

"The book abounds with well-chosen anecdotes to illustrate the misunderstandings that can arise from clashing cultural assumptions, making this enlightening book a pleasure to read."

—*Foreign Affairs*

"Whether you're a corporate or traditional diplomat, global traveler, government official, or passionate world citizen, this is the one book you should not miss. Chock-full of real-world examples and a simple framework that can be utilized in any cross-cultural context, Meyer's work is characterized by a fresh and relevant voice, distilling down the essentials of communicating, persuading and working effectively around the globe. It is rare that I pick up a cross-cultural book and can't put it down."

—Cari Guittard, *Huffington Post*

"This readable book explains how to dramatically increase organisational success by improving our ability to understand the behaviour of colleagues, clients, and suppliers from different countries."

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"A helpful guide to working effectively with people from other cultures. . . . Meyer delivers important reading for those engaged in international business."

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"With business becoming ever global, there are a raft of books available on dealing with cultural differences. If you only read one, make it INSEAD professor Erin Meyer's. . . . [She s]killfully blend[s] real-life examples . . . with an analytical framework. . . . What brings this book to life are the numerous examples Meyer has encountered, both in her own life as an American living in Paris, and in her experience running the Managing Virtual Teams module at INSEAD."

—*HR Magazine*, 5 star review

"Amusing."

—*Financial Times*

"In a relaxed, entertaining, but always knowledgeable style, Meyer draws on numerous examples from her experiences to explain how to detect the invisible barriers in the global business world—and how to get past them."

—*Siemens Industry Journal*

THE CULTURE MAP

*DECODING HOW PEOPLE THINK,
LEAD, AND GET THINGS DONE
ACROSS CULTURES*

ERIN MEYER



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To view complete culture maps for many countries not included in this book, and to compare one culture map to another, please visit the tools page of www.erinmeyer.com.

INTRODUCTION

**Navigating Cultural Differences
and the Wisdom of Mrs. Chen**

When dawn broke that chilly November morning in Paris, I was driving to my office for a meeting with an important new client. I hadn't slept well, but that was nothing unusual, since before an important training session I often have a restless night. But what made this night different were the dreams that disturbed my sleep.

I found myself shopping for groceries in a big American-style supermarket. As I worked my way through my list—fruit, Kleenex, more fruit, a loaf of bread, a container of milk, still more fruit—I was startled to discover that the items were somehow disappearing from my cart more quickly than I could find them and stack them in the basket. I raced down the aisle of the store, grabbing goods and tossing them into my cart, only to see them vanish without a trace. Horrified and frustrated, I realized that my shopping would never be complete.

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After having this dream repeatedly throughout the night, I gave up trying to sleep. I got up, gulped a cup of coffee and got dressed in the predawn dark, and wound my way through the empty Paris streets to my office near the Champs Élysées to prepare for that day's program. Reflecting that my nightmare of ineffectual shopping might reflect my anxiety about being completely ready for my clients, I poured my energy into arranging the conference room and reviewing my notes for the day ahead. I would be spending the day with one of the top executives at Peugeot Citroën, preparing him and his wife for the cultural adjustments they'd need to make in their upcoming move to Wuhan, China. If the program was successful, my firm would be hired to provide the same service for another fifty couples later in the year, so there was a lot at stake.

Bo Chen, the Chinese country expert who would be assisting with the training session, also arrived early. Chen, a thirty-six-year-old Paris-based journalist from Wuhan, worked for a Chinese newspaper. He had volunteered to act as a Chinese culture expert for the training, and his input would be one of the most critical elements in making the day a success. If he was as good as I hoped, the program would be a hit and we would get to conduct the fifty follow-up sessions. My confidence in Chen had been bolstered by our preparatory meetings. Articulate, extroverted, and very knowledgeable, Chen seemed perfect for the job. I had asked him to prepare two to three concrete business examples to illustrate each cultural dimension I would be covering during the program, and he had enthusiastically confirmed he would be ready.

Monsieur and Madame Bernard arrived, and I installed them on one side of the big glass rectangular table with Chen on the other side. Taking a deep, hopeful breath, I began the session,

outlining on a flip chart the cultural issues that the Bernards needed to grasp so their time in China would be a success. As the morning wore on, I explained each dimension of the key issues, answered the Bernards' questions, and carefully kept an eye on Chen so I could help facilitate his input.

But Chen didn't seem to have any input. After finishing the first dimension, I paused briefly and looked to him for his input, but he didn't speak up. He didn't open his mouth, move his body forward, or raise his hand. Apparently he had no example to provide. Not wanting to embarrass Chen or to create an awkward situation by calling on him when he was not ready, I simply continued with my next point.

To my growing dismay, Chen remained silent and nearly motionless as I went through the rest of my presentation. He nodded politely while I was speaking, but that was all; he used no other body language to indicate any reactions, positive or negative. I gave every example I could think of and engaged in dialogue with the client as best I could. Dimension after dimension, I spoke, shared, and consulted with the Bernards—and dimension after dimension, there was no input from Chen.

I continued for three full hours. My initial disappointment with Chen was spilling over into full-fledged panic. I needed his input for the program to succeed. Finally, although I didn't want to create an awkward moment in front of the client, I decided to take a chance. "Bo," I asked, "did you have any examples you would like to share?"

Chen sat up straight in his chair, smiled confidently at the clients, and opened up his notebook, which was filled with pages and pages of typed notes. "Thank you, Erin," he replied. "I do." And then, to my utter relief, Chen began to explain one clear, pertinent, fascinating example after another.

In reflecting on the story of my awkward engagement with “Silent Bo,” it’s natural to assume that something about Chen’s personality, my personality, or the interaction between us might have led to the strained situation. Perhaps Chen was mute because he is not a very good communicator, or because he is shy or introverted and doesn’t feel comfortable expressing himself until pushed. Or perhaps I am an incompetent facilitator, telling Chen to prepare for the meeting and then failing to call on him until the session was almost over. Or maybe, more charitably, I was just so tired from dreaming about lost fruit all night long that I missed the visual cues Chen was sending to indicate that he had something to say.

In fact, my previous meetings with Chen had made it clear to me that he was neither inarticulate nor shy; he was actually a gifted communicator and also bursting with extroversion and self-confidence. What’s more, I’d been conducting client meetings for years and had never before experienced a disconnect quite like this one, which suggested that my skills as a facilitator were not the source of the problem.

The truth is that the story of Silent Bo is a story of culture, not personality. But the cultural explanation is not as simple as you might think. Chen’s behavior in our meeting lines up with a familiar cultural stereotype. Westerners often assume that Asians, in general, are quiet, reserved, or shy. If you manage a global team that includes both Asians and Westerners, it is very likely that you will have heard the common Western complaint that the Asian participants don’t speak very much and are less forthright about offering their individual opinions in team meetings. Yet the cultural stereotype does not reflect the actual reason behind Chen’s behavior.

Since the Bernards, Chen, and I were participating in a cross-cultural training program (which I was supposed to be

leading—though I now found myself, uncomfortably, in the role of a student), I decided to simply ask Chen for an explanation of his actions. “Bo,” I exclaimed, “you had all of these great examples! Why didn’t you jump in and share them with us earlier?”

“Were you expecting me to jump in?” he asked, a look of genuine surprise on his face. He went on to describe the situation as he saw it. “In this room,” he said, turning to M. and Mme. Bernard, “Erin is the chairman of the meeting.” He continued:

As she is the senior person in the room, I wait for her to call on me. And, while I am waiting, I should show I am a good listener by keeping both my voice and my body quiet. In China, we often feel Westerners speak up so much in meetings that they do this to show off, or they are poor listeners. Also, I have noticed that Chinese people leave a few more seconds of silence before jumping in than in the West. You Westerners practically speak on top of each other in a meeting. I kept waiting for Erin to be quiet long enough for me to jump in, but my turn never came. We Chinese often feel Americans are not good listeners because they are always jumping in on top of one another to make their points. I would have liked to make one of my points if an appropriate length of pause had arisen. But Erin was always talking, so I just kept waiting patiently. My mother left it deeply engrained in me: You have two eyes, two ears, but only one mouth. You should use them accordingly.

As Chen spoke, the cultural underpinnings of our misunderstanding became vividly clear to the Bernards—and to me. It was obvious that they go far beyond any facile stereotypes about “the shy Chinese.” And this new understanding led to the most important question of all: Once I am aware of the cultural context that

shapes a situation, what steps can I take to be more effective in dealing with it?

In the Silent Bo scenario, my deeper awareness of the meaning of Bo's behavior leads to some easy, yet powerful, solutions. In the future, I can be more prepared to recognize and flexibly address the differing cultural expectations around status and communication. The next time I lead a training program with a Chinese cultural specialist, I must make sure to invite him to speak. And if he doesn't respond immediately, I need to allow a few more seconds of silence before speaking myself. Chen, too, can adapt some simple strategies to improve his effectiveness. He might simply choose to override his natural tendency to wait for an invitation to speak by forcing himself to jump in whenever he has an idea to contribute. If this feels too aggressive, he might raise his hand to request the floor when he can't find the space he needs to talk.

In this book, I provide a systematic, step-by-step approach to understanding the most common business communication challenges that arise from cultural differences, and offer steps for dealing with them more effectively. The process begins with recognizing the cultural factors that shape human behavior and methodically analyzing the reasons for that behavior. This, in turn, will allow you to apply clear strategies to improve your effectiveness at solving the most thorny problems caused by cross-cultural misunderstandings—or to avoid them altogether.

When I walked into Sabine Dulac's second-floor office at La Defense, the business district just outside of Paris, she was pacing excitedly in front of her window, which overlooked a small footbridge and a concrete sculpture depicting a giant human thumb. A highly energetic finance director for a leading global

energy company, Dulac had been offered a two-year assignment in Chicago, after years of petitioning her superiors for such an opportunity. Now she'd spent the previous evening poring over a sheaf of articles I'd sent her describing the differences between French and American business cultures.

"I think this move to Chicago is going to be perfect for me," Dulac declared. "I love working with Americans. *Ils sont tellement pratiques et efficaces!* I love that focus on practicality and efficiency. *Et transparent!* Americans are so much more explicit and transparent than we are in France!"

I spent several hours with Dulac helping her prepare for the move, including exploring how she might best adapt her leadership style to be effective in the context of American culture. This would be her first experience living outside France, and she would be the only non-American on her team, twin circumstances that only increased her enthusiasm for the move. Thrilled with this new opportunity, Dulac departed for the Windy City. The two of us didn't speak for four months. Then I called both her new American boss and later Dulac herself for our prescheduled follow-up conversations.

Jake Webber responded with a heavy sigh when I asked how Dulac was performing. "She is doing—sort of medium. Her team really likes her, and she's incredibly energetic. I have to admit that her energy has ignited her department. That's been positive. She has definitely integrated much more quickly than I expected. Really, that has been excellent."

I could sense that Webber's evaluation was about to take a turn for the worse. "However, there are several critical things that I need Sabine to change about the way she is working," Webber continued, "and I just don't see her making an effort to do so. Her spreadsheets are sloppy, she makes calculation errors, and she

comes to meetings unprepared. I have spoken to her a handful of times about these things, but she is not getting the message. She just continues with her same work patterns. I spoke to her last Thursday about this again, but there's still no visible effort on her part."

"We had her performance review this morning," Webber said with another sigh, "and I detailed these issues again. We'll wait and see. But if she doesn't get in gear with these things, I don't think this job is going to work out."

Feeling concerned, I called Dulac.

"Things are going great!" Dulac proclaimed. "My team is terrific. I've really been able to connect with them. And I have a great relationship with my boss. *Je m'épanouis!*" she added, a French phrase that translates loosely as "I'm blossoming" or "I'm thriving." She went on, "For the first time in my career I've found a job that is just perfect for me. That takes advantage of all of my talents and skills. Oh, and I have to tell you—I had my first performance review this morning. I'm just delighted! It was the best performance review I have had since starting with this company. I often think I will try to extend my stay beyond these two years, things are going so well."

As we did with the story of Silent Bo, let's consider for a moment whether the miscommunication between Webber and Dulac is more likely a result of personality misfit or cultural differences. In this case, national stereotypes may be more confusing than helpful. After all, the common assumption about the French is that they are masters of implicit and indirect communication, speaking and listening with subtlety and sensitivity, while Americans are thought of as prone to explicit and direct communication—the blunter the better. Yet in the story of "Deaf Dulac," an American supervisor complains that his French subordinate lacks the sophistication to grasp

his meaning, while the French manager seems happily oblivious to the message her boss is trying to convey. Faced with this seemingly counterintuitive situation, you might assume that Webber and Dulac simply have incompatible personalities, regardless of their cultural backgrounds.

So you might assume. But suppose you happened to be speaking with twenty or thirty French managers living in the United States, and you heard similar stories from a dozen of them. As they explained, one by one, how their American bosses gave them negative feedback in a way they found confusing, ambiguous, or downright misleading, you might come to the correct conclusion that there is *something* cultural driving this pattern of misunderstanding. And in fact, such a pattern does exist—which strongly suggests that the case of Deaf Dulac is much more than a matter of personality conflict.

This pattern is puzzling because Americans often *do* tend to be more explicit and direct than the French (or, more precisely, more "low-context," a term we'll explore further in a later chapter). The one big exception arises when managers are providing feedback to their subordinates. In a French setting, positive feedback is often given implicitly, while negative feedback is given more directly. In the United States, it's just the opposite. American managers usually give positive feedback directly while trying to couch negative messages in positive, encouraging language. Thus, when Webber reviewed Dulac's work using the popular American method of three positives for every negative, Dulac left the meeting with his praise ringing delightfully in her ears, while the negative feedback sounded very minor indeed.

If Dulac had been aware of this cultural tendency when discussing her job performance with her new American boss, she might have weighed the negative part of the review more heavily

than she would if receiving it from a French boss, thereby reading the feedback more accurately and potentially saving her job.

Armed with the same understanding, Webber could have re-framed his communication for Dulac. He might have said, "When I give a performance review, I always start by going through three or four things I feel the person is doing well. Then I move on to the really important part of the meeting, which is, of course, what you can do to improve. I hate to jump into the important part of the meeting without starting with the positives. Is that method okay for you?"

Simply explaining what you are doing can often help a lot, both by defusing an immediate misunderstanding and by laying the foundation for better teamwork in the future—a principle we also saw at work when Bo Chen described his reasons for remaining silent during most of our meeting. This is one of the dozens of concrete, practical strategies we'll provide for handling cross-cultural missteps and improving your effectiveness in working with global teams.

INVISIBLE BOUNDARIES THAT DIVIDE OUR WORLD

Situations like the two we've just considered are far more common than you might suspect. The sad truth is that the vast majority of managers who conduct business internationally have little understanding about how culture is impacting their work. This is especially true as more and more of us communicate daily with people in other countries over virtual media like e-mail or telephone. When you live, work, or travel extensively in a foreign country, you pick up a lot of contextual cues that help you understand the culture of the people living there, and that helps you to better

decode communication and adapt accordingly. By contrast, when you exchange e-mails with an international counterpart in a country you haven't spent time in, it is much easier to miss the cultural subtleties impacting the communication.

A simple example is a characteristic behavior unique to India—a half-shake, half-nod of the head. Travel to India on business and you'll soon learn that the half-shake, half-nod is not a sign of disagreement, uncertainty, or lack of support as it would be in most other cultures. Instead it suggests interest, enthusiasm, or sometimes respectful listening. After a day or two, you notice that everyone is doing it, you make a mental note of its apparent meaning, and you are able henceforth to accurately read the gesture when negotiating a deal with your Indian outsourcing team.

But over e-mail or telephone, you may interact daily with your Indian counterparts from your office in Hellerup, Denmark, or Bogota, Colombia, without ever seeing the environment they live and work in. So when you are on videoconference with one of your top Indian managers, you may interpret his half-shake, half-nod as meaning that he is not in full agreement with your idea. You redouble your efforts to convince him, but the more you talk the more he (seemingly) indicates with his head that he is not on board. You get off the call puzzled, frustrated, and perhaps angry. Culture has impacted your communication, yet in the absence of the visual and contextual cues that physical presence provides, you didn't even recognize that something cultural was going on.

So whether we are aware of it or not, subtle differences in communication patterns and the complex variations in what is considered good business or common sense from one country to another have a tremendous impact on how we understand one another, and

ultimately on how we get the job done. Many of these cultural differences—varying attitudes concerning when best to speak or stay quiet, the role of the leader in the room, and what kind of negative feedback is the most constructive—may seem small. But if you are unaware of the differences and unarmed with strategies for managing them effectively, they can derail your team meetings, demotivate your employees, frustrate your foreign suppliers, and in dozens of other ways make it much more difficult to achieve your goals.

Today, whether we work in Düsseldorf or Dubai, Brasília or Beijing, New York or New Delhi, we are all part of a global network (real or virtual, physical or electronic) where success requires navigating through wildly different cultural realities. Unless we know how to decode other cultures and avoid easy-to-fall-into cultural traps, we are easy prey to misunderstanding, needless conflict, and ultimate failure.

BEING OPEN TO INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IS NOT ENOUGH

It is quite possible, even common, to work across cultures for decades and travel frequently for business while remaining unaware and uninformed about how culture impacts you. Millions of people work in global settings while viewing everything from their own cultural perspectives and assuming that all differences, controversy, and misunderstanding are rooted in personality. This is not due to laziness. Many well-intentioned people don't educate themselves about cultural differences because they believe that if they focus on individual differences, that will be enough.

After I published an online article on the differences among Asian cultures and their impact on cross-Asia teamwork, one

reader commented, "Speaking of cultural differences leads us to stereotype and therefore put individuals in boxes with 'general traits.' Instead of talking about culture, it is important to judge people as individuals, not just products of their environment."

At first, this argument sounds valid, even enlightened. Of course individuals, no matter their cultural origins, have varied personality traits. So why not just approach all people with an interest in getting to know them personally, and proceed from there? Unfortunately, this point of view has kept thousands of people from learning what they need to know to meet their objectives. If you go into every interaction assuming that culture doesn't matter, your default mechanism will be to view others through your own cultural lens and to judge or misjudge them accordingly. Ignore culture, and you can't help but conclude, "Chen doesn't speak up—obviously he doesn't have anything to say! His lack of preparation is ruining this training program!" Or perhaps, "Jake told me everything was great in our performance review, when really he was unhappy with my work—he is a sneaky, dishonest, incompetent boss!"

Yes, every individual is different. And yes, when you work with people from other cultures, you shouldn't make assumptions about individual traits based on where a person comes from. But this doesn't mean learning about cultural contexts is unnecessary. If your business success relies on your ability to work successfully with people from around the world, you need to have an appreciation for cultural differences as well as respect for individual differences. Both are essential.

As if this complexity weren't enough, cultural and individual differences are often wrapped up with differences among organizations, industries, professions, and other groups. But even in the most complex situations, understanding how cultural differences

affect the mix may help you discover a new approach. Cultural patterns of behavior and belief frequently impact our perceptions (what we see), cognitions (what we think), and actions (what we do). The goal of this book is to help you improve your ability to decode these three facets of culture and to enhance your effectiveness in dealing with them.

EIGHT SCALES THAT MAP THE WORLD'S CULTURES

I was not born into a multicultural family to parents who took me around the world. On the contrary, I was born outside of Two Harbors, Minnesota, most famous among drivers on the road leaving Duluth as the home of Betty's Pies. It's the kind of small town where most people spend their entire lives in the culture of their childhood. My parents were a bit more venturesome; when I was four, they moved the family all of two hundred miles to Minneapolis, where I grew up.

But as an adult I fell deeply in love with the thrill of being surrounded by people who see the world in dramatically different ways from me. Having now lived nearly half of my life outside of the United States, I've developed skills ranging from learning to eat mopane worms for an afternoon snack while teaching English to high school students in Botswana, to dodging cows, chickens, and three-wheeled rickshaws during my morning run while on a short-term executive teaching stint in India.

Today, married to a Frenchman and raising two children in France, I have to struggle with cross-cultural challenges daily. Is it really necessary for an educated person to fold lettuce leaves before eating them, or would cutting the lettuce also be acceptable? If my very kind upstairs neighbors kissed me on the cheeks when I passed them in the hall yesterday, would it be overkill

for me to kiss them on the cheek the first time I pass them every single day?

However, the lessons in this book emerged not from discussions about lettuce leaves or mopane worms (interesting as these may be), but from the fascinating opportunity to teach cross-cultural management in one of the most culturally diverse institutions on earth. After opening the French branch of a cross-cultural consulting firm, where I had the pleasure of learning from dozens of culture specialists like Bo Chen on a daily basis, I began working as a professor at INSEAD, an international business school largely unknown in Two Harbors, Minnesota.

INSEAD is one of the rare places where everyone is a cultural minority. Although the home campus is located in France, only around 7 percent of the students are French. The last time I checked, the largest cultural group was Indian, at about 11 percent of the overall student body. Other executive students have lived and worked all over the world, and many have spent their careers moving from one region to another. When it comes to cross-cultural management, these global executives are some of the most sophisticated and knowledgeable on the planet. And although they come to INSEAD to learn from us, every day I am secretly learning from them. I've been able to turn my classroom into a laboratory where the executive participants test, challenge, validate, and correct the findings from more than a decade of research. Many have shared their own wisdom and their tested solutions for getting things done in a global world.

This rich trove of information and experience informs the eight-scale model that is at the heart of this book. Each of the eight scales represents one key area that managers must be aware of, showing how cultures vary along a spectrum from one extreme to its opposite. The eight scales are:

- *Communicating*: low-context vs. high-context
- *Evaluating*: direct negative feedback vs. indirect negative feedback
- *Persuading*: principles-first vs. applications-first
- *Leading*: egalitarian vs. hierarchical
- *Deciding*: consensual vs. top-down
- *Trusting*: task-based vs. relationship-based
- *Disagreeing*: confrontational vs. avoids confrontation
- *Scheduling*: linear-time vs. flexible-time

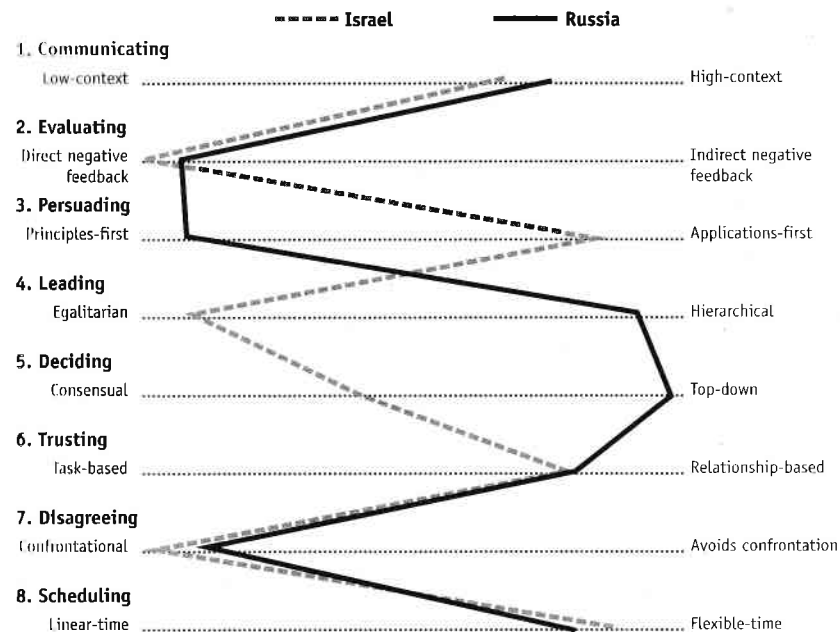
Whether you need to motivate employees, delight clients, or simply organize a conference call among members of a cross-cultural team, these eight scales will help you improve your effectiveness. By analyzing the positioning of one culture relative to another, the scales will enable you to decode how culture influences your own international collaboration and avoid painful situations like the one in which Webber and Dulac found themselves caught.

PUTTING THE CULTURE MAP TO WORK

Let me give you an example of how understanding the scales might play out in a real situation. Imagine that you are an Israeli executive working for a company that has just purchased a manufacturing plant in Russia. Your new position requires you to manage a group of Russian employees. At first, things go well, but then you start to notice that you are having more difficulty than you did with your own Israeli staff. You are not getting the same results from your team, and your management style does not seem to have the positive impact it did at home.

Puzzled and concerned, you decide to take a look at the position of Russian business culture on the eight scales and compare it

FIGURE I.1.



with Israeli culture. The result is the culture map shown in Figure I.1—the kind of tool we’ll explore in detail in the chapters to come.

As you review the culture map, you notice that Russian and Israeli business cultures both value flexible scheduling rather than organized scheduling (scale 8), both accept and appreciate open disagreement (scale 7), and both approach issues of trust through a relationship orientation rather than a task orientation (scale 6). This resonates with your experience. However, you notice that there’s a big gap between the two cultures when it comes to leading (scale 4), with Russia favoring a hierarchical approach, while Israel prefers an egalitarian one. As we’ll discuss in more detail later, this suggests that the appreciation for flat organizational