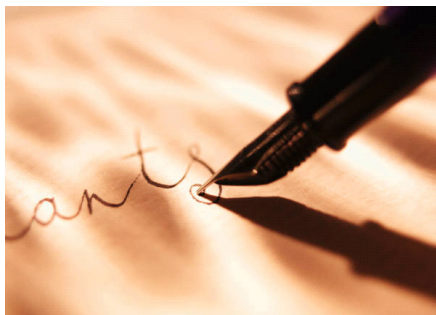


# BREAKING THROUGH CULTURAL BARRIERS: BEST PRACTICES IN GLOBAL OD

*Anna Erickson, Ph.D.*

We live in exciting and terrifying times. Globalization and worldwide competition have become defining characteristics of our time, while we are confronted daily with news of cultural clashes and international conflict. As professionals in the field of Organizational Development, the ability to operate globally is more important than ever. Increasingly, the OD professional needs to be able to maneuver the global organization and implement programs and processes with employees around the world. Moving from local to global adds new levels of complexity to already difficult challenges. In order to be successful, it is increasingly important to understand the complications that arise due to differences in culture, geographical distance and our changing world.



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## OUR CHANGING WORLD

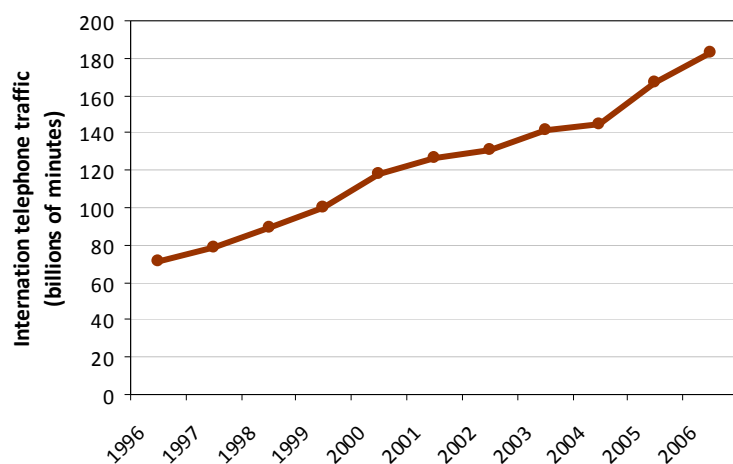
When Marco Polo returned from Asia and the Middle East in 1292, the stories of his travels were met with amazement and skepticism. The wonders that he described were difficult for his European contemporaries to comprehend or accept. Stories of paper money, exotic animals, clothing lined with gold, and black stones used for fuel were rejected by most as products of Polo's imagination. So skeptical were many of his acquaintances that Marco Polo was reportedly urged to recant his stories to save his own reputation, even until his death in 1323. As the story goes, a priest asked Marco Polo to confess the stories were concocted as Marco Polo lay on his deathbed. In response, Polo not only refused to do so, but responded "I do not tell half of what I saw because no one would have believed me."

The skepticism of thirteenth century Europe should not surprise us. Things Polo described such as crocodiles, coal, and coconuts were unheard of in Europe at the time. And information was slow to travel in 1292. In fact, it took nearly four years for the Polo family to travel from Venice to China. Contrast that with today's environment. In 2006 there were more than 180 billion minutes of international telephone traffic around the world according to the International Telecommunication Union. This global chatter continues to increase steadily, as evidenced by an increase of nearly 300% in just the past decade. Add to this other mediums which have made our world smaller,

including dramatic increases in communication and information exchange via satellite television and Internet access. Our world is definitely shrinking.

As the world gets smaller and increasingly shares information, it begins to share culture as well. In his book, *Cultural Literacy* (1987), E. D. Hirsch articulates the importance of shared experiences, shared information, and shared symbolism as the foundation of culture. He also argues that this foundation provides a catalyst for efficient, unambiguous, and coherent communication. With the creation of industrial nation states in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, national cultures were deliberately created partly through the standardization of language within their borders. This systematic documentation and dissemination of language and legend within a country created the framework for sharing information efficiently.

**Growth of Global Telecommunication**



If culture is shared information, shared stories and shared meaning that help us communicate more efficiently, it would seem that the global economy is

creating an international shared culture. As a result, we are seeing evidence that cultures are merging, and individual national and local cultures are becoming endangered. There is indeed evidence that local cultures are converging. For example, Kristin Tillotson in an article “Photographer works to keep languages, culture alive” (Minneapolis Star Tribune, April 26, 2004) reports that of the 6,000 languages spoken around the globe, half will die out within a generation.

While we mourn the depletion of cultural distinctions around the world, we recognize the potential that could be obtained by leveraging shared cultural experiences and shared understanding around the world. As information is shared across political and geographic boundaries, our shared experiences hold promise for improvements in cultural understanding and increasingly effective communications around the world. Regardless of our feelings about our ever-changing world, it seems likely that globalization will continue. Our world will never be the same. As Thomas Friedman said in his book *The Lexis and the Olive Tree* (1999), “Globalization is not a

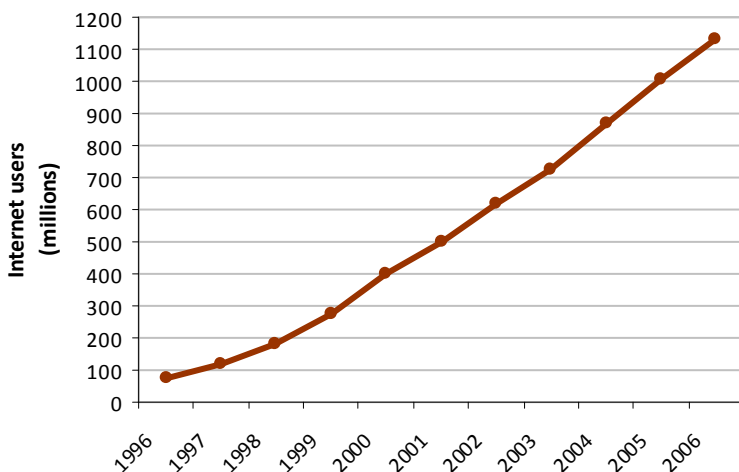
phenomenon. It is not just some passing trend. Today it is the overarching international system shaping the domestic politics and foreign relations of virtually every country, and we need to understand it as such.”

## THE GREAT DIVIDE

Although there is great convergence of cultures around the world and potential for increased understanding across cultural boundaries, vast differences still exist. While the sharing of information around the globe is spreading every day, there are huge gaps in access to this shared information. More than half the world’s population has never made a telephone call. In Chad or Afghanistan, you’ll find fewer than one telephone for every 800 people, compared with nearly a one to one ratio in countries like Sweden and the United States. In Canada and Iceland, close to half the population are Internet users. In contrast, only one percent of the residents of India or Cuba have access to the Internet. Examining many African countries, this number drops to fewer than one in 1000.

In addition to the differences in access to information, there are individual differences within cultures with regard to the exposure one chooses to have to these global influences. This makes it difficult to predict how familiar specific individuals within a culture will be to the concepts or paradigms we use to communicate. An excellent example of this divergence within a culture comes from a friend who is in the military as he described his experience in Afghanistan. Specific messages that needed to be communicated to local residents were first presented to focus groups to ensure that the correct meaning would be derived from the

**Growth of Global Internet Usage**



message. The focus groups were held with residents near a city close to an American Air Force base. When approved messages arrived at my friend's base in a much more rural area, the message may not have been appropriate with the local people living there. Residents living near the Air Force base had been exposed to western culture, concepts, and terminology, and had a better understanding of certain key terms within the message. The residents living in the more rural area, however, had been much less exposed to Western culture. As a result, some of the messages needed to be adjusted to avoid misunderstanding.

"Never underestimate the westernization of people, even in remote areas of the world," warns global survey professional Jill Roberts. In her work in Senegal, Africa, she had an experience that drove this lesson home for her. As she was walking down the street, a stranger confronted her with very offensive insults in perfect American English. Upset, she turned to the stranger and scolded him in the native dialect, Wolof. Our colleague later discovered that the stunned young man had not been addressing her at all. In fact, he did not even speak English. The man was simply "singing" an American rap song, having no idea what it meant.

## **W**ORKING IN THE NEW ECONOMY

So what does this mean for the Organizational Development professional? More than ever, OD professionals need to be able to navigate this global environment, understand the implications of cultural differences, and be aware of the special challenges that global implementation will bring. Although it is difficult to predict the impact that cultural differences and political events may have on your project or initiative, there are some basic

principles that can help you increase the likelihood of success in the global arena.

### **Approach the process ready to learn.**

No matter how many times you've facilitated the process or how much experience you have, assume that you don't know the best way to approach the initiative in any given country. Approach the process as an opportunity to learn. Openness to learning is a significant predictor of success when implementing global projects.

### **Learn as much as you can about the local culture.**

Cultural differences can create unexpected problems for your program. Gert Hofstede (e.g., *Culture's Consequences*, 1980), Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner (*Riding the Waves of Culture*, 1998) offer great frameworks within which to consider cultural differences. It's important to anticipate how culture may impact your OD initiative. For example, Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998) describe the difference between Ascription- and Achievement-Oriented cultures in the ways these cultures accord status. In Achievement-Oriented cultures, such as the United States or Norway, status is based on what the individual does or has achieved. In these cultures, it is not appropriate to flaunt titles or educational degrees unless it is relevant to the task and the competence you'll need to complete the task. In Ascription-Oriented cultures, such as South Korea or Spain, status is based on who you are in terms of family, organizational level, education, age or gender. In these cultures organizational level, age, and other determinants of status influence everyday interactions between individuals. When doing business globally, it is imperative that these differences be taken into account, for example, as you establish sponsorship or communication around your initiative.

### **But don't try to become a cultural expert.**

There is no better way to insult your business associates than to make assumptions about individuals based on generalities about a population. As Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner put in their book, *Riding the Waves of Culture* (1998), "It is our belief that you can never understand other cultures. Those who are married know that it is impossible ever completely to understand even people of your own culture." Even if you've had a great deal of experience working across cultures, it's important to leverage local input to ensure your messages and processes are appropriate for the specific audience you will be addressing.

### **Create a global implementation team.**

Creating a global implementation team to guide planning and execution has been key to the success of many global initiatives. It's important to allow the team to have input from the very beginning – at the design phase of the project. This team will help you think through the details and avoid common pitfalls. A well coordinated global implementation team can help you with key messages and implementation strategies. They can help you adapt your program to ensure it is culturally appropriate, and prevent you from making key mistakes like rolling out the program in Europe during August when most employees will be taking holiday.

Facilitating this global team will be challenging. Deciding ahead of time specifically which decisions are up for discussion and which decisions are non-negotiable can help avoid delays in the process. In addition, specifying who the final decision maker is will ensure that decisions are made and the project actually does move forward. Because decision making by committee is not efficient, we recommend the global team be drawn upon for

input, rather than working toward consensus. You'll also want to be sure to build extra time into your project plan to accommodate some loss in efficiency.

### **Utilize local administrators.**

Organizations that successfully implement programs on a large scale global level typically train people who are already working within various countries to administer the program at the local level. Utilizing this model can help you avoid a number of problems that may arise due to geographical distance, translations, and cultural influences. For example, a well-trained local administrator can provide feedback on appropriateness of communications and processes. Resistance that may arise when programs are seen as coming from "corporate" or from the "outside" can be diminished by leveraging the local contact to build trust and understanding. In addition the local contact can be there to answer questions or provide other assistance, and will be available during the same working hours as the targets of the initiative.

### **Maintain flexibility.**

Although you may need to maintain control over the process, don't be too rigid in implementing global programs. You may have used a similar process a hundred times, but when implementing the program globally, don't assume anything will work the same way. It's imperative to be in tune with your audience, be a good listener and observer of people, and be ready to make adjustments on the fly. Build in more flexibility than you normally would and take advantage of anyone who is willing to provide informed mentorship about navigating a particular culture.

### Pay attention to the little things.

Sometimes decisions you make about the smallest details can have unexpected impact on the success of your project. Things you may consider insignificant may be noticed by others. For example, the paper you print on (e.g., 8 ½ X 11 or A-4?), the time zones you reference, and your choices about US vs. UK spelling preferences in English communication pieces can accumulate to come across as either ego-centric or globally sensitive. In addition, the smallest errors can create very large obstacles. When shipping materials to other countries, the way the boxes are labeled can have huge implications on the way they are treated when going through customs. One company that we work with accidentally shipped a package bound for South Korea to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. The project manager explained, "There was no way to get those materials back once they had arrived in North Korea." Be aware that in certain countries, such as Germany, labor unions will need to approve materials completed by employees, such as employee opinion surveys.

### Take care in interpreting data.

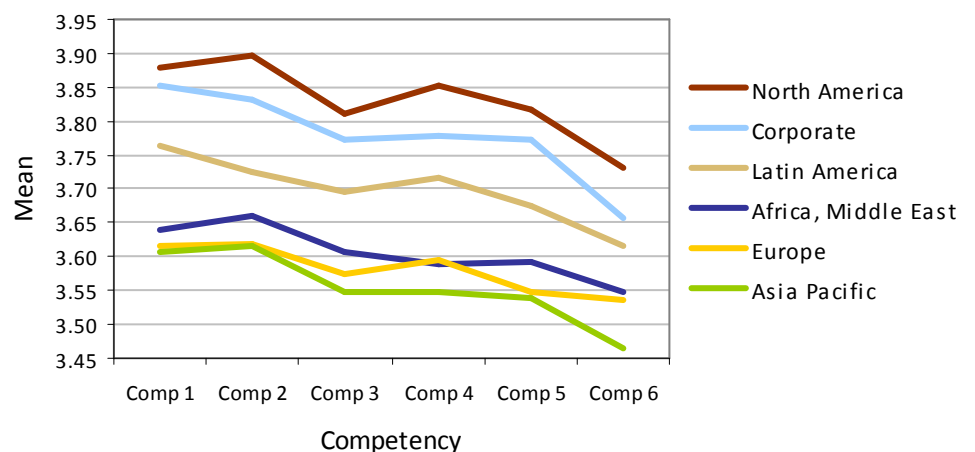
Cultural differences can impact how individuals interpret and respond to measurement tools such as surveys. It's easy for individuals who are not in tune with these rating tendencies to misinterpret differences in measurement results as true differences in skill level or attitude, rather than cultural artifacts.

In fact, it is very common to see rating discrepancies that reflect cultural differences in approaching the survey or other measurement tool.

For example, we commonly see cultural differences in 360° feedback scores and employee opinion survey results. In sharing the graph below with a client, it would be a mistake to assume that executives in North America have a greater level of competence than executives in the Asia Pacific region. In fact, cultural differences influencing the ratings do not allow us to make that comparison.

Without a doubt, global implementation of OD programs can be challenging. Sloppy implementation or rollout that does not take cultural differences into account can be costly in terms of credibility, morale, and productivity. However, with careful planning, attention to detail, and inclusion of key stakeholders, global implementation can provide huge benefits to the organization.

**Global Executive Ratings**



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