Book Review: The Culture Map by Erin Meyer

Summary: The Culture Map is a guide to working with people from different cultures by being aware of cultural differences. While the book deals in generalities, it acknowledges that every person is individual, while also being shaped and informed by the culture in which they grew up. It looks at how cultural practices vary in eight different areas: communicating, evaluating, persuading, leading, deciding, trusting, disagreeing, and scheduling. Awareness of the cultural background of another in each of these areas can reduce misunderstanding and create better working relationships. For instance, in some cultures time is very linear (e.g. Germany and Switzerland) and events should start and stop precisely on time. Other cultures (Middle East, India, Africa) are more time-flexible. You aren't late if you arrive in the correct part of the day. A German may interpret a Saudi showing up thirty minutes late as inconsiderate, rude and irresponsible, while the Saudi may be confused at the German's frustration.

Dr. Meyer is an American married to a Frenchman who has lived abroad for most of her adult life and consults with companies to prepare individuals for cultural differences. The book is thought-provoking, informative and easy to read. It is filled with real life examples from her work that make the concepts relatable, memorable and interesting. Readers will have a greater appreciation for their own assumptions and be better prepared to understand people from different cultures.

Detail:

We all have habits and assumptions which are largely based on our upbringing. While there is clearly variation in behavior from person to person, family to family, and locale to locale, there are broad trends that permeate countries. A New Yorker is likely to be quite different than someone from the rural South, but still more similar than to someone from India. Our culture is largely invisible to us. We see it as just the way things are. When someone else has a different culture, we can inadvertently frustrate or even offend each other. Awareness of cultural norms helps us to be contextualize others' behavior and to adjust our own to work better together. What is important is not where a country falls, but where it falls relative to other culture. Meyer gives the example of KPMG consultants. One team was made up of British and French. The British consultants complained that the French were disorganized, chaotic and lacked punctuality. Another team consisted of French and Indians. The Indians complained that the French were rigid, inflexible and obsessed with deadlines. This is because The UK is far to the linear-time end

of the continuum, the Indians are far to the flexible-time end and the French are in the middle. (Germans probably would have thought the British were lax.)

The first cultural concept addressed is communication. Cultures fall on a continuum of low-context (direct and to the point) to high-context (reading between the lines.) Someone from a more low-context culture may appear rude to someone from a high-context culture, while also missing what the person from the high-context culture has to say. People from high-context cultures can leave a lot unsaid because everyone understands the background and implications. It's like the difference between an inside joke and a joke where the punchline is explained.

The second concept is evaluating performance and providing negative feedback. Some cultures are very direct with negative feedback. People aren't offended, because they expect it. Other cultures are very polite and tone down negative feedback. The typical American truism that criticism should be sandwiched between positive comments doesn't work with people from more direct negative feedback cultures. They are likely to entirely miss the criticism, which is probably stated gently and to walk away thinking they were commended for doing a good job. While this may make them feel good, it doesn't help address negative job performance, leaving them bewildered when they fail to get a promotion or raise. Interestingly, high-context cultures are not always indirect with negative feedback, nor are low-context cultures always direct with negative feedback. For instance, the US is the most low-context culture. Americans have a reputation for being blunt and not catching subtle messages, yet when it comes to negative feedback, we fall right in the middle for directness – far less direct than France, which is a high context culture, for instance.

The third area is the art of persuasion. There are two basic approaches. Principles-first (deductive) reasoning uses facts or general principles to argue for a conclusion. Application-first (inductive) reasoning uses patterns of observation from the real world to draw conclusions. Principles-first thinkers want to learn all the rules and to know why something works a certain way, while application-first want to skip the "why" and get to the "how" as quickly as possible. A principles-first presenter will spend most of the presentation reviewing the background of the concept and explaining why is must work, while an application-first presenter may skip all of that and demonstrate that something has been observed to be effective and then focusing on use cases.

The fourth area is leadership style. Some cultures, like Scandinavian countries are very egalitarian. The boss is a facilitator among peers and is treated like everyone else. Other cultures are more authoritarian. People there expect the leader to give direction, and to act in a way commensurate with their position. In more hierarchical cultures, titles are

important, and people defer to the boss. In more egalitarian cultures, people are expected to solve their own problems when they can and to speak up. It is easy to see how a leader from a different culture than the group will be misunderstood and have trouble with team morale. An egalitarian manager with a hierarchical team will be perceived as a weak leader who can't make decisions and lacks respect for the role. Meyer gave the example of a Dane sent to lead a team in Russia. A hierarchical leader in an egalitarian culture will be perceived as a tyrant.

The fifth area is decision-making. Some cultures embrace a collaborative decision-making approach, where nothing happens until there is buy-in from the whole group. Others have a more leader-driven approach. Consensus is time-consuming, and may result in compromises leading to a decision that is not fully desirable to anyone. One would think that decision-making is tied to leadership structure, but this is not always the case. The United States has a very flat hierarchy, but it values speed in decision-making and unity around team direction, so the leader makes the decision. Japan is the opposite – the culture is very hierarchical, but the decision-making process is collaborative. Leaders want all of their people on board before they make a decision. The other part of this dynamic is how binding decisions are. Some cultures (generally the more collaborative decision-makers) take a long time to get to a decision, but once the decision is made, it is locked in and everyone proceeds. Others make decisions more quickly, but then adapt as more information comes in. Americans tend to decide and then adjust, which is viewed by Germans as fickle. Germans and others see value in taking their time to arrive at a decision and then focusing all energy on implementation. Americans and others with the "little d" decision style see value in moving quickly and being flexible.

The sixth area is trust. "Cognitive trust is based on the confidence you feel in another person's accomplishments, skills and reliability. This is the trust that comes from the head." Contrast this with affective trust, which "arises from feelings of emotional closeness, empathy and friendship. This trust comes from the heart." Which culture a person comes from determines whether they prefer to just get down to business and focus on accomplishing a task together or to incorporate a lot of social time to get to know each other better. Dr. Meyer describes the difference between a "peach culture" and a "coconut culture." In peach cultures, like the US and Brazil, people are very friendly with strangers – soft on the outside. Once you get past the external, people are more protective with their real selves. Friendliness does not mean a person is trying to befriend you. In coconut cultures, like many European countries, people are much more reserved – hard – at first, but once you get past the hard outer shell, they value relationships.

The seventh area is how disagreements are handled. Some cultures are very accepting of confrontation, while others avoid it. In confrontational cultures, debate is like a sport. People can passionately argue their point in public, with no hard feelings whatsoever. Other cultures avoid public disagreements at all costs in order to preserve harmony and to save face. Arguing with someone, especially someone culturally higher than yourself brings shame to them. A second dimension is emotional expressiveness. Some cultures are much more reserved in displaying emotions, while others are very expressive. There are two ways cultures handle this. Some accept or avoid confrontation based on how emotionally expressive they are. Those that are very expressive are careful to avoid confrontation so as not to ruin relationships. Another group of cultures embraces confrontation in line with their expressiveness. The cultures from this group that are most expressive are also most likely to disagree. This creates situations that look like bitter and potentially dangerous fights to people from other cultures, but are no big deal to the people engaged.

The eighth issue is how a culture views time. Some cultures take a very linear view of time. Nine o'clock means nine o'clock. Events are expected to begin and end precisely on time. Other cultures have a more fluid view of time. Nine o'clock means some time in the morning. A good question is, how late is late? People from linear time cultures (often industrialized countries) can appear rigid and inflexible to those from relative time cultures (often more agrarian or less developed countries). People from relative time cultures seem irresponsible and unserious to people from linear time cultures. Leaders of cross-cultural teams would do well to be explicit about expectations.

We often view our own culture as just the way things are. When people act contrary to our expectations, we naturally assume they are inconsiderate or uptight. We may interpret interactions as more or less positive or confrontational than they were intended. While we still need to get to know people as individuals, understanding their cultural norms can take us a long way to better communication and cooperation.