

EXERCISE: STRUCTURING - "INTERCULTURAL SENSITIVITY"

Purpose: becoming aware of the content of the text and mark a text efficiently.

Duration: 20 minutes.

Take a look at the text for the first time. Highlight (parts of) titles & subtitles. This way, you immediately get an idea of the structure of the text. Then thoroughly read the text paragraph by paragraph. Ask yourself a WH-question for every subtitle (WHO, WHAT, WHERE, WHY, WHICH, HOW,...). Read the text a second time and mark the keywords.

Intercultural Sensitivity

1.1 What is Culture? Visible and Invisible Culture

According to the interculturalist Edgar Schein, culture consists of layers, like an onion.

14



Illustration 1.1 Cultural onion.

1. Artefacts of Culture
2. Norms and Values
3. Basic Assumptions

1. The outer layer, or material culture, we call *artefacts of culture*. Artefacts are the first things you notice when entering a new country. Foreigners arriving in the Netherlands notice: the bicycle lanes, large windows and open curtains, the tall people, and how they dress. They notice that a lot of Dutch people eat bread and drink milk at lunchtime. The first time you enter a new company, you'll notice the artefacts: company logo, company house-style, and whether or not the employees wear ties. Artefacts are easy to perceive, and they're nice to know, but intercultural communication is not going to be about artefacts.

2. The second layer we call the *norms and values*. They are written and unwritten standards of correct, desired behaviour. Is it the norm to arrive in class a few minutes early, exactly on time or is it the custom to be a few minutes late? Is 3 minutes late acceptable and 10 minutes not? These are examples of norms. Values express what we think is good or right. For example, is it good to stand up for an elderly person on a crowded bus? Is it right to send a card or make a phone call to a classmate who is ill? Norms and values are not as visible as artefacts. It takes some time to notice, let alone learn them. But with the necessary effort and observation, they can be learned.

3. The deepest layer is that of the *basic assumptions*. They are abstract and invisible, we learn them very young – before we are 7 – and we are unaware of their influence.

Yet the perception of the world around us, and the judgements we make about others, are very much shaped or distorted by the basic assumptions of our culture. Intercultural communication is about bringing basic assumptions of our own culture to our awareness and to recognise the basic assumptions of other cultures. This is in order to communicate creatively and more effectively with people from other cultures, to use cultural diversity at work as a source of inspiration and growth, and to achieve cultural synergy. In chapter 5 of this book we will present a 3-step strategy on how to achieve cultural synergy.

15

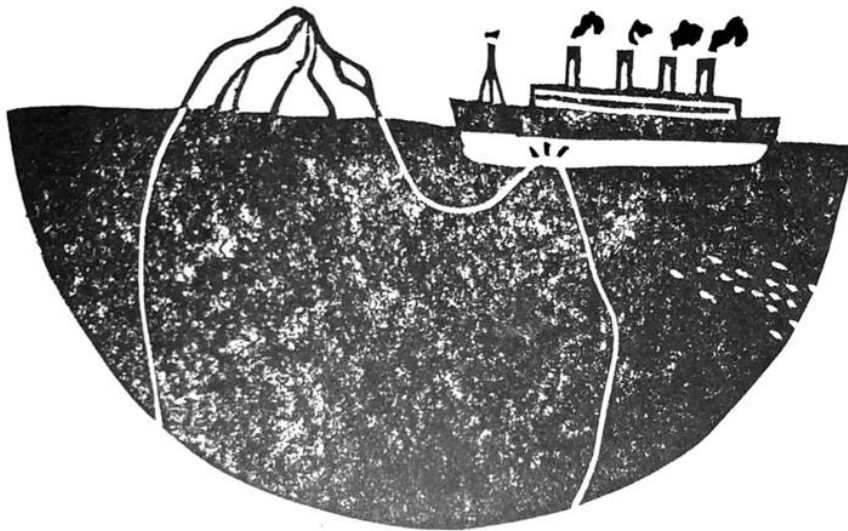


Illustration 1.2 Cultural iceberg and the Titanic as metaphor of cultural clashes on the invisible level of culture: the basic assumptions.

1.2 Definition of Culture

This book is not going to be about Culture with the capital C such as literature, art, music, theatre, museums and architecture. It is about culture with the little c. It is about the familiar way we think, feel and behave. How we learned this and share the meaning of it with other members of our society. The list of definitions of culture is endless. The table below gives four definitions. We have chosen this short definition by interculturalist Geert Hofstede:

“Culture is the collective programming of the mind, which distinguishes the members of one group (...) of people from another.”

Some Definitions of Culture

1. Edgar Schein defines culture as... "a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and therefore to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems." (Schein, 2004)
2. Mijnd Huijser defines culture as ... "a group's set of shared norms and values expressed in the behaviour of the group's members." (Huijser, 2006)
3. Fons Trompenaars: "Culture is the way in which a group of people solves problems." (Trompenaars & Hampden Turner, 1998)
4. Geert Hofstede: "Culture is the collective programming of the human mind, which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another." (Hofstede, 1991)

1.3 Cultural Programming

Culture is learned. Hofstede calls it *programming*. You could also call it 'learning', like Edgar Schein does. We are programmed through upbringing, socialization, norms and values, and perception.

A lot of programming comes with our *upbringing*. Take a simple handshake. There's nothing natural about it. No child would dream of shaking hands unless it was programmed to do so. "Be a good boy, be a good girl now, shake hands." This is repeated and drilled so often that you end up thinking that shaking hands is normal.

A lot of other things we learn through *socialization*, by interacting with others. To stay with the handshake, do you give a limp handshake? A firm one? A crunch? Through socialization you learn just how firm a desirable handshake is, and even the right smile and amount of eye contact to go with it. In Europe, a firm handshake is desirable. And you would associate a limp hand with weakness of character. In many Asian countries, firm handshakes are seen as aggressive, and people find a modest, gentle handshake more polite. We are also programmed through norms and values. If we value showing respect for older people, and the norm is to give your seat to an elderly person on the bus, you will feel good when you stand up for someone older, and feel uneasy if you don't. In some countries the norm is to give up your seat to children, because children are small and vulnerable.

Finally, part of the programming happens through *perception*. Just by looking around us we make conscious or unconscious choices about how we want to behave.

Does programming reduce us to cultural robots then? No. Regardless of culture, each person is a unique individual and makes choices, for example, to follow or to deviate from the cultural group norms.

There are three levels of programming:

Individual
Cultural
Human Nature

If we haven't eaten for days, human nature makes us look for something to eat and devour it with our hands! That we decide to put the food on a plate and eat it with fork and knife is our cultural programming. However, individuals may choose not to use fork and knife, regardless of their cultural programming or what society thinks. Similarly, in some cultures, your programming teaches you always to share food with others and never to eat on your own. There too, individuals may choose to eat it up all by themselves, regardless of the community's disapproval or possible sanctions.

Source: Intercultural Sensitivity: From Denial to Intercultural Competence. Chapter 1 Culture, Communication and Global Citizenship.