

Preface

The Value of Alternate Lenses to Leverage Culture

It has become somewhat of a tradition for my family to hire a professional photographer for the holidays or other special occasions. While it wasn't intentional, it became a way of documenting just how much my son has changed over the years.¹ The photographer that we hire is amazing. I find it hard to reconcile the images that I see from her photographs and the experience of being in the photo session. What seemed to be just an average day looks stunning in the pictures. Again and again, our photographer captures the perfect moment at the perfect time.

Being somewhat of a nerd, I became curious as to how she was able to capture such perfect photographs. I bought a SLR camera and tried to read some books and websites, but found it difficult to replicate the outcomes. After asking our photographer some questions, she shared one of the key elements of her success. She told me that the choice of lens had a great deal to do with her ability to get just the perfect shot.

The choice of lens allows one to gain a different perspective and to have a view of the world that would be invisible to the naked eye. So, while I was in the same physical space during the photo session, I could not see what our photographer could see.

Culture can operate in a similar fashion. Culture allows us to interpret and make sense of our world, and those who come from a similar culture share this interpretive framework. Just like the lens, some cultures focus on events that are close, while other cultures take the telescopic lens's perspective of the distant future.

In the modern world, it is becoming increasingly common to work and interact with people from very different cultures. Globalization brings us closer together, either physically or virtually through the means of electronic communication. English has been adopted as the international language of business. Thus, even though we may be from different cultures, we may speak the same language. Yet,

¹Story courtesy of the first author.

this common language may be deceiving. Its adoption doesn't mean that we have perfect understanding. What makes perfect sense to you may not make sense to your international partner, your international supplier, or your international market. We view the world through different lenses; our perspectives may not align, which can lead to miscommunication, misunderstanding, and lost opportunities.

To share key elements of success in understanding culture, we convened the first Cross-Cultural Management Summit in the spring of 2014. The Summit was hosted by the Institute for Cross-Cultural Management at Florida Tech, and this book is a product of that summit. Culture and organizational effectiveness was the theme that brought the Summit participants together. Each of the participants saw culture impacting their profession, and they gathered to learn more about culture from each other. For our participants from the corporate world, culture was an unknown variable that could impact their bottom line and add risk to their business. For participants from the military, knowledge regarding culture could improve the intelligence they gathered and make sure that our men and women in uniform came home alive. For our participants from academia, a better understanding of the context of cultural dilemmas may be a piece of an intellectual puzzle in a long a productive research career. So while our interest in culture was common ground, the background of the participants was quite varied. We feel that is the real strength of the Summit.

If we all came from the same background and had the same problems, the solutions available to us would be fixed and expertise more limited. However, the participants didn't have the same background, which gives us the opportunity to create and claim value. A quick examination of the summit participants revealed participants flew from China, Europe, Africa, and South America and represented equally diverse professional fields. Included in the participants was a former foreign area officer who used his cultural experienced gained in Indonesia to facilitate the success of a Marine Expeditionary Unit in Cambodia, the first US Marine back in that country since the last battle of the Vietnam War. Another participant was the Vice President of Nortel, who used her understanding of the value of family in Latin cultures to build business in Bolivia, not through the traditional gifts of liquor and cigars, but through family gifts that led to an invitation into the home of her future partners. Yet another participant was a cultural anthropologist who worked with the king of Tonga to improve the quality of life of people on the islands.

The goal of the Summit was to leverage these different vantage points to solve each other's problems, to gain a new perspective, and re-focus on our work. With the aid of a different lens, we might find a solution to our problem that wasn't apparent from our own point of view. In fact, one person's problem may actually be another person's solution. There is an old idiom "One man's trash is another man's treasure," and our hope was that through networking and sharing with other professionals, the participants of the Summit might stumble across just such a treasure.

While the collective wisdom in the room provided the potential for deep learning and problem solving, all of that potential needed to be unlocked before it could be shared. Because the participants of the Summit came from such varied backgrounds, they often spoke different professional "languages." Luckily, the staff of

ICCM often found themselves acting like interpreters, facilitating conversations by helping to translate language and keep conversations on track. With a just little help, we were able to unlock a lot of that hidden expertise through probing questions and explicit clarifications.

By no means was this process easy for any of the Summit participants. It took a lot of effort, patience, and perseverance. Lugging a camera bag full of lenses around is hard work. It is much easier to stick with our same old lens and same old habits. We asked participants of the Summit not only to lead discussions, but to follow tangents down a rabbit hole or two. We encouraged them to look for opportunities to share, question, and translate across professions and contexts. Luckily, the participants were up for the challenges. What resulted was a high energy exchange of thoughts, ideas, questions, and perspectives that lasted the duration of the Summit.

Reflecting on all we learned at the Summit, it would a shame if the lessons we learned weren't spread to a wider audience. The outcome of that sentiment is the book that you're now reading. Our goal for this edited volume was a wider dissemination of the lessons of the Summit so that the value created at the event could be claimed by other professionals with similar challenges.

The 2014 Cross Cultural Management Summit was an enjoyable and memorable event for us. We hope this book will be an enjoyable read for you, and allow you to borrow the lenses of some of thought leaders at the Summit. Perhaps with a change of perspective, your challenges may be drawn into sharper focus and the improved view offer new insights.

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