

Navigating Across Cultures: Cultural Competence Challenges for Budding Indian Managers

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ABSTRACT

The research paper attempts a reconnaissance of the challenges that Indian leaders and managers face while dealing with people from the west. For many decades now, Indian understanding of business theories and concepts has been informed primarily by western thought and philosophy. Even studies in cross-cultural communication have been received from the west, with Indian culture as the “other”. The study proposes to use the theories propounded by prominent thinkers in the field but change the foci by making Indian culture the norm and western culture the “other”. The paper also looks at the concept of cultural competence and investigates the challenges in developing it in the face of increased transience of cultural identity. And finally, it investigates the anthropological approach to cultural understanding and developing CQ – Cultural Competence by proposing *theoria* as a starting point to comprehend cultural differences.

Keywords: Culture, Cultural Competence, Indian Culture, Western Culture

INTRODUCTION

We must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools

Martin Luther King, Jr.

In the emerging global environment, diversity is playing an increasingly important role. More and more often organizations are trying to boost their competitive advantage by utilizing outsourcing, cross-cultural teams, and other international relationships. One of the consequences of globalization is the increased need for people from different cultural backgrounds to work with each other. With the advent of global communications, rapid transportation, and worldwide markets, when the era of global village seems just around the corner, it is easy to forget how vastly different cultures can be. Underneath the veneer of modernism and globalism, deep cultural differences often remain. These inherent differences in cultures across and within countries can affect international business; therefore, navigating this quagmire of cultural differences in a world with permeable borders requires cultural competence, and cultural literacy for business success.

DEFINING CULTURE

In the complex and interconnected global culture of today, each of us is shaped by many factors. Culture is one of the powerful influencing forces that deeply shape our values and communication styles. ‘Originally the domain of anthropologists and sociologists, culture has emerged as a topic of interest and application in many disciplines, including the social sciences, management, and other areas in which people and their behaviours are important’ (Glover, Friedman, & van Driel, 2016). But the definition of culture has been elusive primarily because it is mired in complexity. In 2014, there was a sudden surge in the number of hits the word got on the internet in look-ups. The sudden pique in interest, writes Joshua Rothman, was because of the dissonance it created due to its popular usage and polemical nature. He quotes Raymond Williams explaining the three divergent meanings of culture:

there’s culture as a process of individual enrichment, as when we say that someone is “cultured” (in 1605, Francis Bacon wrote about “the culture and manurance of minds”); culture as a group’s “particular way of life,” as when we talk about French

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culture, company culture, or multiculturalism; and culture as an activity, pursued by means of the museums, concerts, books, and movies that might be encouraged by a Ministry of Culture (or covered on a blog like this one). (cit. Rothman, 2014, para. 2).

Of particular interest to the present enquiry, is the second meaning of the term culture — as a group's way of life, and how that impacts the way people from one group communicate with another. The necessity for such an understanding arose after the two great wars when businesses and governments both sought to expand globally. This led to the rise of cross-cultural studies as a field unto itself with many prominent thinkers, leaders, and philosophers building a repertoire of usable knowledge. The famous Dutch scientist who created the seminal text of cross-cultural communication, Hofstede (1984, 2001), defines culture as 'the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others' and examines culture from a value-based perspective. For Hofstede (1984), cultural patterns remain stable. From his perspective, culture is viewed as a homeostatic (self-regulating) quasi-equilibrium. On the other end of the spectrum is the notion that culture is evolutionary and cultural phenomenon can be understood by applying the Darwinian methods, tools, theories, and concepts. Mesoudi (2011, pp. 2–3) writes that '*Culture is information that is acquired from other individuals via social transmission mechanisms such as imitation, teaching, or language*' and changes in socially transmitted beliefs, knowledge, technology, languages, social institutions, and so on share the very same principles that Darwin applied to biological change in *The Origin*.

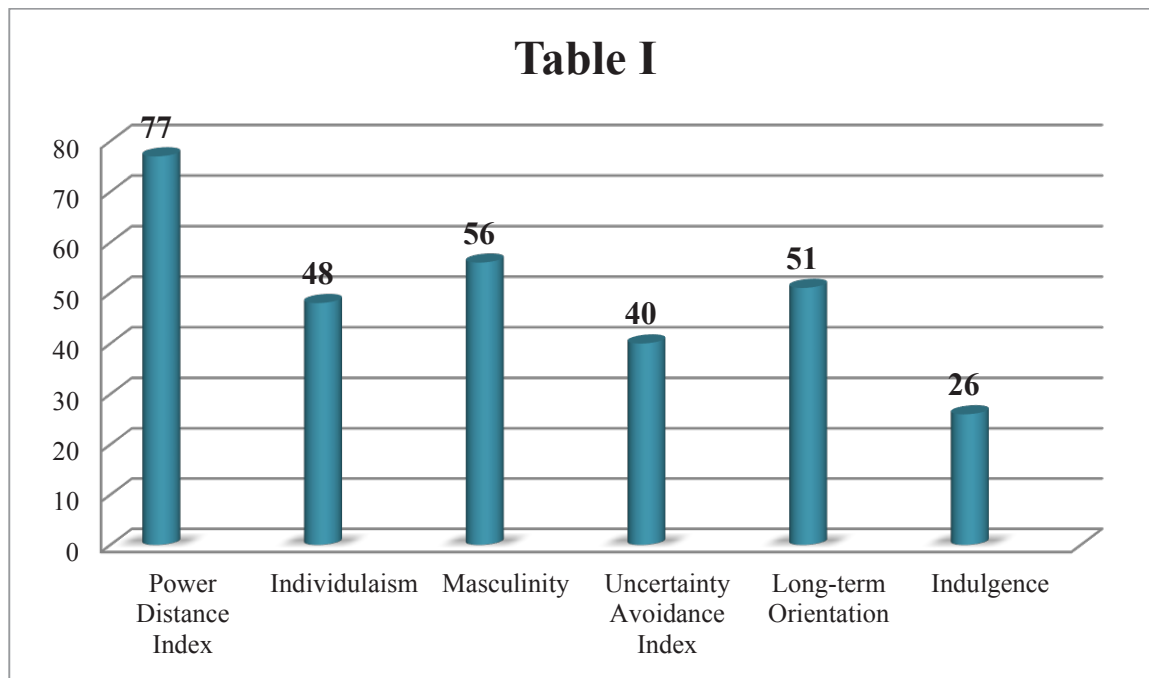
Alternative perspectives view culture as more fluid. For example, (Myers & Tan, 2002) view culture as something that is invented and re-invented and always in a state of flux Hammerich & Lewis (2013, p. 5) aver that, '*culture is behaviour and behaviour is culture*' Turner & Trompenaars, (2012, p. 8) define culture as, 'the way in which a group of people solves problems and reconciles dilemmas.' They further contend that (2012, p. 6), 'the

belief that human cultures in the workplace should resemble the laws of physics and engineering is a *cultural*, not a scientific, belief. It is a universal assumption that does not win universal agreement, or even come close to doing so.' (Soderberg & Holden, 2002, p. 108) define culture as a '. . . system of assumptions, values and norms transmitted by socialization to the next generation . . . it is seen as something members of the community have or belong to.' Schein takes the anthropological argument that culture resides in conceptual categories and mental models. He hankers for a 'real' positivist hold on a world of slippery intangibles, constructing culture as an object capable of standing free of its context: 'We cannot build a useful concept if we cannot agree on how to define it, "measure" it, study it, and apply it in real world of organizations' (Schein, 1991, p. 243 cit. in Wright, 1914).

This disparity in definition and differences in approach brings us back to the problem at hand – if there is no scientific formula that can guarantee success in a multi-cultural environment, how is one to approach such interactions amidst the tapestry of diversity? And how shall one recognise, respect and act with civility toward people who are different from us? And how would one, based on these differences, create teams, organisations, and communities that are cohesive? The present article does not presume to find solutions to these problems but attempts to open a dialogue by posing a few questions and seeking to find possible 'lines of flight' (Deleuze, 2000).

THE INDIAN WAY

An ocean's worth of ink has been spilled in understanding culture and cultural dynamics and differences between the East and the West and how these differences can become an impediment to mutually beneficial business endeavors. And yet, social scientists never seem to run out of problems to discuss. A good starting point in any discussion on the topic shall be Hofstede's six dimensions of culture. India's score on these dimensions is reflected in table I (Hofstede, n.d.).



Source: www.hofstede-insights.com

It is fairly evident that three traits are pretty dominant in India: there is great disparity in power in personal and professional relationships, the masculine traits like success, competition and achievement are lauded and the general proclivity of the people is towards restraint rather than indulgence. It is the score on the other three categories that may be a cause of great consternation to the people dealing with Indians. For these are the areas where haziness creeps in due to subjective differences pertaining to peoples' 'sociality', 'personality', and 'culturality' (Balagangadhara, 2011) leading them to swing either way. That is not to say that subjectivity doesn't impact all categories.

'It is a common claim in the literature that Indian managers experience a clash between the values acquired from their education and professional training and those drawn from Indian culture and society' (Garg & Parikh, 1988; Parikh & Garg, 1990; Tripathi, 1990; cit. in Fisher, Shirole, & Bhupatkar, 2001, p. 698). Decision making, for instance, for Indian managers is conflicted owing to their education and training which is informed by western textbooks emphasizing instrumental rationality and rule-following whereas the values drawn from family and community emphasize affiliation and social obligations. This conflict may portend trouble for Indian managers operating in western organizational set-up as their social

values may interfere with their job roles (Haley & Haley 1998, pp. 311–315) argued that dependence on family and networks, and a heuristic and intuitive approach to decision making, were necessary strategic responses to the uncertainty that Indian businesses faced in the Asian arena' (cit. in Fisher et al., p. 699).

A salient feature of the Indian business approach is a melding of business and national leadership. This melding goes well beyond private profits and public charity, with national purpose as much a part of the business mind-set as financial results and reputational gains; The philosophy is rooted in the ancient Indian treatise *Arthashastra*. The traditional Indian values are in stark contrast to Western corporate mores about decision making. The differences exist at a far deeper level – while the Western businesses emphasize on delivering shareholder value, Indian business leaders as a group place greater stress on social purpose and transcendent mission, and they do so by devoting special attention to surmounting innumerable barriers with creative solutions and a prepared and eager workforce. Purpose, pragmatism, and people aptly capture the zeitgeist of the Indian philosophy.

The book, *The India Way* (Cappelli, Singh, Singh, & Useem, 2010, pp. 4–5) has captured the true spirit that defines the Indian way of doing business. The authors outline four practices:

1. ‘Holistic engagement with employees’ – unlike the west, emphasis is on nurturing interpersonal relationships, and people are considered as assets.
2. ‘Improvisation and adaptability’ – finding ingenious ways to get work done and being adaptable are the cornerstones of Indian business style.
3. ‘Creative Value propositions’ – Indians are compelled to create unique propositions to stay relevant and offer the best products and services to the ‘value-conscious’ customers.
4. ‘Broad mission and purpose’ – ‘Indian business leaders place special emphasis on personal values, a vision of growth, and strategic thinking . . . and take pride in enterprise success – but also in family prosperity, regional advancement, and national renaissance.’

Apart from the ideological differences in approach to business, Indians differ significantly from the Westerners in their style of communication. And that is where the fault lines begin to appear for an ideological difference can be ascribed to recognizable external factors but when communication breaks down, it can sour relationships. Storti (2007, p. 19) writes that ‘one aspect of culture that accounts for more miscommunication between Indians and Westerners than any other is what is usually called the concept of identity.’ This concept can be best understood by taking recourse to Hofstede’s second dimension of culture —Collectivism. Indians are collectivist and what that implies is that they are group-oriented; they put the needs of the group they belong to before theirs and it is critical for them to maintain their position as a member of the group. It dictates their approach and behavior because they would do things that would ingratiate them with the group members and refrain from acts that alienate them. It is also inextricably linked with the concept to keeping ‘face.’ Harmony and face, along with loyalty are arguably the foremost Indian cultural values:

The need to preserve harmony prescribes a certain code of conduct for all members of the group, namely: being humble and self-effacing, deferring to seniors, avoiding public disagreements, and all other kinds of confrontation, never causing offence, and being careful never to embarrass anyone in front of the group. Common to all five of these ideal group behaviors is the underlying necessity to be tuned in and extremely sensitive to the feelings of others- which is usually referred to as the concept of “face” (Storti, 2007, p. 22).

This can become a challenge when communicating with people from the west who are more open in voicing their opinion even if it is divergent from others’. Power dynamics, nonverbal, gender differences, business etiquette, decision making, and socializing further complicate the harmonious exchange of ideas between Indians and Westerners. The problem that one encounters then is how can one develop competence to work around these deep differences? And since we are now aware of the problems we face, why are we still struggling to overcome them? The next section discusses some of the challenges faced in developing cultural competence.

CHALLENGES IN DEVELOPING CULTURAL COMPETENCE

If culture is a contested term, cultural competence is even more so. It is considered to start with the development of an individuals’ knowledge, and skills to allow for effective engagement with people from diverse cultures. Balciunaitiene, Barvydiene, & Petkeviciute (2013, p. 10) define it as the ‘ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in a variety of cultural contexts with people who are different from one’s self, for example, who are from different national, ethnic, religious, professional, organizational, generational, etc. culture.’ In the business context, ‘contemplating the work that leaders do in society, in organizations, and in the world raises a number of questions about the skills that are necessary, the attitudes that are important, and the intellectual capabilities that are essential to be a global leader’ (Pusch, 2009, p. 66). Cultural competence or CQ (cultural intelligence) tops the list. Earley & Mosakowski (2016, p. 1) contend that ‘in a world where crossing boundaries is routine, CQ becomes a vitally important aptitude and skill, and not just for international bankers and borrowers.’ Understanding culture of the organizations as well as people that one deals with and picking up and deciphering the sparring subcultures is a tall order for anyone. Many leadership and management books give us the idea that leadership is a universal skill set that works the same everywhere. It sounds promising, but it doesn’t quite jive with the realities of leading in today’s multifaceted, globalized world. History is testament to the fact that great leaders are not always intellectually impressive or endowed with extraordinary skill, for success has not always come to those with highest intelligence since there are many not

very accomplished people who have done fabulously for themselves in life. It is imperative therefore, to identify the critical abilities that are fundamental to functioning as a leader in the global intercultural environment, to solve the new age problems pertaining to humanity, economics, environment, and sustainability.

‘Learning about cultural differences is important for international managers, because behavioral mistakes and misattribution can lead to dysfunctional relationships and can be a cause of poor organizational performance’ (Moodian, 2009). Yet, global leaders don’t have the time to master the ins and outs of every cultural difference they encounter. Furthermore, many of the traditional approaches to cultural differences are outdated. For example, can we really say that all Chinese are one way and all Indians another? Neither is it sufficient to simply work on being more culturally sensitive. Sensitivity is a start but then what - how do we lead effectively across borders? For even before sensitivity, one has to amass cultural knowledge - the cultural characteristics, history, values, beliefs, and behaviors of another ethnic or cultural group; then generate a cultural awareness - being open to the idea of changing cultural attitudes; then acquire cultural sensitivity – understanding that differences exist between cultures, but not assigning values to the differences (better or worse, right or wrong); and finally, developing cultural competence – knowing how to operate effectively around these differences and build organizational capacity to bring into its system many different behaviors, attitudes, and policies and work effectively in cross-cultural settings to produce better outcomes. This developmental journey is fraught with many challenges, not least among them the cultural paradoxes.

Srivastava (2007) proposes three aspects of complexity thinking that further the understanding of cultural competence: the ‘dialogic principle’ which means that two opposing notions can coexist without one contradicting the other or being lost in the unit. ‘Culture is about groups in a system as well as about individuals, where the individual is simultaneously a part of and separate from the group.’ The second is the principle of recursivity which implies that causes simultaneously are effects. ‘Individuals create the society which in turn creates the individuals [and] this is a recursive process’ (Browaeyns & Baets, 2003, p. 336, cit in Srivastava, 48). This can be extended to the socio-

cultural construction of the subject, that is, individuals create culture through their interactions; at the same time, culture influences the interactions that occur. Third, the hologrammic principle states that parts and whole co-exist simultaneously. It is similar to the dialogic principle in that the parts are present in the whole; the difference is that the whole also is reflected in the parts Srivastava (2007, p. 48) notes that ‘the principle “goes beyond reductionism, that only sees the parts, and holism, that only sees the whole. Holons or whole/parts are entities that are both wholes and parts of ever greater wholes” (Browaeyns & Baets, 2003, p. 336). Similarly, individuals are whole entities but also are part of a cultural group and carry the culture as a whole around with them.’ These arguments may indicate that culture is some indefinable chimera and developing cultural competence would be a *non sequitur*.

The situation is made more deliciously complex when we fail to segregate the subjective differences we find in people from a particular culture (nation) and cannot correctly ascribe them to their ‘sociality’, ‘personality’, and ‘culturality’ to borrow some expressions from (Balagangadhara, 2011). And to make complex matters confounded, the dominant theoretical perspectives and explanatory frameworks in diversity research all focus on the negative dynamics and consequences of diversity, rather than capturing its upside. The pessimistic perspectives even view diversity as a liability. This means that leaders have to be constantly reminded of the double-edged sword nature of culture and the fact that under some circumstances cultural differences can be a source of synergy, innovation, and learning. As Carlos Ghosn, the CEO and President of both Renault and Nissan, repeatedly stressed: “Cultural differences can be viewed as either a handicap or a powerful seed for something new” (Emerson, 2001, p. 6 cit. in Stahl, Miska, Lee, & Luque, 2017, p. 4).

A lot of research and discussion in cross cultural management is symptomatic of this pessimism and takes a culture-free approach to intercultural communication, one that tries to identify ‘certain communication skills [that] are needed in all cultural settings’ (Goby, 1999, p. 181 cit. in Hunsinger, 2006, p. 31). Edmond Weiss argued that:

universal expectations for various features of communication, such as clarity and persuasiveness, are hard to come by under any circumstances; most attempts at universality have ended in ethnocentrism, no matter the intentions behind them. Importantly too, the culture-free approach provides researchers and students little opportunity to explore the important roles of culture and cultural identity in communication (Hunsinger, 2006, p 33).

This brings us back to a heuristic approach which identifies important dimensions of culture and then rates particular cultures for each dimension, with the goal of developing workable descriptions that practitioners might find helpful in cross-cultural communication. So we circle back to theories propounded by Hofstede, Hall, Lewis, and Trompenaars. Hall surmised that culture is essentially an irrational force and that:

Deep cultural undercurrents structure life in subtle but highly consistent ways that are not consciously formulated. Like the invisible jet streams in the skies that determine the course of a storm, these hidden currents shape our lives; yet their influence is only beginning to be identified. (cit. Harris, 2004, p. 268).

Here, one is reminded of the definition of culture formulated by the famous anthropologist, Clifford Geertz who suggested that we can truly understand another culture only when we are able to enter into it and to completely pass ourselves off as insiders, for instance, by mastering perfectly the linguistic system, the feelings rules, the complex rules for nonverbal gestures, etc. (cit. Morand, 1995, p. 54). Given the complexity of cultural systems, this approach may as well be the only way to truly comprehend culture by getting unparalleled insights into its workings, yet in its extreme, it represents quite an arduous undertaking. Every culture is so distinctive that one would have to spend years if not a lifetime mastering its rich intricacies and nuances. While that may seem both daunting and improbable, it is however possible to begin one's foray into cultural competence by immersing oneself in a culture, however vicariously. The next segment explores one such possibility by proposing a starting point of cultural understanding as it originally started when the seeds of anthropology were sown.

LOOKING BACK TO MOVE FORWARD

To figure out a way to overcome challenges in developing cross cultural competence, we hark back to the 4th century BC, when the foundation of anthropological studies was probably laid by (Herodotus, para.3), considered as the Father of History and Father of Anthropology, he travelled far and wide making 'excellent use of his opportunities, inquiring everywhere about the customs and traditions of the lands through which he passed and amassing a great store of information of all kinds.' It was Cicero, the Roman of letters, who gave Herodotus the title of *pater historiae* – Father of History, but Herodotus's notion of history extended beyond the usual and much disdained version of 'maps and chaps.' He took up the daunting yet invigorating task of 'autopsy' and inquiry to sort out myth and fact and created a rich tapestry of a text that presented to its readers the account of the broad diversity of customs and values in the world. The master storyteller constructed a challenging narrative consisting of many short *logoi* (tales) stitched together, 'ranging from forays into the political history of Athens and Sparta to whimsical anecdotes clearly grounded in folk motifs or fairy tales' (Roberts, 2011, p. 4).

Redfield writes that for a Greek, there are three great reasons for travel: commerce, war, and seeing the sights; the Greek term for the last is *theoria*. 'For Herodotus, *theoria* is characteristic of the sage - of the Scythian Anacharsis, who "saw a great part of the earth" and in the process became partly Hellenized and of Solon, who made *theoria* his reason for leaving Athens' (Redfield, 2002, p. 25). *Theoria* in particular means going to see the great spectacles, the international games and festivals of the Greeks, sometimes as a member of an official party - but the word has a broader connotation which can also mean going to see another country. Herodotus was interested in natural wonders and imposing monuments, but he had a special interest in the life of the peoples, in what we would call their culture. For this concept he has at least three different words: *diata*, *ethea*, *nomoi*. *Diata* has to do with material culture, with what people eat and drink and otherwise consume, and with their livelihood. *Ethea* are more subjective, relating culture to personality; according to their *ethea* people are more or less savage. It has to do with the cultural tone or ambiance of a community. *Nomos* means something more explicit than *ethea*, something

more definitive as command or prohibition. Very often a *nomos* is a written law; when used for a custom it means something which can be put into words and stated as a rule. *Nomoi* are specifically human. Furthermore, *nomoi* are the sign of a certain level of culture; every people has its *ethea*, but the most savage people have no *nomoi* at all; they are incapable of stating rules for themselves (Redfield, 2002, pp. 24–27).

These three traits together are what we call culture today, social programming, and a way of life and therefore, all three concepts carry with them certain relativism. People differ along these lines and each group of people finds their own way correct and others' odd. It was the oddities of other cultures that fascinated Herodotus. It is through the discussion and comparison of diverse *nomoi* that the observing traveler becomes explicitly conscious of the relativism of culture and inadvertently constructs and reinforces her own cultural identity.

Redfield is dismissive of such a superficial exploit as that of *theoria* or tourism for through travel one does not engage with other cultures but merely observes them from the fringes, collecting '*nomoi* which are emblems of the various countries he visits in fact or in thought. Holland: wooden shoes and windmills. Paris: cafes and the Eiffel tower' (p. 27). The tourist discovers the specific contours of her own culture by taking it places where it does not fit thus making cultural relativism ethnocentric.

But one has to argue that *theoria* is its own reward. If the road to cultural competence begins with 'cultural knowledge' and 'cultural awareness' then there is no better way than to experience it firsthand instead of reading about it in a book or being trained in it by another's account of her experiences. Leaders today can reduce time spent in learning about the differences that exist so that they may invest time in devising ways to work around those differences. That is one of the reasons why business schools around the world have global programs that allow students to study in different countries to have an immersive experience of living and working with people from different cultures and why companies invest heavily in training their senior staff to work harmoniously across borders. Furthermore, having an appreciation of such cultures through *theoria* helps us to remove our cultural blinkers, overcome our ethnocentric assumptions, and develop and understanding and respect for other

cultures. Faucheux (cit. Hofstede, 2001, pp. 17–18) has compared ethnocentrism with egocentrism. Egocentrism is a phase in the development of a child before it can take the viewpoint of an other and one may argue that given the changing world scenario, no individual can afford to be egocentric, not able to see the cultural 'other' but needs to be polycentric. Then alone can one navigate across the cultural Styx.

CONCLUSION

Cultural diversity is a phenomenon in its own right and is interwoven with a rich tapestry that, if explored and exploited, could yield firms incalculable and tangible benefits and generate a source of competitive advantage in this geo-knowledge economy. Cultural competence requires a desire and a commitment to learn both about and from the cultures to which one is exposed locally, nationally, and internationally. So while international exposure through travel or *theoria* many not be on a par with a systematic development of cultural knowledge and understanding, it definitely merits consideration and further research. For, in *theoria*, the three interpretations of culture unify to form a harmonious whole, and its fissiparous tendencies coalesce.

FURTHER RESEARCH

While the present conceptual paper suffers from a lack of quantitative and qualitative validation of ideas, it opens up possibilities of exploring these in greater detail through such methods. For instance, a study could be conducted to assess the cultural knowledge, awareness, sensitivity and competence of managers/ leaders who have had international exposure through travel from early years of their education and how they compare to the people who have been isolated from such inter-continental experiences. A second study may be conducted on students of management to assess the validity of theoretical and practical approaches in their level of preparedness to meet the inter-cultural challenges in the corporate world. Also, a qualitative assessment of cultural competence training methods' efficacy can be another line of study. The area of cross cultural management is so vast that any research in the field would require constant updating since culture itself is dynamic and in a permanent state of flux and the best a scholar can do is to continue the endeavor to explain, discuss, and comprehend.

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