extra time not as waiting time but for building relationships | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If possible schedule a three-day meeting and 'sleep twice', to provide enough soaking time and informal meetings. • In flexible-time cultures: Meetings with open space for flexibility, allow for unexpected things to happen • In mixed cultures: Keep time, be clear about why, and ask every participant to |

| Culture Dimensions and built-in WSCC principles | Before and after a whole-system event: Work with client, planning group, invitation process | During a whole-system event: Design and facilitation |
|---|---|--|
| Managing one thing at a time Managing many things at the same time | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learn style switching, work with open-space technique for agenda setting and allow for unexpected things to happen | become a timekeeper |
| WSCC working elements: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be explicit in how we deal with time, establish a clear and explicit way of working | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learn to understand what works best in a specific culture. Is it polite to come on time for a meeting, or is it polite to come 15 min. or more later to let the host relax and have everything ready? • Try to match tasks with culture. Many deadlines? People from a linear-time culture. Client with many changes? People from a flexible-time culture. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with a design team during the event and discuss rescheduling; invite participants to the design team meetings |

Concluding remarks: Be prepared to be surprised

“It takes a collective journey, so it takes time to build trust and get to know each other, both differences and sameness. Then we will discover that we share more than we are different.”

(Kwame Anthony Appiah)

Of course, there is much more to say about culture and whole-system change. We conclude this chapter with some recommendations.

General pillars for cross-cultural collaborative change

Pillars of WSCC that people of all cultures can share are the greater purpose, the holistic view, and the hands-off methodology that provides a common language and stimulates leadership.

Good advice was given by Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff: Control what you can

(conditions), let go of what you cannot control (people). Create a container for good work:

Make people feel welcomed, appreciated, comfortable. Focus on building the process, not the

event. Firstly, ninety percent of success is in the preparation of an event. Secondly, the

container falls apart after an event. So the strength of whole-system change is also its

weakness. Parallel learning structures will have to be put in place somehow to make the change process sustainable, whether before, during, or directly after the event (see also Chapter 4).

Humble inquiry

You can never learn all the codes of all cultures, so how do you navigate? With curiosity and humble inquiry, the gentle art of looking and asking instead of telling⁹. When you feel irritated, try to dig under the surface and find out what the underlying values are by asking humble and simple questions. Learn to know your own values and learn to deal with your personal ‘weak spot’ as facilitator. Ask yourself: “What makes me highly nervous or irritated?” and build your capacity in containing anxiety in that weak spot (see also Chapter 3).

Manage expectations, discuss the culture scales

Be clear about the playing field and the rules of the game. When working cross-culturally, discuss the culture scales and simply explain what you are doing as a facilitator and why. It is impossible to be familiar with all cultural differences and sensitivities.

Don’t do it alone

You don’t have to do it alone. Work with a planning team that is a micro-cosmos of the cultures involved. Look for cultural bridges, people with experience in several cultures. Work with design team meetings *during* the event; invite participants to join and discuss how you are doing and what needs to be adapted.

Keep it simple

A final thought I would like to share: “*What role are we giving ourselves by turning simple things like talking, meeting and doing valuable things together into expert techniques with*

complex names?.” (Margaret Wheatley). In a highly multi-cultural system, keep it simple and use a method that has proven itself worldwide. Choose either an open and flexible form with minimal structure and minimal rules, such as Open Space Technology or World Café, or a very structured method with very clear, pre-set rules, such as Future Search.

Cultural diversity brings difficulties, but also great richness when handled with care.

More Information

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About the Author

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Personal Bookshelf

Cornelis, Arnold. *Logica van het gevoel: Stabiliteitslagen in de cultuur als nesteling der*

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The Shaw Shank Redemption. Film directed by Frank Darabont, 1994.

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These resources developed and supported my philosophy of life that everything that lives wants to grow and flourish, and that all things are connected (Cornelis, Maturana & Varela). It made me realise that when we do research, we carve out a piece of reality and view it through our own lens (Erlandson, Weisbord, De Waal). Thus, all boundaries and categories are artificial: between theory and practice, between body, mind, and soul (Cornelis, Maturana and Varela), even between animals and humans (De Waal).

For my personal development, I am inspired by stories about how people grow and flourish despite difficult circumstances. How they ‘get busy living instead of dying’ when in prison (Shaw Shank), sick (Remen), or lost in another world (Le Guin). I found keys to sustainable development in awareness of the need to think in terms of eco-systems (Scharmer and Kaufer) and follow in the logic of our feelings (Cornelis). My main insight: The left hand of darkness is light, the two are one (Le Guin).

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¹ Kwame A. Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 71.

² Pellegrino Riccardi “Cross cultural communication”, TEDx Talk October 21, 2014 video on <https://youtu.be/YMyofREc5Jk>.

³ For example Open Space Technology, World Café, Future Search and many other methods developed their own worldwide network of practitioners.

⁴ Erin Meyer, *The Culture Map. Breaking through the invisible boundaries of global business*. (New York: Public Affairs, 2014).

⁵ Erin Meyer, *The Culture Map. Breaking through the invisible boundaries of global business*. (New York: Public Affairs, 2014), 24.

⁶ Tonnie van der Zouwen, adapted from *Building an Evidence Based Guide to Large Scale Interventions. Towards Sustainable Organisational Change With the Whole System* (Delft: Eburon, 2011), 57.

⁷ Erin Meyer, *The Culture Map. Breaking through the invisible boundaries of global business*. (New York: Public Affairs, 2014), 72.

⁸ Erin Meyer, *The Culture Map. Breaking through the invisible boundaries of global business*. (New York: Public Affairs, 2014), 184.

⁹ Schein, Edgar, *Humble Inquiry. The gentle art of asking instead of telling* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2013).