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## **UNIT 16, CHAPTER 4**

### **CULTURAL METAPHORS: THEIR USE IN MANAGEMENT PRACTICE AND AS A METHOD FOR UNDERSTANDING CULTURES**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

This paper describes cultural metaphors and how they can be used in business and related areas. A cultural metaphor is any activity, phenomenon, or institution with which members of a given culture emotionally and/or cognitively identify. As such, cultural metaphors reflect the underlying values of a culture. Examples of national cultural metaphors include the Japanese garden, the Chinese family altar, and American Football. Ordinarily business students and managers have only a limited amount of time for studying culture and the manner in which it interfaces with their work. Cultural metaphors provide a quick, efficient, and easily understandable way of responding to this challenge. They build upon the perspective of cross-cultural dimensions, arguably the most important advance in cross-cultural understanding in the past forty years.

#### **INTRODUCTION**

It is a truism that an educator must know the audience he or she is trying to influence, either cognitively or emotionally. This is particularly valid for a management educator and trainer in the cross-cultural area, as MBA (Master of Business Administration) students and seasoned managers frequently constitute difficult audiences, especially when their exposure to cultures other than their own is limited. These students and managers have only a small amount of time to devote to a particular subject, and they tend to prefer classes and training sessions that give them specific guidance and understanding that they can immediately or soon apply to their work, that is, "takeaways." Two examples should suffice:

- I presented a seminar on cultural metaphors, the subject of this article, to a group of managers, one of whom approached me afterwards. He was the President and CEO of a medium-sized furniture-making company in North Carolina. Until his 50th birthday, he had never been outside of the United States. During the next five years he traveled to 55 nations doing business. He desperately needed some shorthand way of understanding the non-U.S. managers with whom he was negotiating. As discussed below, cultural metaphors are a quick and efficient way to alleviate his problem.
- I co-direct an 11-course internal certificate training program that is required for managerial promotion at a large company that has achieved considerable international success in recent years; each course lasts one day. Most of the courses are concerned with such specific issues as international financing and governmental regulations, and only two of them focus on genuine cross-cultural issues (international negotiating and cross-cultural understanding for business success). I co-teach the second of these two courses and am always impressed how difficult it is for the managers, almost all of whom work at least 50 hours a week and sometimes much more, to fit in the reading assignments and the time for the session itself for this one course and, of course, for the other ten courses in the program and additional courses outside of it that are also required for promotion. My role as a management educator and trainer is to provide some added value or something meaningful in a few hours of interaction with these hard-working and frequently overworked managers.

Such an educator has at his disposal the large number of training techniques that have been developed in the cross-cultural area over the years. And I do take advantage of them, using short experiential exercises, video clips of cross-cultural interactions followed by a discussion of what was happening cross-culturally, and so forth.

Over the years I developed my own perspective and method, cultural metaphors, that allows the educator to incorporate all or most of these techniques into a training program that can extend from one and one-half hours to 60 hours. The interested reader can look at the book, *Working Across Cultures: Applications and Exercises*, for a description of 70 exercises that go beyond the concept that cross-cultural differences exist (Gannon, 2001b), which unfortunately is the point at which many training sessions end. But MBA students and managers want to understand much more, specifically how they can apply the concepts and lessons learned to their actual work situations. That is, these exercises are integrated through cultural metaphors which focus on management issues and practices in such areas as advertising, business strategy, and negotiating.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 1) in their classic work on metaphors argue that "the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor." That is, humans compare a new and uncertain situation to something with which they are thoroughly familiar in order to understand it.

For example, a popular metaphor for an organization is that it is a machine, which then can easily create a situation in which managers construct their organizations using

principles applicable to a physical machine such as an automobile. In this case subordinates would have only limited authority and there would be close supervision and many organizational levels. This way of designing organizations is not compatible with intense competition that may be global, rapidly changing technology, and decreased product life cycles. A more pertinent metaphor might be guerrilla warfare with its flexible use of troops, rapid change in plans, and strong ideological commitment or strong organizational culture. Thus the selection of the correct metaphor is not only important but also frequently essential for success to be achieved.

In essence, a metaphor is only as good as the value it creates in providing new insights and increased understanding. But a cultural metaphor is even more complex, as it involves aggregations of individuals. The Preface of the second edition of my book, *Understanding Global Cultures: Metaphorical Journeys Through 23 Nations* (Gannon, 2001a), provides the following definition of cultural metaphors:

"A cultural metaphor is any activity, phenomenon, or institution with which members of a given culture emotionally and/or cognitively identify. As such, the metaphor represents the underlying values expressive of the culture itself. Frequently, outsiders have a difficult time relating to and/or understanding the underlying values of a culture, and this book is designed to address this difficulty. Culture allows us to fill in the blanks, often unconsciously, when action is required, and cultural metaphors help us to see the values leading to action. This is probably the most interesting feature of culture."

Each of us uses metaphors, and when we begin to apply this concept to culture, we are dealing with cultural metaphors. For example, American football is the most popular sport in the United States, even to the extent that the Superbowl held on Football Sunday in February has replaced Christmas as the most popular American holiday for family and social gatherings. It is helpful and perhaps crucial that both U.S. and non-U.S. citizens understand American football and its many intricacies to understand the United States and the manner in which business is conducted by U.S. managers. Camille Paglia (1993), the social critic and commentator, encourages women to study football rather than attend feminist meetings for the same reason.

Managers seem to agree that American football is an effective metaphor for understanding the growing complexity of modern business. At the turn of the 20th Century baseball may have represented an effective metaphor, as it reflected both a link to the United States' agrarian origins and as a way of talking about figures and data, e.g., runs batted in. As Kaufman (1999, p. A8) points out, today "Many business leaders see their game as more like football, with its image of interdependent players with multiple skills cooperating to move the ball down a long field 10 yards at a time." And even the jargon or popular vocabulary of American football dominates business meetings and activities, for example, "going for the blitz," "getting to the red zone," "fall back and punt," and "throwing a Hail Mary Pass." Not surprisingly, then, American football is our cultural metaphor for the United States.

When we were originally attempting to develop a cultural metaphor for the United States, we had great difficulty identifying a suitable one, given the geographical and ethnic diversity of the nation. As in so many cases, it is really outsiders who have the best perception of the essence of a national culture. In this case Hakam Kanafani, a graduate student at the University of Maryland and a native of Egypt, volunteered to do the research (interviews, etc.) and write the initial draft of the chapter on American football. When he presented his initial draft to an MBA/PhD. seminar with 18 students, there was general agreement that he had selected wisely and accurately.

Rob Norton, in commenting on the business scandals that have erupted since 2000, titled his column, "Sick of Scandal? Blame Football!" He compares the worldwide popularity of soccer (or football to the rest of the world) and the national popularity of American football, focusing on one specific difference: The number and complexity of rules in American football. But there are other critical aspects of football, and even Americans not interested in the game would do well understanding them. Not surprisingly, football is the cultural metaphor for the United States. See Table 1 for the central characteristics of American Football and, by metaphorical reasoning, the conduct of business.

The unit of analysis in *Understanding Global Cultures* is the nation, but cultural metaphors can also be used for ethnic groups within nations. The idea was to describe a nation in one chapter using a cultural metaphor, and the key features or dimensions of each metaphor would become the subheadings within each chapter. For example, the Japanese garden includes the following key features: Wa (group harmony); Shikata (a seemingly excessive and large number of rules governing behavior, e.g., not crossing the street at a red light at 2 a.m. in the morning when there is no one in the area); Seishin or spirit training designed to make the mind control the body through the use of such techniques as meditation, judo, and kendo or sword fighting; combining droplets or energies to accomplish group goals; and aesthetics, as the Japanese sense of aesthetics is unique.

We developed 23 cultural metaphors based both on such well-known phenomena as the Italian opera and on less well-known phenomena such as the Chinese family altar and the Swedish stuga (see Gannon, 2001a). Currently we are working on the creation of several additional metaphors for the third edition of this book.

As suggested above, MBAs and seasoned managers constitute a tough audience, and the rule most experienced educators and trainers follow is to get them actively involved in the first three to five minutes of any session. This can be accomplished in a variety of ways:

- Start off with a series of non-threatening but meaningful questions with which all will be comfortable. For example, Samuel Huntington, whose book *The Clash of Civilizations* provoked a worldwide debate (Huntington, 1996), subsequently co-edited a book, *Culture Matters* (Harrison and Huntington, 2000). Such questions include: Does culture matter? If it does matter, does it matter all of the time?; If not, when does culture matter?

- Begin with a short experiential exercise.
- Start off with a video clip demonstrating a cross-cultural problem or problems and ask: What do you think is going on?

Once MBA students and managers are actively involved, it is much easier to present more difficult material. For example, arguably the most influential work on culture since the 1950s has been completed by cross-cultural researchers who have empirically demonstrated that there are dimensions along which nations can be arrayed or ranked, but many management educators have difficulty using this dimensional perspective to train MBAs and managers because of its abstract nature. Geert Hofstede (2001) is the best known of such researchers, and I typically present his five dimensions of cultures and the scores for a selected group of nations. These dimensions include individualism-collectivism (the degree to which the group influences the individual when making decisions) and power distance (the degree to which there are wide disparities in power and prestige in a nation's culture). I then ask: What is incomplete about this framework?

Ordinarily a dead silence occurs. It is then easy to point out that these dimensions provide an excellent starting point for understanding a nation's culture, but that they do not give a real-world sense of what actually happens in cross-cultural interactions. For example, understanding Japanese culture through the use of the Japanese garden goes far beyond the five dimensional scores on Japan that Hofstede presents, especially when its essential characteristics are contrasted with the essential characteristics of American football.

This conclusion came from my own attempts to use Hofstede's dimensions in understanding Thais when residing in Thailand. After much additional reading and frequent conversations with Thais, I had almost given up until I read John Fieg's influential comparative description of Thais and Americans (Fieg, 1976; Fieg and Mortlock, 1989). In both cultures there is a love of freedom, a dislike of pomposity, and a pragmatic outlook. But the differences are vast. For example, the Thais follow a complex group-oriented authority-ranking system of status in which the leader is expected to ensure the welfare of subordinates, much as a father or mother would protect their children. Thus Thais tend to be more group-oriented or collectivistic and to more readily accept distances in power and status than Americans.

Fieg uses the metaphor of a rubber band to demonstrate the critical differences. In the United States, the rubber band is held tautly between the two fingers most of the time, and is relaxed only periodically, for example, at a Christmas party. In Thailand, the rubber band is loosely held most of the time, as evidenced by the fact that Thais feel that work should be sanuk or fun. In fact, the Thai word for work, ngan, is also translated as fun. However, when a superior issues an order, compliance tends to be swift, after which the relaxed atmosphere returns. Further, the Thais want everyone to be happy, which is why the Thai Smile is so famous worldwide, but they hate complainers. Related to this approach to life is the concept of mai pen rai, which is virtually untranslatable. This concept has been rendered as "never mind," "don't worry about anything," "things happen and it is best to accept them without anguish," and "going with the flow." Carol

Hollinger, an American secondary teacher in Thailand in the 1950ies, authored a classic book with the title *Mai Pen Rai Means Never Mind* published by Houghton Mifflin in 1965, and it is still popular (see Hollinger, 1977).

Broadly speaking, the training program I have developed emphasizes three areas:

- The dimensional perspective
- Cross-cultural communication, particularly the influential work by Edward Hall (see Hall and Hall, 1990)
- Cultural metaphors

To provide both a sense of closure and meaningfulness (that is, the "takeaways") in an MBA class or management training seminar, we use a number of techniques. One of the most popular is the presentation of these three perspectives followed by an extended Marketing/Advertising exercise during which the trainees are asked to use all three approaches in developing an advertisement, including a slogan of 50 words or less, that a travel agency in the United States could use to attract visitors from a specific nation. This exercise is very meaningful to MBA students and managers, as the tourist and travel-related industry now constitutes 12.5% of GNP or one of eight jobs in the United States and its importance is increasing in many nations in a similar fashion. The difficulty, of course, is to have some overlap between American football and the cultural metaphor for the selected nation, as visitors must feel comfortable. But there cannot be total overlap, as there would be no reason for visiting the United States.

The exercise can be completed during class, as the class is broken into small groups, each assigned to work on a specific nation, for 30 minutes, followed by class presentations. Alternatively, each small group can complete the exercise as a homework assignment, preparing a PowerPoint and/or music presentation. For example, the cultural metaphor for Thailand is the Thai Kingdom, as it is one of the few functioning kingdoms in the world. The King, who has been in power for over 50 years, is revered, and tourists have been arrested for throwing Thai money on the ground because it contains the King's image. The slides that an MBA team included the following:

- Slide 1. TRAVELING IN THE UNITED STATES
- Slide 2. AN EXTENDED SANUK....VACATION PACKAGES IN THE UNITED STATES FOR YOU AND YOUR FAMILY (Accompanied by three pictures of: a Thai family camping; large lighted buildings in Las Vegas; and Mickey Mouse at Disney World)
- Slide 3. HOW ABOUT AN EXTENDED SANUK? Come share your smile with us, while we share our culture with you! We offer the best in vacations in the United States! Mai Pen Rai, come visit the U.S.A. (No pictures for this slide).
- Slide 4. From excitement...to relaxation come discover the beauty of our country. We've got vacation spots that are right for you, your family and your friends. City, Country, Beach, Disney World. See it all with us. And there are discounts for groups of 6 or more. (One picture of a Thai teen-ager gawking out of an open car window.)

- Slide 5. Excitement package #1: Gambling, boxing matches, and musical and dance performances in Las Vegas (There is one picture of a card about the size of a card from a deck of playing cards with three overlapping images: A dice on the left, a pharaoh's image that is prominent in Las Vegas in the middle, and a playing card on the right.)
- Slide 6. Excitement package #2: Family entertainment for all ages at Disney World, with rides, rides, rides...and the world-famous Animal Kingdom (One picture, again of Mickey Mouse, but this time with a Thai boy.)
- Slide 7. Relaxation package #1: Relaxation in Florida. Card games by the pool, chess on the deck, biking on the boardwalk, and picnics on the beach. (On the right one picture of a male Thai teen-ager riding a bike on whose handles a female Thai teen-ager happily sits; a second picture below the description is a picture of a beautiful beach, with a ship on the horizon.)
- Slide 8. Relaxation package #2: California tour. Pai thieo (traveling) from San Diego to San Francisco: a mix of bike, boat, bus, and foot tours. (Two pictures are below, one of which is a large ship powered by sails toward which many Thais are walking, the second of which is a small group of Thais standing at the back of a motorized ship as a bridge recedes into the horizon.)

The MBA team explained that they had taken this approach in constructing the advertisement because the people of Thailand, as explained previously, enjoy sanuk, and this is accompanied by a natural gregariousness. The ad was designed to appeal to this combination. To ensure that the Thais felt comfortable reading the advertisement, the team emphasized both formal and spontaneous opportunities for leisure and fun or sanuk. In short, the team sought to give a feeling that, because of both the formal and spontaneous opportunities, there was a 100% probability that the vacation would be a great success. Even the picture of the Pharaoh was an attempt to link the cultural metaphor of the Thai Kingdom to the advertisement.

Another meaningful approach that allows for closure is to develop a company-specific cross-cultural case in which the trainees must select one of three partners for a joint venture, for example, a Korean, Brazilian, or German partner. The trainees must also complete a "cultural diagnostic matrix" that includes the concepts covered in the training session, for example, individualism, power distance, etc., and show how the differences relate to the metaphor for each nation. If a company-specific case is not available, there is a large number of cross-cultural cases that can be obtained through the websites of the Harvard Business School, the Darden Graduate School of Business at the University of Virginia, the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, etc.

The first edition of *Understanding Global Cultures* did not categorize the chapters into various parts of the book. In the second edition the book is organized into the following parts, with the proviso that a particular nation may well fit into two or three parts of the book: Authority ranking cultures; equality matching cultures; market pricing cultures; cleft national cultures; torn national cultures; same metaphor, different meanings; and beyond national borders. This framework makes explicit the direct links between the dimensional perspective, cross-cultural communication, and cultural metaphors.

In short, a cultural metaphor represents a way to obtain new and deep insights into a group's or nation's culture. Cultural metaphors also provide a method for discussing cross-cultural issues, differences, and similarities in a collegial rather than a stereotypical and perhaps hostile fashion. In developing such insights, it is critical that the cross-cultural research be taken into consideration, and it is for this reason that both the dimensional perspective and the communication perspective should supplement cultural metaphors. Cultural metaphors represent only a starting point for understanding a culture; they are easy to use, but do require much thought to avoid inaccurate stereotyping; and they can be supplemented by other methods. Most importantly, cultural metaphors allow managers with limited time to gain some understanding of a group or nation's culture that they can apply quickly to the myriad problems that they face daily in international activities.

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### **About the Author**

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### **Questions for Discussion**

1. Why is a metaphor useful in understanding other cultures or countries?
2. Gannon and his colleagues used "American Football" as a metaphor for the U.S. Do you think this is the best metaphor for the U.S.? Why or why not? Do you think that U.S. citizens tend to use different metaphors for their country than people from outside the U.S.? Why or why not? If you are a U.S. citizen, can you think of metaphors that people in other countries would use for the U.S.?
3. What are the advantages and disadvantages of the cross-cultural dimensional approach and cultural metaphors?
4. Think of your own ethnic heritage. What metaphor or metaphors would you use to describe it? Why?
5. To help capture the meaning of metaphors in this context, try to identify metaphors for the following: a) Your college or university; b) the city in which you live; c) your hometown; and d) the neighborhood in which you grew up.
6. As indicated in the paper, it is frequently said that the most interesting feature of culture is that people respond unconsciously or semi-consciously in terms of their basic values when making decisions. Which approach seems to best capture the dynamics of such reactions, cross-cultural dimensions or cultural metaphors? Why?

7. What cautions should you take when using cultural metaphors?
8. What ways do you personally use to understand cross-cultural differences? Can you use cultural metaphors in combination with them? If yes, how? If no, why not?

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