

Intercultural conflicts

How our judgments become our teachers

Jitske Kramer & Karin Brugman

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Abstract: Most people enjoy visiting different places around the world. Meeting different people and learning about their ways of life gives a sense of adventure. A lot of people rave about places that are “still authentic and have not yet been taken over by tourism”. Working or living with people from different cultures, however, tends to transform this adventure into a troublesome relationship, peppered with confusions and misunderstandings. Why is it suddenly so difficult to keep our minds open? How is it that our judgments suddenly become harsher, and cultural values tend to polarize? In this article, Kramer and Brugman explain the mechanisms underlying cultural dynamics and provide tools with which to improve cultural intelligence. As a coach, you need to be able to help people open up to differences. This requires actively listening to what our judgments are telling us. Judgments should be taken seriously; this article gives an example of how voice dialogue can help us do this.

The problem is not that we have prejudices and make judgments about other cultures. The problem arises when we deny these, and forbid ourselves to look at them. People with different origins are more and more part of our everyday life and future. We will therefore be increasingly confronted with different ways of behaving, thinking and feeling. If we are not able to deal with this process of the interculturalization of our everyday life, we will feel insecure and threatened, and put the blame for this on the others. More conflicts will arise and groups will polarize. Instead of blaming each other, it is much more rewarding to focus on the dynamic processes: what happens in the interaction between people from different cultures?

The key questions are:

- Why do people often react emotionally to intercultural conflicts?
- How can we benefit from our judgments?

In this article, we will approach this field of knowledge from the perspective of personal reflex reactions to the unknown; what dynamics arise at an identity level when people from different cultural backgrounds meet. To understand these processes, we will first explain the concept of cultural dynamics. To do this, we will use Kramer’s model, which distinguishes three phases of the intercultural interaction process. The first phase is about going beyond judgment. How can you, as a coach, facilitate the process of opening up? The method of voice dialogue is a useful tool in this.

Cultural dynamics?

Cooperation between cultural strangers evokes questions and emotions, as this can challenge many things we have previously taken for granted. Experiencing behavior and thoughts that are at odds with ours can bring about sincere confusion. However, this provides us with great building blocks for change and personal growth, as our unconscious routines and conventions are challenged. But at the same time, the risk of conflicts and misunderstandings grows. These dynamics can be referred to as ‘cultural dynamics’, which we define as:

The psychological and emotional effects of experiencing a cultural distance, and the processes set in motion when arriving at a new balance.

As a coach working in a culturally diverse environment, it is important to understand how to facilitate people in managing these cultural dynamics. Both by themselves and within a team. This means being aware of your personal routines, assumptions and judgments, as well as having an understanding of the cultural dynamics involved in working together with ‘cultural strangers’.

The three phases of the intercultural interaction process

Experiencing differences is coupled with experiencing emotions, and almost immediately an issue of power relations arises: who is in the right, and who has to adapt? The other’s ‘being different’ confronts us with our own habits, norms and values. Cultural dynamics involves feelings, perceptions, misunderstandings and power struggles, and can become very complex. To get to grips with these processes, Jitske Kramer designed the follow model, called The Cultural Stepping Stones:

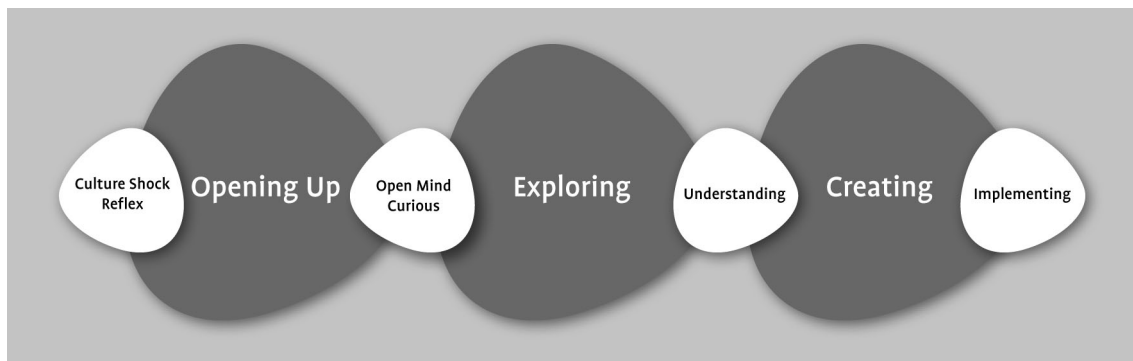


Figure 1. The Cultural Stepping Stones model

The model describes three phases of an intercultural interaction process. The needs in each phase are different, requiring a different focus and approach. There is a certain sequence to the phases, but one step does not necessarily lead to the next; this will differ per person and situation. Sometimes, people jump back and forth through the phases; sometimes, certain aspects will require extra time and attention.

The Cultural Stepping Stones model starts with a meeting between two cultural strangers, in which they are confronted by different behaviors and thoughts, throwing them out of their routines. This can be very refreshing, stimulating curiosity about each other. Unfortunately, however, people often react emotionally to the uncertainty that then arises; especially when the pressure is high and important issues are at stake. The first cultural stepping stone therefore deals with emotional reactions to the unknown. This phase is about *Opening up*. To further explore the situation, it is essential to be open to differences, to allow misunderstandings or frictions to be explored. We need to recognize differences and emotions and to reframe negative feelings and judgments into a more neutral and positive attitude.

The second phase, *Exploring*, requires a curious and open mind. Judgments should be put aside and situations explored from different perspectives: our own, the other’s, and that of mutual interaction. Through this triple perspective, we can see and compare images of reality, compare and contrast cultural frames of reference and take a closer look at the interaction process, in order to understand which tensions and misunderstandings need to be resolved. Interpretations of underlying intentions and needs are made explicit.

The next step in the process is to create solutions for those matters that need to be resolved in order to ease the tensions. In general, this is about questions such as: how will the team cooperate, how

will we manage the differences and how will we put these into use? During this phase of *Creating*, we search for creative solutions in order to work well with the differences.

This article focuses on the first phase of this process – Opening up – of which reframing judgments is an important element.

Judgments: the other is wrong!

Intercultural conflicts can be emotional because value systems – which are passed on from generation to generation – are challenged. A very comfortable way of dealing with this tension is to point the finger at the other, saying that s/he has got it wrong. Doing this means we have no need to really listen to the other or reconsider our own cultural assumptions and routine behavior. If someone you are coaching has strong emotional reactions to strangers, you can be sure of one thing: there are judgments at work.

To improve people's ability to work in a culturally diverse environment, it is necessary to strengthen their intercultural sensitivity. Approaching people with an open mind is many times easier said than done. As a coach, you need to understand the source of the emotional reaction in order to allow the person you are coaching to truly open up to differences. This initially requires not putting the judgments aside, but inviting them into the conversation in full. Judgments are there to teach us about our personal identity and the cultural dynamics involved when we work with cultural strangers. They should be taken seriously, as they hold the key to leading people towards an open, explorative mindset. How can we look at judgments in a constructive way? We therefore ask you not to look at a person as a single, indivisible entity, but as a sum of parts; a team of selves.

Judgments and our personal team of selves

Sometimes, I call all my selves together. I have built up an impressive reservoir. And when I ask: Which self is actually true?' I, I, I all my selves call out together – Harry Jekkers

The idea that every one of us is made up of many sub-personalities is the theoretical framework for the voice dialogue method developed by Hal and Sidra Stone, two American psychologists. Voice Dialogue provides us with a good understanding of what happens within our personality when our beliefs and ideas about right and wrong are challenged. Invaluable information when coaching in a culturally diverse environment.

Voice dialogue works from the idea that each of us has many different Selves within us. And each Self has its own feelings, thoughts and needs, and his or her own vision of the world. Expressions like 'On the one hand I want this, and on the other I want that' are quite common. These refer to different parts of us that simultaneously have different, opposing thoughts about the same situation.

How do Selves within us develop?

We are born as vulnerable creatures. Vulnerable as in open, sensitive and dependant. Without other people to feed us and take care of us, we wouldn't survive. We therefore learn how we get the things we need: love, care, attention; and how to diminish pain and punishment. We learn to approach the world with those Selves that help us get what we want. These are our '*Primary Selves*'. The Selves that give us pain and rejection we push away; they become our '*Disowned Selves*'. Although we consign those parts of us to the basement of our personality, this doesn't mean these Disowned Selves no longer exist inside us. We are just not aware of them.

Primary Selves in an intercultural context

Which Selves are welcomed and which are rejected depends on our family system, life experiences, but also on the cultural context within which we grow up. For example, in a Dutch context, the 'analytical self' and the 'perfectionist' are very much appreciated, whereas 'being emotional' is often seen as unprofessional and excessive. In a Dutch context, people often learn to push their 'Emotional Selves' into the background, to cast them off, and to bring their 'Rational Selves' to the fore. Unlike, for example, in Southern European countries, where 'Emotional Selves' are more respected and given more space.¹ Here we see the answer to where the emotional aspects of cultural dynamics come from: in intercultural interactions, we are frequently confronted by our Disowned Selves. What we have (unconsciously) pushed aside as 'inappropriate behavior', might well be the Primary Self of a cultural stranger.

Maybe we are happy with the fact that we have pushed a certain Self into the background; or maybe deep down we are a little jealous of others' ability to act in a specific way. Either way, the routines and stability of our developed team of selves are called into question. Which means that our Primary Selves may be unable to protect our vulnerability, which is well hidden beneath our behavior and thoughts. The easiest and quickest way out of this tension is to judge the 'inappropriate behavior' of the other, and to try to compensate for this 'bad behavior' by showing off our own, well-developed Primary Selves. A Dutch person, for example, may try to compensate for the 'exaggerated emotional discussion' of her Italian colleague by posing as a very rational person. Often, this is not a conscious decision but a defense reaction from one of our Primary Selves.

As you can see, an encounter with a cultural stranger can cause a great deal of upheaval at identity level. If we feel we will have to modify our behavior and ideas about right and wrong, our vulnerability may feel threatened and our Primary Selves may become worried. And though there are many ways to respond to a situation, we usually fall back on several standard reactions: we go on the defensive or attack the other's ideas. Which are human and understandable reactions to the unknown, but do not help us open up to differences. How can judgments help us to do so?



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How judgments become our teachers

The bigger the cultural distance we experience with someone else, the harder it is to cope with the conflicting values, norms and behavior. The confusion we experience due to broken routines triggers and fuels judgments and activates Primary Selves to protect the status quo. This confusion can be very exhausting, but will decrease if the tension between the extremes of the same dilemma is managed. This means that the process of personal development asks us not to put judgments aside, but to really stretch and polarize the conflicting ideas and judgments, to create space for new views and new connections.

Intercultural working demands that coaches develop a certain level of tolerance of ambiguity, and develop the ability to put behavior and views about right and wrong into their cultural context – both the coach *and* the coached need to improve their cultural intelligence. Instead of judging ourselves in relation to our judgments, we should listen to the wisdom of the judgment. A person may say that the other one is: ‘lazy, never on time, too emotional, too rational, too slow’, etc. The Self that carries all these judgments may experience it as a relief to have the opportunity to let it all out. As a coach, you should encourage this.

By stretching the extremes, the chances are that the judgments about the other’s misbehavior will give a clear picture of the behavior and thoughts that have been pushed away – the Disowned Selves. A coach needs to listen to the fear or emotion which underlies the judgment. What are people afraid of happening? What vulnerability is at stake? And what would actually happen if we were to welcome some of the ideas and thoughts of the Disowned Self into our lives?

Back to our example: the Dutch person has learned that people will keep away from us, or think that we’re unprofessional, if we behave too emotionally. To avoid this uncomfortable feeling, s/he has pushed away the Emotional Self and developed a strong Rational Self. This Self will prevent this Dutch person from becoming too emotional. Or, when confronted with people who behave in a very emotional manner, it will do everything possible to stop this. As stated above, this is an unconscious process.

If you are able and willing to listen to the fear or anxiety underlying the judgment, you will discover the vulnerability beneath it. Instead of protecting our system of Selves by making judgments, we should find other ways to protect our vulnerability. Maybe by letting in a little bit of our Disowned Selves, which does not mean we need to become someone else; we can keep our Primary Selves. It is not about becoming ‘more emotional’ if you are a rational person. It is just about the fact that the possibility of becoming emotional is at your disposal, and that you can learn to understand and appreciate this behavior in others. Remember that ‘learning a new language doesn’t mean you have to unlearn the old one. If you learn French, it does not mean that you lose your English.’ⁱⁱ

Facilitating the exploration of judgments

The following exercise can be used in a coaching session to explore judgments and learn more about underlying vulnerability and possible other ways of protecting this. This results in a more open, explorative mind, which will improve work in a culturally diverse environment.

Step 1: “That terrible culture!”

- Which (national) culture (or cultural characteristic) do you dislike or feel uncomfortable with, by impression or experience? Why?

Step 2: Characterize in three keywords

- characterize this culture in 3 keywords

Step 3: ‘trigger’ and ‘ego-position’

- pick the most important word from your list, and write this on a sticky note. We call this: *the trigger*

NB: a *part* (a Primary Self) of you dislikes this trigger. We can, by using voice dialogue, interview this part (referred to as 'Part Y') to get a better understanding of your needs and judgments.

- We call the position of the person you are coaching the 'Ego Position'. Place the trigger somewhere at a distance from the *Ego Position*. Ask the person being coached to move physically. He or she will step into the 'Y' part.

Step 4: Interview 'Part Y'

1. Welcome. Good of you to come, I understand you have problems with '*the trigger*' (name the keyword as mentioned in step 3). Please share with me what it is you find so terrible about this '*trigger behavior*'?
2. What then is important to you, 'Part Y'?
3. How would you feel if the whole world were like '*the trigger*'?
4. Summarize: so, if the whole world were like '*the trigger*', you would feel ...?
5. If the whole world were like you: what would it be like?
6. Summarize: so, if the whole world were like you, it would be....?
7. What are the most important keywords to describe you ('Part Y')?

- write the most important keyword on a sticky note and place this on the spot where the person being coached is standing.

- the person being coached moves back to the *Ego Position*

Step 5. Interview ego position

1. Welcome to this new position. From here, you can look at the part of you ('Y') that absolutely dislikes '*the trigger*'. Could you share your thoughts and feelings when looking from this position at 'Part Y'? Can you feel that 'Y' is only a part of you, and not you as a whole person?
2. From this position, do you experience '*the trigger*' differently? If so, how?
3. From this position, do you experience 'Y' differently? If so, how?
4. Can you see which vulnerability 'Y' is protecting when confronted with 'the trigger'? What is the underlying need?
5. Are there different ways of taking care of this vulnerability, this need?

Authors

Jitske Kramer holds a Master's Degree in Cultural Anthropology, is a trained psychodramatist and uses voice dialogue in coaching. She has vast experience of coaching people who work across cultural borders (e.g. international managers, expats). Further info: www.humandimensions.nl. Kramer is author of the book 'Managing Cultural Dynamics' (www.amazon.co.uk) and a professor (lector) in Cultural Dynamics at TIO University of Applied Sciences.

Karin Brugman is an experienced trainer/coach, specialising in working with Voice Dialogue and Psychodrama. She trains and supervises coaches and trainers in using these methods. In her work, she strives to combine in-depth work with playfulness, reality with imagination and sensitivity with humor. Further information (in Dutch): www.de-onderstroom.nl. Brugman is author of the book 'Ik en mijn Ikken' (*Me and my Selves*), expected spring 2010.

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