

A review of

Comfort, Jeremy and Peter Franklin, *The **Mindful** International Manager: Competences for Working Effectively across Cultures*.

2008. York Associates. (www.york-associates.co.uk)

Reviewed by George Simons at www.diversophy.com

It is the word **Mindful** that is written in bold in the title of this handsomely laid out work intended for travelers, expatriate managers and others working in unfamiliar surroundings. It aims at assisting the user to consciously make the effort to understand others and work effectively across cultures. The authors deliberately state that their work is not for interculturalists or human resource managers—who should know better already. Suffice it to say, however, that these latter might indeed be well aware of the book and the possibility of suggesting it or putting it in the hands of those they serve. Thus this review is written very much with the interculturalist, the consultant and training room facilitator in mind.



As in many professional fields, breaking new ground may not be about proposing radically new theories or presenting as yet unheard of research, but in saying as simply and clearly as possible what we know to be best practice in a specific area of competence. The intercultural field is not beyond this need. Over the years a certain set of principles, approaches and models have been developed that assist individuals and organizations to address the ever increasing frequency of cultural interaction at every level. This book places this information in coherent, usable and in relatively simple language for end users.

An attractive presentation and considerable white space make the book easy to read, particularly for the many of us who have now consume more print in pixels than in ink. The authors, both interculturalists of experience and stature, have taken care to make the book interactive, encouraging us to apply the ideas contained to our own person and our experiences. It frequently asks us to assess the degree to which we find ourselves culturally inclined to or engaged in ranges of behavior, belief, concepts and practices.

Occasional quotations, generally from working managers experiencing intercultural realities, give a sense of realism and relevance to the intercultural perspective and numerous models and tools taken from the intercultural and organizational development fields.

Too often learning about our own as well as others' culture is the result of mistakes made when we don't know what we don't know about others or our environment. These can be anything from discourteous to fatal depending on the circumstances. So the first step that the authors take is to urge us to be mindful of our own expectations and our cultures, both of origin and of the organizations we are part of. They then address the tensions that exist between culture and personality as well as between individuals and groups, minefields where mindfulness of both cultural characteristics and avoidance of distorting stereotypes are important competences if one is not to lose a professional limb.

Discussions of intercultural communication and intercultural competence frequently address the individual and personal aspects of behavior with little or no attention being paid to one's role or organizational aims and restraints. Not so here, where intercultural mindfulness is combined with models and best practices from OD and management education. This is challenging, as many of the best models and behaviors that form the lore of management training in English are strongly influenced by US and British management gurus and must be reexamined for their applicability in a cross-cultural context. Feedback skills, active listening, SWOT analysis, assertiveness, plain speech and conflict management models all have their moments depending on the context in which one is operating.

As both authors received their education in the UK and this reviewer is US-born and California-educated, it may be hard to recognize what we take for granted and have in common when writing and speaking about cultural competence. Despite our efforts to put intercultural study on a scientific basis, years of experience suggest that intercultural competence becomes, in the end, very much an art of keeping one's balance on the high wire between two or more cultures, a matter of daily testing and challenging our theories as much as our stereotypes of others.

Another constant challenge is the fact that many managerial practices are embedded in the native culture of the organizations we seek to serve. This means that we must mediate even between the culture of intercultural lore and that of our work settings. Once an Egyptian PhD candidate, who was my tour guide in the courtyard of Mehmet Ali Paşa's palace, mentioned to me that she was getting married after graduation in a few months. I asked about her fiancé's profession. She told me that she didn't know yet as her parents were still researching the future spouse. She reminded me that in an arranged marriage two people learn to love each other. The ability to explore a different logic is a competence we need to exercise when difference meets difference. We are still sorely lacking in research in how various cultures view the intercultural challenge beyond our Western models and that even organizations that seem to have a global organizational context can be rooted in a local set of values.

The authors of this book are fully aware that in many organizations up to 90% of all work may be done virtually, whether the distance is two floors away in the same building or six thousand kilometers. This means that cultural competence is as important when connecting within the home office or with someone in the branch office on another continent. In either circumstance, feedback, resolution of conflict and trust building are vital tasks of the mindful manager. Both face-to-face as well as virtual contexts are addressed directly in the book.

Finally, a generous glossary of terms is provided with an emphasis on specifying how the terms listed are used in the body of the book. Since many words and phrases used have meanings in a variety of contexts, they may, in fact, not travel well in common speech even within the varieties of English. Definition is a must.

At a time when books may be becoming the "road less traveled" gifting our clients and learners with simple, direct, well-organized and practical information may in fact promote their use, as we hope will be the case with *The **Mindful** International Manager*. While the book may be described as "an easy read," it, in fact, offers the reader a challenging and essential discipline.