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Culture as a Driver and Key Component of International Business: A Primer

Richard J. Hunter, Jr.
Professor of Legal Studies and
Chair, Department of Economics and Legal Studies
Stillman School of Business
Seton Hall University
South Orange, New Jersey

Héctor R. Lozada
Associate Professor of Marketing and International Business
Stillman School of Business
Seton Hall University
South Orange, New Jersey

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ABSTRACT

This article is an analysis of the role of culture as a driver in international business, most especially when a business is seeking an entry into a foreign market. The article begins with an assessment of several key components, including a discussion of subcultures, ethnocentricity, and social structure. It then moves on to a detailed discussion of the components of culture in the context of international business, including aesthetics, values, attitudes, customs, manners, and traits. The article then moves to a discussion of religion and cultural diffusion as they impact international business. The article provides many practical examples of the role of culture in the business decision-making process. The article concludes with a mandate or imperative to international businessmen and women: to achieve a high degree of cross-cultural literacy and to "check their stereotypes at the international cloakroom door."

KEY WORDS: Culture, ethnocentrism, social structure, "Flash Points," intellectual property rights

1. INTRODUCTION

Businessmen and women must understand the significance of *culture* in conducting international business—especially when they are attempting to penetrate a foreign market. Culture poses a major challenge for managers in the international arena in developing strategies involving foreign direct investment (Hunter, Shapiro & Ryan, 2003/04; Hunter & Lozada, 2009), licensing, joint venture (Georgieva, Jandik & Lee, 2012), or creating a strategic or equity alliance (Serapio & Cascio, 1996; Bleeke & Ernst, 1995). Ultimately, to be successful in international business, businessmen and women must be knowledgeable about world cultures, must develop a cultural literacy—that is, a detailed knowledge about a culture that enables people to live and work together—a keen cultural sensitivity, and an insightful cultural awareness (Lenartowicz & Roth, 2001). Knowledge of culture and cultural literacy are the components of a successful international business operation.

Let's begin with a simple question. What is culture? Robert Kohls, former director of training for the United States Information Agency, provides a valuable insight. Culture may be defined as an "integrated system of learned behavior patterns that are characteristic of the members of any given society. Culture refers to the total way of life of particular groups of people. It includes everything that a group of people thinks, says, does and makes—its systems of attitudes and feelings. Culture is learned and transmitted from generation to generation" (Kohls, 1996, p. 23).

Edward Hall, a respected anthropologist and cross-cultural researcher, coined the concept of "*intercultural communications*" (Hall, 1976). Professor Hall provides an important construct that is helpful in understanding the context of culture as a component of international business. Hall makes the distinction between *high and low context cultures*. High context refers to societies or groups where people have close connections, usually fewer in number, but which are developed over time. As such, many aspects of culture are not required to be made explicitly, either orally or in writing, because members of that society know what to do and think from literally years of close interaction with each other.

Low context refers to societies where people tend to have many connections but of shorter duration or which are accomplished for some specific reasons or purposes. In low context societies, cultural behavior and beliefs may need to be spelled out explicitly so that those who come into the culture know how to behave and what to expect. In low context countries, for example, decision-makers may only be interested in processing direct firsthand information and will state directly and unequivocally all pertinent facts directly (see, e.g., www.culture-at-work.com.html, 2012). In a high context country (such as Japan and Saudi Arabia), context is at least as important as what is actually said and people will infer meanings from information conveyed indirectly. In low context countries (such as the United States, Germany and Canada), information is contained explicitly in the precise words expressed.

The distinction between high and low context may have a major impact on the area of negotiating international contracts, where an implied contract (made pursuant to conduct rather than words) may be clearly secondary to an express contract (found in words) which captures the agreement between the parties(Hunter, Shannon, Amoroso & O'Sullivan-Gavin, 2010, 88-90). Whether a country is low or high context may affect whether or not explicit language will be required in contracts relating to such issues as termination of operations, geographic or "field limitations," management operations, issues relating to use of important intellectual property assets, and the protection of human assets through the enforcement of a covenant-against-competition (Hall & Hall, 1987, pp. 9-10). In addition, business behavior in high context cultures will often differ significantly from that in low-context cultures. For example, in the area of international marketing, advertising in Germany is primarily direct and fact-oriented, while advertising in Japan may rely more on emotion (Hall & Hall, 1990, pp. 72-73).

2. KEY OR FOUNDATION CONCEPTS

There are several key or foundation concepts in the analysis of culture in the business environment that may shape the ability of a company to penetrate into a foreign business market or environment and may also serve to clarify the selection of the right market penetration strategy. The first key concept is recognizing that that a nation will often not exhibit a uniform cultural identity and that within a larger culture may lay one or more *subcultures.* Daniels, Radebaugh, and Sullivan (2007, p. 51) note that "each nation possesses certain human, demographics, and behavioral characteristics that constitute its national identity and that may affect a company's methods of conducting business effectively in that country." Nevertheless, because host countries may not be completely homogeneous in terms of its population or ethnic base, international businesses will have to be cognizant of the existence of a subculture (or several subcultures) operating within the larger cultural borders of a nation.

A *subculture* is a group of people who share a unique way of life *within* a larger, dominant culture, manifesting itself in such areas as language (spoken, written, or silent) (Hall, 1960), lifestyle, values, attitudes, or some other characteristic or factor. A subculture can transcend or extend beyond national boundaries, such as Arabic/Moslem culture, Jewish culture, Hispanic culture, Greek culture, and Chinese culture, which may exist in many nations simultaneously (Foster, 1991). Think of how many sub-cultures exist with the borders of many nations and how a whole rash of business opportunities present themselves in order to exploit the existence of these cultural variations or subcultures through carefully constructed marketing strategies.

The second of these key or foundation concepts is termed *ethnocentricity* – a belief that one's own culture or ethnic group is superior to that of others. Ethnocentricity may be benign and may point to the existence of a certain "national pride," or ethnocentricity may also play out in what is sometimes termed "cultural imperialism" in which a company may be accused of forcing or insisting on its own values or culture in introducing new products or management techniques into a foreign business environment. Daniels, Radebaugh, and Sullivan (2007, pp. 74-75) take note that ethnocentricity may cause managers to "overlook important cultural factors abroad because they have become accustomed to certain cause-and-effect relationships in the home country."

In this context, companies may often employ a strategy known as *ethnocentric management*, where foreign business operations are managed exclusively or perhaps primarily by nationals of the investing company to the exclusion of local managers. In some cases, this staffing function is accomplished by and through the hiring of reliable expatriates ("In Search of Stealth," *The Economist*, 2005). This strategy is often explained on the basis of a belief that ethnocentric staffing ensures that a firm's core competencies or values are reflected in any overseas operations (Hsieh, Lavoie & Samek, 1999). Daniels, Radebaugh, and Sullivan (2007, p. 711) put it this way: "Posting a home-country manager to foreign operations, therefore, puts the company's core competency under the direction of the home-country manager who commands the hands-on-knowledge that made the company successful in the first place."

It is, of course, important to recognize that corporate values are essential components in assuring the success of a business model and that international business operations should not be entirely "corporate valueless." However, when taken to the extreme, ethnocentrism may be fundamentally antithetical to a successful international business venture. The rejection of any extreme form of ethnocentrism may result in the adoption of a strategy which has been termed *polycentrism*, where business units in different countries are free to act independently of each other, reflecting on their local environment, in order to provide location-specific and function-specific values. In today's international business environment, perhaps the most efficient and effective strategy is to seek a middle ground between the seeming extremes of polycentrism and ethnocentrism by adopting a strategy termed *geocentrism*, which is a hybrid of the "best business practices" found in a host country, the practices which are at the core of a company's business model, and some entirely new practices developed to deal with country-specific circumstances, strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities, in a variant of a cultural S.W.O.T analysis(Brannen & Salk, 2000).

Recognizing the existence concept of a *subculture* within a larger culture and the potential negative aspects of *ethnocentrism* are important in devising a strategy for using culture as a "success point" in penetrating a foreign market.

3. SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Social structure is a fundamental organizing principle of any society. The structure of a society will include groups and institutions, rankings or *social stratification*, and any system of social positions and relationships. The way in which a society is organized may affect the process by which a society or an individual business allocates and distributes its resources. Social structure may affect business decisions in such areas as deciding what products to sell, the selection of production sites, and the choice of advertising methods, and may even have a direct influence the costs of doing business in a country. *Social stratification* is the process of ranking individuals into social layers or classes. An individual's ranking may be affected by both individual factors such as their level of education or may be determined by that person's affiliation or membership in a given societal group (Trompenaars, 1994, pp. 100-116). Affiliations which are determined by birth are known as *ascribed* group memberships. These include those based on gender, family, caste, or factors relating to ethnic, racial, or national origin factors. Affiliations not determined by birth are termed as *acquired* group memberships and include those based on religious preferences, political affiliations or memberships, and other associations that individuals voluntarily chose to enter.

A *caste system* is a rather extreme system of social stratification in which people are born into a social ranking, with no or very little opportunity for upward social mobility and where membership in an individual caste or group meets with a negative preferential stigmatism (Arnold & Robb, 1995). A *class system* is a system of social stratification that is less rigid than a caste system but is nevertheless built around social status. Griffin and Pustay (2002, p. 88) note that: "The U.K.'s formerly rigid class system and relatively low social mobility created an 'us versus them' attitude among many British industrial workers." In a *high class-conscious culture*, there is often little social mobility and society will often experience class conflict. In a *low class-conscious society*, mobility is encouraged and society will often experience a lower level of class conflict.

4. COMPONENTS OF CULTURE: "FLASH POINTS" IN OBSERVATION AND ACTION: *Aesthetics, Values, Attitudes, Traits, Customs, Manners, Education, Religion and Cultural Diffusion*

A nation's culture may be heavily influenced by a concept known as *aesthetics*. Aesthetics includes what a culture considers to be "*in good taste*" in such areas as the arts, music, painting, dance, drama, and architecture. Aesthetics may also implicate aspects of culture such as the imagery evoked by certain expressions, the symbolism found in certain colors, or even aromas (Adler, 1997). Businesses have unfortunately learned that major blunders can result from selecting inappropriate colors, sounds, or imagery used in advertising, product packaging, and even work uniforms (the use of "brown" uniform shirts in Poland by a major international company) in certain countries.

Daniels, Radebaugh, and Sullivan (2007, p. 68) offer these examples:

- "United Airlines promoted a new passenger service in Hong Kong by giving white carnations to its best customers there. The promotion backfired because people in Hong Kong give white carnations only in sympathy for a family death."
- "Motorola had difficulty in assigning certain cellular telephone numbers in China because of their sound in Mandarin. The worst is one ending in 54-7424 because it sounds like 'I die, my wife dies, my child dies."

Values of a society include ideals and beliefs, to which people are emotionally, psychologically, or spiritually attached.

Values are critical to business. In fact, Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric, stated: "Objectives don't get you there. Values do" (GECO, citing the *Harvard Business Review*, 2000). Welch's successor at GE, Jeffrey Immelt, commented that General Electric has tried "very hard to provide a company, a set of values, and a culture that employees can be proud of" ("In Search of Global Leaders," *Harvard Business Review*, 2003).

Values may affect an individual's work ethic (Hagen, 1962), a desire for material possessions (Inden, 1986; Chatterjee, 1986), the toleration of bribery and corruption in both the governmental and business environments (Hunter, Shannon, and Mest, 2011), the recognition of key environmental issues, and the expectation of generational economic betterment (e.g., Inglehart, Basanez & Moreno, 1998). For example, in Singapore, people are said to value hard work and material success; in Greece, people are said to value leisure and a modest lifestyle (e.g., Wolf, 2002); in Japan (Newman & Rhee, 1990) and South Korea, people are said to value individual hard work and value group consensus, rather than the imposition of a majoritarian solution; and in Eastern Europe, people generally are said to value frugality and expect that religious practices will be a major part of civic and business activities.

However, on the other hand, in any consideration of values, businesses must be very careful to avoid *stereotypes* or overstatements in assessing values. Assessing values is an important *balancing concept* for business—especially for international businesses—which may be plunged into the midst of a society that is itself experiencing changing values or differentiation of values based on demographics, income, aging, or other factors. For example, while it may be generally true that higher levels of corruption may be closely associated with lower growth and lower levels of per capita income (Habib & Zurawicki, 2001, this does not necessarily indicate that all countries experiencing low growth or low per capita income are rampant with bribery and corruption (see generally, Transparency International, 2012). Decisions relating to investment must be made on the basis of fact and not stereotypical responses.

Attitudes are positive or negative evaluations, feelings, beliefs, and tendencies that individuals may harbor towards objects, ideas, or concepts such as time (Saunders, Van Slyke & Vogel, 2004; Trompenaars, 1994), work, leisure, or "culture change." Work attitudes are frequently influenced by factors such as salary, workplace (male/female) relations (Westwood & Leung, 1994), the trade-off between family and career, and how employees should be rewarded for on-the-job performance.

Closely allied to attitudes are *cultural traits*. A *cultural trait* is anything that presents a culture's way of expressing itself, including gestures, material objects, traditions, and communication concepts. For example, a cultural trait may include an understanding of body language or *kinesics or kinetics*, which deals with the way people walk, talk, turn, or move their bodies. Because few gestures have a universal meaning, a manager or employee of an international business must be aware of key differences in interpreting body language and gestures (Axtell, 1998). More than a quarter-century ago, Condon and Yousef (1975) presciently identified the following forms of nonverbal communication that may impact on the business environment: hand gestures; facial expressions; posture and stance; clothing and hair styles; walking behavior; interpersonal distance; touching; eye contact; listening behavior; architecture and interior design; "artifacts" and symbols; graphic symbols; art and rhetorical forms; smell (olfaction), including body odors, perfumes, and incense; speech rate, pitch and inflection; color symbolism; synchronization of speech and movement; tastes; cosmetics; signals; time symbolism; timing and pauses within verbal behavior; and silence.

In addition, an important aspect of culture as it relates to the business environment is *language*. Language is critical as it organizes and informs the way in which members of society think about the world—in the context of as many as 3,000 different languages and as many as 10,000 distinct dialects throughout the world. In India alone, there are 16 "official languages" and approximately 3,000 dialects. Yet, India has been aggressively successful in attracting numerous international businesses into its internet service and medical transcription environment, perhaps not surprisingly, by adopting English as the predominant common business language. In an interesting twist, difficulty in language transmission may make it an easy decision to locate a manufacturing plant or a distribution center outside of a home country and on the soil of a host country where its citizens speak the native language of the manufacturer. Stated William Hanneman, the President of Giro Sports Design, a manufacturer of bicycle helmets, "With all the problems you have in running a business abroad, we didn't want to be bothered by language" ("Going Global," *Wall Street Journal*, 1992).

Attitudes may provide a point of differentiation between nations that are individualist rather than collectivist in their business orientation—perhaps reflecting their base-line economic system or traditions. Daniels, Radebaugh & Sullivan (2007, p. 64) note that "attributes of individualism are low dependence on the organization and a desire for personal time, freedom and challenge." Attributes of collectivism are "dependence on the organization and a desire for training, good physical conditions, and benefits." In Japan, for example, a person's compensation reflects the *group* to which he or she belongs, and not necessarily personal achievement. However, what should also be apparent that in a practical business sense, measuring differences in terms of individualism versus collectivism must be approached rather openly because, just as in the case of measuring values, any attempt to characterize entire societies on the basis of just these two variants is both "complex and controversial" and may not be either helpful or dispositive (Hofstede, 1997, pp. 49-78; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman & Gupta, 2004).

Perhaps, not surprisingly, attitudes are a major "flash point" in the protection of intellectual property rights (see Business Software Alliance, 2010). Countries that demonstrate an "individualist orientation" tend to view ownership claims to intellectual property as legitimate and worthy of protection, and are thus concerned about such issues as end-user privacy, internet piracy, counterfeiting, or more recently, online auction piracy. In contrast, nations that are more "collectivist" (for example, China), may not fully recognize individual ownership of patents, copyrights, and trademarks and may not be as forceful in assuring intellectual property protections, at least partly on the basis of their systemic economic foundations (Hunter, 2006; Hunter, Blodgett & Hayden, 2009, pp. 223-227).

In fact, the *Global Software Piracy Study,* conducted in 2004, listed China (92%), Vietnam (92%), and Ukraine (91%) as the three leading "pirating countries," perhaps reflecting their orientation towards a collectivist, central-planning model (Business Software Alliance, 2004). The United States (22%), New Zealand (23%), and Denmark (26%), were listed in the "bottom 20 pirating countries." By 2010, the three leading pirating countries included Georgia (93%), Zimbabwe (91%), and Bangladesh (90%). China still scored 78%, Viet Nam (83%), and Ukraine (86%). In terms of "bottom countries," the United States, Japan, and Luxembourg all stood at 20% (Business Software Alliance, 2010). Weinstein and Fernandez (2004, p. 227) account for the high instance of pirating in the Chinese economy and note that "Chinese intellectual property laws exist to protect Chinese intellectual property from foreign intellectual property." This statement may underscore why many international business are reluctant to transfer certain types of high- level technologies into the Chinese market and the fact that many Chinese products, which have been termed as "Dollar Shop Goods," with relatively low levels of technology, have made their way into U.S. and world markets.

Cultural diffusion is the process whereby cultural traits are spread from one culture to another (Kottak, 2009). For example, it is interesting to note how the seeming "icons" of American culture such as jeans, "big Macs," pizza, hotdogs, sneakers, or rock or rap music have permeated the world stage and have dominated international sales. Advances in telecommunications and the rise of international franchising (Hunter & Lozada, 2000; Hunter, Lozada & Kritz, 2005) are just two factors that have led to increasing the cultural diffusion process. In the business context, cultural diffusion has been explained by what is known as *country-similarity theory*. The application of this theory indicates that once a company has developed a new product in response to market conditions in the home market, it will turn to markets internationally that the business may see as most similar to those at home – i.e., those that are most receptive to the diffusion of culture into the host market structure or in markets that are receptive to the influences of culture on an international scale (Linder, 1961).

Manners are appropriate ways of behaving, speaking, and dressing within a culture (for example, the etiquette of extending a hand in greeting, giving up a seat to an elder person on a bus or train, holding open a door, the exchange of business cards, or rising in a room). *Customs* are habits or ways of behaving in specific circumstances that are passed down through generations within a specific culture. A *folk or traditional custom* is behavior, often dating back several generations, that is practiced within a homogeneous group of people—often more out of memory or nostalgia, rather than actual practice. A *popular custom* is behavior shared by a heterogeneous group or by several groups and exhibits itself in contemporary culture (Generally, Morrison & Conaway, 2006).

Since many human values often derive from religious beliefs, *religion* frequently influences societal views on work, savings, and the possession of material goods. In any culture, these differing views influence the competitiveness of companies, the pace of economic development, and direct how managers adapt their strategies and methods for change. Examples of how religion influences and impacts the business environment include the influence of Kosher laws on food preparation and hours of business operation—critical factors in the success of a franchise operation; Islamic and Hindu prohibition on the consumption of alcohol, pork, or other meat products; the lending of money "for interest" because such a practice may be seen as an unfair exploitation of the poor (Khalili, 1997; "Court Ruling on Islamic Banking Practices Poses a Challenge for Pakistan Interests," *Financial Times*, 1993); the Hindu emphasis on spiritual accomplishment rather than economic success and the prohibition against willfully harming any living creature and injunctions against the serving of pork or other meat products in India (Taylor, 2002); and the Buddhist insistence on modesty, compassion for others, and self-control. All of these factors must be carefully considered in any business decision in a society in which religious values strongly influence secular-civil society and the business environment.

In a *theocracy*, or a society dominated by religion or by religious figures, religious values or attitudes may, in fact, be *the most important factors* in determining potential patterns of behavior and in assessing future prospects for success in the business environment. For example, in a theocracy, the legal system may confer secular authority on religious leaders who use religious laws, religious principles, or theology to govern civil society. At present, Islamic Law or Sharia is the most prevalent aspect of a theocratic system, relying on the Koran (Quran), the Sunnah (or decisions or sayings of the Prophet Mohammed), the writing of important Islamic scholars, and legal principles derived from recognized decisions from religious figures from Muslim countries in order to formulate the rules which will organize civil society or regularize the business environment.

Finally, because each culture educates its young people through a combination of formal schooling, parenting, religious teachings, and group activities, membership and formal and informal affiliations, *education* is an important part of culture. However, it is also important to recognize that some societies have been hit rather hard by the phenomenon of the "*brain drain*," the systematic departure of highly educated young people from one profession, geographical region, or even one nation to another. The nations of Central and Eastern Europe, South Korea, and the Philippines were especially susceptible to the "*brain drain*" phenomenon in the 1970s and 1980s when prospects for reform, progress, and personal advancement were minimal in their own country (Hunter, 2006).

5. SOME CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

Sounds very challenging! It is, but not impossible. One solution to the conundrum of culture is for the international businessperson to strive to achieve the highest degree of cross-cultural literacy as possible on a personal level. While there are many vehicles available to learn about culture in business, the one sure way is to engage directly in international business activities that will require the businessperson to check their stereotypes at the international cloakroom door and delve into the practicalities of conducting business around the world. Americans should be willing to take on both long and short-term assignments abroad and to engage frequently in non-business travel. Business executives must recognize the benefits of offering cross-cultural training to all their employees—not just those slated for immediate international assignments—and Americans must embrace the new norm of cultural convergence.

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