

Chapter 3

Individuals and groups

This chapter focuses on

how your actions can be influenced by the situation you are in, the people involved and their cultures

how cultural stereotypes can be both useful and harmful

how effective international managers need to take account of both culture and personality when working in international groups

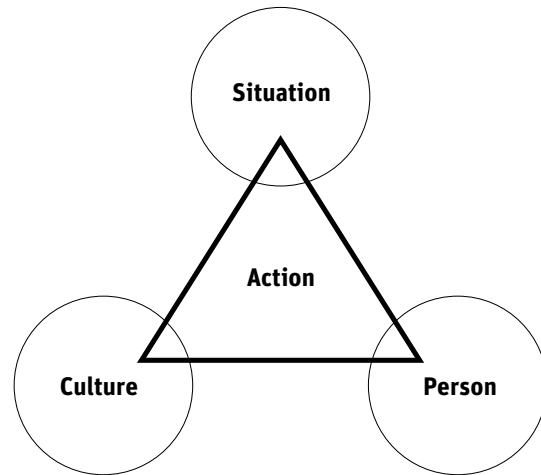
how getting things done as a manager depends on building relationships with colleagues and staff



Stereotypes | 3.1

When you meet a Kazak or Brazilian or German for the first time, it is all too easy to think that you now understand something about all Kazaks, Brazilians or Germans and their cultures. But in fact, a person's behaviour and actions are not solely influenced by that person's culture but result from the interplay of three factors: culture, the person involved, and the situation.

The triangle of behavioural influences



So when you meet a Slovak or a Senegalese or a Saudi for the first time, you do not necessarily learn something about the national or ethnic culture of this person. You may simply understand something about this individual's personality and preferred behaviours.

It is in fact very difficult to distinguish between what is personal and what is cultural. You need to gain much more experience of the culture in question, for example by spending a lot of time watching people from that culture working or playing together. Then it may be possible to decide whether the behaviour you see is mainly influenced by culture or by personality.

Even then, you have to be careful not to over-generalise and assume that all members of that culture are like those you have observed. What you see may be typical only of some members of it.

In building this picture of the other culture, you also have to be careful not to notice only those things which make it different from your own culture. People tend to perceive an out-group in terms of what makes it different from their own in-group. We may overlook the similarities.

It is therefore very difficult to measure the impact of culture since we are the victims of the triangle of behavioural influences. However, when you watch groups of people from the same culture, you tend to see some patterns of behaviour which repeat themselves. This is where some stereotypes come from. Other stereotypes, generally the less reliable ones, come from factors like minimal knowledge and experience, hearsay, the mass media and out-of-date school books.

Stereotypes are fixed, general images that a lot of people believe represent a particular group of people. These images may be accurate in describing what the group is like in reality. Or they may be rudimentary, incomplete and inaccurate.

These inaccurate and less reliable stereotypes can be harmful in a number of ways. In particular, they may result in us seeing only the stereotype when we encounter somebody from a different culture. We may thus ignore the individual, who may in fact be different from the stereotype.

- **You have to know stereotypes. For example, when I'm a German in a group, some people approach me in a certain way because they think I'm German and they expect me to act as a German. So I have to know the stereotypes, not so much to change my own behaviour, but to understand why the others behave in a certain way.**
- Thorsten Weber (Germany), HLP, Germany

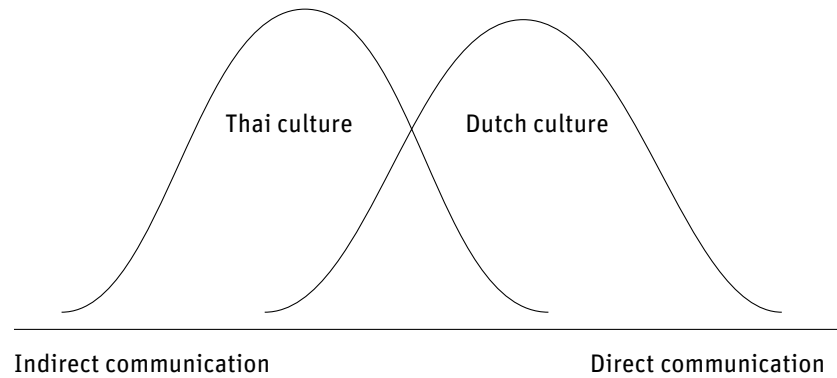
Some researchers believe that we use stereotypes, regardless of whether they are accurate or inaccurate, to help us to make sense of the world, especially when we have little information about the situation we are in and when we have little time. They reduce the complexity of perceiving, understanding and handling new or unknown situations. For this reason – and because we often unconsciously use stereotypes in dealing with new situations – it is important that our stereotypes are based on knowledge which is accurate and up-to-date.

When stereotypes are accurate in this way and also have other features, as Nancy Adler¹ describes, the mindful manager can use them as a first best guess and a tool for managing cultural complexity. Other research makes clear why stereotypes can be harmful.

A stereotype ...

can be <i>helpful</i> as a tool for managing complexity as long as ...	can be <i>harmful</i> because it may...
you know that it is a stereotype	lead to the ignoring of individuality
it is accurate and based on sound, up-to-date and reliable knowledge	be based on very limited knowledge and experience, hearsay or the mass media
you can modify it on the basis of further knowledge and experience	influence the way we process information and what we remember
it does not evaluate the group but only describes it	fail to take account of new knowledge and experience which contradict the stereotype
you know it describes the group norm and not every member of the group	create expectations and self-fulfilling prophecies

Stereotypes are often only partly accurate because they don't describe all the members of a group. In the best of cases they may describe the norm for the group. A common stereotype could be that Dutch people communicate directly and that Thai people communicate more indirectly. But as you can see from the diagram below, some Dutch people are less direct than some Thais, even if the majority of Dutch people are much more direct.



Using stereotypes can lead you to make quick judgements about people when you first meet them. When a Canadian meets a Japanese, the experience may confirm the stereotypes they already have. The Canadian may expect to find the Japanese formal, indirect and rather reserved. The Japanese may expect to find the Canadian informal, direct and outgoing.

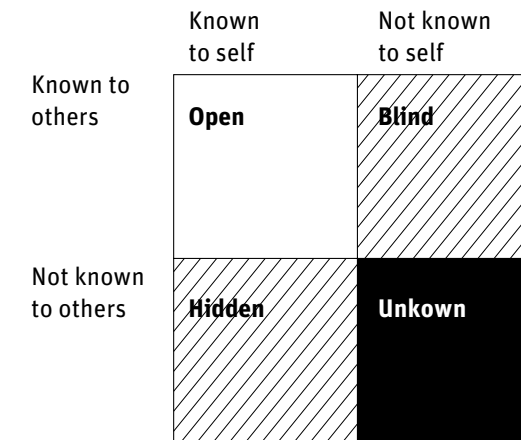
If we observe the Canadian and Japanese behaving in this way, the mindful international manager needs to be aware that their behaviour might be caused more by the *situation* than any cultural stereotype. For example, the Japanese is speaking English as a foreign language and this is making him seem very quiet and reserved. Or, it could relate more to *personality*. Maybe fellow-Canadians regard this Canadian as unusually outgoing.

Personality and behaviour – at work and at home | 3.2

The sociable Canadian who we met in the last section may not be so outgoing when he is at home. When we are at work, we often adapt to fit with the cultural norms that we find there. When we are at home, we may show another side of ourselves.

The Johari² window shows us how there can be a gap between what we show and know about ourselves and what our colleagues see and know about us.

The Johari window



- ▶ The *open* quadrant is where we spend most of the time at work, displaying sides of our personality openly to our colleagues.
- ▶ Our colleagues have much less insight into how we behave at home – we may keep this side of our life *hidden* or secret.
- ▶ The *blind* spot is where our colleagues see things about us which we do not see ourselves. This could be a weakness or an opportunity – some potential to perform that we do not recognise ourselves.
- ▶ Finally, the *unknown* quadrant is the area for lying on the couch and talking about our childhood to a psychiatrist!

Personality | 3.3

Mindful international managers need to recognise that behaviour and interaction are not only influenced by *culture* – the most obvious difference from managing in their home culture – but also by *personality*. Personality and thus personal preferences have a big impact on performance because generally we do our best work when we are doing what we like. Understanding personal preferences is a good starting point for mindful international managers to get the best out of themselves and their people.

There are many psychometric tools which profile an individual's personality (e.g. Myers Briggs Type Indicator) or behaviour (e.g. Belbin's Team Role Inventory). One of them, the Team Management Profile³ is based on four key dimensions at work:

- ▶ relationships (how we like to relate to other people)
- ▶ information (how we like to process and deal with information)
- ▶ decision-making (how we come to our decisions)
- ▶ organisation (how we organise ourselves and others)