Cross-Cultural Negotiation

Culture influences how people build trust, communicate, disagree and decide, so it also shapes negotiations. Erin Meyer, a professor at INSEAD, explains this in her 2014 book The Culture Map, where she describes eight scales that compare how cultures work. Each scale has two ends, and neither end is right or wrong. What matters is where each side sits relative to the other, and individuals always vary. We follow Youssef, an exporter, as he meets a new partner abroad.

1. The Culture Map: Compare, Do Not Stereotype

Meyer's eight scales cover communicating, evaluating, persuading, leading, deciding, trusting, disagreeing and scheduling. We place ourselves and the other side on each scale and look at the distance between them. The larger the distance, the more likely a misunderstanding. A country gives only a first hint, so we treat it as a starting point and then observe the real person.

Example: A traveller notices that dinner guests in another country arrive much later than the invited time. The traveller applies the culture map idea and compares attitudes to time instead of calling the guests rude. The traveller relaxes and enjoys the evening.

At work: Youssef prepares for his first meeting abroad. He applies the culture map idea: he places his own style and his partner's style on each scale, and notes the biggest gaps without assuming anything about the person. In the meeting, he is ready for the differences instead of being surprised by them.

2. Trust: Tasks or Relationships

Meyer's trusting scale compares task-based and relationship-based trust. In task-based cultures, trust grows from the work itself: reliability, quality and kept promises. In relationship-based cultures, trust grows from time spent together, such as meals and conversations, before the work begins. When a partner values relationships, hurrying into the contract can look cold, and when a partner values tasks, long social time can look like wasted time.

Example: A market trader offers every new customer tea before talking about prices. This is relationship-based trust: time together comes first, and business follows. Customers return because they feel known.

At work: Youssef's partner invites him to a long dinner and does not mention the contract at all. Youssef recognises relationship-based trust and accepts without hurrying, and he uses the dinner to learn about the partner's family and plans. The next morning, the partner opens the contract talks warmly.

3. Communicating: Low or High Context

Meyer's communicating scale compares low-context and high-context communication. In low-context communication, messages are taken at face value, so good communication is precise,

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simple and clear. In high-context communication, much of the meaning is implied, in the tone, in silence or in what is not said. A polite phrase such as we will consider it may mean yes in one setting and a soft no in another.

Example: A friend says that the film was fine, in a flat tone and without a smile. Reading high-context signals, we notice the tone and the missing enthusiasm. We understand that the friend did not enjoy it.

At work: Youssef's partner replies that the offer is very interesting and will be considered, and then silence follows. Youssef applies the communicating scale and considers that this may be high-context communication, so he asks an open question about what would make the offer easier to accept. The partner explains that the delivery terms are the problem.

4. Deciding: Consensus or Top-Down

Meyer's deciding scale compares consensual and top-down decisions. In consensual cultures, decisions are made by the group, which often takes longer but can make action smoother later. In top-down cultures, one person, usually the boss, decides, which is often faster. In negotiation, this tells us whom we must convince and how long we may have to wait. Mapping the decision process early helps us avoid pushing the wrong person or the wrong deadline.

Example: Two families plan a holiday. In the first, a parent decides at once, which is a top-down style, and in the second, everyone discusses until all agree, which is a consensual style. The second plan takes longer, but nobody complains afterwards.

At work: Youssef notices that his partner's company keeps asking for more meetings with different colleagues. He applies the deciding scale and sees a consensual style, so he asks who else needs to agree and gives each person the information. The decision takes longer, but the team then acts together quickly.

Conclusion

In summary, culture shapes how people build trust, communicate and decide in negotiation. Erin Meyer's culture map compares cultures on eight scales, and what matters is the distance between the two sides. We compare instead of stereotyping, build trust in the way our partner expects, read the level of context and map who decides. This preparation turns cultural differences into something we can manage.

Sources

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