

Making Value-Based Decisions and Dealing with Value Dilemma and Conflict While Working on OD in a Global Context

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A WORD ABOUT THE BACKGROUND THAT LED TO THIS CHAPTER

I was born into a multicultural and multiracial home environment. My grandfather was sold as an indentured servant from China to Surinam in South America, and my grandmother was a Guyana-born, third-generation, mixed-race (Chinese and African) woman. Prior to his marriage to my grandmother, my grandfather had a black woman partner (slave status), and from that union, a few children were born bearing the full name of my grandfather as their last name—Tjon'ah'pian (Tjon has the same pronunciation as Cheung and ah'pian was his first name). The skin color among my first and second cousins spans from African/Caribbean black, South American black and Chinese mix, to Dutch and black Chinese mixed race, to pale skin.

I was born in Hong Kong, grew up in the United States, and have always had a strong affinity with my cross-cultural and cross-racial family, especially my South American cousins whom I have met and kept in touch with.

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After receiving my PhD from the University of Maryland, I taught for three years in the United States before marrying a Scottish academic and moving to Oxford, United Kingdom. There, I left the academic world and went straight into OD consultancy practice, first as an internal consultant, and after four years, establishing my own OD consultancy firm, which still exists.

In the past decades, 80% of my professional work portfolio consisted of systemic transformation efforts in a global context. The following are some of the substantial global projects I were involved in. By “substantial,” I mean projects that required a minimum duration of 12–36 months, with regular trips (often monthly trips) to the client organization outside of the United Kingdom. For example:

1. A review of the global graduate recruitment and selection process of an energy sector company: checking how the procedures worked across the globe within multicultural/social/racial settings and giving support to the subsequent implementation program
2. A review of the global talent management processes in another energy sector organization by working with five regions in the world; sharing the diagnostic data with six types of stakeholders; and supporting the internal change team through the global implementation phase
3. Troubleshooting for a leading UK global quango (a quasi-autonomous nongovernmental organization) whose worldwide staff survey had dropped 32% over a period of two years due to badly managed changes. This project involved collecting data from over 40 countries across four regions and supporting the top management team to agree on a plan of action to (a) arrest the drop of the psychological contract and (b) to raise the morale and bring loyalty back in the organization
4. Led a system-wide transformation consultancy project in a Middle Eastern organization as part of rebuilding their state-owned multimedia organization, from diagnosis to setting up the implementation plan, and through to the completion of most of the implementation actions
5. Led and supported a nation-wide system change in Asia, achieving service transformation close to a four-year period

6. Supported a global healthcare sector organization in carrying out a number of worldwide transformation programs in countries, regions, and headquarters, around the world over an eight-year period
7. Supported a global quality culture change process of a multinational organization, working with a central team to design and kick-start the process; over 20 manufacturing sites worldwide participated in this quality culture initiative with my support and monitoring.

The above projects, together with other smaller projects, took me to countries like Hong Kong, China, Singapore, Japan, Mexico, Greece, Germany, Spain, Italy, Switzerland, Holland, Russia, the United States, the Caribbean, Lesotho, South Africa, the Philippines, and India. During these decades of work, many mistakes were made and the learning curves continued to be steep. This led me to be very curious as to how I and other OD practitioners can improve in our transnational and cross-cultural work within the OD value agenda. This chapter emerged from over two years of reflection, research, and dialogue with colleagues and clients.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

This chapter has four sections. Each stands independently, but they are woven into a story of how one OD practitioner has navigated through the interaction between national cultural values, professional OD values, the client organization values, and her personal ethical and moral values when working across cultural settings. The purpose of this chapter is, through three case situations, to help readers identify how our own values, OD professional values, and national and cultural values interact with the values of the client organization, drawing out the key principles that will guide and enhance the effectiveness of your practice in a global setting.

The four sections are as follows:

1. Types of values: What OD professional values are important to me?
2. What is my cross-cultural values profile, and what are the sources for those values?
3. Three case illustrations: Case 1—a Middle Eastern Organization; Case 2—an Asian organization; Case 3—a European organization
4. What are the general applications other OD practitioners may find helpful?

The chapter ends with three appendices:

Appendix 1—a brief explanation of the various cultural dimensions of Hofstede, Trompenaars, and Meyers

Appendix 2—a special note about how long one should stay in a job that is costly to the practitioners’ sense of well-being due to cultural and value clashes

Appendix 3—a summary of the simple rules that guide cross-cultural work

SECTION I: TYPES OF VALUES: WHAT OD PROFESSIONAL VALUES ARE IMPORTANT TO ME?

OD Professional Values

I got into the field of OD because of its strong value base. In my first year in college, I was fascinated by the following values which were expounded by my first-year professor Dr. Culver: “help people; make the world a better place; empower people to live a fulfilled life; be respectful and inclusive, and continue to enhance one’s self-awareness.” This first encounter with OD led to a “homecoming” experience for me—having a clear sense that I was in the right place. There was a sure conviction that if I chose to do OD, I would be operating from the right principles and approaches and possessing values that are congruent to who I am and where I come from. I was also relieved to know that in OD we are asked to work in both levels of values that Bunker (2014, p. 48) talked about: (1) the values underlying the work of OD and (2) the values about how the consultants best do the work.

As mentioned, besides the OD professional values, other categories of values are also important to guide our practices, which in turn will manifest in four levels of systems:

1. Personal values
2. Moral and ethical values
3. National cross-cultural values
4. Organization cultural values

Cultural values often come in three levels of manifestation (Schein, 1990): *observable (behavioral)*, *reportable (attitudes and values)*, and *sub-conscious (beliefs, taken for granted assumptions)*. Or in Schein’s terms, values as part of culture can be expressed as artifacts, espoused values, and basic assumptions.

In this chapter, I will focus on how these four values interact and their impact on OD practitioners’ approach to work. I will also concentrate more on the visible and reportable level of culture.

What Professional OD Values Are Important to Me?

Milbrandt and Keister (2014) have done a wonderful job in putting together the findings from the ODN LinkedIn discussion on OD values. I have found it helpful, and hence decided to adapt their grid to map out my own values (see Fig. 13.1) with support from a few colleagues. Without too much surprise, the value profile I charted resembles the data input to the ODN LinkedIn discussion.

But out of all this range of 15 differentiated values, 6 are particularly central to my practice. Out of the six, three have been presented in the Milbrandt and Keister (2014) article.

The six values are as follows:

Humanism. This is a central tenet in our field, proclaiming the importance of every individual by respecting the whole person and treating them with dignity by honoring the intrinsic worth of each individual. Milbrandt and Keister (2014) summed this up as “the value of being human-centred; acknowledge the needs, desires, and concerns related to the human system.” This means as OD practitioners, we focus on building inclusive and developmental processes that help to bring out



Fig. 13.1 The mapping of my values

the best in people, working with principles behind how human behavior and human dynamics operate within the work context and to ensure—whenever possible—an “ALL WIN” outcome when transforming an organization by always taking a system approach.

Optimism. This value posits that people are willing to participate and contribute to improve the system they belong to. Progress is possible and desirable in human affairs, and people within the system are willing to live “larger than who they are” when given the right opportunities within a right set of conditions that will motivate them to do just that. This fundamental belief also applies at the intrapersonal level; when given the right conditions, most human beings can achieve their potential and enjoy the experience of being able to make an impact in their world. This value would require that practitioners operate from a “possibility and hopeful” perspective.

Participation. The most fundamental belief underlining this value is that people within the system are capable of solving their own problems and possess both the drive and creative ideas about how to improve the system they live in. Hence, if they are given their “right” as part of membership of that system (vs being granted as a privilege by a benevolent autocratic leader) to facilitate self-organization and own the responsibility to shape the current work that will affect the future productivity and destiny of those who are both within and outside the system, regardless of their rank and level of authority within the system, they will deliver.

Fairness. This value focuses on the inherent value of all people, regardless of the demographic, religious, and psychological differences, as well as their life choice, personality, and preferences, and so on, which they bring to the workplace, the community, and society. Hence, the job of an OD practitioner is to be vigilant and intentional and proactively create opportunities to (a) address structural inequality and (b) build inclusive and fair practices and policies to ensure the organization, community, and society can build a fair place for all. This value would require practitioners to fight structural inequality as well as promote an inclusive culture supported by inclusive policies. As someone once said, “life is not fair, but we can do something about it.”

Pursue the duality of organization effectiveness (performance) as well as sustainable organization health. This value is the backbone of the dual purpose of any OD intervention goal—to build optimal organizational functionality to benefit those whom the organization serves (customers, clients, patients, users, etc.) is paramount to organization

survival, as well as build the sustainability of organization health—achieving sufficient coherency within the organization to enable people to be able to give their best. When both external performance and internal health issues are in equal focus, organizations can then truly be in a continuous “developmental” stage aiming for greater and effective performance.

Global cross-cultural and cross-racial understanding and collaboration.

This value is about staying curious and anticipatory, learning instead of letting fear, judgment, and assumption be our dominant attitudes when we interact with people who hold different beliefs, cultural norms, and behavioral patterns. This value requires us to commit ourselves to build “transcultural competence”—which involves the ability to not just recognize and respect cultural differences but also know how to reconcile and resolve differences by creating new ways for resolving cultural dilemmas within the core OD value framework whenever possible. This value is underpinned by respect and a nonjudgmental attitude in working across different cultural contexts.

However, in consultancy situations, being clear about our values is one thing; having the ability to translate them into behavior is another thing. As Vallini (2007, p. 29) rightly said, “ethics is a behavioral value.”

SECTION II: WHAT IS MY CROSS-CULTURAL VALUES PROFILE AND WHAT ARE THE SOURCES FOR THOSE VALUES?

Knowing Others and Knowing Ourselves

When working in a global and cross-cultural context, the most essential step is for us to “know ourselves” first. Trompenaars frequently said, “if I do not know my own Dutch-ness (the behavioural and psychological orientation of being Dutch), I would not know what to do with your French-ness.” What he means is that knowing our own cultural values is a prerequisite to (a) adapt our behavior as well as to (b) anticipate the range of conflicts and dilemmas we may come across in specific cross-cultural contexts.

More importantly, knowing ourselves well will help us to be clearer on:

- which values we would need to hold firm because they are so key to delivering the necessary results to “develop the organization”;
- which values we could compromise with full knowledge that ultimately it would not matter;

- what level of compromise will help us to gain more credibility and respect in order for us to be trusted to do deeper and more penetrating work within the system eventually; and
- which values we would not and cannot compromise—which may lead us to choose to resign from the job, if there is no resolution to the value conflict.

The journey to get to know who we are will take time as different encounters with different people and groups will reveal different sides of ourselves. Hence, seeking our understanding of both the *origin* and the *function* of our value behavioral pattern is a worthwhile self-development pursuit.

Therefore, knowing and disclosing our value profile as an OD practitioner is a critical step in helping clients and ourselves to understand who we are and why we do what we do when working in a global setting. The purpose of Figs. 13.1 and 13.2 and Table 13.1 is to help the readers understand the three case illustrations in the next section better. All three cases taught me different things about OD practice, the use of values, and “self in action”—offering crucial insights for the use of self.

ERIN MEYER		Hofstede		FONS TROMPENAARS
COMMUNICATION Low Context	High Context	POWER DISTANCE High ————— Low		UNIVERSALISM ————— PARTICULARISM
EVALUATING Direct negative feedback	Indirect negative feedback	UNCERTAINTY AVOIDANCE High ————— Low		INDIVIDUALISM ————— COMMUNITARIISM
PERSUADING Principle first	Application first	INDIVIDUALISM COLLECTIVISM [—————]		NEUTRAL ————— AFFECTIVE
LEADING Equalitarian	Hierarchical	MASCULINITY FEMININITY [—————]		SPECIFIC ————— DIFFUSE
DECIDING Consensual	Top down	LONG TERM SHORT TERM Orientation [—————]		ACHIEVEMENT STATUS ————— ASCRIPTION STATUS
TRUSTING Task based	Relationship based			INTERNAL CONTROL ————— EXTERNAL CONTROL
DISAGREEING Confrontational	Avoids confrontation			TIME ORIENTATION PAST ————— PRESENT ————— FUTURE
SCHEDULING Linear time	Flexible time			SEQUENCE ————— SYNCHRONICITY

Put together by Mee Yan Cheung, Judge, Quality & Equality Ltd. October 2015

Fig. 13.2 Author’s dominant cultural value

Table 13.1 Sources of author's values and behavioral patterns

<i>Sources of values and cultural behavioral patterns</i>	<i>Trompenaars</i>	<i>Meyer</i>	<i>Hofstede</i>
Asian/Chinese cultural pattern	Particularism Communitarism Diffuse	High context in communication	Collectivism
OD and professional values as framed by my own cross-cultural upbringing (14 years in the USA and then 34 years in the UK)	Achievement status Internal control	Application first in persuading Equalitarian in leading Consensual in deciding Direct negative feedback in evaluation (straight talking)	Low in power distance Long term in Orientation
Personality preference (as shown in multiple testing on MBTI, Firo B, 16 PF through three decades)	Affective Synchronicity Future in Time Orientation	Relationship based in trusting Avoids confrontation in disagreeing Flexible time	Low in uncertainty avoidance Femininity

My Cultural Profile

The first time I charted my cultural preference was right after I had read Hofstede's work, and then I updated that original charting after having attended workshops with Fons Trompenaars a few years later. In 2014, Erin Meyer published an updated cross-cultural profile with new dimensions in her new book. These three thinkers/writers have helped me and millions of others to understand how we and others operate cross-culturally, to which we owe sincere gratitude.

Figure 13.2 shows my cultural values and behavioral patterns across all three authors' dimensions. A brief explanation of the three authors' dimensions can be found at the end of the chapter as [Appendix 1](#).

As those who study behavior know, there is a dynamic interaction between culture, upbringing, personality, and professional values that shape our behaviors. The function of behavior is shaped by the context in which we work, Gestalt's concept of figure and ground, Lewin's concept of group dynamics, people's own judgment of what level of discernment they need to exercise to stay safe, useful, affiliated, and what will contribute best to their own self-respect and sense of significance. As behavioral patterns do not come from a single source, the task has been a difficult one. But the attempt has been worthwhile because it has been conceptually challenging and offers insights to help me understand who I am better—something I would encourage readers to do as well.

Looking across my profile in Fig. 13.2, it is immediately clear that while there is much consistency across the board, there are also some contradictory patterns within my behavior. In Table 13.1, I attempted to differentiate which dominant value behavioral pattern came from where.

Regardless of the source of my behavioral values, in summary I am more or less:

- a collective and community-based thinker and doer—system perspective is my natural base of operation.
- a straight talker in most situations but with a high sensitivity to people not “losing face”; low tolerance of high and unfair power distance systems; a believer that collective leadership is preferable to a hierarchical situation and that people should be allowed to do joint decision making, given opportunities to become aware of their internal control mechanisms, and able to achieve the longer-term future they want.

- a relationship-based person, believing in the importance of affect and emotions as part of the normal interface between people, and hence careful in direct confrontation when disagreeing; believing that taking risks is part of the necessary process to get any new and innovative thing done; and believing that building the future should be in our own hands; always future oriented and seeing being flexible as part of life.

Two key realizations after mapping my own values profile are that (1) regardless of whether we choose to stick to or deviate from our values in different contexts/situations, we will eventually get into awkward, uncomfortable, and even conflictual situations and dilemmas when working with clients and colleagues who themselves will also have different behavioral patterns due to a myriad of factors; (2) it is difficult to work globally without some basic awareness of both our OD values and our cross-cultural values. Values are the rudder to help us navigate through the complex value differences resulting from the interaction of culture, organization, and professional values.

Will it be helpful if you (the readers) also chart your cultural profile?

SECTION III: GLOBAL CASE ILLUSTRATION

The following three case situations are used to illustrate three areas:

1. How to chart our analysis of the similarities and differences between the client system and ourselves
2. The implications of such similarities and differences on the type of interaction and intervention design that will help us
3. The type of decisions and choices practitioners need to make in order to stay useful while navigating through these situations

Figure 13.3 shows the similarities and differences I have with a Middle Eastern organization.

Figure 13.4 shows the similarities and differences I have with an Asian organization.

Figure 13.5 shows the similarities and differences I have with a European organization.

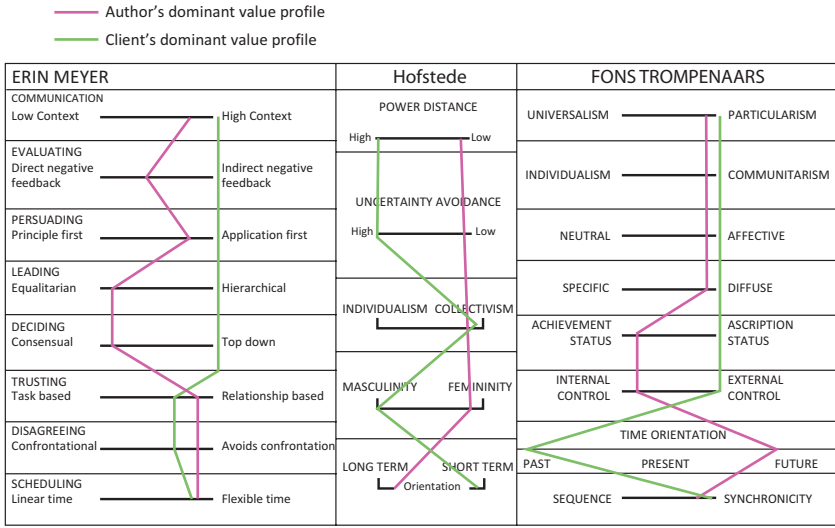


Fig. 13.3 Author's and Arabic client system's cultural values profile

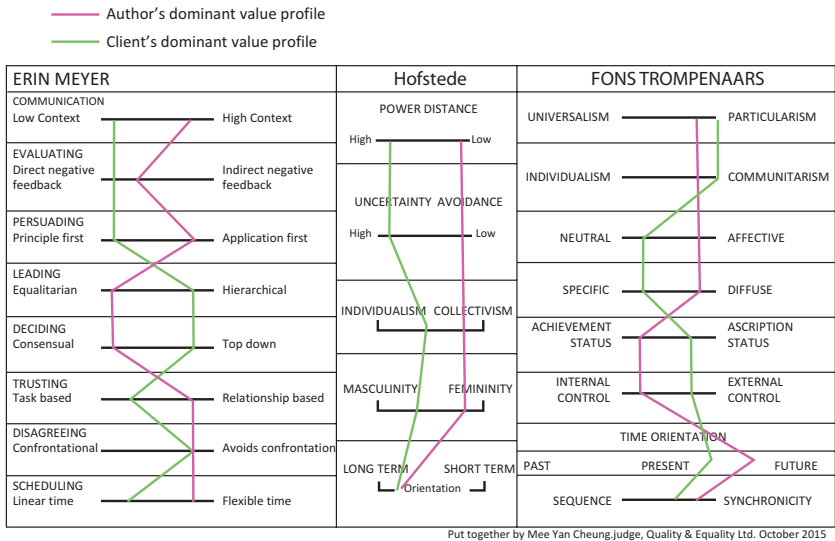


Fig. 13.4 Author's and an Asian client system's cultural values profile

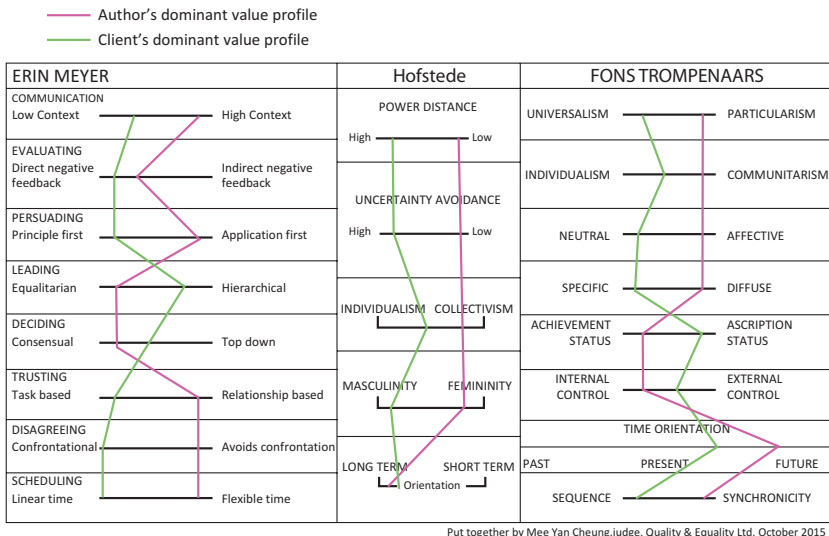


Fig. 13.5 Author’s and a European client system’s culture value profile

When reading, please note the following:

1. The markings are done more in a prototype format of the organization and culture mix.
2. Within that prototype, there are always individual system members who do not fit. But as Schein points out, as long as those members of the system still “hold” the cultural values (i.e., do not actively contest them—often for good reasons, such as safety) they are the “bearers” of the culture whether or not they agree with that culture.
3. The differentiation between me and the client organization in that cultural context is exaggerated a bit to illustrate the type of challenges, for example, conflicts and dilemmas, that emerged from such differences.
4. Regardless of the difference between consultants and the clients, there is always sufficient similarities that we can use as levers to build trusting relationships and to negotiate the differences. Identified similarities provide space for us to work through those tough conflicts while remaining professional—always aiming to deliver the tasks that we have agreed to.

5. It is important to look at the cultural differences without a judgmental lens. Most cultural patterns are strongly rooted in the socio-political-historical contexts from which they emerged and function. One key value OD practitioners need to hold is to remain nonjudgmental, no matter how much those differences grind at our own values, and to remain in a stance of curiosity with a desire to understand. Of course, this is easier said than done.
6. We practitioners need also to reflect on the impact of our own cultural profile as demonstrated by our behavior in each client situation. In a continuous learning and development spirit, we need to always ask “is there room for me to stretch my behavioral values without compromising my core values in order to increase my own effectiveness in this global situation?”—as part of “use of self, self as an instrument” while doing OD work.

The First Client Situation

Case 1 Working with a State-Owned Middle Eastern Multimedia Organization

The Job: My commission was to support the CEO and his top team to rebuild a national multimedia organization. At the time of entry, the organization was close to £40 million in debt, running without an agreed budget. Hence, without a balanced budget, every year the deficit continued to mount up. The organization had a rigid structure, with almost no core processes; nor was there an operational framework to harness and support the running of the organization. Staff had not been technically trained to use any of the expensive multimedia equipment they had purchased; there was a nonexistent HR system; appointments were made based on “wasta”—on who an individual knew—rather than any skills, and so on. The transformation agenda was to implement a total system rebuild and development.

Key Clients:

- The CEO, who had long-standing educational, military, and social relationships with various members of the elite class
- The top team, which comprised all the divisional heads of the organization

(continued)

Case 1 (continued)

- The state-appointed board—with the chair of the board being a member of the powerful elite group in the country, while the rest of the board was made up of various significant players and influential leaders from different industries within the nation.

Duration and Setting: Just under 26 months, involving mostly monthly trips to the country, working with the group of primary clients and with an internal change team, which was co-led by two external recruits (CFO, CHRO) whom I had recruited from the United Kingdom to work directly with the organization full-time, based in the country.

The Context:

- Tremendous drive toward modernization, capitalization, and a thirst for best talents
- Supremacy of the local population in terms of ownership and power even though numerically they are the minority (most service providers are from various migrant populations)
- Legislatively, the policy stance is protective of local population.
- Strong cultural and religious norms and tight beliefs about many aspects of organization life
- The overt structural inequality of members from the minority groups, for example, the role of women and migrant workers
- Islamic in religion

From Fig. 13.3, the congruence and incongruence in values and cultural dimensions between the multimedia organization and me can be summed up in the following summary.

*Summary of Our Similarities and Differences***Similarities**

They and I both operated from a

- particularism,
- communitarianism,
- diffuse, and
- collectivism perspective.

However, even some areas of similarities eventually became sources of conflicts because of the differences in scale: for example, flexible time, synchronicity, direct negative feedback, and relationships (as they always tinted by political dynamics). But I am grateful that some of the above similarities did give me some strong levers to build trusting relationships even though all my primary clients were men except for one woman.

Differences

- highly ascriptive in status;
- strong in external control—always taking cues from the chair of the board and any significant others in the political system;
- high in power distance, especially in rank and social relationships;
- high in hierarchical structure (every senior person had an average of four to five people to serve them);
- job title is very important—as long as the title “manager” is there, it helps to signify the rank, which often carries more weight than a pay raise;
- believe in top-down approach (wisdom exists at the top);
- high avoidance of uncertainty as the risk of failure can often incur negative personal consequences;
- very high in masculinity in approach;
- while they think they have long-term focus, their decisions and actions are very much short-term focused; and
- time orientation very much rooted in the past (how the nation was built up from nothing).

Conflict Areas Between the Client System and Me

The differences listed above led to a number of conflictual situations I had with them, mainly the *what is* and *how* to carry out the consultancy project.

While I built up a positive and trusting relationship with the CEO of the organization, we found no agreement in the following areas (even though eventually we compromised on the methodology in both data collection and intervention).

Participation

Who among the staff would participate in the change processes, and what would be their level of involvement. My intention was to ensure staff from all levels would have a voice in shaping the processes of change—especially in coming up with the plan of transformation in which they would have to play a key role in implementing, which is often blocked.

Optimism

The client system was much more “environmentally dominating” (i.e., accepting that environmental forces will act and therefore accepting the fate of what happens to them as an individual and as a system). They were ready to work with whatever had been given to them on their plate and were not generally optimistic that anything they wanted to push through would get through. They seldom put up a fight to address situations that they did not agree with, especially with the power elite, but reverted to closed-door lobbying with specific individuals—which often did not work.

Fairness

The values conflict in this area showed up in two specific areas:

- (1) **In pay and compensation.** As we were looking for professional standardization of pay, compensation, and benefits, as well as looking for talents they already had within the organization and whether they could be promoted, developed, and deployed against well-set-out criteria, we found that there was a low appetite for any formalization of talent definition and selection processes. As a result, certain groups of talents were consistently not considered and the concepts of equal pay and fair access from all levels of talents were impossible to implement
- (2) **In training and development.** In order to build sustainable skills and competences to support the continuous transformation, we needed the system to invest in developing and growing key individuals and groups in specific areas of expertise (especially when they were already in that particular role to execute the required changes). But such decisions were mainly shaped by rank, who in the hierarchy had power to suggest and nominate whom, and who had what connections to significant people in the political system. Training was thus provided to those who would not necessarily be doing the job, and the benefit was often lost.

Humanism

A tight political structure, rigid system boundary, and clear rank differentiation made any humancentric-related approaches very difficult to implement. Every decision was oriented toward “what is acceptable within the political and national structure and culture?” This does not mean compassion and kindness did not exist; it did in abundance. But it was not the dominant orientation in the organization cultural values or in the decision-making processes.

Duality of Organizational Effectiveness and Health

Most work was done to support the organization, and hence ultimately the state, so organizational effectiveness (i.e., high media standards, overall organization performance, running a balanced budget, etc.) always took precedence, while the need to look out for the health of the internal system and people was very low in priority. This difference caused many conflicts in our priority setting.

Global Cross-Cultural Mind-set

Being successful economically with a leading-edge standard in a number of the media domains fuelled the patriotic behavior that inevitably led to the dominance of their own nationalistic and cultural perspective over all else, especially in the decision-making processes and outcomes. Most of the decisions as to who to use, who to send for development, who should play a leading role in the change landscape, and so on, were all governed by their desire to honor their own local population. Other talents would be used only if they were perceived as filling a critical gap. This strong national devotion existed in an organization where the staff was made up of close to 100 nationalities.

In that context, one of the most challenging situations was that the decision-making process simply could not be mapped or identified. The combination of top-down, hierarchical, and the supremacy of the ascriptive status, together with low tolerance of uncertainty and diffuse relationships, created a maze of confusion as to what were the acceptable routes to get things done and how to achieve robust decisions. Decisions that were made one time, even by the CEO and the top team, could be overturned to something else in a short time, and even while that decision was being implemented, someone else higher up could overturn the latest decision, and so on. This called for the need to have an alternative strategy to deliver support.

Need to Find Another Way

Once I experienced this pattern of decision making, in order to remain effective in developing the organization within that cultural frame, I knew I needed to find “another way” to live with all the conflicts and dilemmas I faced. This included the following:

- I accepted it was not my job to shift the national cultural values, and hence my chance to shift the organization (heavily embedded in the national cultural values) would be almost impossible.

- I decided I would need to identify those areas that I could deal with and get things done without too much visibility. This meant that we carried out a number of “small” interventions without beating the drum, focusing mainly to help and encourage people to take a small degree of risk to improve day-to-day working practices and conditions.
- I also discovered that there was almost an assumed agreement that if I were to use a number of covert tactics to get things done that the leaders personally valued, then they would not visibly oppose. Moreover, they would allow staff a certain degree of freedom to shape small changes as long as no one made a song and dance about the approach. I also knew that if someone opposed those measures I had taken, my team and I would not get any backup in public. Therefore, this situation gave me a wider space to operate (as long as I guessed correctly about what mattered to the leaders) even though the corresponding risk was also very high.
- Practically, my team and I always worked on multiple scenarios in order to ensure something important would not fall into a hole if direction and decisions were shifted by the higher-ranking individuals at short notice. We often assessed (a) what damage was done to that specific area, (b) how we could use another scenario to rescue the situation, and (c) whether a different type of alternative we had planned could step in and pick up where we were stopped.
- I accepted the fact that the client system only wanted me to act like an expert advising them about what to do instead of being a facilitative consultant using inquiry as a key approach because diverse opinion existed among the top leadership team, in which, within that cultural context, deference to the top and expert opinion was an easier option. By accepting the role of “expert,” I built a reputation of being an “expert with the human touch” in order to win credibility while demonstrating there were alternative models of behavior.
- Next, as an expert, I knew I would need to provide the architectural map to the board and the top team to guide the transformation processes. So that was what I did. I constructed a change map/plan to guide the transformational processes and used that to educate as many leaders and staff as opportunity allowed in order to build their own capability to tackle the multiple areas of transformation.
- I gave up the idea of co-construction as a high level of participation within that context is impossible. Instead, I asked for help from all the top leaders to nominate whom they could trust to support the

change within their division. This way, at least I got to train a group of individuals and gently shift the way they thought about organizations. We also encouraged them to practice alternative behaviors and approaches that could give them even greater personal success. Most of the nominated group responded very well even though a few of them remained suspicious about “the new way of working.” Some of them, at the end of the project took up bigger roles in running the organization.

- I decided that the best thing I could do in that project was to deliver the one top priority—that is, stop the financial bleeding by introducing clear procedures, policies, and governance for the way money was spent. The newly appointed CFO did an audit of the inherited financial system, operations, and processes and identified the multiple sources of “financial bleeding.” He then involved the top team in approving the budget with built-in financial control. At the end, we implemented a new system (Oracle) under nine months. This enabled the directors to monitor their own budget, control spending, and hence track their spending effectively within a short period of time. This accomplishment won trust and respect from the top team, which was important for us to proceed with other transformation work.
- Various covert processes were used to navigate through all the cultural barriers, (e.g., involving more female staff, suggesting someone lower in the hierarchy to do an important job and then profiling them, running a few focus groups, and typing up their data to present to the board, etc.). I had accepted there was very little I could do to solve the “ethical value dilemma.” My aim at that time was to focus on completing the commissioning contract, keeping in mind the future and safety of other staff while making minor attempts to shift the system.

In summary, I focused on what I could do to solve the type of practice value dilemma by negotiating my own cultural values, as well as making choices about what OD values I would temporarily put on hold in order to deliver highly professional services to the client situation.

What Were the Results?

From a traditional consultancy processes perspective, my team and I had delivered an amazing set of results. By the time we left, by taking the expert role “with a human touch” the team I had set up had accomplished the following:

1. A working budget was established (first agreed budget in the history of the organization), which then went straight into implementation.
2. The Oracle system was set up to enable each department to track their own budget implementation.
3. All the jobs were profiled, with job description, job evaluation done externally with industry-recognized corresponding pay scale.
4. Pay grades were aligned to address the huge earning differentiation between different groups of staff—especially from different nationalities.
5. A consultancy firm was brought in to undertake an asset registry—as they had more expensive multimedia equipment than the BBC in some instances, and yet no one could track whether assets existed or had “disappeared.”
6. Internationally experienced BBC personnel were brought in to deliver training and development to key multimedia staff, from programming to production to postproduction.
7. Financial processes and systems were defined, developed, and embedded in the center to support the organization to live within budget as well as establish a structure to provide excellent financial advice to the divisional director.
8. There were revised (and new) HR policies and procedures that eventually fed into a new national labor law.
9. A program of development for existing HR staff was set up to enhance their capability to maintain key HR policies and procedures.

From the above, it would seem that we had achieved a significant amount, because in the end, we delivered our core commissioning task—to stop the organization from overspending and install strong financial controls in the system. On top of that, we also upscaled key media processes and HR processes to support the organization to transform itself from an average multimedia company to a top brand in the region. We tackled a number of areas from an expertise and strategic perspective as well as provided an extra pair of hands to undertake these tasks.

But from an OD perspective, I judged myself as having failed, because none of the core OD values to which I subscribe had been translated into significant interventions to “develop” the organization and shift its culture. The people within the organization had not been empowered, taught, or properly developed except for a few unusual

individuals. This was the direct result of my inability to resolve some of the key value differences between me and those key stakeholders in the political and national life.

To sum up the ways I deployed to manage the value dilemmas, I resigned myself to the fact that I could not touch the ethical and moral value differences (treatment of migrant workers and women). I used my own cultural profile to max out my proximity with their culture in order to build trusting relationships to gain entry to areas of work. I went underground with my OD values (using them mainly in covert ways) and exaggerated my expert roles with my team to get the key process work done in order to achieve the core outcomes. I focused on supporting the CHRO and CFO I brought in from the United Kingdom and formed a tight-knit team to cope with the daily frustration of not being able to make key decisions to further work or enjoy smooth passage of any projects we started.

My team members and I learned a lot about self, consultancy work, and how to live with constant value conflicts and yet stay resilient to keep the work going. And at the end, some strong relationships were forged. As of 2016, I still get personal Christmas greetings from the former CEO and some key staff within the system.

The Second Case Situation

Case 2 The Case of a Large System Transformation of a Service Organization in Asia

The Job: My commission was to support the central agency of the organization to look at the link between strategic planning, HR policy, and OD with reference to how public services were delivered, keeping and building on the many strengths, improving key areas that were not running well, innovating new ways of delivering new services, and generally functioning in the role of a methodological adviser to those who were leading the system-wide transformation.

Key Clients: the top leader of the central agency and other senior staff at the center and other top leaders of other divisions, as well as those functional heads who required OD support; the teams I partnered with were drawn from the OD team from the center and the OD team from the development academy.

(continued)

Case 2 (continued)

Duration and Setting: close to four years, first involving trips every two months, and later every month, with an internal change team set up to run the transformation program led by senior staff in the center and supervised by me.

The Context:

- Very well-respected, public sector organization.
- Public services, despite regular improvement, had been running in a similar model over a long period of time. But a combination of vocal service users who were more critical of the organization, together with the aid of the power of new technology, which gave rise to the visibility of users' demands and complaints, made the need for more radical improvement of the services delivery urgent.
- Legislatively, it leaned more toward the conservative front, with a focus on building sustainable economic prosperity and a protective approach to the national interest security and its citizens.
- Strong cultural norms and beliefs about the importance of independence and self-sufficiency.
- Tremendous drive toward modernization and a thirst for being the best as well as heavy investment to develop top talents.
- A crossover between Eastern and Western mind-sets and values as most of the senior staff were educated in the West.

*Summary of Our Similarities and Differences***Similarities**

- Particularism
- Communitarianism
- Collectivism
- Long-term perspective
- Avoiding confrontation
- Balanced in femininity and masculinity—fewer differences between the sexes

Differences

- Neutral vs affective
- Specific vs diffuse in relationship
- Ascription status vs achievement status
- Internal control as a nation but external control as an individual
- Sequential in time line
- High in power distance
- High in uncertainty avoidance
- Collectivism in national interest but individualism as everyone needs to shine
- Low context in communication
- A mixture between direct negative feedback and indirect negative feedback, depending on rank
- Like principles and concepts first before being persuaded to apply
- Hierarchical in leading
- Top down in deciding
- Task based in trusting
- More linear time in scheduling

Through these type of differences, the nature of the value dilemma and conflict is very different—multiple parties' experiences.

Types of Conflicts

Three types of conflicts happened at multiple levels. The first one was between the client system and me. The second was between members within the client system, and the third was between me and the various conflicting parties within the system. The system members' value differences stemmed from diverse sources: cultural, political, religious beliefs, age/generation, and ancestry (racial and ethnic)/heritage, degree of strength of nationalistic values, and a dynamic mix of Western and Eastern cultures as leaders tended to be educated and gained their professional training in the West. This meant that within the organization, the system members themselves had to operate with a rich blend of differences as well as their professional identities as policymakers, politicians, decision-makers, and service deliverers. One of the areas that showed up such differences was what they thought a good leader should look like. This process of being in multiple values intersection meant that the system's members had to engage in an ongoing process of value shaping, reshaping, redefining, and most of all negotiating how to work with each other as well as with me as an external. For example:

1. Real intergenerational differences existed. Practices and tactics to create movement within the system that works for the older clients (people in their 40s and 50s) sometimes do not have the same appeal and attraction to the younger clients (people in their 20s and 30s) and vice versa. These intergenerational differences in many ways coincide with how appealing the OD principles and methodologies are.
2. The system had a strongly held belief and tradition of supporting an “ascriptive” talent program that intentionally or unintentionally created an elite class. This ascriptive stratification affected the perception and level of confidence among the rest of the staff population about whether any OD program of intervention could be effective to bring true participation to the system, or for that matter real change. Any OD intervention was seen in a tinted skeptical lens—would these interventions be able to give real opportunity to those who were not in the elite class to have equal voice and equal participation in shaping the outcomes of any changes that mattered to them?
3. Like any organization, the established rank of senior leaders had clear demarcations of power and I knew no amount of effort would shift the decision-making power significantly. This left no ambiguity for many staff members as well as external consultants like me about what were the “go” or “no go” areas as there were clear boundaries of what was acceptable and what was not, which in turn laid out the limits of what one could and could not do.
4. There was a clear difference between values and beliefs in the system, for example, along religious lines. In simple terms, it was between those who had conservative religious views of how society and life should be and those who either had no religious links or had a more liberal orientation. The differences manifested in the level of liberal thinking in each group. Civil liberties meant different things to the various groups.
5. There was a gap of opinion between service users and those who provided the service, especially among those who designed the service and their corresponding policies, which would have direct impact on the day-to-day living of the service users. As predicted, the latter saw themselves as the group who “know better.”

However, it is important to say that despite the dynamic generated from these multiple differences, there was tremendous coherence within the organization as bounded by the powerful nationalistic identity.

In that context, I found myself needing to use the full range of my own cultural lenses and my own value anchors as I was not working with one group but with a wide range of leaders and talents who among themselves were different in their value orientation. For some, I had to use my Asian cultural lens to get connected; others required the Western blend of professional and OD values to build a sense of collegueship; for some I had to flaunt my age and educational status (ascribed status) to gain automatic acknowledgment; for some I had to ensure that my own racial and ethnic blend helped to gain trust and safety from the diverse group members within project teams. This rich mix of differences within me had to be deployed creatively in order to win sufficient trust from different groups to do the work. It was one of the few occasions that I had experienced the need to use the full range of “self” in service of the clients.

From this case, the issues were no longer about value differences between consultant and client but about value differences between the system’s own members and what the consultant needed to do to ensure she had sufficient value alignment with all parts of the system in order to get permission from different parties to intervene. It was also very important that I have to appear neutral in order to gain acceptance from a very diverse client system.

It is important to say that no significant level of moral and ethical dilemmas or conflict existed between me and this client system, as I came to accept the historical and political context that gave rise to the national cultural patterns and how that in turn led to the mix of values which was crucial to the maintenance of the integrity of the nation.

However, there were some differences between the organization and my core six OD values. For example:

Participation

Because of the size of the organization (over 100,000 employees) and the subscription to hierarchical values, there was no natural inclination to encourage widespread participation. Many people got to participate, but there were even more individuals excluded from the process. So, this was a matter of scale issue.

Humanism

There was a genuine subscription to the intrinsic worth of each individual, but it was subsumed under the strong value of communitarianism, in which community, society, and national success mattered more than individual values, freedom of choice, and pursuit of self-fulfillment of potential. This powerful value had, in a subtle form, demarcated what were acceptable or unacceptable interventions while transforming public services.

Optimism

This value appeared in an interesting way when it came to the transformation program at work. While individuals were optimistic about their own willingness to participate and contribute to improve the system, they were not very optimistic about whether the top would grant permission for both process creation and level of involvement to support individual initiatives, allowing self-empowered initiatives to take shape in their local ground areas. On the other hand, the top was optimistic that they would welcome initiatives from the ground yet not optimistic that their staff would be courageous and bold enough to initiate such changes. This granted me an opportunity to design processes to help both parties to experience more and more early success and link their labor to outcomes. As a result, instead of focusing on my value differences with the client system, I played a role to bridge the differences between members of the system so that there was a clear growth of optimism and an increase of a “possibility and hope” perspective.

Fairness

Most leaders were fair minded, but they were the products of a structural system of inequality, that is, from the elite talent system. This was set up with clear intentions to build a strong, clean organization, so it was important not to make this structure “wrong.” However, this elite system impacted the equality “feel” of the organization. There was a fatalistic attitude among staff who did not belong to the “elite” system, as they knew not being on that track, their career prospects were limited, the chance of their participation in selected high-profile projects would be rare, and there would always be someone else in a position to determine a number of critical factors shaping their work lives. There was nothing I could do to reshape this system, so I concentrated my energy to continue to manage the gap of expectations between the people from the two camps.

The overall challenge for me in this organization was not to overidentify with a group closer to me in values and become unacceptable to others but to help the groups within the organization who had such diverse views about what values should be in action to learn how to have high-quality dialogue with each other on how to overcome such differences to work together better. Hence, unlike Case 1, the value dilemmas occurred within the system, and I had to use my full range of values profile to work the system in order for them to be joined together to transform the public services.

Most of the conflicts in values were around cross-cultural and OD practice values, which I found, though challenging, provided great stimulation and stretch for my practice. Some of the areas where I had to find new ways of working were:

- adjusting to a much more neutral versus affective client relationship as well as using specific versus diffuse types of interaction—especially in the beginning. This neutral interaction was a bit unsettling for me in the beginning, as I couldn't gauge what the client thought of my approach to change.
- finding a way to embed OD values, and hence methodology, into the change program by following the rules of the organization and to draw closer to the most senior sponsors who were pro-OD methodology.
- focusing on building up and strengthening a network among those system members who were pro-OD values as a change brand for this transformation program and supporting them to become multipliers of the OD methodologies/practices in increasing involvement, participation, and engagement among those playing a key role to improve public service delivery. By the time I left, we had around 600 people in this category.
- being given a group of the elite talent officers and focusing on supporting them to be successful while encouraging them to shift their practice and thinking—to subtly link their success with alternative behavior. On top of that, to educate them on how to think and work within an OD framework—so that when they continue to rise to senior position, there will be an alignment among emerging leaders of the alternative values.

The Third Case Situation

Case 3 Working with a European Healthcare Sector Organization

The Job: During the eight years I have been working with this organization, I have been asked to undertake a number of substantial change projects: a total transformation project for a country operation, particularly of the sales and marketing office; kick-start the beginning of a global restructuring of the downstream business; restructuring—merging of countries into regional operation centers; supporting the transformation of one corporate function—supporting a worldwide culture transformation among all its global functional sites; supporting a separate business unit in its own transformation journey.

Key Clients: Each of these jobs involved very diverse personnel, from research and development people to sales and marketing, to HR to specific sites operatives. Hence, the key clients also varied—from CEO of businesses, country director, regional director to head of HR, head of OD, senior teams, senior project teams, and board members. But the key partner has been the global head of OD and the OD team.

Duration: Each of these jobs took more than a year and often up to two years. Sometimes they happened simultaneously and operated in parallel.

The Context:

- This is a transnational healthcare organization.
- It is a highly hierarchical and political organization even though it has a courteous and polite culture.
- Underneath the polite manner, the organization has a competitive culture internally—often with different leaders vying for attention from the board, and anyone who is senior and seen to have power.
- Decision making is still residing at the highest level. There is real deference to the top and often even very senior leaders are looking for guidance from the top to make key decisions regardless of how senior they themselves are. A recent case example is that the board members still see their need to play a key role in selecting talents for key middle management job roles in a country.

(continued)

Case 3 (continued)

- The business is successful, but recent cases of intervention from regulators have resulted in substantial financial cost to the organization.
- The organization is a transnational one, but their stage of internationalization is still very much at stage 1, where the majority of the top leaders are from the founding country and a majority of the decisions on change are mainly driven from the center.
- The demographic profile of the top is mostly exclusively of one nationality and male. Diversity is very low in the higher ranks of the organization.
- This is a very significant healthcare organization and has made major contributions to the industry.

*Summary of Our Similarities and Differences***Similarities**

- Along all three dimensions (Meyer's, Hofstede's, and Trompenaars'), I have the least similarities with this organization.
- Along Meyer's dimension, the only thing we have in common is our preference to give direct negative feedback; but even then, the scale and scope of direct negative feedback are poles apart.
- Along Hofstede's dimension, we are similar only in long-term focus.
- Along Trompenaars' dimension, the only area we are closer is the time orientation—both near future state.

Differences

- First, the organization is hierarchical in orientation, with relatively high power distance, operates more on ascriptive status—even though it is unclear what distinct criteria the ascription is based on—it can be related to the proximity of relationship with the powerful elite group or can be those who have been tested by the senior leaders and found worthy.
- There is a tendency for the individual to look up and out (from themselves to the environment) for signals to make decisions (external control), which causes frustration when most decisions need to be made with expediency, and yet the procedures most of the time

turned out to be slow and cumbersome. Also, the outcome of the decision tends to end up being very different from what is needed or expected at the local level especially when they involved too many senior leaders in making the decision.

- In terms of human relationships, this client is highly task based, confrontational in disagreeing, low context in communication, masculine in approaches, neutral versus affective in expression, and very specific versus diffused in interaction. This cultural profile of the organization has created an internal climate in which senior people in the center rule the organization with little consideration of cross-cultural context and implementation processes.
- Most leaders tend to be principled first, much more universalistic and believe that rules, codes, and law should be applied universally to all people. Together with a tendency to be high in uncertainty avoidance, this means that there are strong tendencies to resist a number of OD practices as they are deemed risky. Any methodology that presses the risk button and puts the organization in an uncertain state will be gently or sometimes rigorously opposed. The organization seems to be full of “certain people”—anything that is not certain is seen to be woolly and wishy-washy.
- Finally, their sense of time tends to be linear and sequential, which means any initiatives/projects that will involve trial and error with real-time experimentation are not generally welcomed. This in turn means that any OD processes that encourage co-emergence are looked upon with suspicion.

Experiences Working in This Context

Navigating through the cultural differences with the other two client systems were a lot more challenging both in scales and in types, yet working within this system has felt the hardest for me, and with the least job satisfaction. This is most curious to me, especially considering this organization is within the European Union, only 1.5 hours instead of 8 hours or 13 hours by plane.

Nagging questions have pursued me throughout my time with this client system—why does this client system feel like such hard work? Why, despite having achieved some good-to-great work, do I have the least job satisfaction? The even more worrying question is “why have I continued to stay and work for all these years in spite of the fact that I have wanted to leave since the third year?” To say it clearly, these have been eight hard

years. So, this case has provoked a different type of reflection compared with the other two client cases.

The factors that led to the sense of hard work with no job satisfaction can be summed up by the value differences between the client organization and my four big legacy values—participation, fairness, humanism, self-organization, and two of my intervention values: duality of organization effectiveness and health, and the global cross-cultural perspective. Having limited areas of similarity to leverage, building a trusting relationship has definitely contributed to such a feeling.

[Appendix 2](#) has a special note about this type of scenario and our own judgment about when to quit.

Type of Conflicts

Participation

I and other OD practitioners soon found that it was almost impossible to have real participation in this organization. Involvement was fine, as long as its definition was to allow people to come together (if necessary) to hear about a piece of change and be asked to give their view in a limited way. Against that backdrop, decisions in those areas of change had often been predetermined—in fact the essentials of implementation planning had often been done; hence whatever was allowed was much more a “good thing” to be seen to do versus essential to do as part of the desired culture. (The gap between espoused values and theory in use is big.) Genuine participation with an intention of co-construction was rarely permitted. Even if it was, it was a grudging permission with conditions attached, which left participation seen as both a risky and unnecessary practice.

Fairness

In my early days, the puzzle I held was—how can a courteous and polite organization which believes in treating its staff well be “unfair” both in public perception as well as behaviorally in experience. I believe the following factors all contributed to such reputation and experience:

1. The rigid hierarchical culture and exclusive decision-making processes as the board tends to make both big and small detailed day-to-day decisions.
2. The dominant white and male demographic profile of the most senior people—there is a glaring absence of female and racial minority members in the top leadership teams.

3. Inequality is built into the structure and policies as day by day, there are unfair consequences that happen to individuals due to the inconsistent use of procedures, for example, in talent management, in discretionary deployment of important roles, the differential consequences to different types of poor performers, the overt use of power by those who are in close association with powerful individuals.
4. How the decision-making processes create rigidity; for example, major decisions that have major consequences for people in the global level are made mainly at the corporate center. Once a decision is made, they are rolled out to the rest of the organization with or without due regard to those regions and countries where there may be adverse consequences, and there are no feedback loop or system to channel back implementation experiences to the center. Cross-cultural awareness and competency are limited.
5. There is a clear message in the decision-making process that “there is a group who knows best that will make all sorts of decisions without further referring to those who will be affected” that has left the organization culture feeling unfair, without either an inquiry and listening culture from the top leadership, and often perceived as with limited empathy, especially in reference to the practical impact on local areas.
6. In the organization, there is a genuine espoused theory that we will need to be kind to the staff, but underneath the “kind” culture is a tremendously task-oriented one, which, when it exerts dominance can render humanistic and people-centric practice unreal. This creates a level of dissonance, which in turn has both confusing and energy-sapping consequences.
7. The lack of *global cross-cultural mind-set* has also made any systemic, whole-system intervention difficult. While individual business units around the world can create a temporary oasis for themselves, when there are major global changes it is the directive from the center that has to be followed—often without deviation. It is true that often a parent company does take precedence as well as dominance over regional and country business operation units, but those who have genuine respect for the cross-cultural differences will handle such processes with more skill and respect. When I worked with those business units away from the center, I was often struck by their sense of powerlessness about changes that will affect their sense of future and well-being significantly—as one country leader said, “without cross-cultural empathy.”

8. Finally, it is not easy to witness the consistent lack of desire to hold the *duality of organization effectiveness and health* simultaneously. So many of the major changes are very much about speed and cost (which are legitimate) or “right ideas to be pursued by the board” instead of genuine dialogue on the robustness of the case and engendering ownership and sustainability in implementation. Only recently one of the Big Four consultancy firms had told the CEO of the business unit I support that he cannot involve all his top team members in the decision forum as their commissioner (the board) wants speed; hence, they do not have time to go through so many rounds of iteration of decision, and there was very little the CEO could do against what the board had commissioned.

To sum up, the lack of true participation, unfair practices (regardless whether they often are done unintentional), heavy task versus humanistic focus, lack of encouragement to self-determine and self-organize, little regard to the duality of organization effectiveness and health, and lack of awareness and learning attitude toward global cross-cultural perspective have consistently made the practice of OD feel like fatalistic moves—like working in a dry broken ground where no seedlings will ever have a hope to grow.

When any practitioner is charged to do OD work within such a system, the natural consequence is that one will experience a tough terrain to navigate. That may be why the experience of working in this organization has been a stream of hard sweat with low job satisfaction for me—lots of ongoing value dilemmas with very little similarities to leverage on. For the internal OD change agents, the environment created a sense of failure and powerlessness.

So, what were my tactical choices? I knew if I had to add value to this system, I would have to find other sustainable tactics to function in this low level of communication, neutral emotion, task focussed with hierarchical orientation, and confrontational setting. They were as follows:

- Align my expectation that I am here to perform tasks, so I excelled in my “task projects” but always sneak in the “OD touch.” Somehow during these eight years, I have become increasingly task focused to ensure they get done while sneaking in OD methodology, for

example, asking for permission to work with their staff and training them to do the work.

- I have also grown ever more (to my standards) straight and confrontational in my interaction with senior people. In the beginning, I found the scale of their straight and confrontational ways of talking intimidating. But when I tried to meet that style with the same, I ended up earning greater respect from them. This increasing level of respect opened more doors for me to do further penetrating work within the system. This aspect, however, does grind at my Asian “face saving” cultural roots.
- Look for opportunities to work with solid “soliders” in the “middle” who are charged to do important (though not high profile) work and support them to be successful. Cumulate the rate of success in supporting and empowering those ordinary citizens in delivering important work and slowly help to spread the encouragement and hope among other middle managers.
- Start doing things that the organization needs, seeking only general permission, but do the work without noise until it delivers good results, which then encourages the internal system members to claim the credit—so that they will garner attention from the top. This helped to send a message to those whom I supported that taking autonomy in this system is possible as long as you are doing real work without any unnecessary political exposure.
- Help people within the system to build networks within the system so that more support exists in different parts of the system.
- Build strong alliances with the few key political players to secure ownership and sponsorship of OD change initiatives that you know will bring successful changes.

In other words, the tactics I have adopted for this system are to (a) move toward their cultural values without violating my own; (b) decide not to even negotiate the differences by ignoring the impenetrable differences; (c) focus on seeking general license to work, but often deploy covert processes and choose to work with the ground force rather than attract attention from the top.

So far, these tactics have been very effective for me. I have gathered lots of respect and accomplished some great work with the client system. But it has come at a cost.

What I Have Learnt from These Three Cases

These three client cases have illustrated the different dimensions of cross-cultural work. I will now first reflect on my own learning from these three cases before I extract wider principles for general application in the ending section.

1. **Leverage Similarities.** In all client cases, there will always be areas of similarities we can leverage to build trust and relationships. For example, in the Middle Eastern organization, we had similar cultural values in being high context in communication and orientation toward collectivism and communitarianism. We believed that business relationships should involve the whole person, which means we make real and personal contact and are not bound by specific role and context. I ensured that I brought family pictures with me to show the client, asked after their family, did tiny favors for their children when they visited the United Kingdom and brought small gifts for their wives which—in that culture—are not only acceptable but are often greeted with delight.
2. **Signal to the client system we know the boundary they function within—to build respect and trust.** For us to build and maintain trust, it was important to signal early on the cross-cultural boundary. I went out of my way to show them I understand, within the context of the commission, there are specific “no go” areas, which has acceptability and unacceptability consequences within their cultural context. Signaling without directly using words—especially in the high-context communication culture—will reassure and help to allay their anxieties that I would not be one of those foreign consultants who would crash around in their system. In almost all cultures, the actions of the consultant will reflect on the person who brought them in. In the Middle Eastern case, the CEO was the one who recruited me to go and work with him. My behavior would give him associated shame or esteem. These were important steps in building trust with them.
3. **Stretch our roles—willing to adapt our roles when required to be “useful” to the system.** Another tactic I have adopted is to play the expert role whenever it is expected and needed, despite my commitment to facilitate and enable the client organization to build self-determination and self-organization. This decision was based on the

importance in fulfilling expectations within that cultural context as well as making judgments on their state of capability and readiness. In the Asian organization, while they had human resources within the system to do the OD work, the public shame if something went wrong was too much for the internal agents to bear. Also, there were only a few internal agents that had deep experience in supporting large-scale, complex change projects and they needed support. In the Middle Eastern organization, they lacked both the capability and readiness to take leadership of the change. By meeting their expectations, I gained further street credibility, which in turn opened doors for me to do deeper work.

4. **To speak the truth with grace and discernment.** In terms of addressing some of the tough ethical issues, for example, fairness and discrimination, in the early part of my global work the question was always “to say or not to say” or “to make a stand or not”? In principle, it is an OD belief that it is better for us to set up processes to help the system to reveal itself, but in reality, without the literacy and basic understanding of such issues, the action research process will only yield limited fruits. I came to the conclusion early on in my career—not so much to “say” or “make a stand,” but “how.” Hence, after many mistakes and blunders, I have learnt (a) how to say it; (b) when to say it (always looking for the right time and opportunity to say it so that it will land as positively as possible); and (c) how to deal with the negative consequences after I say it.

In the Middle Eastern organization, I planned for a long time—almost nine months—to have those real conversations behind closed doors with the CEO, who had learnt to trust me and vice versa. So, how did I say it?

- (1) I intentionally communicated that I understood that within the overall political, economic, and historical context, there were compromising issues that they could not currently address, but I hoped they would bear those issues in mind as they journeyed onward in their leadership role.
- (2) Then I posed some gentle challenges, often with a few very specific proposals, and asked whether it was impossible for them to follow up on those issues.
- (3) I would always prepare a list of specific small-scale change to seek permission to carry out immediately for the organization

in order to facilitate “movement” to the system—action mainly for the change team to take. Often, such requests were granted because they knew deep down the possible long-term benefits such action might have on the system.

- (4) However, I always signaled that the power of choice was totally theirs, and whatever they decided I would understand (whether I found it acceptable or not). From my experience, such a closed-door conversation has often led to a deeper contact with the client as often they ended up confiding in me their own struggles and the type of constraints they would face, and how they felt. I seldom pushed them as it is important in a culture like this to learn to respect the individual and system defenses without judgment because there are genuine safety issues related to change.
5. **Pay attention to the diversity of values within the system.** When working in a global setting, it is important not just to focus on the similarities and differences in values between us as consultant and them as a client system, because there exist very interesting value differences and dynamics within an organization. Hence, it was very important for me to (a) pay attention to the number of diverse groups in terms of their value and cultural differences; (b) intentionally work through the differences between the various subgroups; (c) find out how best I should facilitate and bridge those value differences in order to increase the coherence of the organization; and (d) map out how I could work effectively with different groups without losing my own sense of marginality and my integrity.
6. **Stretch our value range without compromising our core values.** From all three cases, my biggest learning has been how to lean into my own discomfort in shifting my practices to be more impactful in the long term to the clients, especially in those nonethical values. Instead of trying to change them to give myself greater ease in working with them, I have learnt that I can do tasks in a masculine manner; I am able to be confrontational when it is necessary to bring what’s under the table onto the table. I know that to be acceptable as valuable help, my “weirdness” factor has to be less noticeable, especially when their values are very much embedded in the national, historical, and political landscape.

SECTION IV: GENERAL APPLICATIONS/LESSONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

Working in a global cross-cultural setting when there is also a gulf of differences in national values, professional values, and organizational culture has never been an easy task. The glamour often associated with this type of work is accompanied by some deep soul-searching questions: “Who am I and what do I really believe?” and “What informs my practice?”

But there is a sense of fulfillment as we participate in a deep learning curve to expand our cultural horizon all the time—testing whether how we go about the world fits or does not fit in different context is also most stimulating. I would like to, besides sharing what I have learned from the three case studies, end this chapter by highlighting the important principles that I have derived from my three decades of working globally. I will frame them as questions, hoping this will evoke you, the reader, to reflect and build your own working theory.

- **Are values negotiable? If yes, what type?** When facing our own values profile, are we able to discern the values and principles from our culture, and which ones are negotiable (or not)? How much OD practice values we hold dear can be adapted, adjusted, delayed, held back (temporarily), reinvented, and so on, especially in other global settings when OD values are not congruent with their own cultural fabric? Finally, how much of the values are of an “ethical and moral” nature that we simply cannot compromise? If not, what should we do?
- **Is it worthwhile to mainly intervene at the micro level within the system?** Professionally, if we are not in a position to shift the macro social-political issues within the organization that are incongruent to our ethical values, yet we have contracted to support the organization, is it worthwhile to focus intervention among middle managers and grassroots staff in order to start making “baby” shifts as an alternative way to spark some small fires within the larger system?
- **What type of support and whom do we need support from when we are working through the tough terrain** or when we find ourselves operating within a value-compromising situation? Worse still, if it is only midway through a job and we know we cannot compromise further on our values, is it professional to abandon the system

and walk out? At that junction, what type of help and support will we need to see us through the commission? There is no good answer to this question except having wise counsel will make a difference and help us to make a sound decision.

- **How do we not fall into the trap of making our client or ourselves wrong in the midst of conflict?** There are two possible ways to help us; first is to be prudent to have as clear a diagnosis as we can in the early stage of engagement about (a) what personal, professional, and cultural values matter to us personally; and (b) similarly, what values are central to the client system, and what are the out-of-bound values for us to intervene, or are beyond our ability or mandate to go against? (c) what tactics, support can we put in place to get us through these inherently challenging situations while remaining as “clean” as possible in our conscience? And if we have decided to go ahead with the project, then we will need to work hard to ensure we take the client system as it is—putting our espoused theory and theory in use in congruence.

Second, if we do not have such a clear diagnosis and midway through the project, we experience difficulties and conflict with the client, then, we need to remember what Barry Oshry often expounded in his teaching that these are situations where we are called to turn judgment into curiosity, turn blindness into understanding and seeing, and turn hatred into love. From my experience, high-quality supervisory support will make a difference under such circumstances.

- **How would making relationship our top work—together with compassion and empathy, help us to do this type of job?** Kindness and empathy go a long way in helping to build and win trust in the client–consultant relationship. By signaling how we “respect” what they do and think regardless of whether we agree with them or not and taking time to have dialogue and make meaningful inquiry will help to support clients who often are struggling within the system themselves but cannot appear to be different from others in that culture. So, the question is whether we can commit ourselves that even in conflicting situation we can extend basic courteous behavior.

- **Why do we need to make a distinction between different types of values?** In cross-cultural contexts, making the distinction between whether the dilemmas/conflicts come from our cross-cultural differences or from our professional OD values and approaches to work; or from the differences between values that come from their deep-rooted national culture; or from our fundamental value differences that are based on our moral and ethical beliefs is important. If the conflict comes from the first and the second ones, then the prevailing dilemmas are in the normal range, which will require creativity and ingenuity to navigate. Those types of situations do not necessarily represent good or bad, right or wrong; differences are just differences. In fact, they can often both be good—we can have “two goods.”

Once such a distinction is made, then we can spend time in rearranging hierarchically the resolutions to the conflicts of values by asking ourselves “What ought I do?” and “Why ought I do it?” and I add the third question, “How possible or feasible is it for me to do what I ought to do without incurring negative consequences to those groups that I want to support?” Also, the main soul-searching question for me as a professional OD consultant during any assignment is: What can I do to achieve the commission I have agreed to deliver—would I be able to add real contributory values to the organization and the people who work within the system by heightening such conflict and tensions? In most cases, I come to the conclusion that it is my job to continuously deal with the ongoing conflict and tensions while delivering effective outcomes without letting the tension to eat into my well-being or endangering the safety of other system members.

- **What are lenses to look at ethical and moral values dilemmas?** Then there is the other type of conflict and dilemma which is rightly labelled as an “ethical dilemma,” which is defined as a fundamental conflict of values between parties on what is right or wrong. In such cases, there is no easy or possible way to resolve them, especially when (a) the conflict of values is heavily structured, through history, as a way of living within that national, political, and cultural setting—and each strand of values supports and reinforces other strands in a tightly interwoven way; (b) we do not have the mandate or the

power to touch those areas even though we can covertly disrupt them through local action, individual conversation, or taking “baby steps” to enable the more powerful subsystem to experience the alternative values in action. From the three cases, I found myself experiencing deep value conflict over issues like the use or misuse of migrant workers or the inequality shown toward women and racial and ethnic groups, and so on. But with the systemic lenses (and having talked to many migrant workers and women workers), if I do act like a campaigner within the system (vs being a consultant), the chance of my doing a serious disservice to them is high, not to mention the issue of safety as for many of them, their entire livelihood is dependent on them keeping up with the status quo—which poses a different dilemma for me.

CONCLUSION

In [Appendix 3](#), I will share a few simple rules which have guided my practice in cross-cultural work. Many of them were extracted from the work of Hofstede, Trompenaars, and, later, Meyers. These principles have helped me stay curious and “clean” (vs judgmental) in my practice. Do adapt them to make your own simple rules.

Looking at the unstable socio-economic-political situation globally, I believe that OD practitioners can play a key role in bringing deeper understanding and appreciation of cultural differences between nations in three areas: (a) our practices at organization and community levels, (b) through our writing, and (c) educational roles. We may not contribute directly to world peace, but promoting mutual respect between national groups through the business world will be a key step we all can take.

APPENDIX 1

A Simple Explanation of the Various Cultural Dimensions from Hofstede, Trompenaars, and Meyers

Table 13.2 Hofstede's, Trompenaars', and Meyer's cultural dimension

<i>Hofstede's cultural dimension</i>	<i>Trompenaars' cultural dimension</i>	<i>Meyer's cultural dimension</i>
<p>Power Distance—High vs Low: Degree to which different cultures encourage or maintain power and status differences between interactants; cultures high on power distance will develop rules to maintain and strengthen status relationships versus cultures low on power distance that minimize those rules and customers.</p> <p>Individualism-Collectivism: Degree to which individuals sacrifice personal goals for sake of in-group; individualistic cultures foster less sacrifice for group and focus on individual goals, wishes, and desires whereas collectivistic cultures foster more compliance with company policies and exhibit more conformity in group, section, or unit behavior.</p>	<p>Ascriptive vs Achievement Status: In an ascriptive culture, one's status is attributed to him/her by birth, kinship, gender, age, connections (who one knows) and educational record. In an achievement culture, one is judged on what one personally has accomplished and his or her record. The important thing in this culture is to think and act in the ways that best suit the way you really are, even if you do not get things done.</p> <p>Individualism vs Communitarianism: The former has "a prime orientation to the self" Culture in this scale believes that "it is obvious that if one has as much freedom as possible and the maximum opportunity to develop oneself, the quality of one's life would improve as a result" whereas the latter has "a prime orientation to common goals and objectives within a community framework." They believe that "if the individual is continuously taking care of his or her fellows then the quality of life for us all will improve, even if it obstructs individual freedom and development."</p>	<p>Leading—Egalitarian vs Hierarchical: The former believes that the ideal distance between a boss and a subordinate is low. The best boss is a facilitator among equals. Organizational structures are flat. Communication often skips hierarchical lines. For hierarchical culture, the ideal distance between a boss and subordinate is high; the best boss is a strong director who leads from the front. Status is important. Organizational structures are multilayered and fixed. Communication follows set hierarchical lines.</p> <p>Scheduling—Linear time vs flexible time: The former implies all project steps are approached in a sequential fashion, completing one task before beginning the next. One thing at a time, no interruptions. The focus is on the deadline and sticking to the schedule. Emphasis is on promptness and good organization over flexibility. However, flexible time believes that project steps are approached in a fluid manner, changing tasks as opportunities arise. Many things are dealt with at once and interruptions accepted. The focus is on adaptability, and flexibility is valued over organization.</p>

(continued)

Table 13.2 (continued)

<i>Hofstede's cultural dimension</i>	<i>Trompenaars' cultural dimension</i>	<i>Meyer's cultural dimension</i>
<p>Uncertainty Avoidance—High vs Low: Degree to which different cultures develop ways to deal with anxiety and stress of uncertainty. Cultures high on this scale will develop highly refined rules and rituals that are mandated and become part of a rubric and normal way of operating, while cultures low in uncertainty avoidance will be less concerned with rules and rituals to deal with stress and anxiety of uncertainty.</p>	<p>Internal vs External Control: The degree to which we believe we can and then act on dominating the environment—and believe that what happens to us is our own doing as we can exercise control over the direction my/our lives is taking. Culture that is more rooted in external control believes that we should submit to nature and environment, hence should go with the direction and forces, whereas internal control culture believes that we can exercise dominance over the environment and nature to render it less threatening.</p>	<p>Disagreeing—Confrontational vs Avoids confrontation: In the former, disagreement and debate are positive for the team or organization. Open confrontation is appropriate and will not negatively impact the relationship. The latter believe that disagreement and debate are negative for the team or organization. Open confrontation is inappropriate and will break group harmony or negatively impact the relationship.</p>

APPENDIX 2

A Special Note About How Long Should One Stay Within a System at the Cost of the Practitioner's Own Sense of Satisfaction

The challenging question that emerged from Cases 1 and 3 situations was how long do we practitioners stay in a system when there are ongoing value conflicts that we cannot resolve? and why?

“Would our own conflicting personal values have something to do with the type of tension we experienced?” Also, what circumstances make us work with the system despite our desire to leave it? Our value as an anchor as well as a hook for our practice? Or is it that when our own internal values contradict with each other they throw up the type of dynamics that make clear decision making a tough call? Case 3 serves as a good illustration of how that is the case.

Figure 13.1 and Table 13.1 show that my own legacy values and my practitioner's values are in such dynamic interplay with each other they join forces to max out value congruence with each other to make me think twice before leaving. They are, in Lewin's terms, the restraining forces keeping me from leaving.

Three of the restraining forces are compassion, empathy, and relevance. My key reasons for staying around in Case 3 was the personal respect I had for the internal OD team, who all have a genuine and exciting vision for the organization, and whom I know have seen the value of what OD can do for the organization through the various rounds of major change initiatives. This respect for the internal OD group played into my practitioner's values of compassion, empathy, and a true sense of relevancy of OD practice for the organization.

Secondly, for both Cases 1 and 3, one of my legacy values—optimism—gave me a strong motivation to keep going. It was very seductive when the level of acceptance of OD intervention by key leaders had been “creeping up” throughout the period I was there. Even though the level of acceptance has never reached the tipping point, for those of us looking for signs of hope, all we need are just a few of those positive remarks, a rare shift of behavior, someone standing up and saying OD approach helps, and off we run for another 100 miles without looking back. It is hard for an OD practitioner to live without hope and optimism about the system we work with. Many of us are willing to continue to throw energy into a system, hoping that it will be transformed through sound OD interventions. It is stunning that, when that reality is happening, how much “unpleasantness” or challenge we are willing to withstand as we are greedy for more positive signs.

The struggle about staying or going is often due to the dominance of our personal values, which when taken seriously are a powerful anchor for us. The more powerful they are, the more they can work for or against other values. When that happens, we need to employ a whole different type of strategy to manage the tensions and dilemma as they are sourced from within versus from outside. This is much more than a “boundary management” issue; this is about our ability to dial up or down those personal values which are in conflict within our identity system, in order to do the best for the clients while practicing self-care as a premium activity to ensure our effort and energy are sustainable.

APPENDIX 3

Simple Rules in Doing Cross-cultural Work

- Rule 1: Resolve to work through cultural value challenges without making others and ourselves wrong. (The challenges are always greater than what we expect.)
- Rule 2: Apply multiple perspectives when working through value differences; hold on to what is important to yours and theirs (especially against the historical and political context).
- Rule 3: Find the positive in other approaches. (It is easy to diminish their approaches, especially when those differences make you feel uncomfortable or evoke a sense of loss of your own control.)
- Rule 4: Adjust and readjust your position, approaches, and styles. (Use the opportunities to widen and stretch your range, and learn from your own sense of vulnerability.)
- Rule 5: Cultivate a progressively deeper understanding of your own cultural and value orientation. (Without that, we will not be able to navigate through the value maze of others.)
- Rule 6: Use your own OD values/practices and the use of self as levers to work effectively (across value and cultural boundaries to deliver greater good).
- Rule 7: Be committed to developing your transcultural value understandings to touch the core of deep human connectivity.

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