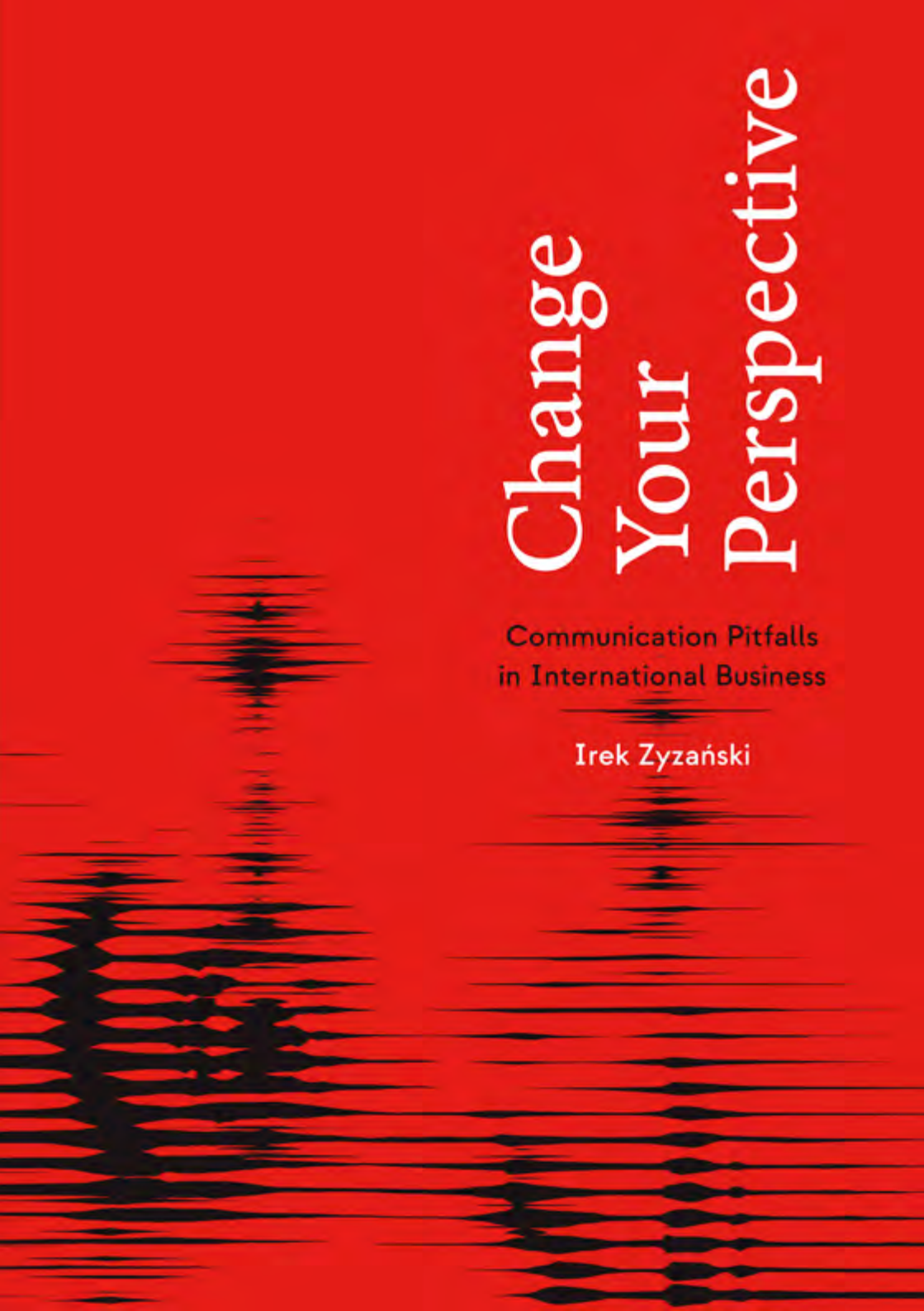
Change Your Perspective

Communication Pitfalls in International Business

Irek Zyzański



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Publisher:
Culture Power Solutions Ireneusz Zyzański

ISBN 978-83-68032-30-7

First edition – Warsaw 2024

It's not just for managers!! Communication in a multi-cultural business environment is difficult for the uninitiated regardless of if they sit in a C suite, manage a salesforce spread across the globe, or work as an engineer helping to start up an overseas manufacturing facility. Irek's valuable contribution to eliminating the difficulty is a consequence of years of putting practice to the test and studying and then applying the theory, but above all, it is due to his obvious and deep introspection and passion for the theme. His insightful, and sometimes humorous, anecdotes are coupled to detailed explanations that give the "whys" of a culture's communication style. Irek then provides the necessary tips and skills, so that all of us can adapt to such styles, and ultimately to achieve our goal – to have business and personal successes. As someone who has work in technology development for over 30 years in the United States and abroad, and who has had the great pleasure of working with colleagues from every continent … but not always done with great communication …, Irek's book provides me with the long-sought after understanding of the why and the how to effectively communicate in a culturally diverse business environment. I'm sure it will do the same for all readers.

– Douglas Gregg Neilson, PhD,
Senior Development Associate *Corning Incorporated*

Managers face the same sorts of problems all over the world, and how they deal with them depends not only on their skills, but also the culture from which they come, and the culture in which they work. When we first met, I was the "foreigner" and it was with the help of Irek and many of his colleagues who guided me on how to manage the Polish market, which, while still stuck in traditional business principles, is slowly opening up to new Western methods. Over the next twenty-five years, we met many times in different countries, and together we tried to avoid the communication and organizational traps that awaited leaders in international corporations. I believe that Irek's book will help both novices and experienced managers alike in solving a variety of problems that await them over the course of their career.

– John Gledhill, long-time Managing Director in global corporations in the FMCG sector in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East

As a senior executive in global organizations, I have spent many years learning intercultural management. From the perspective of my experiences, I can say that understanding the motivational mechanisms of colleagues from different cultures is the key to succeeding in international business. A close second is the ability to adjust your communication style to adapt to that which your subordinates will not only understand, but also respect. Irek's book aids in recognizing the motivations that push people from different cultural backgrounds to act, and also suggests effective ways of communicating with employees from different countries – an extremely useful skill set in the day-to-day work of a manager and leader of a global organization.

– Daniel Saw, Founder and Managing Partner in *Infood Asia Company Limited*, Operating Partner in *Citic Capital Partner* in Hong Kong

Success is always attainable, given that you can find a common tongue with the people you work with. In his book, Irek shows you how to effectively communicate in a culturally diverse environment. He breaks down the reasons you might misunderstand a colleague, boss, or coworker. For this reason, it's essential reading for any responsible manager in an international environment wanting to attain success. Much like Irek, I spent a couple decades in various countries, and so I know from experience just how integral it is to be able to understand the different communicational needs of various cultures for a happy and successful career.

– Dr Andrzej Jeznach, an experienced leader and author
of business books *Art of life, The Boss who has time, The Boss who thinks* and others

Twenty five years of experience and observation in working with cultures from three different continents allows Irek to verify cultural patterns as well as asking the key questions about nationality, ethnicity, and culture in the context of leadership and management. It is this aspect – leadership and management in a multicultural environment through the perspective of the history of our multinational country as well as our perspectives and developmental ambitions – that makes Irek's book essential reading for every leader and manager wanting to have a global perspective.

– Paweł Sopkowski,
Founder and President of *CoachWise.Org*

Working with different cultures teaches us a lot about others and even more about ourselves. Through this, we discover what our principles, values, and norms are, and eventually, we come to understand that our actions are just one facet of communication. The question arises what to do when you discover the world is more diverse than it seemed. Do you carry on, unbothered, or face the unknown?

Irek teaches us how to look at the world differently. It's not always comfortable, but if we learn to change our perspective, we have a greater chance of attaining success in an international company or in a managerial position. Irek's book is a must-read for those brave individuals who, armed with curiosity, boldness, and humility, want to work in a fascinating intercultural melting pot.

– Zofia Barańska,
CEO of *Blackbird* and intercultural trainer

The modern, globalised world demands "cultural agility" from us – that is, the ability to navigate flexibly and effectively in international business – a skill that requires constant nurturing and growth by gaining experience and deepening professional knowledge. Irek's book is a useful aid for this goal. The stories here teach us how to adjust expectations and fine-tune communication when faced with a clash of cultures. This is essential reading for every leader working in an international environment, as well as for any reader who wants to take a critical look at not only the world, but themselves. The interesting anecdotes and natural narration lend themselves to a pleasant yet gripping lead for people of all backgrounds.

– Dr Barbara Bartczak,
Founder of the *European Institute for Intercultural Development*

A delightful blend of anecdotes and practical advice on how to recognize and utilize the “cultural lens” we wear both in and out of work, this book is an absolute pleasure to read. Amongst the advice for leaders working in multinational environments, the examples are powerful (and sometimes funny!), and each chapter concludes with a concise summary useful for quick references.

Chapter by chapter, this book leads you to discover the intricacies of different cultures and their traps hidden in daily business. It helps you become conscious of your own cultural sensitivities as well as those of the people around you. It is worthwhile to join Irek on a trip around the world as he generously and openly shares his experience working abroad.

– Magdalena Gera-Pikulska,
Senior HR Director, Business Mentor

In his book, Irek shares knowledge and experience pertinent to any leader who wants to be internationally successful. For many years he worked with our senior management team and he’s been a source of inspiration and support throughout our journey from a small family firm to one of the best international football retailers in Europe. Irek’s experience in cross-cultural leadership and communication helped my team and me become not only better leaders, but also better people.

– Marcin Radziwon, Founder and CEO of *R-GOL*,
an international football retailer

Preface to the English edition – dramatic change of the landscape

Dear Reader,

Thank you for your interest in my book. Before you go any further, I would like to preface with a reflection about the drastic change of landscape and context of what you're about to read.

I published the Polish version of this book at the end of 2021. COVID-19's social distancing and isolation were coming to an end; we saw the light at the end of the tunnel. Slowly, life was returning to normal.

Unfortunately, we could not predict the next dramatic event on the horizon. It's early 2024 as I'm writing this preface, and the war in Ukraine has raged for nearly 2 years. It has changed everything: people are dying, their homes are destroyed. A senseless waste of life has again become a new reality.

We lived in both Ukraine and Russia. I am devastated about the tragedy of this war. I hope that at the time of you reading this book it has ended. But even if peace was made, the wounds will remain open and raw for the next generations to come.

The war has dramatically changed the context of my book. I share here stories from Russia, but this was a Russia from before the war. When I present the positioning of Russia on various cultural dimensions, it is

meant to illustrate the situation before the war. These cultural dimensions are relevant in times of peace, not in bloodbaths and mindless destruction.

Even so, I made the conscious decision not to alter the contents of my book. What is written here was true at the time of writing. Let it stay as it is, as a testimony of a more peaceful time.

Irek Zyzański
February 2024

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Cross-cultural communication – a key competency for a 21st century manager

Intercultural intelligence is one of the most important skills of a 21st century manager. Essentially, it is a toolkit of social abilities that allow for effective communication and teamwork with representatives of different cultures. Similarly, cultural intelligence is the ability to adapt to different cultural contexts. It allows one to work competently in a wide range of cultural situations and aids one's understanding of both unspoken rules and social cues of various cultures. And although intercultural intelligence is not something one is born with; it is possible to learn.

To effectively lead intercultural teams working on different continents, it is imperative to be able to quickly understand one's surroundings, including its norms and barriers. This applies to more situations than one might initially expect, such as understanding the needs of coworkers, communicating with the team, establishing, and realizing achievable goals, and appropriately praising people for a job well done.

I have spent twenty-four years working in a large international company in the Fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) sector, with branches in over one hundred eighty countries on six continents. To answer the oft-asked question, "*How can you spend so much time in one company?*" I often reply that, as long as it guarantees intellectual stimulation, offers

a change of position every two or three years, allows for job development and rewards hard work with raises – then one does not even have time to think about changing one's work. In this line of work, simply put, there is no end to both everyday and extraordinary changes.

Over the years, I have worked in Poland, Ukraine, Dubai, China, Russia, Indonesia, and Hong Kong. Airports and hotels were my second home – although according to my wife, they were rather my first. I've had bosses from fourteen different countries: Poland, America, China, Malaysia, France, England, Denmark, Turkey – the list goes on and on. I, myself, have overseen international teams in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, made up of just about all nationalities.

I finished my corporate adventure as a Regional HR Director for Commercial Organization Development supervising thirteen countries in the Asian and Australian region. Before that, I spent four exciting years in Indonesia as the HR Director of Sales and Marketing, where I was responsible for supporting teams made up of four and a half thousand people in over one hundred locations.

It's a little embarrassing to admit how many mistakes I made, and how many cultural traps I fell into over the span of my career, but it is because of these experiences that I can now share my knowledge. The lessons I write about in this book are ones that I've seen – and often experienced – first-hand, and although they were sometimes painful, they were an important part of my growth. Thanks to them, I can tell my current clients – "I came, I saw, I made my own mistakes and I learned from them".

Thanks to these lessons, I have a unique portfolio of skills from the intercultural management perspective. I'm able to quickly and accurately identify typical issues concerning communication in international teams. I know how to integrate teams and encourage their effectiveness, as well as to advise leaders and managers how they should act in regard to conflicts. All of this is possible because I, myself, took part in all the above-mentioned situations – both as a leader, and as a subordinate. Above all, I draw my knowledge from these everyday situations. My colleagues

and superiors have faced similar challenges, and observing them has allowed me to draw knowledge from their experiences as well. In this book, the examples I describe, for the most part, come from the organizations with which I worked, but a few are derived from other companies. All of them, however, lend themselves as starting points to engaging in successful intercultural communication in not only the standard stages of teamwork, but also in its more critical moments.

Currently, I use my collection of experiences to advise companies on how they should further develop the intercultural intelligence of their workers. After all, it is one of the most important – albeit underappreciated – skills of a 21st century leader. I also help expats adapt to life and work in Poland, and, on the flip-side, help Poles preparing to move abroad, either for business trips or longer relocations.

I have always yearned to travel, which is why I chose my studies and career path with this dream in mind. During my studies at the Jagiellonian University of Cracow, where I majored in Arabic Philology, I spent a year abroad in Baghdad, on a scholarship at the University of Al-Mustransiriya. This took place during the Iranian war, back when Saddam Husain was still the West's good friend. I still remember watching the news; televised coverage showing the corpses of Iranian soldiers being thrown into mass graves, all while triumphant orchestral music played in the background. I lived through a number of Iranian bomb attacks, the nearest of which fell three kilometers from me, while another demolished the academic dorm in which I stayed only two weeks prior.

After my studies, I expanded my language competencies by working as a translator in Libya. My role also encompassed the of building cultural bridges of understanding between Polish companies and the local bureaucracy… more often than not, it also encompassed bailing Polish drivers out of the local police's arrest.

It's difficult for me to separate my private and working life from one another, as they have almost always been intertwined. I married my wife and my ex-company in the same year. The former gave me a wonderful

life and children – and the latter financed it: family vacations, travels, and most of my children's international education. Despite all this, sometimes I still feel guilty for putting my three bundles of joy through so many relocations; that is, forcing them to change schools and friends and surroundings every two or three years. The price they paid was high, but at the same time, they received something that not many of their peers have, as they are what is known as "third culture kids" – multilingual and well-educated. While they have no problem getting into a plane and flying to another continent, completing a banal errand in the local town hall is outside of their scope of capabilities.

I've dedicated a fair bit of this book to my family. The divorce rate amongst expats is incredibly high, and not without reason. Managers who leave the country because of their work often lack an appropriate work-life balance. They are usually so in over their heads dealing with new challenges in new environments that their family falls to the backburner. Their partners are forced to make do on their own, creating new connections and finding another meaning to their life, as usually, in accordance to their visa specifications, they're unable to undertake any paying work. Moving to a new country under such circumstances is not easy – but on the other hand, splitting up for the rest of the family to stay in their home country is not any easier, and leads to loneliness and uncertainty in the relationship. It is no surprise that so many families fall apart under these circumstances.

So, it is important to remember that the potential price for one's career success could be the concomitant destruction of one's family life. I'm truly a lucky man – my wonderful wife took charge of our everyday life throughout these twenty years of relocations and infused them with love and stability and understanding. We are still together – and celebrating, this year, thirty years of adventures.

Throughout my corporate life, my family and I lived through nine relocations, including two returns to Poland – the first after eight years abroad, and the second after another six. Contrary to what one might think, returning to one's fatherland is often the most difficult challenge:

it's easier to relocate to the next country as an expat than to return as a sort of foreigner to the local workforce, where so much has changed. This, too, will be expanded upon in one of the upcoming chapters.

There are many projects that I am proud of in my professional CV. They include designing and implementing assessment centers, mentoring and talent development programs, building variable pay systems for sales departments, recruitments, training, and, generally speaking – any projects related to the development of an organization.

Amongst my successes, I am particularly proud of my consulting business, which I have created and developed since leaving the corporation. Although my work is very different now – I still have clients from all over the world. During the workshops I lead, people from all over the world have a chance to meet one another, for example, New Zealand, Canada, and Brazil, to name a few. I specialize in intercultural communication, as well as leadership development, mentoring and coaching programs. It is thanks to my work that I have the chance to meet so many fantastic, interesting people, and further thanks to them that, through their eyes and experiences, I have the privilege to observe the world from so many new perspectives. Working with Senior Leaders, Board Members and CEOs has allowed me to not only share my knowledge and to support others, but also to consistently improve myself as both a trainer and a manager.

Admittedly, corporate life no longer entices me; I consciously did not want to return.

Some time ago, one of my friends shared an inspiring metaphor with me, comparing working for a corporation to being a freelancer.

The former is a dog on a chain: he never goes hungry, and he has a roof over his head, but he is held back by the chains of strict rules and regulations. The latter is a wolf: he may freely wander the forest as he pleases, but oftentimes goes hungry.

After a long consideration, I realized that I've had enough to eat – enough to fall back upon for a couple of years, if need be – and so, I entered the forest.

I have gathered knowledge and experience, and finally, I decided that the time has come for me to share it. My previous company played no small part in it. First, they provided me with solid, practical business school. I learned from managers and leaders from all over the world – and then, they threw cold water in my face and handed me only a towel. A few weeks after my fiftieth birthday, I was informed by my boss that further development of my career would have to take place outside of the corporate structures – meaning "goodbye". I have always considered myself tenacious and unshakable, and I have to admit that I left the company with a golden parachute – but even I could not help but fall into the depths. I managed, somehow, to control the fall so as not to break my bones, by realizing what I had now, and what was worth taking with me. In the chapter, "The landscape after the battle" I share how to overcome this fall; how to leave a corporation and cheerfully move onto the next chapter. After all, what I want to express most of all throughout this book is how to manage the plunge into intercultural management and communication.

To the managers and leaders working in international environments, I say: rather than making quick judgments, you should remember to accept and understand this often unstudied and unknown world. I will show you how to tame your initial reactions, to allow you to instead attempt solutions tried and true in many cultures and many organizations. I will show you how to take a step back, out of your own perspective and ingrained thought patterns, to appreciate the beauty of diversity.

Irek Zyzański
www.zyzanski.com

How and why should you read this book?

Thank you for picking up my book. Throughout the next chapters, you will learn how to:

- Be an effective leader in an international team.
- Be a productive employee.
- Avoid falling into the traps of stereotyping and how to manage your automatic reaction.
- Interpret communicational contexts and adjust accordingly.
- Effectively give feedback to and understand feedback from people of different cultures.
- Build trust in a team where relations are important, and in those that are more results oriented.
- Efficiently use your working time.
- Increase your efficiency.
- What to take into consideration when working with cross-cultural virtual teams.

Baghdad: the first time I noticed the lenses of my culture
– what is cultural software?

Baghdad: the first time I noticed the lenses of my culture – what is cultural software?

II

Baghdad, the end of the year 1986. The church we frequent every week with the Polish engineers living in Camp 100 in Baghdad Jadida is a little way away from the Iraqi's capital. The Polish priest stands at the altar, facing the believers as he conducts Mass. All of sudden – vooom! The walls begin to shake, and the stained-glass windows vibrate as if they want to jump out of their frames and shatter into a million pieces. It is the echo of an ear-splitting explosion. Silence overcomes the church. Even the priest, his face as white as the communion wafers he holds, freezes mid-sentence, his hands held up in a paralyzed prayer. After a few seconds that seem to drag on into eternity, the priest cautiously looks around, then nervously releases the breath he had been holding, and begins the prayer anew. We take the car home after Mass. Two, maybe three kilometers away from the church, on the bank of the Tigris River, we pass a smoking crater: the remnants of an Iranian bomb, and the remnants of what had been in its path. I whisper a prayer of thanks to God. It could have ended very differently…

26 COUNTRY ROADS, TAKE ME HOME

When I think back to the beginning of my multicultural journey, I return to 1983, to the summer between my third and fourth year of high school. I remember sitting at home, mulling over the university guide for new students. My dad, with more patience and candor than was usual for him, helped me realize that my dream to study at the cinematography department might not really be what I dream of. “Son, do you really want to scurry around with a camera, doing what others tell you, filming exactly what they tell you, for the rest of your life?” he asked.

My left hemisphere (at that point in time, I did not know the left – right brain theory) took charge over my right and, reluctantly, I decided he was correct. Now I know that this was a so-called “deep coaching question”, which I use when I work with my clients, but at that point, neither I nor my dad had any idea about it. Those were the times when you had to return your passport – given that you could get your hands on one at all – to a passport office after you returned to your homeland. When the possibility of you traveling abroad at all was determined by some worker affiliated with the security office. When the average wage in Poland was only twenty dollars a month. And I, like so many of my peers, wanted to see the world and earn money abroad. It ate at me.

The first nineteen years of my life I spent in a small, albeit bucolic mountain town in Beskid Żywiecki: Milówka. Although you may not have heard of it, it gained fame by the Golec brothers, who went to the same school as I did, although I was a few years their senior. When they released their hit song, *Do Milówki Wróć* (“Come back to Milówka”), in the year 2000, I was already working in Dubai. I remember the joy I felt when I received the package with the CD “Golec uOrkiestra”. I wasted no time and played it in the car on my way to Abu Dhabi. The first words resounded through the speakers on the highway that cut through the desert. I could see the heat waves through the windshield; the temperature outside was over fifty degrees Celsius. And there I was, thousands of kilometers away from home, tears streaming down my cheeks as I listened to the song telling me – *come back to Milówka*.

It was there in Milówka, in a flash of genius, that I made the decision that would change my life forever: I decided I would study oriental philology at the Faculty of Arabic Studies at the Jagiellonian University in Cracow. My reasoning, as a high school student from a small town (yes, there is a general high school in Milówka), was quite simple: many Polish companies at that time signed contracts in Arabic countries, but only a handful of Poles knew the language. If I learned it, I reasoned, I would be guaranteed a job, a passport, the chance to travel abroad, and money. I would be set.

During my studies, I started learning Arabic, the history of civilization, Arabic culture, and religion, and I was preparing for my first trip abroad. My older colleagues, like most of the teachers, already had their first contracts in the bag and surely others coming up in the near future. A window to the world – at least to the Arab world – was opening up for me. My dream of traveling abroad was so close I could almost taste it.

After my second year of studies, I received a scholarship at the Al-Mustansiriya University and left for the Middle East. While Iraq's long and devastating war with Iran was at its halfway point at the time, peace reigned in Baghdad. The hostilities took place in Basra, a long six hundred kilometers south of the Iraqi capital.

After sleeping off the trip, I made my way to the streets of Baghdad around noon. The air was so hot that it burned the lungs on deeper breaths. The first shock. Next to the dormitory I met two soldiers – they were in full uniform with Kalashnikov machine guns on their shoulders. But that wasn't what shocked me – it was the fact that they were holding hands. How could that be? After all, boys, much less soldiers, do not walk down the street in such a manner! Girls maybe, but men? I soon found out that there were no sexual overtones to it. In Arab culture, it is completely natural and permissible for men, being friends or even good colleagues, to hold hands on a walk or in the cinema. This was probably my first glimpse into intercultural awareness. I realized that the rules that I considered universal did not necessarily apply everywhere in the world. Something that was the

norm to me, amongst the culture and group of people with whom I grew up, might not be the norm elsewhere.

The story of the soldiers holding hands came back to me many years later. But before we get back to that, I want to tell you how I first learned to integrate intercultural intelligence into practice.

A TOUGH CHANGE

The stay in Baghdad was a catalyst for my development, as well as the starting point of me understanding my own cultural identity. I emphasize "my own" because everyone's journey is unique; a person only begins to understand their own upbringing when they come face-to-face with a foreign culture. Consequently, it is through this that they begin to understand who they really are. I, myself, discovered just how determined I can be, and that I have the means to pursue my goals at all costs.

Throughout the eight months of the academic year that I spent abroad, I saw the world from a different perspective. The war against "satanic" Iran, as official propaganda proclaimed, was thankfully far from Baghdad. For a visitor, the capital of Anno Domini 1986 was an oasis of relative peace – albeit watched over by soldiers patrolling the streets – just in case.

If I now showed you a photograph of the streets back then, you'd be hard-pressed to say there was any danger lurking at all. The shops were fully stocked, good cars raced along the wide avenues, and the likeness of the leader pasted on every wall seemed soothing. Saddam Husain smiled down at passers-by from every poster, whether he was depicted riding horseback, hugging children, or bestowing heroic medals upon soldiers. State television showed scenes from victorious battlefields, of fallen Iranian soldiers disappearing, forgotten, into mass graves. Lively military music played as enthusiastic crowds of Iraqis saluted their leader. It was all cheerful – and all so, so far away from me.

The first rocket hit Baghdad about a month and a half after my arrival. It was already late in the evening, darkness shrouding the student

dormitories in which we sat leisurely after classes. All of the sudden, the windows began to shake. Everything shook – the chairs we sat in, the glasses we held in our hands. Although I had never before heard a missile fall, I knew very well what that bang meant. We ran to the roof. Looked out at the buildings around us. But there was no fire, or smoke, or explosion in sight. We waited with bated breath for more missiles to fall, but nothing else happened. It was only the next day that I read in the newspaper that a rocket had demolished a house and killed, in the process, a family of seven. That was the first missile attack I experienced – but far from the last. Over the next two months, more than thirty Iranian rockets fell on Baghdad.

The first few explosions were a shock. I was acutely aware of the fact that people, existing not so far from me, had died. That children had lost their parents. That their whole lives were changed forever. Then came the uneasy thought that it could very well have happened to me, had I made different decisions that day. That, maybe, it was time to go back home.

But gradually, I became indifferent. I got used to the sound of rockets hailing down upon the city. I would not even stop reading the newspaper, I would just think to myself, “Oh hell, there goes another one,” without even tearing my eyes from the page.

Over time, I concluded that I had changed under the influence of these experiences. I had become a less sensitive person. I learned something new about myself, that being that I was not quite who I thought I was. All my life, I had considered myself an empathetic and rather gentle person, but life in Baghdad showed me that my skin was thicker than I had realized. That, in times of danger, my concern for others was relegated to the background. All that mattered to me then and there was my own survival. I knew that the threat was great and that I could die here, so far away from home. So I allowed myself to be selfish. This transformation of thought surprised and scared me both. Baghdad showed me that I was tougher than I realized.

Huge, black banners hanging over the gates of houses was not an unusual sight in the slightest. I saw them often, traveling through the city by

bus or taxis. The banners bore the inscription in Arabic language: “Here lives the family of a hero of the Great Nation, who gave his life for the Fatherland and its Great Leaders, fighting satanic Iran.” There were tents out on the street, by these houses, where the family, neighbors, friends and other loved ones met to reminisce, shed tears and mourn the dead.

One morning, while I was walking around the area of my university, waiting for classes to begin, the terrible sound of a machine gun firing pierced through the air. Instinctively, I threw myself to the ground and waited for it to be over. Not long after, I heard an excruciating scream, almost animalistic in nature, echo through the air. It melted into equally despaired wailing. Two officers visited one of the nearby houses to share news from the frontlines. One of them fired the machine gun into the air, and the other told the now-grieving parents that their son had become a national hero. I had reacted on instinct, wanting, only, to protect myself. But it turns out that neither this family’s despair, nor the other sounds related to war – gunshots and explosions – had much of an impact on me anymore. Evidently, you can get used to just about anything.

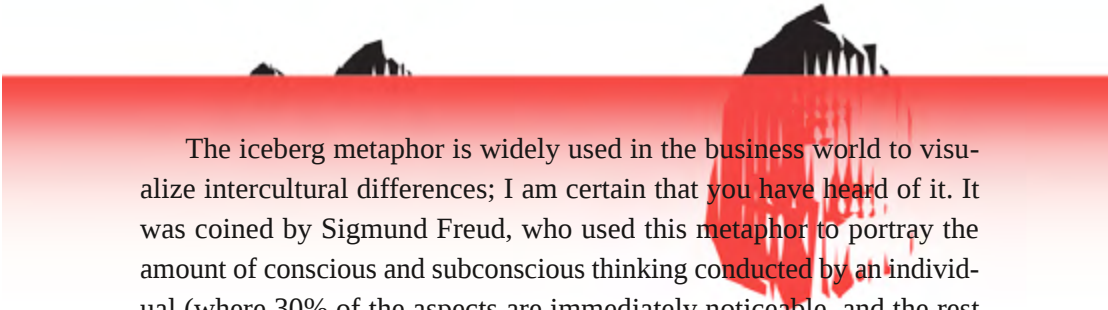
Baghdad changed me. My experience there opened so many doors and made me aware of so many mental perspectives I never even realized existed. It prepared me for life in an ever-changing and dangerous reality. It also helped me take the first steps onto the path of intercultural awareness, which I often overcame without even realizing. Trial and error, over and over again, and metaphorical scrapes on my knees. But it is thanks to this experience that I have the foundation of my work, upon which I built opportunities to manage culturally diverse teams in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. I know very well how important intercultural intelligence is for a leader of the 21st century – after all, I lived through it.

THE ICEBERG, THE ONION, AND MIND SOFTWARE

I once read that culture is to people what water is to fish – we are so completely immersed within it that we do not even realize it exists. It is only

when there is a change in the current that we begin to notice where we are, what surrounds us, and what this change could possibly mean. When I saw those soldiers holding hands in Baghdad, I felt cognitive dissonance – it turned out that the unspoken rules which I always assumed were universal were anything but. They applied to my culture, and maybe a few others, but not everywhere. This means that, regardless of self-awareness, interdisciplinary education, or political correctness, we will never be able to regard another culture with a neutral, blank slate. We will always look at the world through the lenses of our own culture, through the norms and values that we ourselves hold. Of course, we can work on changing these filters, and should aim to be respectful of other cultures even with the biases that we hold. But the first step on this journey to intercultural awareness is to realize that these lenses exist.

Over the years, topics such as diversity and tolerance for others have become more and more talked about. No wonder, with how many communities are experiencing epochal changes, caused by, among other things, migration, westernization, and people opening up to problems that were, until now, a taboo subject. There is a lot to be said about these topics, far too much to be included in one book, and so I humbly step aside from the general topic of diversity, and focus, instead, only on the practical considerations regarding intercultural communication in the context of business.



The iceberg metaphor is widely used in the business world to visualize intercultural differences; I am certain that you have heard of it. It was coined by Sigmund Freud, who used this metaphor to portray the amount of conscious and subconscious thinking conducted by an individual (where 30% of the aspects are immediately noticeable, and the rest are situated “underneath”, meaning they are happening subconsciously).

In the 1970s, this metaphor was adapted by Edward T. Hall, an American ethnologist fascinated with intercultural communication – specifically, the problems it entailed. He claimed that the tip of the iceberg, the part that was situated above water, contained our habits, morals, verbal and graphical language, as well as our body language, physical distance, rituals, fashion, food, and music.

At this level we come across the first, most trivial conflicts and potential disagreements between people from different cultures. For example, blowing your nose in public in Japan, or greeting someone with your left hand in an Arabic country, or giving a Pole a bouquet with an even number of flowers, could all be catalysts to potential conflicts.

Situational blunders are just the tip of the iceberg of problems in intercultural communication. That, which is really important in a given culture and what affects our behavior, misunderstandings, and successes lies deeper, beneath the water. It is dependent upon our beliefs, values, social roles, norms, religions, and ideologies. Therefore, to understand any given culture, we should aim to know and understand it at this deeper level. Only then will the cooperation between people from different countries be effective and allow us to eliminate distortions in communication.

I know, getting to know another culture in depth is easier said than done. Sometimes you have to cut corners. When we work in an international environment, the first thing we should do is build trust in the team and aim for effective communication. There are a number of models of intercultural communication which can be used for this purpose, which suggest, in a simplified manner, how to achieve this and minimize the sources of conflict between cultures A, B, and C. (More on this topic in chapter 12: *A cultural melting pot – different models and how to use them*.

Another popular model is the onion metaphor, which allows us to visualize the multidimensional aspects of culture.

Much like an onion, culture is made up of many layers. The first, outermost layer is visible at first glance – these are all sorts of symbols, rituals, material items, fashion, food, and so on. Beneath it is another,

fairly noticeable layer, this time of behaviors shown through actions, such as how we greet one another or how we practice religion. Much deeper beneath these outermost layers are norms, including both laws implemented by leaders and social norms on an individual level, such as whether partnerships without marriage are acceptable or not. Then, in the very center of the onion are more abstract and individual aspects, such as our own values, worldviews, beliefs, family, definitions of good and evil, and so on. Just as in the iceberg metaphor, observing only the visible layer will not lead to fully understanding any given culture. To do so, we must dive down to the deeper layers, and to come to experience many different situations. Peeling an onion is often unpleasant, but it always pays off, for it allows you to behave in a more conscious and enlightened manner, taking into consideration a variety of elements in different cultures. This process allows us to understand another culture, yes, but by doing so, it also helps us understand ourselves.

Personally, I am a fan of the definition coined by the contemporary Dutch academic, Geert Hofstede. He defined culture as programming of the mind that differentiates members of one group from those of another. I like this statement because it combines the ideas of community and differentiation in a positive manner. Moreover, it is connected to the development and changing nature of a cultural melting pot, as the use of the word "programming" implies the possibility of adaptation – that is, updating and bettering oneself to a newer version.

Even in our global village, we are constantly updating our cultures. Twenty or thirty years ago, the divisions between cultures were rather clear-cut. Poles worked in Poland, the Chinese in China, and Spaniards in Spain. Significant interaction only happened when people left, for however short or long a time, to work abroad. First, they had learn the local customs – for example, the appropriate manner in which to hand a business card to someone in Japan, or how long to keep eye contact in China, or how to address a colleague in Germany so as not to forgo their academic degrees. Although these are rules that must be learned, over time, expats

came to naturally deepen their practical knowledge of the local culture and became better adapted to the expectations of their environment.

Today, with the internet bringing the world to our fingertips, in this global village, our shared service centers, and especially in remote work, members of multicultural teams can no longer rely on the practical way of getting to know colleagues from other regions of the world. Not everyone has the luxury of traveling abroad and immersing themselves in foreign culture – but the challenges of cultural differences between co-workers remain. Remote communication does not exempt us from retaining awareness of our co-workers' origins and habits, including colleagues, contractors, and bosses. When the diverse needs of the team are not taken into consideration, it is easy to fall into any number of cultural traps, leading to misunderstandings.

ELIMINATING SILENCE

A good example of communicational disorientation is an incident that took place in a Polish service center that, amongst others, worked as IT support to a large American retail firm. When there was a problem with a computerized cash registers in Texas or Ohio, an American employee would call the service number, unaware that the person who would answer the call was a Pole on the other side of the ocean – let us say, Jan Kowalski. Jan's work generally followed a simple procedure: he would ask the caller a few diagnostic questions, such as whether the register was definitely plugged in, what sort of problems were shown on the screen, and so on. When the answers to these questions were insufficient to solve the problem, Jan would remotely access the computer register and set into motion a diagnostic procedure, which would take a few minutes, give or take, depending on the nature of the problem. The service center was very adept at solving these technical problems. They were efficient. And yet, they summoned me for mediation of a conflict. Why?

It turned out that the Americans were complaining about the frigidity of the Polish technical support. They regarded them as unsympathetic,

sometimes even arrogant. The Poles, on the other hand, regarded their own behavior in a completely different light. They claimed that they were professional, efficient, and entirely focused on solving the problem at hand. Where does this discrepancy come from? It's a typical example of a clash of cultural values.

After taking a closer look into the problem, we came to the conclusion that the root of this misunderstanding came from small talk – or rather, the lack of it. The Poles saw no need to talk "about nothing" while they were busy working.

"Irek," they told me at the beginning of the workshops I organized to manage the problem, "Why should I waste time making small talk with someone I've never laid eyes upon, thousands of kilometers away from me, as I'm actively trying to solve their problem as best and quickly as I can? My company doesn't pay me to entertain customers with conversation, but to fix the computer system."

I had also invited to these workshops a colleague from the United States, a true American born-and-raised, who moved to Poland, as they say – for his wife. He had lived in Warsaw for a few years at that point and was able to look at the situation from both points of view.

"We, Americans, tend to have an internal need to make people feel good in our company. Long silences are unsettling", he explained to the workshop participants. "Your silence was a signal that something was wrong. Small talk isn't a means to exchange information, but to signal to the person on the other end of the phone that everything's all right. That they're satisfied with the conduct of the interaction."

The Polish IT specialists came to understand that small talk is not a waste of time, but a signal that there is an agreement between the interlocutors, and that their relationship is agreeable. After this explanation, we turned to the iceberg model and spoke about what, in this situation, was above the water, what was below it, and why it was so important. The workshop attendees acknowledged that their silence brought discomfort to their American partners. They realized that, although they considered

silence to be an indicator of professionalism and their dedication to the problem at hand, the cashier on the other side of the world considered it a negative sign. Once they understood the importance of small talk, we moved on to how to engage in these pleasantries – what sorts of things you can talk about in a short, sweet conversation, and how to do so. If we had started the workshop with this exercise, without explaining why small talk is so important for the other side, the workshop participants would have simply memorized a handful of sweet, empty words. And they would probably communicate in the same artificial way at work. This way, however, they had the opportunity to understand, and therefore update their intercultural software. When they acquired the knowledge about cultural differences, they began to create the necessary messages themselves and put them into practice. Thus, they were able to build, as we say in the corporate life, a solid intercultural bridge – they checked what they needed to communicate effectively with a different culture and made the effort to adapt to their partners' expectations.

Of course, being aware of the different customs and needs prevailing in different nations will not solve every problem in a multicultural team. Nevertheless, knowing these basic norms and rules will certainly aid teams in more effective communication, motivation, and achievement of mutual goals. Back in 1986, in Baghdad, I had not then realized that the story of the soldiers holding hands would prove useful to me in business, many years later, in Dubai.

RETURN TO BAGHDAD

Fast forward from Baghdad 1986 to Dubai, the beginning of the year 2000. Back then, I was responsible for, amongst other matters, the implementation of IT systems for a distributor sales team in the Gulf Countries (UAE, Oman, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia). Our most important contractors came from Saudi Arabia. Unfortunately, they were also incredibly skeptical towards technological innovations. They were neither

impressed nor convinced by our IT systems, which were, back then, large and heavy handhelds (terminals). Their lack of enthusiasm was hard to understand considering how effectively the machines streamlined the sales process, by suggesting order quantities, calculating rebates, printing invoices, and assisted in automatic inventory reconciliation. For those times, it was a real “sweeper”.

To convince the reluctant Saudi Arabian distributors to consider using our IT systems, we decided to implement them in a smaller country to first prove its practical advantages. The choice fell on Oman and a friendly local representative. After a few months, the new technology and its workers fell into a comfortable rhythm, which made the work of the salesmen easier. Then, we invited a Saudi contractor to Oman to see for himself how well the project worked – which went swimmingly. The next step was conducting a series of presentations in the office, and proved how well even the minimally educated Indian salespeople handled the terminals.

The Saudi Arabians came to like the software, and so we went to another presentation at the hotel Al Bustan. During lunch, our client expressed greater and greater interest in the project. But then, as we were walking back to the conference room after our meal, still speaking animatedly about our project, he grasped my hand. All of the sudden, my cultural programming rang the alarm bells in my head. I wanted, instinctively, to pull my hand away, but in that split second of panic, I reminded myself that Arabic culture is a lot more relational than what I was used to, and that my guest was simply conveying to me, through that physical gesture, that he trusted me. I knew that I could not simply pull away, for breaking contact would also break the bond that I had worked so hard to build. And yet, even knowing this, I did not feel comfortable with this physical contact. The walk to the room felt like an eternity, although it could not have lasted more than twenty seconds. Finally, I knelt down under the pretext of adjusting my shoelaces and managed to discreetly free myself of his hold.

The distributors’ visit was a success. We signed contracts and implemented the software throughout the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The

outcome of these negotiations, however, could have been very different had I withdrawn my hand or told the client exactly what I thought of him. It was thanks to my awareness of the customs and cultural needs of my partner that I could direct my emotions in such a way as not to result in a conflict, but to achieve a goal that would benefit us both.

I do not mean to imply, with this story, that you should stroll and hold hands with your Middle Eastern business partners. I am sharing this story only to exemplify that understanding the cultural norms of your business partners aids in the achievement of goals. And that is why, a few years ago, I smiled to myself upon seeing a photograph of the then president of the United States, George W. Bush, and the King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia walking together, holding hands.