

This article opens with a very common problem facing Western executives working internationally – how to get counterparts to contribute fully. There's clearly a need to have a cultural briefing ahead of undertaking an international assignment, rather than simply 'winging it' as many people in business and government are inclined to do. The cost to organizations when people fail to achieve results in culturally complex settings is highlighted and then the UGM approach to this problem is described. UGM provides people with the cultural intelligence to succeed professionally in settings where 'taken for granted' ways of doing even simple things may not get you the results you want. All our programs start with building a strong foundation about what culture is and the role it plays in influencing behaviour. Using this 'cognitive map' of the territory, clients then learn about the particular cultures of interest to them, including a portfolio of skills selected on the basis of the challenges they are likely to face.

Imagine yourself in the following predicament

You've recently been given an exciting career opportunity. You've been chosen to head up a new product development team in South Korea, working closely over the next six months with your company's Korean alliance partner in Seoul. It's a great chance for you to get some international experience and demonstrate your ability to rise to a significant challenge. The counterpart at your level is Lee and you've been told he's very talented, and has been handpicked for the role.

But now, after some weeks in Seoul, you feel that you've had to initiate virtually all of the ideas about the direction the project needs to take. You're fed up with Lee's lack of any real contribution and you've started to wonder if he's actually up to the task. The deadline for the first project deliverable is looming and very little has been achieved. So you decide to take the problem up with Michael, your manager back in Sydney.

In the phone conversation, Michael listens to you carefully but then expresses his surprise at what you're saying. Lee, he says, comes highly recommended because of his excellent skills and track record. But he agrees to talk to Lee's boss, his own opposite number in the Seoul partner's office. From Lee's boss, Michael learns that Lee is also dissatisfied with you! It seems he's complained that you consistently prevent him from contributing, to the extent of excluding him from speaking at project team meetings. When Michael tells you this, you're taken aback, confused and also quite annoyed! How can you explain what's going on here?

Which of the following explanations seems most likely to you?

- (a) Lee's English language and technical skills are simply not good enough for a demanding project of this type.
- (b) You are (even unconsciously) prejudiced against non-Australians and you won't allow Lee to shine.
- (c) You and Lee are each following quite different ideas about how turns to speak and contribute should be managed in professional settings.

The best answer is

- (a) No. While it's always possible that the Korean company has an over-inflated view of Lee's skills, it's unlikely that they chose someone incompetent. They seem to want the project to succeed.
- (b) No. Perhaps you harbour the kind of prejudice towards non-Australians that would make you a problem in any international role. But, if that were true, you probably wouldn't have wanted to work in Korea.
- (c) Yes. This is the most likely explanation and it fits with our twenty years of experience of helping Australians to succeed in Asia. This is a common problem when there is a clash of two different, culturally-based ways of managing speaking turns in workplace conversation.

Lee will be inclined to wait until there is a brief pause before coming in with his views. Meanwhile, most Australians tend to be uncomfortable with any kind of silence. They usually see it as a sign of trouble, so they will cover it up by continuing to speak – keeping the conversation going, in other words. But Lee would experience this as an impenetrable wall of talk. It would seem as if there was no space for him to come in. He could end up feeling 'conversationally bullied' and withdraw.

In fact, this very problem of feeling excluded always comes up in the programs we run for Asia-Pacific companies and governments to help them deal better with Australians (and other Westerners). It is keenly, even bitterly, felt. How ironic it is that both sides experience that there's an issue here but they generally end up blaming each other!

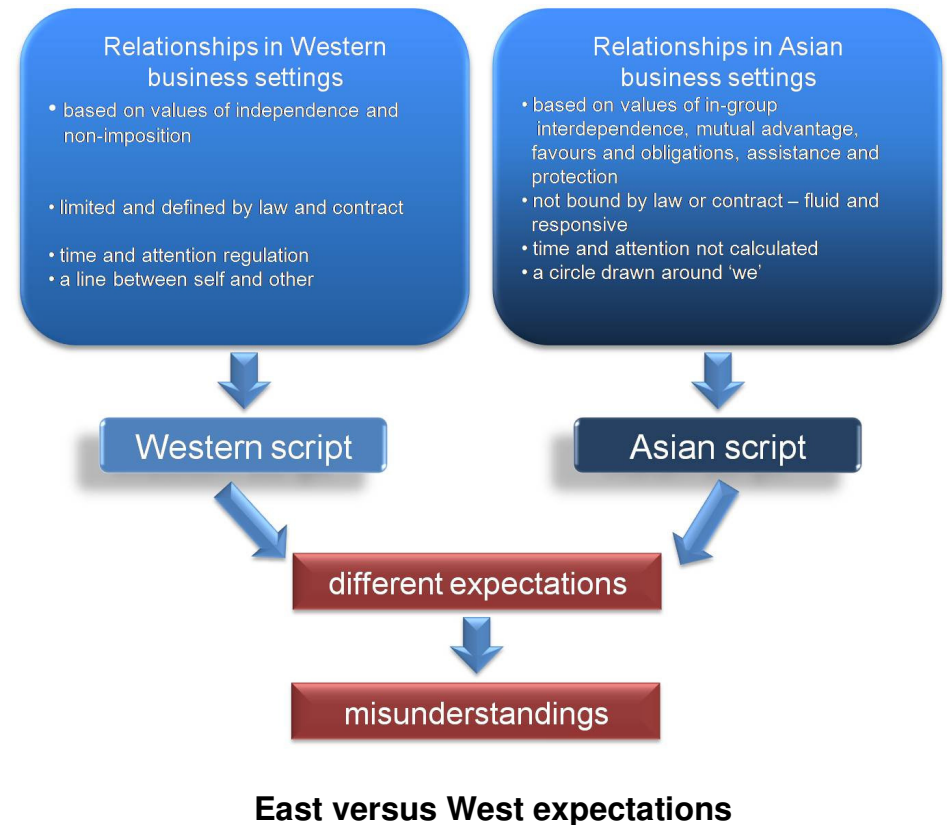
You and Lee would fairly soon start to be frustrated and this, in turn, would lead to mutually-held, negative judgments of the other person's character and ability – when it was actually a fairly predictable cultural problem, with some quite straightforward solutions. If only your company had invested in preparing you ahead!

The need to prepare for international business encounters

Our own UGM research, together with international studies consistently show that the globalisation of business and the increasing number of contacts across national boundaries means that cultural intelligence has become an indispensable asset for today's ambitious executives. Evidence about what personal qualities, information and skills are required for success on an international assignment is also growing and has substantial empirical support. Soundly constructed preparation, of the type we provide, has been shown to pay dividends for organisations, by delivering successful performance in these more complex settings.

But many organisations seem unaware of these findings and provide very little in the way of cultural preparation, often with damaging consequences to their reputation.

Recent figures show that one in seven UK managers and nearly 40 per cent of their US counterparts fail on international assignments. Research conducted in Australia presents a similarly disturbing picture of the failure rate among local executives working overseas. Clearly there are huge financial losses involved in such failures.



But it isn't only the cost of withdrawing someone who needs to come home. There's also the real but hard-to-calculate financial loss involved when someone who is barely coping limps on to the end of their assignment. A recent piece of research found that between 30 to 50 per cent of international managers who see out their assignments are ineffective, or only marginally effective. We regularly see how these failures damage the bottom line of companies and, where government roles are concerned, waste public funds.

A study conducted by Queensland University of Technology of 156 Australian organisations with a presence in the Asia-Pacific region concluded the following in relation to cultural preparation and support, "Of all the money spent on expatriation, it seems inexplicable that the smallest effort goes into the area that research has identified as one of the most important for success".

The UGM approach

We start with a culture-general approach to provide you with a solid foundation, before you learn about any particular countries of special interest to you. There are a number of reasons why we start this way. There are common experiences and challenges that occur when people interact across cultures. These similarities are found irrespective of the specific work people do, or the country where the interaction happens. For example, frustration and misunderstanding must be dealt with, false assumptions examined and workable solutions found.

For these reasons, all professionals need a solid framework of understanding, if they are to be culturally effective. In addition, today executives are frequently required to have the flexibility to operate across several cultures, not just one. They need the culture-general knowledge and skills that will support them in these personally-challenging roles.

Even when an individual is going to live in one country for an extended period and so would certainly benefit from culture-specific information, this should always be built on the solid foundation provided by a broad-based cultural understanding. The new culture can then be understood in relation to this base. We have found there can be a danger in acquiring isolated pieces of information or a superficial list of do's and don'ts, without the conceptual framework that makes sense of particular details. Such a framework of understanding promotes the ability to learn-how-to-learn, a key skill supporting the adjustment process.

The importance of a research-based approach

All our work (culture-general and country-specific) draws on the most up-to-date research from a comprehensive range of academic disciplines, not just one subject area. In fact, findings from sociolinguistics, sociology, social psychology, communication studies, anthropology and management theory, among others, are all reflected in the content of the courses we tailor to meet your needs.

Australian research findings and international studies, together with our own UGM research, provide a richness of reference and an authoritative voice that you can trust. This extensive background assures the high quality and credibility of what we design.

Program design and methodology

A basic assumption behind the UGM approach, substantiated by research on the topic, is that people can generally overcome the difficulties they confront when working across cultures, if they are aware of the range of challenges they will face and helped to learn the practical skills to manage them.

Difficulties on any international assignment are virtually inevitable since each of us has been socialised to accept as 'proper and good' a relatively narrow range of behaviours. In fact, socialisation has been shown to be such a potent process that, once individuals become adults, they may scarcely be aware that other realities exist. They have learned what's required of them to be successful in a given culture and these assumptions and expectations are then brought to every interaction. When these interactions are with people socialised in quite different ways, frustration, misunderstanding and mutually-held negative evaluations are all too often the result, undermining business success.

The key to resolving such clashes is, first of all, the ability to correctly interpret what's going on. This doesn't necessarily mean accepting or agreeing with another culture's preferences but, as much research has shown, accurate interpretation is the base on which an effective solution can be built. For this reason, UGM programs are structured around a critical incident approach and explore examples of common culture clashes between people from different backgrounds.

Each course component follows a sound format where, in an interactive way, you are first presented with information about dimensions of cultural difference. As you work through the course, this information base becomes an increasingly rich context of cultural knowledge that supports you in correctly resolving the common misunderstanding at the heart of any critical incident.

In this way, our development programs help you to build your reasoning and problem-solving ability by encouraging more sophisticated thinking about life in other cultures. The benefit of this approach is that typical assumptions are challenged in order to solve the dilemmas. In the process of doing this, your ability to make correct attributions about people's behaviour grows and this lays the foundation for all the other cross cultural skills you will learn.

Validation of the effectiveness of our methods

The approach we use is one of the most thoroughly researched of all the cross-cultural learning strategies that have been developed and has been put to the test by us in many organisations – both public and private sector – over the last twenty years. For instance, UGM Consulting is the company chosen by Asialink at the University of Melbourne to provide the cross-cultural management and leadership component of all their public courses.

The following is a summary of the outcomes you can expect from one of our programs:

- greater insight into the motivations and thinking style of counterparts in the target culture
- more complex understanding of different societies
- greater enjoyment of cross-cultural interactions and a greater confidence in your ability to be professionally effective
- better adjustment to the everyday stresses of life in another culture
- greater professional competence, more effective performance and greater certainty in achieving your business and professional goals.

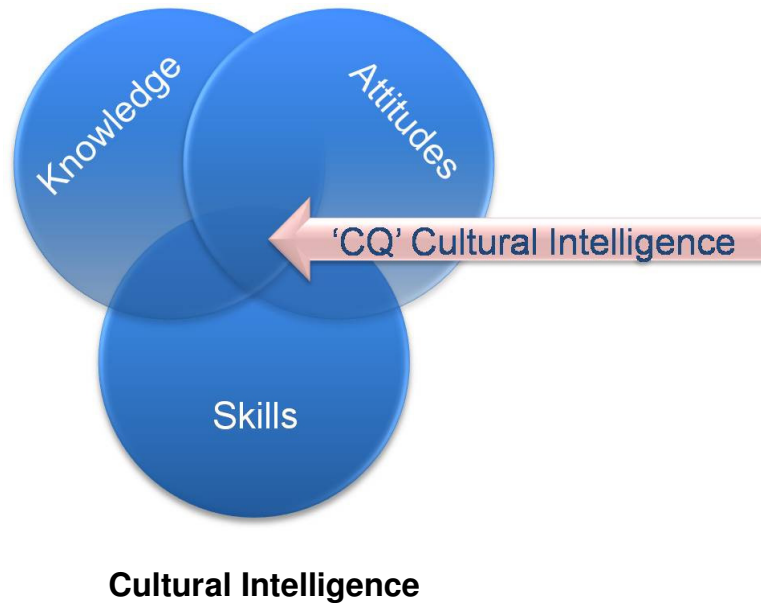
Range of clients we assist

Our approach helps individuals and their organisations to secure the results they want in culturally complex settings, by helping people confront unfamiliar situations with more confidence and interpret them from a more sophisticated frame of reference. This works both ways. In other words, at UGM we help Australians operate more successfully in Asia and elsewhere in the world, AND we also work with non-Australians who want to be more effective in working with their Australian colleagues or counterparts. One of our past clients, for example, is the Chinese Department of Trade in Beijing. We have also worked extensively with international companies who may have as many as thirty different cultures represented among their employees.

In addition, for professionals working in their own country but in very culturally-diverse settings, developing their own cultural intelligence underpins professional effectiveness. Similarly, for organizations with a multicultural employee base and serving the needs of multicultural clients, cultural intelligence can be vital in order to secure business outcomes.

A final application worth mentioning is the challenge of teamwork. When members of culturally diverse project teams have the insight and skills to manage their often quite considerable differences, our filmed research has demonstrated their diversity can be an asset, producing more innovative problem solving. In contrast, when the skills needed to manage their differences are lacking, team members' performance deteriorates, and their diversity becomes a drawback and an energy drain.

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A solid base of insight and skills

We focus our assistance on helping you to address the practical problems you face when you begin to work outside whatever is your own cultural comfort zone. We aim to equip you with a solid base of confidence, insight and skills. With this firm foundation, you'll find you are well prepared to meet the challenges that international business brings and also experience for yourself its many rewards.