

My name is Erin Meyer. I'm Professor of Organisational Behavior at INSEAD, which is a business school outside of Paris. I study how cultural differences impact organisational effectiveness. I am also the author of the book *The Culture Map*, breaking through the invisible boundaries of global business.

In today's global economy you might be a French person working in Korea, a Russian person working in Brazil, or a Scottish person trying to do business in France. But what's really complicated is figuring out how to adapt your style to the society you're working with in order to get the results you need.

Often people think the challenges will be things like: should I shake hands, or how should I ask for business cards? But the real challenges are much more subtle.

I had a situation in Japan recently where I gave a presentation to a small group of Japanese. Afterwards I asked if there were any questions and no one raised their hand. So I went to sit down. My Japanese colleague said to me, "Erin, I think there were some questions. Do you mind if I try?" Then he stood up and asked the group, "Does anyone have any questions?" When no one responded, he looked very carefully at the audience and said, "Oh, do you have a question?" A woman then said, "Thank you, I do," and she asked an important question.

Later on I asked him how he knew they had questions. He said it had to do with how bright their eyes were. These are the types of things that, if we're aware of them, we can look for—the silent interaction that is impacting us. But if we're not aware, we might go through our entire business without realising how culture has affected our success.

For example, I worked with a team with just British and French members. I asked the British what it was like to work with the French and they said, "Well Erin, you know the French—they're very disorganised, they're always late, they're always changing the topic in the middle of the meeting, so it's difficult to follow them."

A little later, a group from India joined the same team. I asked the Indians how it was going working with the French, and they said, "Well Erin, you know the French—they're very rigid, they're very inadaptible, they're so focused on punctuality that it's difficult for them to adapt as things change around them."

This is what I call **cultural relativity**. On my Culture Map framework, France is positioned between the UK and India, which explains these opposite reactions. This can be helpful when leading a global team.

I've also worked with Heineken, the Dutch brewing company. A while ago they purchased an office in Monterrey, Mexico, and I had Mexican managers working with Dutch employees in the Netherlands. In the Netherlands, children learn from a young age that an authority figure is really just a facilitator among equals. In Mexico, however, children are taught to defer to authority.

The Mexican managers told me, "Managing Dutch people is incredible because they don't care at all that I'm the boss. I go into meetings, I try to roll out my strategy, and my team contradicts me, challenges me, and takes my ideas in other directions. Sometimes I just want to plead with them, 'Please, don't forget I'm the boss!' It's really complicated."

In today's global world, it's no longer enough to know how to lead the Mexican way, or the Dutch way, or the American way. We have to be flexible enough to adapt our leadership style to the environment we're working in.

I developed a system called **The Culture Map**, which divides culture into eight dimensions. It looks at things like: how do we build trust in different parts of the world? How do we make decisions in different societies? Countries are positioned along these dimensions, which helps decode how culture is impacting work.

Sometimes, opposite cultural reactions can create misunderstandings. For example, research shows that the highest failure rate in cross-cultural business is not between the UK and China, but between the US and the UK. People assume that because they speak the same language and seem similar, there are no cultural differences. But when both sides push their own culture, it leads to the highest failure rate.

Even when working remotely—by email or phone—cultural differences can affect us. In the UK, it's common after a phone call to write an email recap of decisions made. But in India, a client once told me, "If we come to conclusions verbally, that's enough. If you send me a written recap, it signals you don't trust me." Companies need to be aware of this at every moment when working internationally.

There's also research showing that if you show a video of fish swimming in an aquarium, people in Western countries focus mostly on the fish in front, while people in Asian countries focus more on what's happening in the background. People in different parts of the world are literally trained to think differently.

When you bring together people from different countries, you can achieve a more complete perspective, identify risks better, and generate innovative ideas. As long as the manager knows how to handle these differences, it can be extremely positive for the organisation.

But in order to succeed, leaders must be flexible enough to adapt their style to the society they are working with—because that's the only way to get the results they need.