ISS Book Group

The Culture Map: Breaking Through the Invisible Boundaries of Global Business
By Erin Meyer, Published by PublicAffairs, 2014

Discussion Questions

This summer, we here at International Schools Services launched our very first ISS Book Group. Considering our strategic focus on a more global perspective, we chose to explore Erin Meyer's *The Culture Map: Breaking Through the Invisible Boundaries of Global Business.* The following questions helped our team spark discussion, thoughtfully consider our own work in relation to Meyer's studies, and simply be better partners to our intercultural classrooms and colleagues. We share these questions hoping your team has an equally rich exploration of *The Culture Map*.

Have fun, and think global!

Introduction
Navigating Cultural Differences and the Wisdom of Mrs. Chen

1. Why does Meyer believe that "being open to individual differences is not enough…you need to have an appreciation for cultural differences as well as respect for individual differences" (pp. 12-14)? Do you agree or disagree with Meyer? Why?
2. What does Meyer mean by "cultural relatively" (pp21-23)? Why does she think it's a critical factor in intercultural communication? Explain how the Mr. Chen and Sabine Dulac anecdotes or any of your own personal or professional experiences illustrate the concept of cultural relatively.

Chapter 1: Listening to the Air
Communicating Across Cultures

1. What are the differences between "low context" and "high context" cultures? How do those differences lead to misunderstandings and how can such misunderstandings be mitigated? Use examples from the text.
2. Think about your own interactions with people from different cultures? Do the concepts of "low context" and "high context" explain any miscommunications you've had? If so, knowing what you know now, how would you approach similar interactions in the future?
3. What does it mean to be a good listener?

Chapter 2: The Many Faces of Polite
Evaluating Performance and Providing Negative Feedback

1. According to Meyer, "what is considered constructive [criticism] in one culture may be viewed as destructive in another," (p. 62) and "politeness is in the eye of beholder" (p. 87). Explain using examples from the text and from your own professional and personal interactions.
2. Based on the evaluating continuum (p. 69) and the evaluating/context matrix (p. 72) in Chapter Two, <u>role play</u> how, where and when you would give the following feedback about a conference – mixed speakers, poor logistics, nice facility – to people from the following countries: Netherlands, US, Russia, Thailand. Be sure to use "upgraders" and "downgraders" (p. 65) as appropriate and discuss the most fitting setting for your feedback.

Chapter 3: Why Versus How
The Art of Persuasion in a Multicultural World

1. In Chapter Three, Meyer argues that some cultures predominantly use principles-first reasoning while others mostly use applications-first reasoning? (pp. 93-95) In addition, she argues that some countries favor holistic lenses while others use more specific perspectives pp. 104-112). Describe the differences in these approaches using examples from the text and discuss some of the sources of these differences?
2. How would you most effectively persuade a French, Mexican, Canadian and Chinese partner to invest in a new initiative?

Chapter 4: How Much Respect Do You Want?
Leadership, Hierarchy, and Power

1. In Chapter 4, Meyer argues that although most people say they would prefer an egalitarian work approach, different cultures fall on a broad array on the egalitarian-hierarchical scale (p. 125). What are some of the reasons for the different placement of various cultures on the leading scale? How does the system of reciprocal obligations work in hierarchical cultures?
2. According to Meyer, "in today's global business environment, it is not enough to be either an egalitarian leader or a hierarchical leader. You need to be both – to develop the flexibility to manage up and down the culture scales." (p. 142) That's probably especially true in the US which falls towards the middle of the leading scale. Discuss some of the strategies that Meyer recommends. Which ones did you find most compelling or relevant to your work?

Chapter 5: Big D or little d
Who Decides, and How?

1. Generally, hierarchical cultures favor top-down decision making and egalitarian cultures favor consensual or group decision-making. Discuss how and why America, Japan and Germany are exceptions to that rule.
2. Why was the German-American company merger described in the first part of the chapter such a difficult one? How can you avoid such cultural clashes when it comes to making decisions?

Chapter 6: The Head or the Heart
Two Types of Trust and How They Grow

1. In Chapter 6, Meyer uses the metaphor of a Peach vs a Coconut to illustrate the difference between two types of trust and how they develop in a business context (p. 174). How does this metaphor explain these two approaches to relationship building. How can people from different ends of the Trusting Scale misread each others intentions? What do you think of the US' placement on the Trusting Scale?
2. Meyer says that "One productive way to start putting trust deposits in the bank is to build on common interests" (p.178) Can you think of any examples of employing this strategy?
3. Meyer suggests considering the communication medium you use in terms of where the recipient's culture lies on the Trusting Scale (p.189). What are some factors in deciding how to communicate with people from different cultures?

Chapter 7: The Needle, Not the Knife
Disagreeing Productively

1. Meyer categorizes cultures as being on a continuum between confrontational and non-confrontational when it comes to disagreeing. What factors contribute to whether a culture is more or less confrontational? What does the concept of 'face' mean in many Asian cultures?
2. Meyer cautions to not confuse emotional expressiveness and confrontation. Consider figure 7.3 (p. 204) and reflect on how disagreement might play out in a German context vs a Mexican context.
3. On page 213 Meyer lists three different outcomes for a 'good meeting.' How is placement on the confrontational scale reflected in those 'good meeting' definitions?

Chapter 8: How Late Is Late?
Scheduling and Cross-Cultural Perceptions of Time

1. Discuss the differences between monochromatic/linear-time cultures and polychromatic/flexible-time cultures, including arrival times, scheduling, waiting or queuing, and meeting agendas? Why do some cultures value punctuality (e.g. Germany) whereas others value flexibility (e.g. Burundi)?

Epilogue: Putting the Culture Map to Work

1. Using the attached cultural map (or the maps in each chapter of the book), pick 1-3 cultures (other than your own) with which you regularly interact. Identify a few of the biggest differences between those cultures and your culture. Pair and share your insights with someone at your table.
2. Based on the map and what you learned from the book, what are three specific things you can do going forward to improve communication with clients or colleagues from different cultures? Share your three action items with the people at your table.