The Moral Circle in Intercultural Competence

Trust across Cultures

Gert Jan Hofstede

Intercultural competence requires the ability to participate in the social life of people who live according to different unwritten rules. This implies being a "good member" of a community other than one's own. A community, potentially ranging from a few people to all the people in the world, constitutes a "moral circle," that is, a group of which the members expect to live by a shared standard of moral rules. While these rules are usually unwritten and implicit, adhering to them is crucial. To investigate intercultural competence, one must take a look at what it means to be "good" and "bad" in a moral circle. This is how we begin the chapter. Then we investigate trust and reputation, notions that have to do with the expectation that others will behave in moral ways. After that we turn to culture. Culture is about the unwritten rules for being an acceptable member of the moral circle, and it varies across groups. Finally, the knowledge about good and bad, trust and reputation, and culture is used to tackle practical issues of intercultural competence, whether that involves receiving outsiders, traveling abroad, or working in multicultural teams.1

"What do you have to do to get expelled?" This question was asked in a full conference hall by a U.S. student during the international student welcome week that is organized each year at the Dutch university at which I work. The answer disconcerted the student. He was probably expecting a list of heinous transgressions, but instead he was told, "We never expel anybody. At most we sometimes give somebody the urgent advice to leave." This anecdote shows that a university operates, among other functions, as a moral circle. The student was from a society where evil is deemed to lurk nearly everywhere, and severe punishments are often expected. He was studying in a society in which self-control rather than punishment is expected to keep people in check. The point here is not to argue which approach is best. Different explicit rules hold in both societies, based on different unwritten cultural assumptions, and thus may seem strange to those from a different culture. This example applies to any other institution in society, including institutions as varied as companies, families, teams, governments, and armies. People are moral, but culture modifies that morality.

The Biological Basis of Morality

The most quoted philosopher about morality is probably Immanuel Kant. Kant's reasoning was that any behavior that would be detrimental if everybody engaged in it was to be avoided (Johnson, 2008). This led him to formulate his categorical imperative. This categorical imperative is in fact so generic that it is found in many proverbs and religious rules. "Do to
others as you would be done unto" and the religious command to "love thy neighbor as thyself" are forms of this.

We now take a big step back to consider morality from a biological point of view. It turns out that Kant's imperative has operated in evolution in all cases where between-group competition occurred. All the way from colonies of bacteria onwards, "bad" behavior benefits an individual at the detriment of the group while "good" behavior benefits the group (Wilson, 2007; Wilson & Wilson, 2007). Morality is that simple in its basics, and this is due to evolutionary logic. All along evolution, groups have competed with one another, and groups that suffered from antisocial behavior have been outcompeted by groups that did not.

At the same time, morality among human societies is incredibly complex in its ramifications. This chapter will address some of these ramifications, particularly those connected with culture. Perceptions of what benefits the group are widely different across and even within cultures given the variability in cultural perceptions of what constitutes group membership. Anybody who might be or might become a member of the moral circle deserves to be treated as a moral being, while those outside the group do not deserve such treatment. This is the logic that has made us evolve as a group-based species.

One of the foremost institutions to deal with morality in any society is religion. Other potential symbolic delimiters of moral circles are ethnic appearance, gender, caste, class, clothing style, hairstyle, education, and membership in associations or clubs. The preponderance of each of these varies greatly across and within societies. People are endlessly creative in creating group identities, and the list is not exhaustive.

Evolution of Morality

Humans have not invented morality. Many species of social mammals and birds show notions of good and bad that are very similar to our own (de Waal, 1996). Over the centuries, our ancestors took the next steps. Under selective pressures of rapid climate change and intergroup competition, they developed an ability to evolve much faster than through genetic evolution. The alternative, cultural evolution, operates by imitation and has now become a powerful force driving the evolution of human societies (Richerson & Boyd, 2005). However, a battle between levels of evolution is still raging. We are stuck with a perennial conflict of interest between our own selfish interests and the interests of the groups to which we belong. It is rare for these to not be in conflict. We reserve moral feelings for members of our groups, whatever that may be. Research in physiology and neurology confirms that the in-group/out-group distinction is basic for generating empathy and other moral feelings.

Trust

Trust and the Moral Circle

A plethora of literature about trust has appeared in the past decades in various fields of the social sciences (Doney, Cannon, & Mullen, 1998; Kramer, 1999; Nooteboom, 2002). Numerous definitions are used in psychology, management, and economics, most of which stress the single transaction between two people (e.g., "If A believes that B will act in its best interest and accepts vulnerability to B's actions, then A trusts B"). This kind of definition captures the meaning of
trust in the context of a transaction, and as such, it is useful. But most transactions take place within some kind of relationship, be it family membership, friendship, business partnership, or ownership. The wider context of trust can be defined as follows: "Trust in sociology is a relationship between people. It involves having one person thinking that the other person or idea is benevolent, competent/good, or honest/true... . It makes social life predictable, it creates a sense of community, and it makes it easier for people to work together. Trust ... is also integral to the idea of social influence, as it is easier to influence or persuade someone who is trusting" (Wikipedia). This definition of trust restates the idea that a network of people who trust each other form a moral circle. It also implies that trust cannot be the same to people who have different ideas about benevolence, competence, or honesty. Likewise, most people have probably experienced in their lives that benevolence, competence, and honesty are not always combined in one person. What is more, they can sometimes become opposites, as, for example, when one hides a very disagreeable truth from somebody for the sake of benevolence (i.e., to spare the other's feelings). The last sentence in the Wikipedia definition points to the fact that trust is always vulnerable to exploitation by those with ill intentions. Doney et al. (1998) add two more "trust-building processes" to the three highlighted in the broader definition of trust: prediction and transference. Prediction means that A can trust B to do something in an instrumental way, as you would trust your car, regardless of B's intentions. Transference points to the practice that people rely on accounts by third persons: "Call B. You can trust him, I've known him for years." This is normally known as a reputation mechanism. The unwritten rules of reputation mechanisms vary across the world, just as do those of other social processes. For instance, what happens to a whistle-blower who exposes immoral behavior within a community? Will he become a hero or an outcast? The most likely outcome varies by culture.

The conclusion is that it is not fruitful to try and define the concept of trust in every detail since this varies by culture. A general definition would hold that one trusts others to the extent that one expects them to adhere to Kant's categorical imperative. In other words, trusting people means expecting them to behave as upstanding members of your moral circle.

**Intrinsic and Enforceable Trust**

A few years ago, a Japanese businessman was having pasta in a fast-food restaurant. Suddenly, he choked on something. It looked like a piece of plastic. Soon, the restaurant's staff were making profuse excuses. They in turn wrote to their Australian supplier, making it known that traces of plastic had been found in their pasta sauce and that a food safety visit was deemed necessary. Within weeks a delegation from the Japanese fast-food chain visited the Australian facilities. Not only were the ISO 9000 certificates in order, but nothing that remotely pointed to the possibility of plastic contamination was discovered. The Japanese delegation returned home, both parties feeling disappointed about the unsolved issue. Then the Japanese had another look at the offending plastic. And...lo and behold, it turned out to be the outer peel of an Australian onion (Storer, 2004), indicating differences in the way in which the outer peel of the onion is used in two different cultures.

This anecdote underscores an important lesson about trust. The certification system had not worked, but the visit to the factories had. After having trudged along together through the factories in a very stressful atmosphere and finding out that nothing had really happened after all,
the Japanese and Australians actually had become companions in adversity. They had come to trust one another.

This story points to a general distinction into types of trust—between intrinsic and enforceable trust. In both cases, the result is that we can rely on the other. But the motivations are different.

**Enforceable trust** is calculative and incentive-driven. It is the trust we place in those with whom we are not necessarily on friendly terms but whom we know are better off when they live up to the trust we place in them. Contracts can create enforceable trust between two parties. ISO 9000 certificates are a case in which responsibility for trustworthy production practices is outsourced to a third party (i.e., the certifying agency). In the beginning of the pasta story, the Japanese thought they had enforceable trust, and they came to Australia to actually enforce it.

**Intrinsic trust** is the trust that we may feel for a person "just like that." Or more precisely, at first acquaintance, the feeling is "I think I can trust that person," and also "I would like to trust that person." This feeling relates to the basic needs of human beings to affiliate with one another, to be friends (Maslow, 1970). Then, with time, through being tested time and again and not broken, intrinsic trust can deepen. The more stringent the test, the more trust it builds: "A friend in need is a friend indeed." This is what grew between the Japanese and the Australians. Intrinsic trust is a much stronger notion than enforceable trust. Both make social life predictable, and both make it easier for people to work together. Only intrinsic trust, if it is shared in a network of friends, creates a sense of community. And only intrinsic trust makes it easier to influence others. Lenin is supposed to have said, "Trust is good, but control is better" (see, e.g., Busch & Hantusch, 2000). This holds for enforceable trust. Intrinsic trust, however, makes control redundant. Yet the two types of trust are linked. The social environment can exert such pressure that untrustworthy behavior punishes itself. This is exactly what moral feelings of shame and guilt are for and why they evolved to such high degrees in human populations. Intrinsic trust and its attendant pleasurable emotions are the proximate mechanism by which evolution ensures the survival of well-collaborating groups at the expense of poor groups.

In any society, breaches of trust put one's reputation at risk. As Gambetta (2000) states, "It may be hard to bank on altruism, but it is much harder to avoid banking on a reputation for trustworthiness: as all bankers (and used-car dealers) know, a good reputation is their best asset." We may add that fear of losing a reputation is the best enforcer of trustworthiness. In a hypothetical environment where reputation is all-important, the distinction between intrinsic and enforceable trust becomes irrelevant to the functioning of the social network. If we have business partners we do not know well, as happens quite frequently in today's globalized business world with its volatile employment, then we better consider the incentives and punishments.

One of the basic needs of humans is what Maslow (1970) has termed love and belonging and what a biologist might call affiliation. Intrinsic trust is a consequence of feelings of affiliation. People are driven by a need for intrinsic trust.

**Trust, Emotions, and Personality**

In "Western" parlance about organized life, emotion is often contrasted with rationality. This chapter takes the point of view of Frijda (1986), who contends that far from being irrational, emotions are a perfectly rational mechanism that serves our interests. Emotions are the early warning system that tells us about the fulfillment of our basic needs. Some of these emotions are at the basis of intrinsic trust. Having nobody to trust is distressing. Social life is full of symbols
and rituals that express the wish to trust or to be trusted. These can be as basic as the polite smile, the handshake, or the hug. They can involve rituals of sharing food and drink. Or they can be embodied in economic transactions, for example, in the modalities of contracts (Hofstede, Spaans, Schepers, Trienekens, & Beulens, 2004, p. 212). Feelings of sympathy or antipathy, attraction or repulsion guide our choice of whom to trust. For priming these feelings, perceived group membership is a quick decision aid. In economic life, another basic need beyond affiliation is also prominent: the drive for that which Maslow calls "esteem," Nietzsche calls "Macht" (power), and a biologist would call "dominance." Political alliances, whether in the private or in the public sector, tend to be based on incentives for dominance: The partners believe that they are more powerful together. "If you can't beat them, join them" is the motive. Trust in these alliances is incentive driven rather than intrinsic, at least initially.

There is often a friction between the desire of business partners to have it their way and their need to appear trustworthy. Coercive action may not be well received because it connotes self-interest. Displays of power can generate resentfulness. Kramer (1999) gives some eloquent examples of how surveillance systems in organizations communicate to employees that they are being distrusted, making them fearful and suspicious or even inducing them to try and sabotage the surveillance system instead of doing their work.

A society is a mosaic of individuals with unique personalities. In regard to trust, the tendency to trust and the tendency to be trustworthy are both linked to personality characteristics, and this link is valid across cultures. McCrae and Costa (2003), creators of the Big Five personality model (this author’s acronym is OCEAN: Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Neuroticism), show that the agreeableness trait is linked to the benevolence component of trust as well as the honesty component. The competence component of trust is addressed by another trait, conscientiousness. Yet another personality trait that might affect trust is neuroticism. Two forms of neuroticism, anxiety and angry hostility, are the dispositional forms of two fundamental emotional states: fear and anger. Anxious persons are prone to worry, while hostile persons are prone to ill temper. Neither trait is conducive to stable, trusting relationships.

The five traits are independent, meaning for instance that an agreeable person is just as likely to be conscientious as not to be so. But the facets of one trait, such as being trusting and being trustworthy, are linked. As the proverb goes, "Ill doers are ill [thinkers].” In conclusion, trusting and trustworthy behaviors are unequally spread across any population. Each individual is unique, and individuals with different personalities are likely to adopt different roles in society.

Culture

I was walking toward my gate in Charles de Gaulle Airport, Paris, with a few hours ahead of me, waiting for a flight to Tunis. One Tunisian-looking man was the only person in sight, so I greeted him in French. To my surprise, he replied stiffly in English, "Excuse me, I do not understand you, I am an American citizen." We started talking, and he gradually relaxed. It turned out his name was Ramadan, and he was an information technology specialist of Libyan origin living in the United States, and since U.S. authorities did not allow him to travel directly to Tripoli, he took this detour to be introduced to his intended wife, who was a distant cousin. We had a good time together. The next week, we met again at Tunis airport, and he proudly showed me pictures of his future wife, looking happy.
This episode shows the difference between identity and culture. Ramadan started the conversation rather defensively, using his identity as an American citizen to stay away from the personal sphere. But culturally, he turned out to be very much a Libyan, warm and talkative in style, arranging his marriage in a way that was accepted in his home society.

People are conscious of their identity, and to some extent they can change their identity but may not be able to change their cultural conditioning. One's culture, in many cases, is not only a source of deeply felt pride and belonging, but it is often deeply ingrained as part of an individual's worldview. This cultural conditioning denotes the most solid moral circle in which they feel included.

Any society has to come to terms with some basic issues of social life or it could not function. The unwritten rules of the social game in a society differ across the world. In other words, societies have distinct cultures. And while some societies are heterogeneous, research confirms that cultural differences between societies are generally much larger than cultural differences within societies. In many cases, countries correspond with societies. So using country data is in many cases a reasonably good way to obtain insight into the cultures of societies and the ways in which individuals have been culturally conditioned. Almost all countries themselves try to function as "moral circles." This attempt is reflected in manifold institutions. To name but one example: In the United States, many schoolchildren pledge alliance to the national flag on a daily basis. The relations between cultural traits and processes of trust building and breaking are intricate and problematic. The same behavior that builds trust in one context can destroy it in another. Many contradicting viewpoints about trustworthiness of people and groups are held in the world. Yet patterns can be found. The chapter will now turn to such patterns by introducing a trait-based perspective on culture.

Five Basic Issues

Culture is about mutual expectations of morally acceptable behavior. Research has shown and confirmed often that a limited set of issues adequately describes the basic value orientations of societies (Hofstede, 2001; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). Hofstede found five independent dimensions of values related to five basic issues.² It is important to note that in this paradigm, "culture" is not an attribute of individuals but of societies.

Identity: Individualism Versus Collectivism

The level of interdependency that is assumed differs greatly across societies. Western travelers in Malaysia will often comment about never being left alone. On the other hand, Asians in an English-speaking country can be very lonely. Both phenomena relate to the same cultural difference. From a very early age, an Anglo child is supposed to be independent, have his or her own possessions, his or her own opinions. A Malay child is above all a small part of a harmonious group.

Hierarchy: Large Versus Small Power Distance

The asymmetry of power relations that subordinates expect varies across cultures. On Norwegian offshore platforms, leadership of the crew rotates every year, even though some...
members might be more able leaders than others. Leadership is distributed in an egalitarian manner in this society. On the very same kind of platform across Russia, hierarchy is absolute, and no subordinate crew member would dream of overturning it.

**Gender and Aggression: Masculinity Versus Femininity**

In some societies, there is a basic belief that men are intrinsically different from women: Males are fighters who defend the community, while females preserve the social fabric. By the same logic, both males and females in such societies need to be tough to survive the unforgiving conditions of societal life. In other societies, both males and females are supposed to be peace-minded. In these, there is sympathy rather than contempt for losers, and the weak can count on help.

**Anxiety: Weak Versus Strong Uncertainty Avoidance**

We live in an unpredictable world. Some societies take this in stride. Unexpected events and unclear rituals are welcomed. Emotional displays are avoided, and basic stress levels are low. In other societies, the reverse is the case. There is taboo and ritual everywhere, especially around bodily functions such as eating and sexuality. Often, rituals are encoded in religious practices. Deviating from these rituals or engaging in situations without clear rules causes anxiety. Strong emotional displays of internal solidarity or xenophobia are used to relieve tension.

**Gratification: Short- Versus Long-Term Orientation**

A set of basic drives are innate in us. They relate to food, drink, and safety in the first place, but beyond that, we are driven by the need to belong to a community, to be esteemed, to avoid boredom, and, depending on age and gender, to have sex. In some societies, seeking and giving gratification are considered morally good. This makes for happy societies, but in case of trouble, violence is not far away. Other societies hold that morality consists of keeping one's urges in check. The individual is insignificant, and there is a lot of work to do in the world. This attitude represses emotions, but it increases the power of society to respond to environmental changes.

**Culture and the Moral Circle**

The initial question in this chapter, "What do you do to get expelled?" touches the core of the notion of a moral circle. Knowing how a country scores on the five dimensions has predictive value for how and why people might be included or excluded. A culture instills in its members, through upbringing of infants and children, a mind-set that leads to predictable responses to events. We shall investigate this issue dimension by dimension first and then turn to the bigger picture.

**Individualism/Collectivism**

Western societies are at the individualistic end of the cultural spectrum. Every individual or organization is free to choose and to revoke its alliances. One hires and fires people because of
their performance. In a collectivist society, on the other hand, each individual or organization is a member of a very long-lived network of relationships of interdependency. Trust in such a society is intricately linked to in-group membership. One hires people for in-group membership, and firing is difficult.

So, the degree of collectivism of a society is a measure for the solidity of the invisible wall that divides a moral group from another. In a collectivist society, each in-group is like a solid crystal that is internally very cohesive and will not mix with other crystals. In an individualistic society, each individual is like a loose molecule that can move around, make temporary alliances, and move away again.

**Power Distance**

In a hierarchical culture, most employees expect to be treated by their superiors as dependents at best or in an instrumental way. Their superior is of another world, so to speak. The concept of trust in such a culture is entirely different across the hierarchy than it is at one level. This has consequences for the governance of organizations. Employees from hierarchical countries tend to have problems working in network organizations. They often do not understand the concept of working partially under a line boss and partially under a project leader. How can a child have two fathers? In a hierarchical culture, fatalism is a coping strategy for life in general. Pleasing one's superior is clearly the best strategy for employees, along with hoping for mercy. In an egalitarian society, it is rather the leader who stands in danger of being ousted. The pitfall of hierarchal societies is bad leaders expelling good subordinates, while the pitfall of egalitarian societies is bad subordinates expelling good leaders.

**Masculinity/Femininity**

In masculine societies, people hold the implicit belief that most people cannot be trusted. As a result, one expects that in masculine societies, people would need to exert themselves more to appear trustworthy business partners (e.g., by being certified or by drawing up contracts), and more institutions would exist to cope with distrust (e.g., lawyers, weapons). The opposite is a feminine culture, a culture in which moral rules are more forgiving, excuses are found for the weak and for failings, punishment is not so harsh, and violence is strongly condemned. This dimension is all about morality. In a culturally masculine value system, the moral world of both men and women is strongly stratified. It ranges from heroes who are widely admired and deemed without fault to losers who are despised. In a culturally feminine value system, moral qualities are more evenly allocated. Even the best of people can have shortcomings, and even the worst of criminals can have some good.

**Uncertainty Avoidance**

A moral circle in a culture of strong uncertainty avoidance is first and foremost a defense against the dark and dangerous world that lies beyond. Rituals that promote cohesion, including those that involve food, song, and dance, are valued and taken seriously. Anything unknown often causes anxiety, including strangers, strange food, and different religious practices. So this is a cultural trait that makes it harder for outsiders to be accepted as members of the community.
Anxiety frequently leads to aggression as a way to release tension, and immigrants or foreign guests or business partners are likely scapegoats. On the other hand, uncertainty avoiding cultures are associated with a persistent curiosity and a desire to find things out. In uncertainty-tolerant cultures, there could be a tendency to laxness as long as there is no urgency.

**Long-Term/Short-Term Orientation**

Long-term-oriented cultures place high value on the postponement of gratification. This is a good attitude for creating long-term commitments. In a short-term oriented culture, business deals tend to be opportunistic. These societies will look to history to find moral certitude. Long-term-oriented cultures, on the other hand, hold that past results give no guarantees for the future, even in moral issues. They will perceive issues in pragmatic rather than moral terms because morally good behavior is that which benefits the group in a pragmatic way. When it comes to expelling members, short-term-oriented cultures tend to be inflexible and to rely on traditional rules. Long-term-oriented cultures tend to be aware of changing circumstances.

**All Five Dimensions Matter**

Separating the five dimensions for the sake of exposition can be useful. However, readers should not attempt to interpret real-world events using just one dimension. Cultures are holistic, and the five dimensions of culture are only meaningful in combination. Their effects all interact in actual life. There is no space here to elaborate on the combined influence of the dimensions. Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) give numerous graphs showing that the combination of scores on two of the dimensions is predictive of the social fabric of societies. To give one instance, consider the combination of power distance and uncertainty avoidance. In societies that combine large power distance with strong uncertainty avoidance, such as exist in the Latin and Orthodox world, companies are structured as pyramids in which every employee has a fixed place. Societies with a small power distance that are uncertainty tolerant, such as England and Scandinavian countries, have "adhocracies" (a term from Henry Mintzberg, adapted in Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005) in which temporary, flexible structures such as projects are important. Hierarchical, uncertainty tolerant cultures have companies that resemble families. Finally, societies that have a small power distance but are uncertainty avoiding have organizations that resemble well-oiled machines: predictable and efficient.

**Toward Intercultural Competence**

Understanding these five cultural dimensions leads to a greater awareness of acceptable behaviors and thus adoption of such behaviors in different moral circles. Developing intercultural competence beyond one's moral circle is a key goal (Hofstede, Pedersen, & Hofstede, 2002) and can be illustrated by the examples provided here.
Reconciling Different Life Aims

A typical international employee lives for a challenging life with adventure and success, in which doing better than one's parents or one's peers is desirable. But an employee from a collectivistic culture is much more interested in honoring his or her family or country and being a well-reputed member of the community. Michalon (2003), after 20 years of experience in the Third World, shows vividly how this phenomenon can obstruct attempts to "develop" countries. An employee in a hierarchical country wishes above all to please those placed above him or her. And so it is for all the dimensions. Life goals vary with culture. This points to the importance of spending time building knowledge of a place, its culture, and acceptable behaviors and getting to know what constitutes the moral circle before one engages in business or other intercultural interactions. Immersion in the target culture is often very helpful in achieving this goal. The investment of time and energy will result in benefits toward a higher degree of intercultural competence.

Negotiating

Consider the following episode. A German Swiss buyer of goods is visiting a Chinese entrepreneur, trying to close a contract. The Chinese sits inscrutably while the Swiss expostulates his detailed proposal. The Swiss finishes his speech, a bit nervous at receiving so little feedback. Finally the Chinese speaks: "This is not good for us." And then "Let me take you for dinner." If the Swiss has never been to China before, he may be in the belief that his proposal is off. According to Swiss rules, that would definitely be so: German Swiss culture is individualistic, egalitarian, masculine, and uncertainty avoiding, which leads to a performance-oriented, high-energy, no-time-to-waste work culture. In fact, the Chinese is keenly interested, and that is why, using his collectivistic, long-term oriented mind-set, he wants to strengthen the relationship with his buyer by taking him out to dinner as a more appropriate setting for doing business. If neither is culturally savvy, it is not certain that the Swiss will come: He may consider that since the Chinese does not like his proposal, going out to eat strange Chinese food might be a disagreeable way of wasting time. So both negotiators could be letting a chance slip away, and worse, their expectations for the suitability of one another's group as business partners would be lowered, and perhaps still worse, they would never learn that culture was part of the problem here.

It is not amazing that cross-cultural negotiations are so tricky. Negotiators, by definition, have only partly coinciding interests. Their relationship hovers between friendship and enmity. Whether and how they create a common moral circle is a key issue, and in fact, explicitly creating a moral circle is precisely what the Swiss negotiator in our example did not consider necessary and what the Chinese negotiator intended to start doing in the restaurant. If the attempt to create a common moral circle fails, then negotiations break down and they will be hard to resume.

Adapting Leadership Styles

Leadership is not the same across the world (see, e.g., House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004), although some universal principles may apply to interculturally competent leadership (see Pusch [Chapter 3], Chen & An [Chapter 10], and Moran, Youngdahl, & Moran 10
Leaders in masculine societies need to appear strong, and those in feminine societies need to be forgiving. Hofstede and Dooley (2006) analyzed data from all levels in the organization had participated in focus groups, with the aim to determine leadership excellence. Statistical analysis across the focus groups revealed nine models of leadership excellence. All employees agreed that an excellent leader should be (a) optimistic and dependable, (b) approachable and have a sense of direction, and (c) focused and a developer of his or her people. Focus groups in the United States found two more factors: (d) professional at the personal level and passionate about the job and (e) a team player in implementing the organization's vision. Asian focus groups, however, came up with two very different factors: (f) a caring, authoritarian parent figure and (g) a proactive guide. The individualistic, short-term-oriented culture of the United States and the collectivistic, long-term-oriented mind-set of Southeast Asian cultures have clearly made their mark here. The lesson is that some leadership behaviors are universal, while others are local to some cultures.

International organizations are frequently populated by teams formed from members of many different cultures. To operate in such a team and especially to be able to lead it, one must create a moral circle. This means that unique rules and rituals have to be created that enable all team members to show and feel that they are good, upstanding group members. This can allow them to deviate from their own cultural conditioning (back home rules) to some extent while still feeling safe in a new moral circle.

One vignette is the story of a Dutch female manager who found herself in a meeting room in Japan with a number of Japanese males from a sister organization, all of them of lower hierarchical status than she was. Tea was waiting to be served. This created a moral deadlock for the Japanese, who have an extremely masculine and uncertainty-avoiding society in which deviating from ritual is unthinkable. Females must pour tea to males, but subordinates must do it for their bosses. What was to be done? The lady sensed this and made a speech, declaring that within the secrecy of the room, they would create their own rule: Everyone could pour his or her own tea. All were relieved and did as suggested.

Implications of Trust in Intercultural Competence

Knowing One's Biases

The essence of cross-cultural encounters is that one's own unwritten rules about proper behavior differ from those of the people one interacts with. Therefore, it is vital to know one's own cultural values. Everybody speaks with an accent (Peterson, personal communication, 2008). To realize this and to acquaint oneself with one's own culture's peculiarities is the most difficult but also the most essential ingredient for achieving intercultural competence. Means to do this include reading books about one's own culture written by foreigners or simply asking for feedback from non-compatriots. It should be noted that any such account reveals something about both the culture of the observer and the culture of the observed.
A typical case is for a visitor from a Western country of an individualistic, small power distance culture to have a work assignment in a leading position in a country with a more collectivistic and hierarchical culture. Such a visitor will routinely assume an active, self-interest motivated attitude among his or her subordinates. These subordinates will, however, be first and foremost eager to show respect. They will act with little individual initiative, avoid exposure as individuals, and expect direction. The new leader may perceive these behaviors as stupidity or disinterest. As Indian and Chinese companies emerge as major players, reverse tendencies can be observed, and confrontations can be expected between bosses who are used to an authoritarian, paternalistic style and their Western subordinates, who may be more accustomed to taking more initiative.

Adapting

"When you go Rome, do as the Romans do." If one travels and works abroad, one should adapt according to this adage. This necessitates specific knowledge of the host culture and an openness to engage in host culture rituals and behaviors when appropriate. Talking to people who have spent time in that culture, talking to expatriates from the country, and reading books by local authors can all help to prepare for such a cultural immersion experience. Adapting does not mean trying to act like somebody else. It does mean respecting the local customs and investing in learning appropriate behavior. Participate, ask questions, expect the unexpected, and be flexible. Practice in intercultural encounters is the best teacher.

Assisting

If one receives visitors in one's country, the visitors are often expected to adapt. However, visitors may not be willing or able to do so, and they may be in a position to have it their way. Serving as a cultural guide or providing orientation to one's own culture can often be helpful to visitors' adaptation process. Diplomatic qualities may be needed in such cases. The essence of diplomacy is to keep a moral circle intact: Whatever happens, we keep seeing one another as morally valuable beings. Visitors, certainly those from collectivistic cultures, can be greatly relieved if they find a cultural guide, somebody from the host culture willing to spend personal time and to explain the local rules. Finding such a person can make the difference between a successful and a failed foreign assignment. One way to do this is by finding mentors for new expatriate personnel during the first year abroad.

Leading

If one is a member or a leader of a multicultural team, certainly one that has been created by oneself, one is in a position to create a new set of unwritten rules that will enable the creation of a new moral circle. This is a crucial thing to do. In a new team, participants are likely to be anxious at first. To the extent that team members come from collectivistic, hierarchical, uncertainty-avoiding cultures, this is more likely to be so—although, obviously, members of international teams should be selected for language skills and personal qualities too.

So how can one forge team cohesion? Celebrating the team through carefully chosen shared ritual can act as a rite de passage to seal membership of the new moral circle. This can be a way
to circumvent awkward conflicts between team members who might otherwise be prone to taking offense at one another's practices. It is the function of many meetings and conferences to build team spirit.

Another important point is to adapt leadership style to the team members. With a multicultural team, this can be especially challenging. To maintain a good working atmosphere, the leader will have to be resourceful, alert to the satisfaction of each team member, and ready to take action, based on cultural needs of the members. It is useful to work with the distinction between cognitive and affective dissonance. Cognitive dissonance occurs when people disagree about content. In a masculine, individualistic culture (e.g., Anglo cultures or work cultures of trained professionals from competitive subcultures), cognitive dissonance will be frequent. It can serve a useful purpose to clarify intellectual issues, and protagonists should be able to argue while still being loyal team members. Affective dissonance means interpersonal conflict that damages the moral circle. People who were socialized in collectivistic, hierarchical cultures have probably learned not to disagree in public, and people from feminine cultures can disagree but cannot use a confrontational style. Team members with such a background are prone to fusing cognitive dissonance with affective dissonance (i.e., bad relationship). By setting clear rules of discussion, a team leader can ensure that discussion remains intellectual and does not destroy the moral circle.

Conclusion

This chapter has introduced the notion of a moral circle as key to intercultural competence. The main argument is that people live in groups that function implicitly or explicitly as moral circles (i.e., they have mechanisms for excluding members who violate norms so that social life is facilitated by trust and by common expectations among the upstanding members). Groups can exist at all levels from dyads to humanity as a whole. Different societies have different ideas about what constitutes a moral circle. These differences can be described in basic issues of culture. Culture can thus be described as the unwritten rules of the social game that determine which behavior is accepted in which role in the moral circle.

Notes

1. A note from the author: This chapter integrates biological and organizational insights in a novel way. Where no references are given for statements, they express the author's reasoning, and nobody else is to blame for them. This chapter also includes general statements about underlying values and dimensions in different cultures that are meant to be taken as generalizations. It is recognized that persons can also operate outside of moral circles beyond the culture of origin and that intercultural competence involves finding ways to negotiate this.

2. More information about these dimensions can be found in Hofstede and Hofstede (2005). That book has data for 74 countries and regions. Some of those can also be found on the Web—for example, in graphic form at www.geert-hofstede.com (note that this Web site is not that of Geert or Gert Jan Hofstede; see www.geerthofstede.com or www.gertjanhofstede.com for those).

References


