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Handbook of Intercultural Communication and Cooperation

Basics and Areas of Application

Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht



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Volume 1: Basics and Areas of Application

With 23 Figures and 14 Tables

2nd Revised Edition

Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht

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Proofreader: Megan Hayes

Translator's note: I have tried to include the pronouns for both genders (he/she) as far as possible. However, in translating longer passages and for purposes of clarity, I have used only the "he" form.

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

ISBN der gedruckten Ausgabe 978-3-525-40327-3

ISBN der elektronischen Ausgabe 978-3-6475-40327-4

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Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht LLC, Oakville, CT, U.S.A.

www.v-r.de

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Satz: Satzspiegel, Nörten-Hardenberg

Druck und Bindung: ⊕ Hubert & Co, Göttingen

Gedruckt auf alterungsbeständigem Papier.

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■ Introduction

Internationalization and globalization have become an integral part of our society and continue to increase in importance. Our contact with culturally diverse individuals whether in the workplace, educational institutions or in our daily lives, is increasing steadily. For many, job-related international cooperation at home or abroad has become the norm. The international media covers events worldwide and easily accesses geographically and culturally distant countries.

In today's world, a sound basic knowledge of international affairs is a prerequisite to operating in a global network. The ability to contribute qualified and informed opinions is central to international business and constitutes an integral part of a person's self image. In order to be taken seriously in the global arena, a person must have a well-founded understanding of environmental issues, European, transatlantic and transcontinental security, rankings in global economic competition and the worldwide struggle against poverty. Business leaders can no longer afford to lag behind in their grasp of international politics and global developments, regardless of their position in the corporate hierarchy or whether they are themselves only indirectly involved in international business. A minimum of international competence is required in either case.

The challenges faced by many echelons of society with regard to internationalization, globalization and the strategies required for dealing with these issues are central to the 21st century.

Seen from a historical perspective, these developments are certainly not new. History has shown that there have always been times when transcontinental movement for political, economic, expansionist, religious and other reasons was on the rise. Diverse intercultural encounters were a natural outcome.

It was always a question of one dominant power exerting influence over another and securing strategic power bases, countries, cultures and continents. The most recent research into the significance of overland trade routes (e.g., Silk Road, incense, spice, and salt caravan routes) or sea routes

(e.g., The Northwest Passage, Straits of Malacca, the Transatlantic Routes, Bering Strait) has shown that religious beliefs were disseminated in the wake of trade and conquests (e.g., Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam). This development continued on into modern times with the spread of political and ideological systems (colonialism, Marxism, capitalism). Trade and the exchange of ideas throughout the world used to progress steadily over decades or even centuries. It was not until much later that historical research uncovered the global networking processes involved in the movement of people, goods and ideas. The people themselves remained largely oblivious of events outside their immediate sphere of influence, having no information network through which they could grasp the extent of transcontinental developments.

The rate at which the age of technology has progressed over the last century has lead to readily accessible sources of transportation and information, and contributed to a qualitative increase in internationalization processes. As a result of modern scientific and technological know-how, information can be instantaneously sent and retrieved from around the world and is available to everyone at a relatively low cost. International co-operation and travel, as well as access to information gathering, is no longer a privilege of the well-to-do, but long since available to the general public as well, at least in First World countries. The Information Age is here to stay, offering undreamt-of international and global mobility. The question arises, however, if individuals directly or indirectly involved in these developments have the necessary psychological makeup to absorb and process (perception) information adequately. Given this ability, are they able to analyze and evaluate (thought patterns, judgment) newly gained insights, manage emotions (feelings and sensations), plan and implement (application) these in a way that satisfies individual needs and leads to mastering the given challenges? Social and technological developments in a number of areas offer a range of choices for accessing individual potential and lifestyle preferences. However, just as many people who might benefit from such a wide range of choices do not, simply because they are unable to for reasons of heritage and/or personal background. This is a common phenomenon where sophisticated technology is used. An example is in the construction sector, where highly developed machinery and technical components are designed for multi-functional use, but only operate at 50% of their capacity. The reason for this is that persons operating the equipment are either not aware of the full scope of available options or choose not to change the problem-solving strategies they have developed over the years or which have traditionally served them. While users rely on the equipment as such, its full potential is not fully exploited.

In the technical field, the realization that multi-functional operating

equipment is not fully exploited often leads to an initiative to train and qualify the users. The result is an overall improvement in the problem-solving process, requiring all those involved to reorient and reassess their original approach. The problems and possible problem-solving strategies discussed in relation to the handling and use of development potential inherent in increasing internationalization on the macro-social (societal level) and on the micro-social level (individual life planning and career development) are similar.

The following examples from different centuries and cultural regions shed some light on the gradual development of intercultural competence through the ages.

Assessing Intercultural Experiences

In the introduction to his book “Chinese Characteristics”, published in 1900 in Germany, Arthur H. Smith mentions the enormous difficulties confronting Westerners in their dealings with the Chinese: “Sir Robert Hart, the inspector general for Chinese maritime customs who lived in the Middle Empire for forty years, speaks of the exact same phenomenon. ‘China is a difficult country to understand. A few years ago, I thought I had finally reached that point and grasped something about its inner workings, which I attempted to bring to paper. Today, I feel like an absolute beginner again. If I were asked to write three or four pages about China, I would not know where to start. One thing sticks in my mind, however. Where I come from, we tend to say: do not bend, even if you should break apart in the process. In the West, it is considered a virtue to adhere to one’s convictions and value concepts, even at the risk of becoming socially alienated. The Chinese, on the other hand, as Sir Robert Hart noted, believe the opposite to be true: bend freely but do not break’”. Adhering to individual convictions, values and norms might be important, but only as long as they do not lead to a break with the closely-knit family and social network. The ability to intuitively grasp cultural differences and adapt behavior accordingly in an intercultural encounter with Chinese business partners may very well have a positive, long-term effect on the business relationship in terms of communication and sustainable cooperation. The opposite is true if business partners remain largely oblivious to cultural differences and insist on pursuing their own agenda from the perspective of their own cultural orientation system.

Other-culture Experiences

The CEO of a large German industrial corporation with business operations worldwide recounts his experiences in East Asia and the US: “After having worked in East Asia for three years, I was sent to the U. S. In Asia, I was struck by the cultural difference from day one. It takes months to discover anything vaguely familiar behind the foreignness. My experience in the U. S. was quite different. At first some aspects seemed foreign to me, such as urban planning. However, the differences were nowhere near as striking as in Asia. I always tended to see things in relation to Germany. I used to ask myself, sometimes hopefully, but more often with trepidation: When will we be seeing this sort of thing in Germany? The question in itself points to certain similarities between Germany and the US! I got along quite well with the Americans at first: ‘People like you and me’, I thought. The longer I stayed, however, the more dissimilarity I discovered. From today’s perspective, I would still say that I experienced far more difficulties in communicating with my Asian partners. Nevertheless, there were moments in the U. S. when nothing seemed familiar. Things simply did not proceed as I expected them to. A significant difference was certainly my approach to both the American and Chinese cultures: In Asia I expected otherness and was surprised to find similarities. In the U. S., I expected familiarity and experienced much that was foreign to me”.

According to an American trainer who prepares executives for international assignments to Germany: “Most Germans underestimate the differences between the U. S. and Germany. Americans, on the other hand, have little information about Germany through the media and often fall back on a number of clichés. We are not entirely free of feelings of mistrust due to events surrounding WWII and post-war history, current developments in right-wing radicalism and xenophobia. U. S. executives sent to Germany on overseas assignments frequently miss the point when dealing with their German business partners. They believe they are superior, from a technical and especially from a moral standpoint. It is no secret that a number of well-known German firms have experienced difficulties on the U. S. market over the past years. This was largely believed to be a result of the fluctuating exchange rate and similar unpredictable events. Meanwhile, it has become evident that much of the misfortune on the U. S. market was due to the approach in dealing with American business partners. Since then, there has been some reassessment of appropriate and effective behavior in doing business with Americans”. Expectations of the other person and the personal assessment of a given situation inevitably shape other-culture perception, which include experiences of similarity and dissimilarity, cultural distance and conclusions drawn from these. A certain degree of willingness

and the ability to reflect on everyday encounters with dissimilar others is necessary for developing an awareness of intercultural learning and ultimately understanding the factors underlying appropriate and effective behavior in an intercultural encounter (applied intercultural ability). This constitutes intercultural competence.

Intercultural Incompetence

A German engineer received the following mail from his Nigerian client: “Dear Mr. X! Thank you very much for your support. We have decided that Mr. Y will leave Nigeria tomorrow. We feel that there is little sense in continuing his assignment. Regarding his return to complete the assignment, we feel that we need another specialist from Germany, one who is more tolerant and cooperative and is better able to communicate with people from a different culture. Such a person should not only be expertly versed in mechanical processes but also be able to get the job done. In case you do not have a replacement for Mr. Y, we prefer that you do not ask Mr. Y to return. We are prepared to begin production with our own crew. Please send me the contractual conditions for Mr. Y’s replacement. Thank you very much”.

Know-how and technical specialization alone are apparently not enough to ensure success in global business. Customers are demanding intercultural sensitivity, understanding and the willingness to adapt to other-culture customs, rules and general social norms. Those who are unwilling or unable to meet this challenge are likely to forfeit their long-term competitive edge in the international market place. Terminating an international assignment prematurely and finding a replacement is costly and likely to damage the company’s image in the long run in terms of trust, as personal failure can cast doubts on professional competence.

There is convincing evidence that there is a dire need for more awareness of culture-specific differences and the ability to deal appropriately and effectively with dissimilar others in international communication and cooperation. In spite of this observation, underlying cultural influences are regarded as academic hypothesizing rather than a factor worthy of serious consideration. An encounter with cultural otherness does not automatically lead to an analysis of culturally-based causes of unexpected or contrary behavior and the desire to understand intrinsic cultural factors.

In contrast, with increasing internationalization, countries tend to converge and adopt other-culture characteristics more readily (e.g., McDonaldization) and downplay the significance of cultural diversity. A certain

degree of convergence is certainly due to modernization, assimilation and adaptation and is reflected in consumer habits, the workplace and in management styles. A closer look, however, shows that forced adaptation is not evenly distributed. More influential nations, societies and internationally active groups impose adaptation on less influential players. The more pressure there is to adapt, however, the greater the tendency toward cultural divergence, e.g., the (re-)discovery of and emphasis on cultural differentiation and self-determination. Along with the awareness and acknowledgment of cultural diversity, such tendencies stand in contrast to mass standardization. Thus, the convergence theory can hardly qualify as an argument against culturally-based differences and the necessity of training relevant specialists and leaders.

Regardless of whether perceived cultural differences are considered a burden or an enrichment, and dealt with accordingly, it does not change the fact that they exist and that they influence our perception, thinking, feeling and behavior and that ultimately, they impact communication and cooperation between individuals from different cultures. Individuals who intuitively grasp what is going on in an interaction between themselves and the dissimilar other and who understand why events unfold one way and not another, are able to synergize cultural dissonance in a way that leads to achieving a mutual goal. Understanding the dynamics involved in a mutually satisfying cooperation in the international/intercultural arena leads to a more sustainable approach to dealing with cultural otherness. Needless to say, intercultural competence enhances the competitive edge. This reference guide is designed to support and promote the success of such relationship-maintaining, human and materialistic interests.

The credo underlying this guide relative to successful interaction and co-operation between culturally diverse individuals is taken from a three thousand-year-old Chinese proverb: “Only he who knows the dissimilar other and himself well, can succeed in situations involving communication and co-operation”.

It is not enough to grasp, study and understand other-culture values, norms, customs, rules of conduct and world views, in short, their unique system of orientation. Moreover, it requires a conscious grasp of, reflection on, comparison and understanding of one's own cultural system of orientation on the basic level of daily work and private life. Most often, this is taken for granted and only the rare individual is consciously aware of his daily routine. This aspect is key to developing “intercultural competence in action”. The standard of quality worth striving for, however, is not reached until both partners, with their respective systems of orientation, manage to pool their potential in a manner that leads to goal attainment (effectiveness) and improved quality of life (satisfaction). This work of reference

combines a practical approach, underlying theory and methodological tools for dealing with problem analysis and solution processes.

The first chapter deals with the basic theoretical concepts of intercultural communication and cooperation. This includes a discussion of the definition and description of culture and cultural standards, upon which this book is based, as well as the relationship between national and organizational structures. We will take a look at the dynamic triangle of applied interculturalism, which concerns aspects of self, otherness and the intercultural element. The last chapter in this section deals with the basic building blocks of core concepts such as cultural dimensions, acculturation, intercultural perception, communication and cooperation, intercultural identity management, intercultural learning, applied intercultural competence and intercultural research.

In the second chapter, we will examine a number of relevant practical examples from the corporate world: intercultural management, intercultural human resource development and intercultural marketing.

The third chapter explores the complex connection between the concept of applied intercultural competence, the development of applied intercultural competence and the effect of intercultural training and coaching on applied competence, including the evaluation and assessment of such measures. Within this context, we will provide an overview of and insight into different forms of intercultural training, education and coaching. We will deal with the advantages and disadvantages as well as the possibilities and limitations of the development of intercultural competence from a professional standpoint.

The fourth chapter deals with central management themes in an intercultural context. Here, we will take a look at the following subject matter: debating (rhetoric), negotiating, conflict management, project management, leadership, team development and work groups. Further, we will shed light on the complexities involved in joint ventures and acquisitions in international management, forms of modern corporate communication, the challenges employees and their families face on international assignments and finally, the role of women in international management and job enhancement opportunities.

Chapter five concludes our discussion on a strategic plan for comprehensive interculturalism in corporations.

This guide may be of assistance for those wishing to learn more about themselves and the many different facets of intercultural communication and cooperation or for specialists in the field of human resource development with an interest in practical application. Scholars and scientists may also find it helpful for an in-depth study of the theoretical foundations and methods for analyzing and dealing with core aspects of interculturalism.

Trainers, coaches and consultants will find interesting approaches and ideas with regard to the development of culture-general and culture-specific trainings and workshops.

The second edition, co-authored by Alexander Thomas, Stefan Kamhuber and Sylvia Schroll-Machl, “Länder, Kulturen und interkulturelle Berufstätigkeit” (Countries, Cultures and Intercultural Careers), offers insight into a number of different intercultural fields of application apart from the strictly corporate context and explores culture-specific behavioral patterns among individuals from different countries (cultural standards). The series “Handlungskompetenz im Ausland” (Practical Application for the International Assignment) contains additional training material for self-study and serves as a basis for intercultural trainings.

Sylvia Schroll-Machl’s book “Die Deutschen – Wir Deutsche. Fremdwahrnehmung und Selbstsicht im Berufsleben” (2002) encourages reflection on the specifically German system of cultural orientation.

In closing, the authors sincerely hope that the information and recommended reading provided here will facilitate in-depth self-study and greatly enhance the reader’s insight into the subject matter.