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Unleashing creativity across cultural borders

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Unleashing

creativity

ACROSS CULTURAL BORDERS

As the global economy integrates and companies pursue opportunities outside their traditional borders, it is increasingly important to innovate across cultural borders. This article explains how individuals can improve cross-cultural creativity.

By Roy Y.J. Chua

Hollywood studios are teaming up with Chinese film experts to capture the local market. Recent hits such as *Iron Man 3* and *Pacific Rim* added carefully crafted subplots and achieved box office success in mainland China. The reverse trend—Chinese film companies scoring hits in the United States—is still waiting in the wings. As Yu Dong, CEO of China's Bona Film Group puts it: "We lack international experience, in general.[i]"

At first glance, it might seem obvious that tackling cross-cultural innovation challenges requires creative individuals with deep foreign experience. As intercultural business relationships become the norm, professionals are frequently working in global teams to address everything from complex supply chains to integrating new acquisitions. Knowledge of foreign markets and creativity would seem to be the requisite skills. As counter-intuitive as it seems, however, my research has found that this combination alone is no guarantee of success.

Part of the issue is how we think about creativity. We often view it as sudden flashes of brilliance or a rare gift endowed to the lucky few. However, research has demonstrated that creativity requires a great deal of method. It isn't always a sudden flash that produces an idea that didn't exist before. More often, creativity stems from novel combinations of existing ideas that address a problem in a fresh, new way. Notable examples span quite the gamut—from luxury brand Shanghai Tang's fusion of Chinese culture with Western design aesthetics to China's Haier group developing washing machines for farmers to clean both clothes and potatoes.

As business becomes more global and competitive, it is critical for companies to ensure that such novel combinations come to the fore. However, knowledge and creativity alone may not suffice. They need the support of a third skill in order to thrive—a mental habit that psychologists call *cultural metacognition*. The term refers to a person's reflective thinking about what he or she knows about a given culture. It is analogous to the heightened awareness we have when driving in foreign cities[ii]. We don't take our driving skills for granted and assume they will steer us correctly. We pay close attention to road and traffic signs to guide our skills in its new context. This same heightened awareness of, and reflection about, other cultures lies at the heart of unleashing

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creativity across borders. They help avoid the pitfall of engrained knowledge resisting novel combinations of ideas. They build trust in cross-cultural interactions which in-turn drives the free flow of ideas that allows these combinations to emerge.

When knowledge is too much of a good thing

When charged with responsibilities in different cultures, professionals are often deluged with information on everything from social norms to political and economic issues. Cultural knowledge is inherently complex and can span norms, values, customs, history, and traditions. For any two cultures, there are bound to be both differences and similarities. As a result, the more knowledge one possesses, the more difficult it can be to separate the wheat from the chaff and bring the right knowledge and experience to bear on a given creativity challenge.

"The more you know, the better", however, is the conventional wisdom. But I doubted that this is actually the case. In fact, too much knowledge may actually hamper creativity and limit managers' ability to solve problems.

In a study that my colleague, Kok-Yee Ng of Nanyang Technological University, and I conducted recently[iii], we examined the influence of cultural knowledge and metacognition on cross-cultural creativity. In the study, we worked with 89 business students from around the world who were completing an international organisational behaviour course in Singapore.

At the start of the course, we assigned students to teams of five to seven to work together on the projects. While working on these projects, students had to apply their creative thinking to various challenges including cross-cultural negotiations and solving management problems in a global context. Students also had ample opportunities to observe the creativity of their team members.

After several weeks, three randomly selected classmates evaluated each student in terms of their cultural metacognitive skills, creativity and cultural knowledge. At the end of the course, all team members rated one another's creativity.

The results were illuminating. Contrary to conventional wisdom, more

cultural knowledge did not translate into greater creativity unless it was accompanied by the habit of cultural metacognition. Cultural metacognition helps avoid two pitfalls that can stand in the way of effectively leveraging creativity and knowledge—cognitive overload and cognitive entrenchment.

Cognitive overload sets in when individuals acquire such large amounts of factual knowledge that its volume impairs their ability to sieve through all the possible options and arrive at the best choice. Similarly, copious knowledge can result in cognitive entrenchment—when its breadth and depth engrains thinking to the point of resisting ideas that fall outside of what one knows.

Foreign designers at Shanghai Tang, for example, had to overcome their entrenched thinking before they could help the company succeed as a global luxury clothing and accessory brand. Today Shanghai Tang is known for innovative designs that blend Chinese cultural elements with Western clothing styles. But the innovative blend wasn't always the company's hallmark. After opening a large store in New York in 1997, it had to move to a smaller location just 19 months later. Joanne Ooi, who joined as creative director at the time, argued that the company's designs were too "costumey" to have wide appeal[iv].

Although foreign designers spent a great deal of time studying Chinese history, aesthetics and clothes, their designs would often simply mimic iconic Chinese garments such as the *Qipao,* a figure-hugging dress for woman. Ooi's design objectives helped designers move forward by questioning their ingrained assumptions. For example, she felt that some of the company's designs should be comfortably worn with jeans. The objective likely helped designers to open their minds and embrace ideas outside their assumptions about Chinese clothing.

To avoid the trap of cognitive entrenchment, managers can do three things. First, they can take a cue from Ooi and pose questions and ideas that challenge ingrained mental sets. Inquiry is a powerful tool to uncover deeply ingrained assumptions. Second, managers can also help remove knowledge log-jams by making sure employees are actively engaged in activities beyond their specialties. Google, for example, allows employees to devote 20 percent of their time to projects outside their primary responsibilities. That activity provides a constant impetus to think outside the knowledge areas that employees are familiar with[v]. Third, employees should be encouraged to build social networks involving people from diverse cultural and functional backgrounds. Doing so ensures

that one does not get entrenched in one world view. What underlies these three approaches is the development of metacognitive skills in employees, a mental habit that is paramount to breaking down cognitive barriers (See "Putting it to work" below).

Trust and creativity

Although professionals must solve creative problems on their own, more often than not they need to work with others. In cross-cultural creative collaboration, trust is a key ingredient. People must feel comfortable opening up and sharing insights if they are to develop novel combinations of ideas.

Is cultural metacognition also a critical ingredient for creative solutions when people from different cultures collaborate?

Does it foster levels of trust needed for creativity to flourish? To find out, my colleagues (Michael Morris and Shira Mor of Columbia University) and I asked a group of executives attending an executive MBA programme in the U.S. to provide lists of associates from other cultures with whom they had worked[vi]. The executives rated their own level of cultural metacognition: the extent to which they refined cultural knowledge based on their experiences and then made use of those refinements to begin anew. Their associates assessed whether the executives developed win-win solutions when working with people from other cultures and if their work was marked by creativity.

I also examined two types of trust. The first is what we call trust from the

head (cognitive trust). This type of trust emanates from the confidence one has in a person's accomplishments, skills, and reliability. The second type of trust–trust from the heart (affective trust)–arises from feelings of emotional closeness, empathy, and rapport. Most friendships and personal relationships are based on this type of trust. It is also critical to cross-border creative collaboration. How comfortably someone freely shares ideas has much to do with how much affective trust they have in the people with whom they are collaborating. Professionals must be willing to make themselves vulnerable to others. New ideas, after all, can be easily ridiculed, or even stolen.

Our study found a significant relationship between the habit of cultural metacognition, affective trust, and the creative fruits of collaboration. High levels of cultural metacognitive skills create stronger affective trust, which, in turn, drives the free sharing of ideas needed for creativity. The study demonstrates that people feel more comfortable when they have developed the multiple dimensions of a personal relationship. In fact, the affective trust that comes from a personal relationship can be very difficult to achieve in intercultural collaborations without cultural metacognitive skill.

Often, the advice to improve intercultural collaboration hovers on the surface and targets symptoms instead of causes. When it comes to debating or discussion style, for example, managers are advised to explicitly set norms for collaboration and, if necessary, make accommodations.

The heart of the matter, however, goes much deeper. Demographic characteristics such as nationality or ethnic background correspond to significant differences in people's views of the world, motivations, and behavioral tendencies. If we don't thoroughly understand these differences and interact with foreign counterparts in a conscious meaningful way, we can derail

any creative collaboration. We end up reinforcing people's sense of "otherness", making them feel misunderstood or stereotyped. When that happens, people won't open up and share ideas.

The importance of affective trust and how to develop it can't be underestimated. Imagine an American manager working for Chinese company Haier. He or she is leading a team of Chinese and Americans to address call centre complaints that washing machines are breaking down because farmers are putting potatoes in them. The Americans might challenge the Chinese to come up with better ways to explain to customers what a washing machine should be used for. Without a significant level of affective trust, it is hard to imagine a Chinese team member comfortably advocating what Haier ultimately did–retooling a clothes washer to handle potatoes too. Such a provocative idea wouldn't be aired if the Chinese team members don't feel genuine rapport with the Americans.

The proof of the pudding

The studies discussed above focus on individuals evaluating others. It was important to test these assumptions in a situation that simulates real life. I also wanted to know if trust is as important as innate creative ability when it comes to the creative fruits of multicultural collaboration.

To find out, I conducted a laboratory experiment, tasking participants with creating a new chicken dish for a soon-to-open restaurant. I recruited 236 students at Harvard with different cultural backgrounds—European-American, African-American, and Asian-American.

To assess the creativity of each participant as a baseline for evaluating the impact of trust on creativity, I asked each participant individually to develop a chicken recipe using a list of ingredients from different cultures—American, Indian, Chinese, and Thai. I then paired each

participant with someone from a different cultural background than their own. Half were asked to immediately develop a recipe together. The other half had an informal conversation before they started to work. The conversation topics provided a chance to build affective trust by sharing personal experiences in their cultural contexts: significant events they experienced during school and how those would have an impact on their careers and lives.

Professional chefs judged the dishes, evaluating the recipes for their creativity. The results were telling. Irrespective of participants' baseline creative ability, there was a clear relationship between cultural metacognitive skill, development of trust and the creativity that ensued. Pairs that had one individual with high cultural metacognitive ability collaborated well. And their dishes scored higher marks from judges when they were able to get to know each other first. This effect was the same even after accounting for the individual's baseline creativity assessed in the first step.

The proof was in the pudding. An individual's creativity *of and in itself* doesn't always guarantee the most creative collaboration outcome. When working with a partner from a different culture, high levels of cultural metacognition on the part of at least one of the individuals is needed to build the type of trust that fosters the sharing of ideas that produce creative results.

Putting it to work

To build trust in intercultural business relationships, it is important to understand the barriers. The first is mind-set. People from different cultures don't always share the same norms, mental approaches and assumptions. East Asians, for example, tend to see issues in a more holistic fashion than do Westerners who focus on specific issues. The resulting dissonance reduces trust, which in turn impedes the effective exchange of information.

The second is behavioural differences that define appropriate conduct. These are often taken for granted by individuals in their own cultures. For example, recent studies by researchers at INSEAD and the University of California at Berkeley found that if a negotiator perceives anger on the part of his or her counterpart, that perception affected European-Americans and Asian-Americans differently[vii]. Because the blatant expression of anger and negative emotions is considered inappropriate in Asian cultures,

when dealing with an angry negotiating counterpart, Asian-Americans were less likely to make concessions than were European-Americans. This study implies that any mismatch in behavioural and communication style in cross-cultural interactions can easily erode trust.

Finally, vacillating motivation can be an issue. The difficulty in achieving a shared understanding with partners from another culture can drain energy and tempt someone to walk away. Perseverance is critical to building trust and confidence that all participants are committed to finding a solution[viii].

To ensure that employees have the ability to build affective trust with their counterparts from other cultures, companies should expand their training programmes beyond what they typically offer. Often, cross-cultural training focuses on social customs, etiquette and negotiation strategies. The focus should, however, expand to include deep cultural knowledge such as learning the local language–language can be a powerful tool in navigating foreign cultures. Knowing the other person's language enables one to better take perspective and understand his or her true motivations and interests, a prerequisite for building rapport and trust.

As our research demonstrates, however, overcoming these barriers is not only a matter of cultural knowledge. It also requires skilful cultural metacognition to shape that knowledge by testing it in actual experiences. Executives who have mastered this habit do four things[ix]. They consistently:

• Build awareness of their own cultural assumptions

• Challenge these assumptions–i.e. to what extent do they help predict how people will behave and react?

• Modify assumptions that don't apply

• Plan to use the new knowledge in upcoming interactions

To build this skill, professionals need to carve out time to reflect on their intercultural

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encounters. They should view each experience in the context of these questions:

- What cultural assumptions am I making? What assumptions are people from other cultures making about mine?
- Do my assumptions and knowledge apply to a given situation such as a negotiation? Or do they reflect a different setting such as a social gathering?
- What challenges could arise? How can I address them? What do I need to know to avoid misunderstanding?

In addition, individuals should actively observe any interaction and realise that their assumptions might not be accurate or applicable in a given context. For example, it is common to assume that Chinese are concerned about losing face and will avoid expressing opinions candidly. However, instead of simply making such an assumption, professionals should observe how their counterparts interact with one another and see if it always fits with the assumption. Although face-saving is important in China, the degree of that importance can vary. Without that understanding, it is easy to erode trust and avoid frank and useful criticism out of a desire to save face for the partner. For example, an American executive who is concerned about saving face for his Chinese counterpart might avoid voicing his true opinion about the Chinese partner's numerous ideas, only to later find themselves in a project quagmire.

This less-than-desirable outcome might lead the two partners to question whether they could work effectively together. Had one of them exercised cultural metacognition during the collaboration, the outcome might be different. Engaging in cultural metacognition habits when giving feedback during cross-cultural collaborations would make individuals from face-saving cultures, such as China, Japan and India, feel understood rather than offended, which can pave the way for more candid discussions, a critical process for successful creative collaborations.

Conclusion

As business becomes increasingly global, creativity and cultural knowledge are central to developing innovative solutions that will work in vastly different cultures. However, the combination of cultural knowledge and individual creativity alone may not suffice; individuals need to develop the mental habit of cultural metacognition. Mastering that habit assures that they can effectively bring their knowledge to bear on cross-cultural creative challenges and build the trust needed for a free sharing of ideas when working with people from different cultures.

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> As business becomes increasingly global, creativity and cultural knowledge are central to developing innovative solutions that will work in vastly different cultures. Individuals also need to develop the mental habit of cultural metacognition.

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