



Podcast

## Creating a level playing field for collaboration

Tonnie van der Zouwen

# Episode 5 – Nancy Bragard: Bridging cultural differences through understanding

Published December 1, 2024

## Episode description

Nancy Bragard is an expert in intercultural consulting and collective intelligence. She shares a compelling story about workshops she led for Dutch and French HR teams who were facing cultural misunderstandings. Through creative activities like creating cultural DNA profiles, she helped them uncover and appreciate their own and each other's cultural values. The Dutch and French teams learned to navigate their differences, such as the Dutch directness and the French preference for nuanced communication. She also highlights the importance of creating safe spaces for open dialogue and the value of embracing diversity for more effective collaboration.

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## Transcript

### Introduction

Tonnie van der Zouwen: In this episode, we meet Nancy Bragard. Welcome, Nancy.

Nancy: Thank you. Tonnie: We met in Istanbul at the World Open Space on Open Space. I invited you to be part of this podcast. And can you please tell me something more about yourself and what made you say yes. Nancy: OK. Thank you, Tonnie. Well, I like every opportunity to talk about creating a level playing field. And I have been that way several times in my professional life. I have a choice of stories to pull from, but I think the one that has the most recently come up for me I work around collective intelligence and helping organizations move by giving life to their collective intelligence. And I was kind of doing that without knowing I was doing it.



when I was working as an intercultural consultant and coach. That's the story that I'd like to share with you today because as an intercultural consultant.

### **03:09 Cultural Sensitivity and Intercultural Consulting**

I was called into organizations where they were having issues around culture, where two cultures, because they kind of lacked sensitivity for the cultural differences between them, were pointing fingers, making value judgments about each other. And I stepped in and had them think a little bit about the fact that there is a logic to behind people's thoughts and actions, and that they needed to take time to understand what is the logic behind that other person's intelligence so that I, instead of making value judgments and pointing fingers, I can better understand why they do what they do. As an American, so I was born and raised American, but I moved to France when I was in my early twenties. And so as an American living in Europe, I was doing this intercultural sensitivity work all the time myself, on myself, on the people that I was around, trying to better understand French humor, to understand French teasing, the French love to tease. And for many Americans, it's kind of... It's demoting the other person to tease them. So I was constantly having to apply to myself what I was bringing into my expertise in the workplace. I love this work because it really was about promoting tolerance of differences. And the story that I'd like to share with you is in fact a story between the Dutch and the French. Interesting.

Yeah, and I will, of course, disguise the name of the company that I was working for. I think that this, what I'll be telling, can be applied to pretty much any environment. What I will say is that the people that I was working with, they had an HR capacity, and they were in charge of HR for all of Europe for this company. And I'm not sure why, but The HR function was restricted to the Dutch and the French. And they came to me saying, the Dutch are doing this, this, and this, and it's impossible to work with them. And then the Dutch were saying, the French are doing this, this, this. It's impossible to work with them. So we came together. And I had two days with them, which is, and by the way, the story I'm telling you, I did this for about five different groups because I never went beyond 12 to 15 participants. Each time was a little bit tweaked from the time before. And by the time I had done three of these sessions, it was really, it went over really well. It was very successful and they got a lot from it. So we came together and the first thing I told them was, this is a safe environment. And I had on the walls, I can't remember how you say safe place in Dutch, but I had on the walls, environnement secure and safe space. And then I had it in Dutch on the wall, so they knew that they could say what was on their minds and their hearts and their souls, that nothing was inappropriate, nothing was politically incorrect, that this was the opportunity to bring out perceptions and experiences across cultures. Because I said to them, if you don't do it here, where are you going to do it? Because our intention in these two days is to understand what has you saying what you say, doing what you do. So that you can iron out the cultural wrinkles and collaborate and cooperate efficiently together.



## 05:51 Understanding Cultural DNA: The Dutch and French Perspectives

The story I want to tell you is an activity that I had them do, making a creation of your cultural DNA. And they said, what do you mean? So first of all, I gave them all the materials, which was a couple of paper boards and then markers and clips and paste and crayons and a lot of prototyping materials. And I said, I'd like you as a group French on this side of the room, the Dutch over here, to look at what makes you French, what makes you Dutch, what does it mean to be Dutch, what are the inner values that you never talk about because you assume that your fellow Dutch or your fellow Frenchmen have them working at all times, but they're not written on your forehead, the other people don't know them, so they are assumptions that you among yourselves can have, but they are not realities that the other non-nationals know about. And in the beginning, they were a little bit puzzled by what they were to do, but then they got talking and you could see that they were becoming aware of what was their cultural DNA. And I asked them to make a creation, they had a whole hour to do this. And if it was a big group, I'd have like four Dutch working together and three times four Dutch working together or two times four French working together. And I said, I want at the end for you to be able to present this product, this creation, and walk us through it and explain to us how does this show the rest of us what makes a Dutch person Dutch.

So what typically came forward, there were always some differences, but the leitmotif that came forth on the Dutch productions, there was always a boat. And what came through was we are a nation of traders and we trade on the water and we go out on boats to trade and we need to get home quickly because if we don't get home too quickly, the water will have come over the dike. So we need to get home to put our finger in the wall to make sure that the country doesn't get flooded. So we make deals quickly and we easily meet people and exchange with them and start negotiating with them. So we don't take a lot of time for a lot of fuss getting to know you and we just, get to the point and we make deals and no is okay and yes is okay as well. So we're very, very explicit in how we communicate with one another because what's important is getting the deal done.

And then the other thing they were saying is, and for us, hierarchy doesn't matter. So if I don't like what my boss says, I can tell him, you're completely crazy to want to do this. It's not going to work because the boss used to be a guy like me. He also reported to a boss and he probably also told his boss, you're crazy to want to do this. So hierarchy was not an issue and isn't still today.

Then on the other side of the room, the French products, there was usually a big map of France with Paris right in the middle. And they said, the French DNA is very centralized. It hasn't always been Paris, today it's Paris. When you want to get from Marseille to Toulouse, well, you can do it today, but you used to have to go back up to Paris to go down to Toulouse. So a very centralized nation and the king had everything in his hands and he could do what he wanted to with his subjects. And he did whatever he wanted to



with his subjects. Except the French, while the king was the king, the French learned how to come in, and convince the king that they had something that they wanted to talk to him about. So being clever and intelligent and witty, all of that is very important. And you don't do that just by lining up a bunch of words. You have to have really studied how you're going to present what you present. So putting flowers around arguments and presenting them in the right format and the right way is really important. You can't just walk in and say, this is what we need to do. You have to have a good rationale behind it and present it, brilliantly. And sometimes you tell stories around what you're saying or you give little parallels, but you don't just come in and announce things. And it's very important also to know that the king is the king. And at one point, yes, the French got really angry and ended up cutting off his head. But today the boss is the boss because they were often hearing, the French were often hearing from their Dutch colleagues, why don't you tell your boss that he's wrong? And the French said, you don't do that in France. You don't tell the boss he's wrong. And the Dutch said, but I thought you cut off your king's head. Yeah, well, we did, but the boss still has his head. the Dutch were very smartly making the parallel between the king and the boss. And the French were saying, right, the boss is not the king, but the boss is the boss. And you need to be very careful about how you suggest that he may be on the wrong track and there might be a better way of doing things.

Now, I will say, Tonnie, this was a couple of years ago. This was like about 20 years ago. And today there isn't as much top-down, the hierarchical distance is not quite today what it was back then, but it's still much stronger than it is in the Netherlands. So the French product had this really centralized king, very central figure telling people what to do, but telling it in a nice poetic, beautiful way with flowers around the arguments.

in fact, one of them drew a beautiful picture. He was a cartoonist, in fact. And in his picture, he was standing on the dock and there was someone drowning saying, help, help, help. And he was standing between two life preservers. And one of them was square and the other one was round. And he was looking at the guy that was drowning and going, hmm, I wonder which one of these two I should throw. And the French that were in that group said, that's French, that's totally French. You always want to think things through and you don't want to move too quickly because you want to get it right. So it was very strong in the French productions that there was not a lot of room for error. Whereas in the Dutch productions, you could go wrong because then you just did it again. If you did it wrong, then you did it again and you did it the right way and you learn from your error. So it was really interesting when they would present these products to the other team. They would be scratching their head and saying, I understand now why blah, blah, blah. And they would be able to come to terms on differences that they had had. And in one session, the French said to the Dutch when they were done with their production, they said, is that why in the last meeting we had on this project, it was an important project. And the French said, you guys, you Dutch guys arrived at the meeting, you sat down at the table.



You put your fist on the table and you said, we're going to do it this way. And we were like, okay, can we maybe have a chat about this? Can we decide together if we're going to do it this way? We thought that you were being very unilateral, that you were making the decision for the whole HR group. And we were part of that HR group as well. And we were very offended by how determined you were to do it your way. And the Dutch said, really? Is that what you thought? We were simply bringing our ideas to that meeting and we wanted you to respond to what we had put on the table. And the French said, really? And the Dutch said, yeah, you wanted us to go, so maybe how about we perhaps look at this idea? And the French said, that would have been appropriate. If you had presented it to us that way, we would not have been offended. And the Dutch said, remember, we're a nation of traders. We get out there and we make a fast proposal and you can take it or not. But we're not gonna make a proposal surrounded by flowers and suggestions and ifs and whens and conditionals. So I'm gonna stop there just for a second to hear from you some. Is this making any sense and is there anything that you'd like to have? It's perfectly making sense.

## **11:22 Creating Safe Spaces for Dialogue**

Tonnie: Maybe you can elaborate some more what it means when you invite people for a collaborative session or participatory, processes. Because what I noticed is that it's sometimes very difficult to know how to invite people and it can be in the words you use or what you eat or how long the break will be or whatever.

Nancy: Yeah, exactly. Well, one thing that I do is what I mentioned in the beginning is I create a safe zone where everything can be said. Because I tell people what you're saying is not the truth. It's your perception of what's happening, because we all have these cultural glasses that have us seeing what's going on in another culture through our own cultural glasses and makes it wrong. And you're absolutely right, the French, when they would go to either the Netherlands or the UK as well, and there'd be a half an hour lunch break, they said, this is not a lunch break, this is a snack. And it's not only that we don't need an hour and a half to sit down and have lunch and we're not, we don't need wine for lunch. So get rid of those stereotypes that the French always need to have wine, but we need a break away from this heavy, intense conversation and thinking. And the British and the Dutch were like, let's just get on with things. They thought it was a waste of time. And so I really encourage them to share those thoughts and for the other party to simply hear that as a possibility. I always underlined the art of possibilities and I wanted the French to hear them. I wanted the French to be able to say, that's really interesting. A half an hour is enough time for you. Do you guys not get tired to go back only a half an hour later? And for the British or the Dutch to say, really, you need an hour and a quarter? I mean, doesn't that mean that you finish your day 45 minutes later than you otherwise need to? Tell us about needing that much time for a lunch break. So they were delving into the whys behind the behavior differences to understand them. And really telling them that what you're hearing from the other side is not a universal truth.



It is a perception on their part because they're experiencing this with their cultural realities and through their cultural prism.

## **16:04 Navigating Cultural Differences in Collaboration**

Well, what just happened? Let me just finish up on the Dutch-French HR group. And again, they were HR management for all of Europe for this company. In the end, I asked them, I didn't tell them what they needed to do. I said, what are you hearing that you need to do differently moving forward? They agreed, the French agreed. It's true that we put flowers around everything that we say and we use the conditional and we say, maybe perhaps it might be a good idea if you would look at. And we need to get more to the point. So they understood that they needed to be more explicit and direct. The Dutch understood that they needed to be a little bit less explicit and direct and ask a little bit more for return from the French and to know that it's not because they pronounce a definitive idea. That doesn't mean that they're also inviting the French to give their opinion. That can be interpreted as this is how it's going to be. So the Dutch were not used to reading between the lines and they had to learn with the French to read more between the lines and to check with each other, you know, so that the Dutch would say, wait, are you telling us with that, that this and this and this is so? they just, kind of took on new communication means and they were doing some meta communication that they had never done before.

Tonnie: I can imagine that when Dutch people work with people from China or Japan, it will be even more difficult. Nancy: Absolutely. Yeah, another big piece that I had that was really difficult to break into.

## **The Art of Possibilities in Communication**

This was a completely different industry, but it was a big project and the French were working with the Indians. there had been a big mistake made in the packaging and the sending of a product. And what happened is the French manager of an Indian subordinate asked him, said, have the packages been sent? And he couldn't say no, they haven't when in fact they hadn't. So he said, yes, they have been sent. And the packages were indeed sent. When they arrived, the boxes were empty. And this was because subordinate was put into such a position of inferiority and losing face in having to tell the truth that he lied. He said the packages have been sent. He didn't say, of course, the packages are empty, but he did send the packages. But to keep face was more important than the efficiency of the question. The question was, you know, another French person would say, I'm sorry, the packages haven't left yet. I will get them to you by this and such a date. we learned through this and we did a lot of back and forth thing that, in fact, in India, keeping face and holding face is so important that it is okay, if you will, to lie to be able to save face. And I thought that was a pretty powerful statement. And I've taken it to several Indian consultants, intercultural consultants, and they have confirmed that. They say, you know, if indeed there isn't enough framing, of a possible of being late or of





making a mistake. Keeping face is so important that the lie is pertinent and appropriate to be able to save face. So that has big consequences when you invite people from different cultures to a gathering, for a forum or an open space or whatever.

## **26.06 Worldviews and Their Impact on Conversations**

Tonnie: So what is your advice regarding the process of inviting people. Nancy: Well, of inviting people in a place to be able to collaborate, you mean, and cooperate. Yeah. Okay. Well, that'll be an opportunity then to tell the story that I had kind of identified. And this was very high stakes because I was doing a process with a senior team in an organization, a banking insurance organization that were having terrible difficulties with cybersecurity. And they were completely revamping the cybersecurity departments and giving it another hierarchical level. So it was a really new configuration of the cybersecurity department in this company. And the head of this function who had a vice president level in the organization, was with his 10 subordinates and together the 11 of them constituted really the executive team of this branch. the CEO had asked me to interview all of the members of his team. And he said, these are the questions that I'm having difficulties with. And so I interviewed them, all 11 of them. And I told them, I said, some of the key phrases that you're saying I'm going to pull them out and have them as verbatim statements when we come together. Is that okay with you? And they agreed to it. So I had, when we all came together, we came together in circle and I explained to them, said, this is a process in which there are only two rules and I am only here to safeguard those rules. So I'm only gonna step in when I see that those two rules are not respected. One of them is that you may only speak when you are holding this talking piece. And the talking piece will be in the middle. If you want to speak, you get up and you go, in French, we say, prendre la parole. You take the speech. it's only when you have the talking piece that you speak. You speak slowly. And when you put the piece back, there is a brief moment of silence after you've put it back down so that people can integrate what you said. That's the first rule. And the second rule is I don't want to hear one BUT in this circle. If something has been said and you disagree with it, it's not, okay, I see what you mean, but no, it's I see what you mean, and so I'm inviting all of you to replace your but with an AND because in a circle, what we're doing is we're contributing to a pool of shared meaning. What somebody else has said is true for them and what you're going to add is true for you. It doesn't make what the other person has said wrong. So I said, those are the only two rules I'm going to be adamant about, and you'll hear from me only if those are not held. And then what I had done is I had them check in and I asked them a very simple question. Well, I asked them, what's alive in you as we open up this meeting? And there we had the talking piece going around.

They already got a little bit used to because these people had never sat in Circle before. So they understood what Circle was about. And then I put about eight folded papers in the middle of the Circle. And these were verbatim statements that they had said in their interviews. And I invited the head of the team, the director, to choose one, to open it up and read it.



and to the whole circle around what it said on that sheet of paper. then I just let the dialogue unfold with only being guardian of the process. And it was amazing what came forth. And there was collaboration. They actually, for an hour and a half, and they only got through four of the seven sheets of paper on the floor. And when we were finished, and this was cultural as well, it was cultural, I wouldn't say so much French American because those were the two nationalities on this team, but it was cultural around the culture of IT, the IT culture versus the participative leadership and, you know, circle culture. But he came to me, the director came to me at the end and he said, okay, I just want to get this right because I want to do this in our future meetings. Have at least 15 minutes before we get to work to have a circle where, and the two rules are, you can only speak when you're holding the talking piece, and what was the other one? So he wanted me to remind him of the rules so that he himself could see that they were respected in future meetings.

### **30.44 Embracing Diversity for Collective Wealth**

Tonnie: Thank you for these stories. What resonates with me is what you said at the beginning, that you're promoting tolerance of differences. How does that show in practice?

Nancy: That's a good question. I will answer it in saying, I find that expats, When people, I'll take the example of Americans who come to work in France for an expat assignment, and an expat assignment is always at least two years, two or three, and can sometimes be extended beyond that. What they learn in working alongside the French is amazing. And one thing that I have seen them learn is that the way you hold meetings is also culturally speaking very different. And when I used to work with multicultural teams, I would have them do an exercise in the beginning of a day of facilitation of workshop. I'd say, I'd like you at your tables, and I always had multicultural tables, talk about what makes a meeting an effective meeting. What constitutes a good meeting? And it's very interesting because in Latin America, there's always something about who brings what to eat to the meeting.

So it's about what we eat and what we're sharing with each other. For North Americans, it's usually that we have a good sturdy action plan at the end of the meeting. For the French, it's often that we connect with each other and how is this team doing on that project and how is so-and-so whose father was in palliative care. So it's often personally connected more than it could be in North America. So it's very interesting for them already to get a sense of what's different in what we consider a good meeting. And what I have found in Americans that come and work in France for a while, they are able to tolerate because for an American, a meeting, come in, you've got an agenda, you've got a time slot for each part of the agenda. And if you're facilitating this meeting, you keep people to that.





Whereas in France, we're going to talk about this and then maybe also this. But there is an agenda, but it isn't nearly as time constrained as it can be in the USA. And people speak their mind. People come to meetings in France to be able to speak their mind, depending on who's present. If the boss is there, they may be careful of what they have to say. But if it's a meeting among peers, they are there to speak their mind. And I have walked away from meetings with a French on one side of me and an American on the other and the French going, that was a great meeting. Everybody was able to speak their mind. Then the American later on will say that was a total waste of time. All we did was talk, talk, talk, talk. We did not have an action plan at the end of the meeting. The only action plan we had was we need another meeting to come up with an action plan. Two very different perspectives and evaluations of what that meeting was. I have seen Americans come to tolerate and really see the value of long meetings where everyone is able to speak their mind.

And also, I mean, something as simple as a NO. What is behind a no? Because again, that's very different between France and the USA. In the USA, when I ask people, said, if you take a question to your management and the answer is no, what do you do? And they say, well, too bad. I turn around and go figure something else out. And I say, OK, you're going to be here in France on an expat assignment. You may want to change that strategy. Because when you ask a French person, what do you do if you go to your authority, to your management, and get no for an answer? And they all know, they've understood over the years through their training, that a no is in fact an invitation to sit down and try to convince me that you've got a good idea so that I'll change my no to a yes. A no on the part of a French person is never a final no. I'm sorry. If it's said twice, if it's said a second time, then you can take it as a no. But the first no is an invitation that to, with brilliant ideas and brilliantly presented, get me to change my mind.

I have had American coachees in the past tell me, I wish someone had told me 10 years ago, if a French person says no, it is not necessarily a no. So something that simple. What is the meaning of no? And that's why the intercultural component really gives such an amazing opportunity for people to look at possibilities. That's why I keep bringing up the art of possibilities. And rather than getting them to make value judgments to say, okay, that is a possibility.

Tonnie: Beautiful title, The Art of Possibility. Yeah, it's a wonderful book. If you don't know the book, I always advise people to get this book. It's written by Benjamin Zander. Z-A-N-D-E-R. And he is in fact a musician. He was a conductor of the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra. And he's an amazing change maker. And he talks about the art of possibility and what he has done even as a musician teaching students to bring them to a higher level is incredible. Yeah, would say another thing that's important around the art of possibilities is to understand that we all have our worldviews. And our worldviews are basically the prism through which we see the world, today's reality, what's happening in this conversation.



our worldviews have been kind of crafted over the years. They change with our age, they change with what we're doing, they change with what's happening in the world and our own experience of the world, but they really, really impact how we enter a conversation. And we are, without knowing it, without conscious of it, we are so attached to our worldviews that they really represent our own security. And when we're in conversation with someone who has different worldviews, it's like, no, I think we're going to stop there and we will agree to disagree. End of conversation. And the art of possibility really opens up that whole notion of worldviews of saying, okay, listen, it's interesting. We don't have the same worldviews, but talk to me about yours because I want to better understand how it is that you can have that position. And it doesn't mean that I'm going to take that position, but it does mean that we can go further in this dialogue to see what's the best way to collaborate and cooperate.

Tonnie: What comes up to me when some people in the Netherlands right now, very right-wing people with totally different realities, almost automatically there is some judgment in me. So how am I going to invite them and without judgment and really listen to them? Why is that important for you?

Nancy: Yeah. Well, I've done some extensive work in the worldview intelligence field and the two people, I'll give you their names. It's Kathleen Jordan, J-O-U-R-D-A-I-N and Jerry Nagel N- A- G-E-L, they both say it's okay to walk away from a conversation. When you know that extending worldviews is impossible to be able to reach cooperation with the other person, you don't need to go there. But it doesn't need to be a slam door either. It can simply be, we can't go beyond this.

Tonnie Thank you for your stories. Beautiful. Nancy: You're welcome. Tonnie: Such wisdom in it. As a closure, is there anything you want to share right now? Let me think. Yes. Yes. What I would like to say, as I mentioned to you, that I don't do intercultural consulting anymore. I'm really backing off from work. There's a French expression, j'ai donné. I've contributed a lot over the years and I'm looking at slowing down. But what I have understood over the years and the work that I've done is that the more diversity there is in a collective, in a group of people, whether it's a team, a function, an organization, the more diversity, the more wealth there is. If indeed, that diversity has taken the time to, as you say, sit down, listen, practice empathy, practice tolerance, practice worldview intelligence. But that our nature, I mean, the way we are brought up and kind of conditioned, socially conditioned, we don't have room for differences, and differences are often threatening. But if we do take the time to look at and appreciate the diversity within our team, our group, our function, whatever, it is such an incredibly precious wealth. And I would love people to get that and move forward with that.

Tonnie Thank you. That's a very rich ending. Thank you, Nancy, for being in the series. I invite everybody to listen to the next episodes.