

Since its discovery, America has never ceased to be a proving ground for people from all over the world who aspire to success. Now more than ever, high numbers of international students are moving through our educational institutions. As American businesses continue to offer interesting and challenging new opportunities to the successful degree-holders among them, the intercultural issue becomes increasingly important.

Consider the following example. People from Asian cultures can have considerable English-language difficulties due to basic differences in the structure and pronunciation of their native language. On top of this, their own culture requires that they take great care in exchanges with seniors and superiors so as to create no conflicts or "loss of face" for either party.

In the American working environment, these subtle but influential traits may make Asians appear much more reserved than their American counterparts. An American manager might interpret such behavior as unassertive and seek to effect adjustments in the Asian's attitudes and behavior. Most likely, however, such a course of action will not improve relations or resolve the problems.

Today, achieving excellence in managing people means developing new awareness and skills for dealing with employees from other cultures. These experienced-based observations and conclusions, drawn from multi-cultural environments in the U.S. and abroad, can ease the management task.

### The effects of culture

Basic influences come into play when people from different ethnic backgrounds work together on the same project team (Figure 1). The arrows indicate where influence is exerted at both individual and small group (micro), and more general (macro) cultural levels.

Ethnic culture pertains to the history, geography, morality, religion, and thought of a particular group of people. It also plays an influential role in establishing each company's specific corporate culture, and

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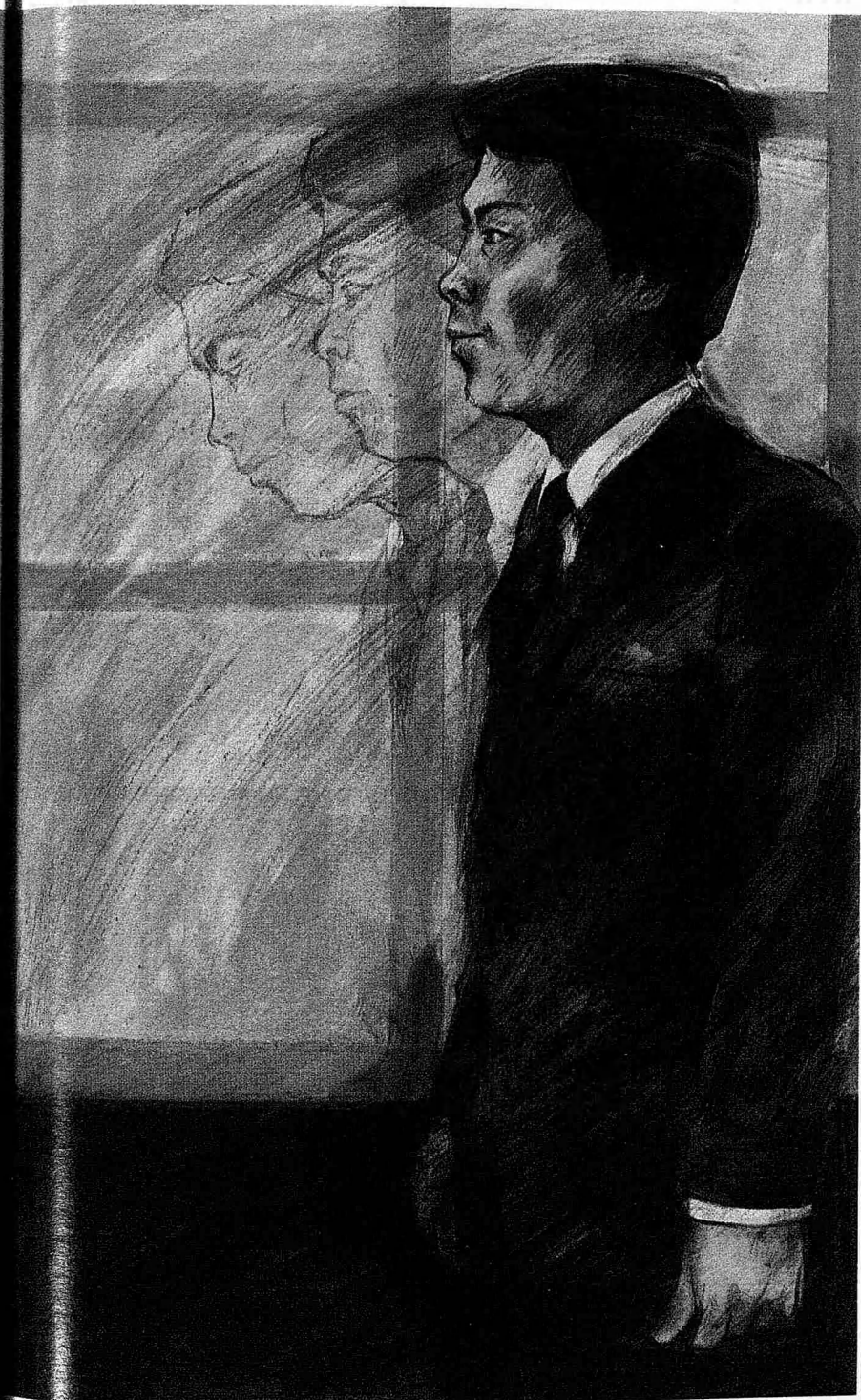


## Internal Cross-Cu

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By BOB MASTERSON and



# Cultural Management

cross-cultural management. As more nonnative employees of training is needed at home.

BOB MURPHY

the performance of individual company employees.

Management culture includes operating philosophy and principles, leadership style, organization, and management systems. The general management culture of any given country is a product, whether direct or indirect, of the ethnic culture that surrounds it.

The corporate culture of your company influences most aspects of the organization, management, and performance of the company and the project teams assigned to various tasks. While the goals and workings of any project team influence the individual members of the team, each participant likewise influences the performance and achievements of the whole team.

When individuals of more than one ethnic background are brought together on the same team, the relationship between the team and each of its members becomes the crux of cross-cultural management. In such a setup, strategy, organization, planning, personnel management, and team-building all need reconsideration.

## Through the culture filter

In the case of NL Industries, the company had recently done some general testing to gauge employee capabilities. Among those tested, one population scored consistently lower in the areas of verbal skills and reasoning skills. This group consisted of predominantly foreign-born employees who had been in America for as long as 25 years. Many had earned advanced engineering and technical degrees from United States universities. They had proven their ability to live, learn, and operate in the American setting and had developed technical skills and competencies that were respected enough to get them well-paying jobs in a dynamic, demanding new field.

So what did the low test scores really mean? Should we assume that foreign employees lack necessary basic technical skills and competences? Before we do, we should look at the test results again through a culture filter. Foreigners' scores were the result of linguistic and cultural differences. When such influences hinder rather than facilitate performance, the effect is called "interference." In the work setting, weaknesses that go uncorrected not only hamper daily communication, but can ultimately slow down career development, whatever the level of interest or stimulation the work itself might provide.

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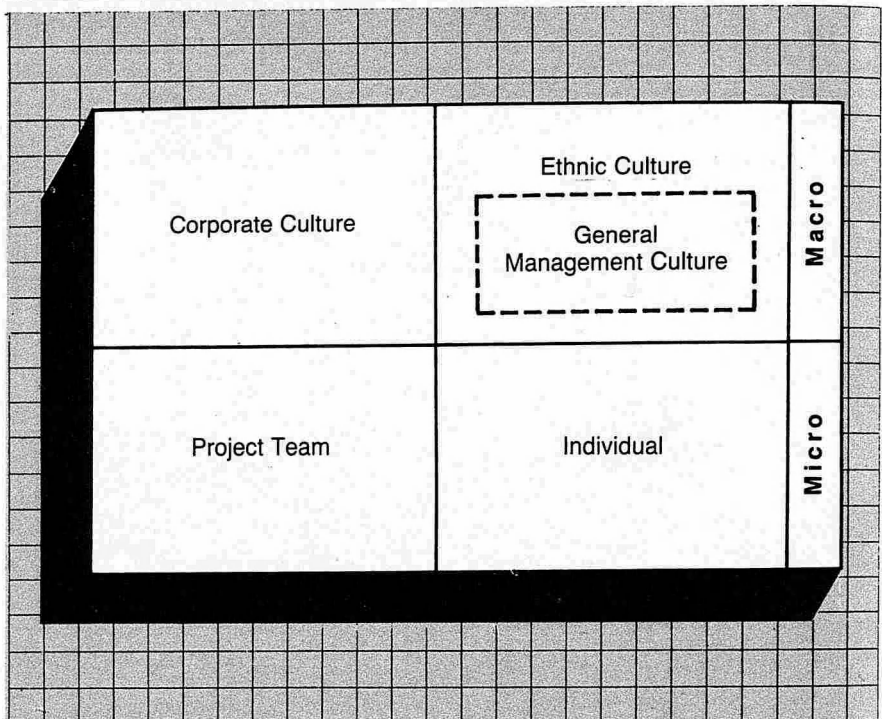
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Figure 1—Cross-cultural dynamics



## Cross-cultural issues

Whether addressing international or local markets, companies who today find themselves operating with a multi-ethnic base need to identify and examine the issues related to managing across cultures.

■ **Communicating.** A basic skill in today's business world, communicating includes oral and written activities as presentations, report writing, meetings, and customer contact. Support skills such as listening, verbal communication, and writing need clear development and frequent revision by foreign employees.

In the best of circumstances, listening is an extremely difficult area to study. Nonetheless, weak listening skills result in frequent misunderstanding. Foreigners often ignore what they don't catch and, as a consequence, communication takes longer than necessary and sometimes goes awry.

Weak listening skills impede pronunciation improvement; the employee cannot even "hear" the sounds he or she is producing and correct them. Pronunciation is one of the most obvious obstacles to clear understanding, and discussions with new customers or acquaintances are frequently accompanied by moments of confusion and embarrassment as both parties try to adjust to the labored exchange of words

and ideas. This might also explain a tendency by foreigners to let their colleagues speak for them during meetings that concern their work. In terms of efficiency, this lack of communication impedes group interaction and makes it more difficult for a team of workers to complete its assigned tasks.

In their writing, foreigners frequently misuse verb tenses and misapply English language structure. Their logic is also sometimes hard to follow due to misplaced detail elaboration. But instead of being seen as a poor writer and enrolled in a remedial class, he or she is sometimes perceived as an unclear, unoriginal thinker.

In many instances, overlapping weaknesses in listening, speaking, and writing are detrimental to the professional reputation of the foreign employee who is ultimately seen as being less technically competent. And while most foreigners agree that career advancement requires improved communication skills, they seldom follow up with systematic, structured practice. In some cases, they simply don't know how to go about it. To others, their deeper feeling is that they are already operational in English and no longer need to study.

■ **Assuring a Balanced View.** Cultural interference does not emanate only from the foreign party; the cultural bias of

Americans can also cause misunderstanding.

One area in which this is clearest is work ethics. As you may witness in annual reviews and appraisals, foreign employees seem to be hard workers, are relatively easy to motivate, and take pride in a job well done. What American managers seldom realize, however, is that foreign-born employees must often work harder than their American counterparts to assure themselves of doing work of comparable quality. Their efforts are observed easily, but are frequently misunderstood, making their American colleagues feel antagonized by so much apparent extra effort. Spoken or silent conflicts may ensue.

Americans also tend to feel they treat foreigners "the same as anyone else." This implies that in most work situations foreigners are subject to the same career development opportunities and problems as their colleagues. They can do just as well as their co-workers if they just ignore their foreignness and make others ignore it too. Intercultural exchange, however, is mutual and effective intercultural performance calls for orientation and education of all the members of the multicultural team. Both foreign and American management and employees must be made sensitive to the influence of language and ethnic culture on communication, performance, interpersonal skills, and working relationships. On both sides, personal needs, values, standards, and expectations are all culturally conditioned. In fact, many people from abroad consider their own culture, history, and way of thinking a plus. Through training, American managers might learn to better exploit these different—and often original—viewpoints for their own sake as well as that of their organization.

■ **Reducing the gaps.** Effective cross-cultural management practices come from adopting active strategies and programs that help reduce gaps between the performance of foreign personnel and that of their American co-workers. They develop synergies that assure a positive, more productive working environment for multi-ethnic teams. They also identify current capabilities and training needs of foreign and American management and employees.

### Reviewing corporate culture

Accompanying the cross-cultural management issue are the difficulties of establishing and perpetuating what a company is and what it wants to be. The most

active agents affecting corporate culture, growth, and change are the company's people. It is they who track and respond to the business environment; implement systems, practices, and procedures; establish routines; and communicate values.

If foreigners' career opportunities take them into higher levels of authority and responsibility, then the corporate culture

must be examined anew, with special attention to the impact foreigners can have on corporate direction. The elements, attitudes, and strategy of "who we are" need clear definition, so that foreigners (like anyone moving into management) know which approaches and style they are required to adopt if they are to fit in with the company's management team and perpetuate existing commitments. Other-

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wise, they may unwittingly set the company on the wrong path.

A number of simple training strategies can better prepare managers and employees to deal with and respond to intercultural problems. These include

■ Giving managers involved in the hiring process training specific to interviewing foreign applicants;

■ Giving managers and supervisors training specific to the management of foreign employees (heightening cultural sensitivity and language awareness);

■ Giving training to foreigners that minimizes the effect of foreign habits, values, and mores on company operations and individual career development;

■ Creating a program for the systematic examination of English language problems coupled with intensive language awareness and improvement training for foreign employees;

■ Teaching specific checking and feedback techniques to assure mutual understanding in communication exchanges.

Training, of course, goes hand-in-hand with the systematic establishment and monitoring of both short- and long-term employee development goals. Employees need to have expectations clearly communicated to them. A timely feedback loop keeps small problems from becoming exaggerated.

## Success in CCM

Many companies are beginning to understand that cross-cultural management no longer should be separated from the more general considerations of good management. The subtle interrelationships of culture, company, and individuals require well-integrated approaches.

Through implementing a cross-cultural management program, companies take a positive step in improving employee relations and offering considered career development opportunities to all employees. Companies have seen that cross-cultural management actions can easily be carried out in conjunction with more general corporate, management, personnel development, and training objectives, and that the results—better understanding, better communication, better productivity, and better management—can benefit everyone.