Culture and Leadership in a Cross-Cultural Environment: A Case Study

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Abstract
There is a growing awareness of the role that culture plays in the success or failure of international projects. However, an awareness of the importance of culture does not necessarily provide one with the tools needed to work effectively in cross-cultural situations.

This paper looks at the role of cultural values in the experiences of a group of US Peace Corps volunteers working in the Farmers’ Training Centers of Lesotho. The Ministry of Agriculture operates these Centers as a training resource for providing extension services to rural farmers in this mountainous nation. However, after changes in the national economy and political systems, these Centers suffered years of administrative neglect. These seven volunteers were assigned as Management Advisors to four FTCs as part of a national effort to reinvigorate these Centers. This group of Advisors was responsible to work with local staff to improve the management, facilities and model farm at these Centers.

The author summarizes Frons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner’s model of seven cultural value continua developed for corporate managers in cross-cultural situations. Using this model as a lens, the author selected three of the continua and explores how differences in values led to predictable areas of conflict that limited the efficacy of the Advisors in engaging their counterparts or improving management practices. Based on this discussion, the author provides some recommendations for being more successful in navigating differences in cultural values.

Keywords: Lesotho, management, cultural values, trompenaars, relationships
Introduction
Agriculture and the business of agriculture are becoming more internationalized. Unfortunately, many of the projects undertaken do not appear to be as successful as expected, in spite of significant levels of technical expertise from abroad. While participating in these projects, many professionals find their ability to utilize their technical skills dependent on their interpersonal and cross-cultural leadership skills. There is a growing body of literature that examines failures in international agriculture and development programming. Lloyd Timberlake’s “Africa in Crisis (1986) discusses a range of these failures across Africa. James Ferguson’s “The Anti-Politics Machine” (1994) focuses on the role of politics and culture in the failure of a massive development program in the Thaba Tseka district of Lesotho.

This author experienced this dynamic when he served as one of seven Management Advisors attached to the Ministry of Agriculture in Lesotho through the US Peace Corps. The objective of the assignment was to facilitate improvement in the management and facilities of four “Farmers’ Training Centres” (FTCs) by working with their counterpart, the FTC’s Resident Officer (the senior post at the FTC), the rest of the FTC staff and officers from the Lesotho Ministry of Agriculture. These FTCs, while an important part of the Ministry of Agriculture’s extension education services, had suffered years of institutional neglect. As a result many FTC staff were under-qualified, several key positions had been left vacant (and, by law, lost funding) and the physical plant of each FTC required significant repairs.

However, despite experience in agriculture, management and significant cross-cultural experiences, he and his colleagues were not as effective as they might have been. While many physical improvements to the FTCs were made over the two years our group was present, only one of the four FTCs could objectively show improvements in the management skills of local staff. The reasons for this are complex, but at least some of the barriers we encountered are related to differences in goals and leadership styles that stemmed from differences in culture.

Purpose
This paper will define the process by which Peace Corps Management Advisors attached to the Farmers’ Training Centers (FTCs) in Lesotho should develop their skills in cross-cultural leadership. Successful cross-cultural leadership in this situation must provide a framework which helps the Advisors achieve the following: (a) develop and support local leadership; (b) engage FTC staff in the process of improving FTC facilities; (c) build the staff and institutional skill base to increase the capacity of the FTCs to sustain the facilities without external supports; and (d) engage the staff and local extension agents on improving management of the FTC’s model farm.

Method
This paper will examine the experiences of the author and other FTC Management Advisors through the lens of a model for cross-cultural management put forward in the second edition of Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner’s 1998 “Riding the Waves of Culture” to assess whether changing how we looked at culture might have improved our ability to work in this cross-cultural situation. This model was designed to guide corporate managers in large multi-national organizations to understand and be effective in cross-cultural situations. It presents seven cultural value “dimensions” that shape differences in goals, expectations and behavior. These authors base their model on approximately 30,000 validated responses from managers in 55 countries.
Given that this paper will discuss the application of this model in a decidedly non-corporate environment, some differences in the application of concepts must occur.

Due to the limited scope of this paper, the author will briefly summarize Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner’s model of cultural value dilemmas and present discussion on three of them. The author will describe differences in values between the Advisors and their Basotho hosts and how those unresolved differences impacted their ability to work effectively together. Discussion of these interactions will form the basis for recommendations on how we might have been more effective working in this kind of cross-cultural project.

Notes:
1. Language: As with many Bantu languages, Sesotho moderates nouns by prefixes rather than the suffixes used in English. Consequently, Sotho people would say an individual Mosotho lives among other Basotho people in the nation of Lesotho and speaks Sesotho.)
2. This paper relies on research done by this author as part of his completed Masters’ thesis: “Implementation of the Student Enterprise Projects in the Farmers’ Training Centers of Lesotho” (Klem, 2005).

Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner’s Model of Cultural Values
Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner’s model of cultural differences defines culture as the patterns by which groups of people solve the problems of social relationships, time and interactions with nature. They present 7 interactive continua of “opposing” cultural values: Rules: Universal vs. Particular (Should rules be applied to all universally, or depend on the person/situation?); Individualism vs. Communitarianism (Should people act primarily as individuals or as part of the group?); Affective vs. Affect Neutral (How much emotion should a person display?); Specific vs. Diffuse Life Areas (Should the various social systems in a person’s life overlap or be separate?); Status: Achievement vs. Ascribed (Should social status come from achievements or by “office” (age, wealth, position)?); Time: Sequential vs. Synchronic (Is time primarily a linear series of events, or repeating cycles of events?). The “Nature” dimension focuses on whether people should attempt to “Control” nature vs. “Let nature take its course” (which correlates to whether people should foster internal vs. external loci of control). These authors stress that all cultures hold each of these values and that there is diversity in individual values within each culture. Their model focuses on the way that the aggregate pattern of those individual preferences tends to one part or another of a continuum – and the way those patterns produce differences in the preferred solution to that “dilemma” for each culture. These continua are therefore a reflection of the degree of relative emphasis within a group towards one value over another rather than a rejection of one value in favor of it’s opposite.

Note: The second edition of “Riding the Waves of Culture” also includes a discussion of how these cultural dilemmas might play out in post-apartheid South Africa. The authors include a brief summary of scores in each value continua for corporate managers from several key culture groups in South Africa, including the “South Sotho” (page 219). Since Lesotho is largely within the historic “South Sotho” settlement area (Gill, page 12) the existence of these scores are noted. However, given the sample bias towards managers in urban settings within South Africa and the potential for differences when compared to civil servants or rural people within Lesotho (as well as potential differences in values held by Americans volunteering as management advisors compared to American corporate managers) these scores are not used empirically in this context.
Results

The cultural value systems of the US Peace Corps Advisors in this project were quite different from those of their Basotho hosts in several of these dimensions in ways that impacted their views on how to interact and their views on business practices. In addition, the bureaucracy of civil service produced situations where the institutional culture differed from broader Basotho culture. A complete discussion of the interactions between the cultural (and sub-cultural) value systems of the American Advisors and their Basotho counterparts is beyond the scope of this paper. Given the constraints of this paper, the author has selected three of these continua for discussion: Rules: Universalism versus Particularism; Individualism versus Communitarianism; and Status: Achieved versus Ascribed.

Rules: Universalism versus particularism

This continuum describes the relative extent to which a culture applies rules “universally” to all or whether rules and consequences are moderated by the people involved and/or the situation. While undergoing pre-service training, and subsequently through their interaction with government officials, the most frequent statements about rules by our Basotho counterparts were put in universal terms. In practice, a great deal of how rules were applied depended on the particular nature of the people involved and the circumstances. This differed from bureaucratic procedures, which were almost always followed to the letter. This author noted that the FTC staff tended to state rules in “Universalist” language, but they meant to describe how things should be done under ideal circumstances. These rules are then interpreted within their context, with action taken based on the specific situation and the individuals involved. As a result it is important for observers of culture to pay attention not only to the rules as stated, but also the spectrum of social rewards and punishments that flow from breaches of those rules.

One incident that encapsulates this value continuum in action involved the disappearance of a tractor wagon from one of the FTCs, followed shortly by the appearance of a remarkably similar wagon on the farm of the FTC’s Resident Officer. To the Advisors posted at that FTC this was a clear example of theft. In communication with this author, they cited this event (and the Resident Officer’s unsatisfactory response to their accusation) as key factors in severing their relationship with their counterpart (Klem, J. 2005). They said the incident was the culmination of other less significant events but it cemented their belief that this Resident Officer was a thief and not to be trusted in any matter – which made it logically impossible to work with him. The idea that the Resident Officer was operating out of self interest when the Advisors were “volunteering” their time to help the FTC was also an issue.

The reaction among the other FTC staff to this incident was different from the Advisors. The reactions of the local staff are an important clue that they are interpreting the matter differently. Even though all the FTC staff knew what had happened to the wagon, it was not turned over to the police and the Ministry of Agriculture did not demand its return. The context of this event was important to interpreting the event. This author spent time at this FTC, and is familiar with this Resident Officer, other FTC staff and the wagon in question: The FTC’s tractor hadn’t been operational for several years, and was unlikely to be replaced. As a result, most plowing of FTC fields was done using local oxen or with tractors under contract with the Ministry of Agriculture in the capital. The wagon itself was too heavy to be practical for pulling by horse or oxen. As a result, it was left essentially unused for several years. Since everyone knew where the wagon was located, and because it was in the possession of the Resident Officer in charge of the whole FTC, it would be hard for the local staff to categorize the wagon as
“stolen.” The alternate use of effectively abandoned equipment had no real impact on the FTC and it could be reclaimed if needed – even years later. While there may have been some private clucking of tongues, the matter was clearly not viewed with the same lens.

In spite of strong preference for universal rules, the management advisors were not the only ones to make use of “particularist” rule structures. One key area of difficulty for FTCs was in purchasing. Many vendors, particularly those in South Africa, refused to accept Lesotho Government purchase orders citing delays in payment of 6 months of more. However, after introductions and a personal guarantee to pursue payment, several vendors agreed to accept purchase orders presented by Advisors but continued to decline orders from local staff with whom they had no relationship and who they did not trust to pursue prompt payment from the government sub-accountancy. In towns with few vendors or limited access to certain items, this was an important source of materials. (Several Basotho noted to this author that the Advisors, like the South African vendors, are white. Not only was this seen as a vestige of apartheid, it also meant that it was unlikely that the local staff could assume that relationship (and access to that vendor) after the volunteer left.)

**Individualism versus communitarianism**

Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner define this continuum as the extent to which people within a culture tend to define themselves primarily as individuals or as parts of a community. They also suggest that this continuum ties strongly to cultural views on the values related to internal or external loci of control discussed in their continuum of values related to Nature. There is a logical progression that if someone sees themselves as primarily an individual, they will also tend believe in the value of being the master of their own fate and an internal locus of control. These authors also suggest the converse progression also has merit: that people who see themselves as primarily part of a group may also tend to value bending with the flow of nature/circumstance. According to these authors, Americans tend to be strongly individualistic compared to many other cultures. The importance of individualism within American culture is well documented in art, literature and law. The author’s experience that he and his fellow American Management Advisors were significantly more Individualistic than their Basotho counterparts is supported by data presented in “Riding the Waves of Culture” which indicates “individualistic” responses from 79% of American respondents compared to 42% of “South Sotho” (pages 232 and 219 respectively). This area of difference played out in many ways, small and large, on a daily basis.

As new arrivals, we quickly tried to demonstrate our value by producing tangible work product. From the day of their arrival at their respective FTCs, this author and his peers showed a strong propensity to jump in, learn by doing (make mistakes, adapt and try again) and start working on projects around the FTC. For their part, our Basotho counterparts encouraged us in this, but did not necessarily emulate our actions. Some Advisors expressed frustration when they found themselves working alone or with a few FTC laborers (but not our counterparts). This dynamic also begins to preview differences in cultural values related to status and the “proper” work for someone of our counterpart’s rank.

One Advisor in our group (a retired forester from New England) had stated a strong preference to work alone on individual projects. While not intending to alienate his counterparts, his apparent disinterest in seeking them out (combined with difficulties learning Sesotho) effectively isolated him from the other staff. Over time, the minor misunderstandings and conflicts that are normal in any cross-cultural project accumulated and cemented his status as an
outsider within the FTC. At times this led to the volunteer (unknowingly) taking on the same projects as his counterpart. That Resident Officer spoke with this author on several occasions about the frustration and the embarrassment he felt when confronted by his own supervisor about errors in supply orders from doubled projects and the appearance that he didn’t know what was happening at his own FTC. The Advisor complained to this author that his counterpart was trying to supervise him, but by this time neither was willing to work with the other.

Another insight into this aspect of Basotho culture comes from the Desmond Tutu’s explanation of the key African value of “ubuntu,” known as “botho” in Sesotho (literally translated as “the state of being a person” (Mabille & Dieterlen, 1985)). Tutu explains that in usage [botho] describes a person who is, among other things, “generous, hospitable, friendly and compassionate. You share what you have. We say a person is a person through other persons.” He notes that “while friendliness and community are great goods, social harmony is the greatest good.” Importantly he also notes that “anger, resentment, lust for revenge, even success through aggressive competitiveness are corrosive to this good” (1999, p.31).

While Tutu’s description of “botho” differs somewhat from the criteria for “Communitarianism” presented here and it covers aspects of more than one of the cultural continua discussed in this paper. However, it is noted here because of the emphasis on the value it places on one’s actions as part of a social context rather than as an individual. This resonated on many levels with the author’s experiences with his counterparts. At the village level, the “pitso” or village gathering was an important part of decision making – even if the decision didn’t seem to involve the whole village. While the chief could have a great deal of authority, people spent a great deal of time working to achieve consensus rather than make quick decisions. Even when we understood this value, it was very difficult for the Advisors to “submit” decisions we viewed as “individual” to this kind of process.

Status: Ascribed versus achieved

Trompennaars and Hampden-Turner define this continuum of values as the relative emphasis within a culture as to whether status is accorded primarily based on achievements or “ascribed” based on other criteria of “being” (such as age, gender, education, genealogy or profession) (page 105). To one extent or another, all cultures accord certain forms of status for achievements and ascribe status for other “classes” of people. However, these authors suggest that not only do cultures vary in orientation towards one part or another of this continuum, but they also vary in what kinds of achievements and ascriptions impact status.

This author perceived significant differences between American and Basotho cultures on this continuum. Americans tend to perceive ourselves as an “achievement” oriented culture. In Lesotho, we immediately experienced an emphasis on ascribed status based on heredity, age and gender. The role of hereditary chiefs, from the village up through parliament in Lesotho represented an obvious difference from our experience. The distribution of power and status at the village level was complex; involving a mixture of hereditary, elected, appointed and informal leaders - all with varying degrees of formal and informal status/authority. For the purposes of this paper, it is sufficient to note that these offices and their mechanisms represented significant differences from what the American Advisors were familiar with. Heredity, livestock wealth (combined with generosity) and age were more significant in many respects than specific achievements in the subject under discussion.

It is within this context that the Advisors encountered the formal hierarchies and structures of government ministries. In this context, the nature of ascribed status shifts from
traditional markers to one’s position on the formal organizational chart and seniority: The Ministry of Agriculture was represented at the District level by the District Agricultural Officer (DAO) and the Assistant DAO, followed by the extension agents and the Resident Officer of the FTC (our counterpart) and various department heads. (Not only does this place the Advisors into a relatively senior position within the District office, but it also raises the profile of the Advisors’ activities.) This pattern is repeated in District offices of the Ministries of Education, Public Works, the Sub-Accountancy and others – each of which is answerable to and supported by a bureaucracy in the capital of Maseru. The government is Lesotho’s single largest employer, so the rules and processes for navigating this sub-culture was part of everyone’s daily life.

It took this author and the other Management Advisors some time to get used to various mechanisms by which the different Ministries interact – and the way that “territory” is allocated. For example, this author was within his “rights” to make repairs to an FTC building (Ministry of Agriculture) but not the house he lived in (Ministry of Public Works). Getting things purchased and paid for was not a matter of simply writing a check. It required multiple actions by the DAO, the Ministry accountants, the procurement officer and the Sub-Accountancy. Understanding the importance of each person’s status and the protocols required to navigate within these bureaucracies was (is) important to getting things done. Readers with experience in large government or university bureaucracies will no doubt be more familiar with these layers than those from small businesses. As such, organizational cultures may be as important national cultures in some circumstances in how values drive behavior and define which outcomes are desirable.

American and Basotho culture not only differed on the relative preference for achieved versus ascribed status, they also differed on the types of ascriptions and achievements upon status were accorded. (This touches on the previous discussion of “Individualism versus Communitarianism” above.) Given the emphasis among the Basotho on acting as part of a group, it is not surprising that one mechanism for a Mosotho to increase “achieved” status is through acts of generosity and sharing. Ferguson’s discussion of the “Bovine Mystique” describes this dynamic in how one becomes esteemed as a morui (a rich person) not simply by ownership of livestock, but through generosity in sharing livestock wealth with the community (page 153). This author noted a pattern of sharing and of overlapping debts for which there was little social pressure to repay promptly. In fact, proactively paying off one’s debts was interpreted as reducing a friendship to the level of business or an effort to pre-empt an obligation to share later wealth. (This author was also told repeatedly that the Chinese and Indian business owners were hated (negative ascribed status) in part because they kept their profits for themselves, effectively exporting wealth from the community.) This differed from the American model of maintaining status through independence so as not to burden family or friends.

One might expect that, in this context the Advisors’ work at the FTC would therefore be seen as community driven and therefore esteemed. This was to some extent, but not entirely, accurate in practice. In retrospect, it appears that this was related to the extent to which the work was undertaken independently and/or accomplished individually. As a result, a certain amount of the work done by the Advisors was viewed in terms of individual work. Advisors perhaps became more achievement oriented in part due to the defined timelines of our assignment and values that put a need to roll up our sleeves and dig in at a higher priority than establishing a relational context for working. The FTC staff’s apparent lack of interest in mirroring our “achievement” ethic generated the makings of a downward cycle where Advisor frustration
increased isolation which accelerated our willingness to work along and our focus on concrete achievements.

Part of this may stem from the way Advisors and their hosts approached status, and therefore work, differently. While recognizing that Americans tended to work “hands on” our counterparts saw themselves as directors rather than actors. They had a rank/level of status where their role was to manage others doing manual labor rather than doing the job personally. In addition, they had neither the technical skills (carpentry, electrical, etc) to work alongside us nor the inclination to do so. Working alongside the volunteers would produce two key impacts on their cultural value systems: it involved being seen publicly doing something at a low skill level and it put the Advisory publicly in the role of “teacher” and themselves as “students.” Becoming our “student” would have redefined their role with us from counterpart to our subordinate. Not only would this impact their ascribed status with the Advisor, but potentially also with the rest of their staff. If they also demonstrated incompetence at the task publicly, this could further erode their status within the FTC. As a result, “teaching” could only occur within the context of a solid working relationship and often in private.

It is impossible to have any meaningful discussion of status in cross-cultural contexts without at least touching on the issue of race. While it is not possible cover this aspect of status and culture within the confines of this paper, neither can it go unmentioned. In this author’s experience, Americans in general and this group of Advisors energetically downplayed the validity of race as a factor in ascribed status. They also had a much more difficult time discussing race than their counterparts. However, whether we refuse to accept it or not, it is impossible to deny that race had a role in how status was ascribed to us in post-colonial, post-apartheid Southern Africa. This status, while often correlated with relative wealth and power - does not necessarily correlate to esteem. It is important to note that, in this author’s experience, the impact of race as a factor in ascribed status varied significantly depending on the situation and people involved. It is this author’s opinion that one consequence of this aspect of status is that it increased the necessity for observing the ascribed status markers of his Basotho counterparts, even at the cost of slowing the pace of his achievements. Taking the time to ensure their status markers were respected (and errors addressed promptly) allowed for the possibility of substituting race-based ascriptions with those based on relationship.

**Conclusions**

The problem with international agricultural programs is not that we do not understand agriculture or management. Our level of scientific knowledge of crops and livestock is unprecedented in human history. Our understanding of management practices is validated by the size and scope of our agribusinesses enterprises. While technical problems persist, the largest problems facing international projects have to do with people. The process by which a seed grows is scientifically understood and the problems of seed growth are technical. However, as soon as human beings become involved, the problems of agriculture take on social dimensions and culture becomes an important part in how the problem is perceived and addressed. The fact that people in other cultures have also created successful business using different management models is evidence that there are multiple paths to success.

One important function of Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner’s model of cultural values is that it poses cross-cultural situations as interactions between valid value systems, rather than a means of describing how other people differ from us. Their observation about solely descriptive models of cultural training is important: “For Cross-cultural training to be successful, it must not
be limited to delivering more or less detailed information about other countries and cultures. If it is, even the most sophisticated model of cross-cultural differences will only enhance the particular stereotypes that the participants have about another culture” (p. 201). Note that this is not a rejection of culturally specific information. One needs culturally specific information in order to begin understanding the underlying value systems. Implicit in this process is a broader understanding of one’s own cultural value systems in the context of other cultural value systems.

Our group of Management Advisors participated in cultural training during a 3 month “pre-service training” period. We had strong intentions of working with our counterparts and we attempted to embrace them across cultural differences. However, training on the ways in which culture impacted management, connected to both the nature of the problem and the solutions, did not occur. As a result, the desire to address culture was strongly overshadowed by our focus on tasks and the desire to “improve” management and facilities. To the extent that we connected management practices and culture, the general (implicit) assumption was that Basotho culture had failed to produce satisfactory management strategies; as evidenced by the deteriorated facilities. The “logical” conclusion was that our ideas on management were an improvement by default. As a result, most of the Advisors focused on improving FTC facilities and programming instead of engaging the local staff who resisted us.

**Importance, Implications and Application**

The goal of cross-cultural training is not simply to make the behavior and motivations of other peoples more comprehensible and predictable; although this is an important start. Effective cross-cultural training must also improve one’s cultural self-awareness and provide the tools needed to dialogue across cultures and reconcile the dilemmas that differences in values present. This reconciliation does not require the adoption of one value over another, but the more complex process of working to make use of both sets of values to improve outcomes.

In order to be effectively engage local staff and develop their internal leadership abilities, a Management Advisor should have a strong awareness of how cultural value systems work and clear plan for developing the cross-cultural competencies needed to be effective. This author recommends the following:

1. **Pay attention to the various ways status is ascribed and achieved – including one’s own.** Repair promptly any slights to the rank or social status of those around you.
2. **Act as a guest,** remembering that one bears none of the long-term consequences of your recommendations.
3. **Focus on relationships.** This is the most important part of cross-cultural work. Relationships are the link to the social (cultural) networks of the people one works with; providing information, a sounding board for ideas and a mechanism for repairing damage when mistakes are made. In most cases this requires relationships that transcend personal and professional arenas. Relationships must be central because, regardless of the technological achievements, the only long-term achievements will be with people.
4. **To make the relationships work,** it is important to ensure that work is undertaken cooperatively rather than independently – which pushes the role of the expatriate from primary mover towards a consultative mode. From this vantage, asking questions and learning become the basis for earning the right to be heard (as opposed to the right to speak).
5. **Let nature take its course;** natural consequences are powerful teachers.
The role of the cross-cultural leader in this situation is not to solve nor impose solutions to the problems that these cultural dilemmas uncover, but to adapt their methods and objectives to the realities of that environment. By taking the time to understand the complexities of the situation, the Advisor implicitly expresses a respect for his counterparts that is otherwise missing. This, in concert with the recommendations above, forms the basis for engaging not only the FTC staff, but also the extension agents who use the FTC in the process of improving the FTC and its model farm.

References