



## From cultural gaffes to cross cultural competence

by Daniel Tschudy

**President Obama should have known better. In Asia, kisses in public are not well received, particularly between unmarried men and women. But his hearty kiss on the cheek of the Burmese Nobel peace prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi violated local etiquette and could have disturbed his following conversations in a negative way.**

Fortunately, that was not the case. Suu Kyi did slightly recoil in embarrassment, but the President, quickly realising his faux pas, spoke and touched her softly and obviously in an apologising fashion. But, in today's complex and multi-dimensional world, cross culture competence cannot be ignored anymore. Obama's own roots lay in Kenya, Hawaii and Indonesia, all of them with a rather particular cultural behaviour. Obama should have known better.



### **New Science – Young Industry**

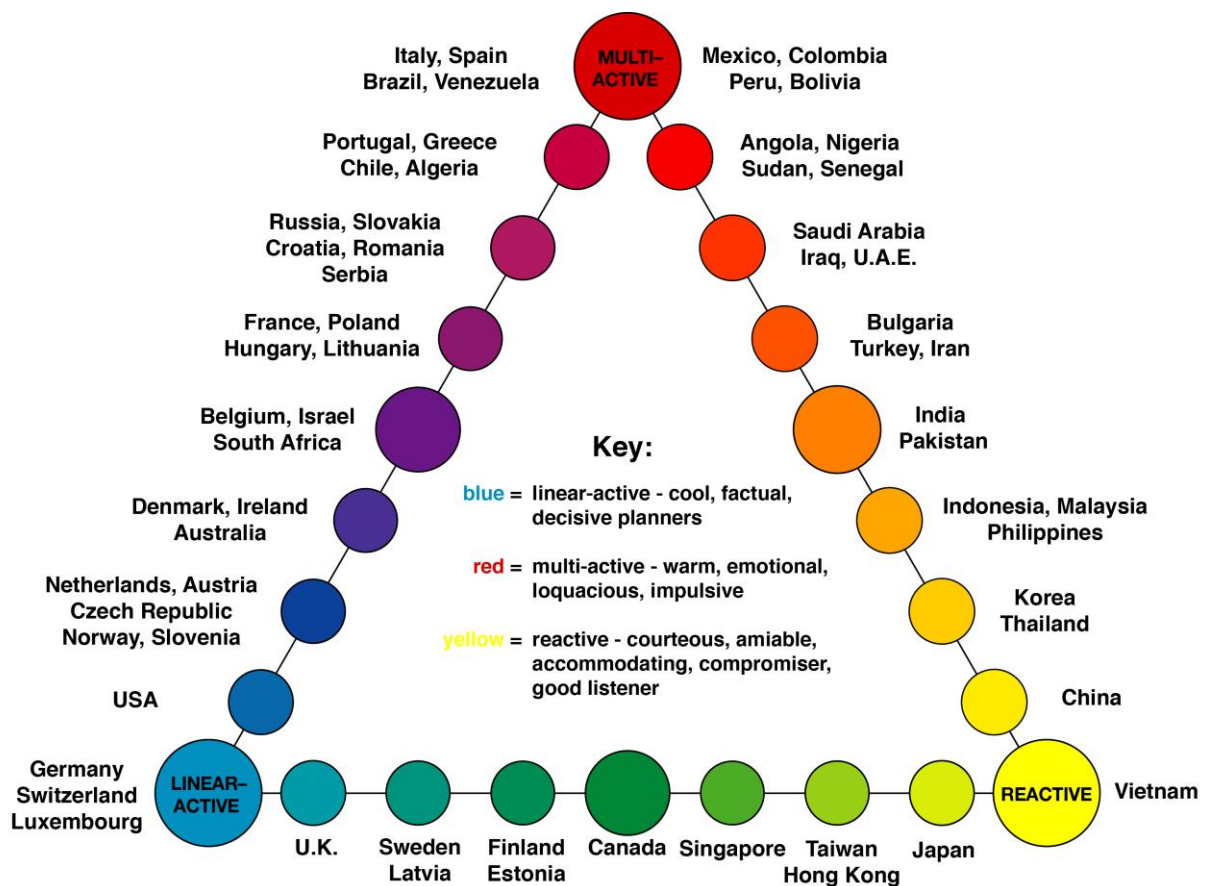
But the trade is relatively young. Intercultural values and behaviours have seriously been looked at only since the mid-50ies of the last century. The American Edward T. Hall (1914-2009) and the two Dutchmen Geert Hofstede und Fons Trompenaars have made their names as leading cross-cultural researchers. Hofstede, for example, divided the cultures into masculinity and femininity or individualism and collectivism, Hall featured nations focusing the past versus others aiming at the future, and Trompenaars spoke about cultures with particularistic interests versus those with universal interests. They all tried to understand the characteristics of the some 300 major cultural groups around the globe and put that knowledge into a cultural order.

Another renowned cross-cultural opinion leader is Richard Lewis, who made his way in the field of cross-cultural training and language education for the business community. His book 'When Cultures Collide' has sold over one million copies. By researching with his international students in language learning courses, Lewis has, in the course of the last two decades, collected 50'000 self-assessments and the data of these people created an "average cultural DNA" (so to speak) of nearly 100 nations. His findings are not only about race, religion and language, but about personal values, manners & taboos, concept of status, stereotypes, listening habits, communication patterns, negotiations styles, and motivation factors.



## The 'Lewis Model'

His 'Lewis Model' foresees that, regardless of politics and religion, the world can generally be divided into three cultural orientations. The linear-active nations, for example Germany, Switzerland, England or the US, function rather well planned, considered, and in control of their emotions. The multi-active countries, such as Brazil, Italy or Nigeria, are impulsive, creative and speak from their heart. While the re-active people aim for balance and compromise, as the Koreans, Japanese or Vietnamese would do.



While the above mentioned countries belong rather obviously to the core of the three cultural orientations, others are more positioned in-between.

India, for example, is on one side a colourful, noisy and emotional multi-active nation; on the other side full of re-active characteristics, such as patience, friendliness and respect towards seniors and supervisors.

## Successful cross-cultural business behaviour

So, there are hundreds of personal and sometimes very peculiar values, manners, taboos and levels of communication and listening factors, which influence the status and behaviour of an employee within the society and within a working team.



Obviously, these findings are average-values only. Each individual person can feel, behave and work in a different way, depending on their specific upbringing, talents, education and experiences. But the overall tendencies are clear and globally active corporations and associations should appreciate and use this expertise. Those who want to be successful in for example China, Senegal or Argentina should apply more

information than just a few pleasantries in the local language.

No longer can CEO's invest millions into a new market, before making absolutely sure, that the company is able to reply to the cultural needs and behaviours of that new target country. Human Resources Directors will employ new expatriates only, if these men and women can provide both, the professional experience and the cultural competence. Or, those investments will be lost within a very short time with consequent disappointments of the involved staff, the management and the shareholders. Intercultural competence helps avoiding significant errors and the subsequent loss of time, energy and money.

Cross-cultural competence is relevant for all management and staff in direct contact with any foreign audience, may it be employees, partners or customers. Those marketing teams investigating in new markets should identify the cultural values and behaviours as well. Those salesmen attending a trade show in a foreign country can use cross cultural data when approaching new contacts. It would help them, for example, not to launch inappropriate jokes or to apply local information as an 'ice-breaker'. Board of Directors, about to make million-dollar decisions about a new factory in a foreign country, should use 'soft-facts' (such as mentality, ability to work, value of status, local-influencing factors such as family or religion) in their evaluations. And Directors, applying for an expatriate-job at a branch-office around the world, should require deeper data than just Google and Wikipedia. And, finally, every single foreign client can be served better and more efficient (thus more lucrative), if cross cultural information and learning's are applied.

Cross Culture competence is therefore not only 'nice to have' but crucial when doing international business, or politics, in a friendly, sustainable and successful way.

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