

# Culturally Tuned Emotional Intelligence: A Tripartite Cultural Analysis

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## Abstract

This article is concerned with culturally tuned emotional intelligence (CTEI) as an effective cross-cultural management tool. Cultural values create a commonality among members in how they interpret and subsequently respond to emotional issues. Better understanding of the influence of culture and the associated outcomes may improve management knowledge in the area of employee emotions, thereby improving both productivity and quality of life in the workplace. In cross cultural environments successful managers require both the intellectual abilities to meet cognitive challenges and the emotional capabilities to inspire and empathize with others. Culturally tuned emotional intelligence may provide a better chance of promoting positive emotions and behaviors that lead to success, and minimizing negative ones that waste company resources.

This paper uses the tripartite conceptualization of culture that includes national culture, professional culture and organizational culture. The Emotional Process Model (Druskat & Wolfe, 2001) is used to illustrate the influence of culture on the emotional responses of employees. Case studies are presented for each of the three cultural areas, depicting varying emotional responses to management initiatives. These examples provide a cultural lens that may be used by managers to better understand the emotions of their culturally diverse employees. This exploratory paper attempts to extend the basic understanding of emotional intelligence by using a cultural perspective.

## Introduction

This type of cross-cultural research attempts to expand the understanding of the influence of culture in employee behavior in an organizational setting of contemporary management. The Emotional Process Model posits a connection between emotions and behaviors. It also provides an understanding of how both interpretation and expression of emotions are influenced by culture. Through better understanding of the role of culture in this model managers may be better equipped to understand the diverse emotional fabric of their workforce.

Within the past ten years there has been an increase in the number of mergers and acquisitions that resulting in a greater mix of employee cultures, in some cases, almost overnight. Improved collaboration and understanding across the resulting cultural boundaries may be achieved by making managers aware of the importance of culturally tuning their own emotional responses, as well as culturally tuning their interpretations of the emotional responses of others. Despite the importance of this perspective, it remains difficult to generate substantive studies from the literature linking culture and emotional intelligence.

Leadership that effectively manages human capital can be defined in a variety of ways, but regardless of the context, effective leadership not only requires cognitive ability i.e. intellectual clarity, but also requires emotional sensitivity. Perhaps it is time to acknowledge that successful leaders need to be both emotionally intelligent and intelligently emotional.

Current management thought supports the underlying premise that cultural awareness is an important organizational skill as well as an important management skill (Herkenhoff, 2000). Within the context of strategic management, Marquardt and Engel (1993) point out that management techniques that are culturally compatible are more likely to endure and be effective than those that are culturally incongruent.

### **Tripartite Cultural Model**

This tripartite conceptualization of culture (nation, organization, profession), which is used in this paper, has been thoroughly explored in the literature (Burns & Stalker, 1961; O'Toole 1979; Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Hofstede, 1980; Laurent, 1986; Trompenaars, 1994; Rogovsky, 1996). The case study analysis will explore all three of these cultural constructs.

National cross-cultural analysis attempts to expand the understanding of how those who manage global workforces may have increased success in promoting constructive emotions such as satisfaction, feeling valued, happiness, motivation, enthusiasm, and loyalty. They may also be better able to mitigate negative emotions such as anger, stress, disdain, frustration, and betrayal, which may waste company resources and decrease the quality of life in the workplace (Goleman, 2004). National culture is operationalised using the five indices from the Hofstede/Bond framework: power distance (PDI), long-term orientation (LTO), uncertainty avoidance (UAI), masculinity (MAS) and individualism (IDV) (Hofstede, 1980; Bond, 1988). Within this context, culture is defined as the “collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another” (Hofstede, 1984). An overview of these dimensions is included in Table 1.0.

Likewise professional culture also plays a role in tuning emotional intelligence. As early as 1973 studies indicated that employee attitudes and behaviors vary within occupations (Bell, 1973). Managers operating in only one country may consider culture as constant, and thereby negate its importance. But supervising employees in various professions also requires cultural tuning that takes into account the different values and beliefs associated with different professions. Cultural values within a given profession create a commonality among members in how they process emotion-eliciting events (Tellman, 2004). Management practices that reinforce professional culture are more likely to yield predictable employee behavior and high performance (Helmreich & Merritt, 1998).

Organizational culture has been popular in the literature since the 1980s but first appeared as early as the 1960s as a synonym for climate (Burns & Stalker, 1961). The Hofstede definition of organizational culture will be used “...the collective programming of the mind, which distinguishes the members of one organization from members of another” (Hofstede, 1980). For example values and attitudes of American engineers may vary depending on whether they work for a large multinational engineering company such as Bechtel Corporation versus a local environmental company. In this case national culture and professional culture are constant but the organizational cultures vary. Culturally tuned learnings about emotional responses within given organizational cultures may be used by managers to better understand the emotions of employees in situations in which different organizations are being brought together i.e. mergers, acquisitions and joint ventures.

Table 1.0  
Hofstede Dimensions

- **PDI**, Power Distance Index refers to the degree to which power differences are accepted and sanctioned by society. A high PDI describes a society that believes there should be a well-defined order in which everyone has a rightful place. Whereas a low PDI is associated with the prevalent belief that all people should have equal rights and the opportunity to change their position in society. This reflects how societies deal with the fact that people are unequal. All societies are unequal but some are more unequal than others.
- **UAI**, Uncertainty Avoidance Index refers to the degree to which society is willing to accept and deal with uncertainty. A high UAI score suggests a culture that seeks certainty and security and wishes to avoid uncertainty. A low UAI score reflects that the society is comfortable with a high degree of uncertainty and is open to the unknown. A high UAI culture tries to minimize the possibility of unexpected events occurring by adopting strict codes of behavior. Cultures with a high UAI seek security and predictability. Change is often construed as threatening because the outcome is unknown. High UAI countries show a need for comprehensive rules and regulations, a belief in the power of experts and a search for absolute truths and values.
- **MAS**, Masculinity Index refers to the degree to which traditional male values are important to society. For example, male values would include assertiveness, performance, ambition, achievement and material possessions. The female values would encompass issues such as quality of life, environment, nurturing, and a concern for the less fortunate. A high MAS culture would have clearly differentiated sex roles with men being dominant. In low MAS cultures, the sex roles are more fluid and there is a predominance of feminine values. In low MAS cultures a quality of life focus replaces the money focus found in high MAS cultures.
- **IDV**, Individualism Index IDV refers to the degree to which individual decision-making and action are accepted and encouraged by society. It describes the relationship between individuals and groups and the extent to which the individual is integrated into the group. A high IDV score depicts a society that emphasizes the role of the individual. In high IDV countries the links between individuals are loose. People are expected to look after their own interests and at the most the interests of their immediate family. Conversely, a low IDV indicates a society that emphasizes the importance of the group.
- **LTO**, Long Term Orientation stands for a society fostering virtues oriented towards future rewards, in particular perseverance and thrift. Long-term orientation pertains to the past and demonstrates, a respect for tradition, 'preservation of face' and fulfilling social obligations. Short term orientation focuses on the now and seeks quick results. Investment in long-term relationships is deemed unnecessary.

### Emotional Intelligence

Throughout this paper the definition of emotional quotient (EQ) is provided by Bar-On (1988) as the innate set of emotional and social abilities you are born with. Whereas emotional intelligence (EI) is defined by Goleman (1995) as the ability to recognize and regulate emotions in others and ourselves. According to Bennis (2001), EI accounts for 85-90% of the success of organizational leaders. Successful managers require both the intellectual abilities to meet cognitive challenges and the emotional capabilities to inspire and empathize with others.

Specifically, employee EI has been linked with health, teamwork, productivity and profit (Cherniss and Goleman, 2001; Goleman, 1995, 1998, 2004). In other words leaders need to recognize the influence of employee emotions in determining team design (teamwork), or work outcomes (productivity and profit). Achievement drive (McClelland, 1961) means optimistically striving to continually improve performance. Consider how fear and anger affect productivity. In focusing on profit, being emotionally intelligent allows you to focus on the right problems which are the greatest cost to the organization, as well as to focus on change interventions that have the maximum impact on costly problems.

Employee health is a common factor across all contexts. Consider the emotions of stress and anger, which when left unchecked may lead in the extreme example to suicide. Toxic emotions such as these can provide obstacles in managing across cultures effectively.

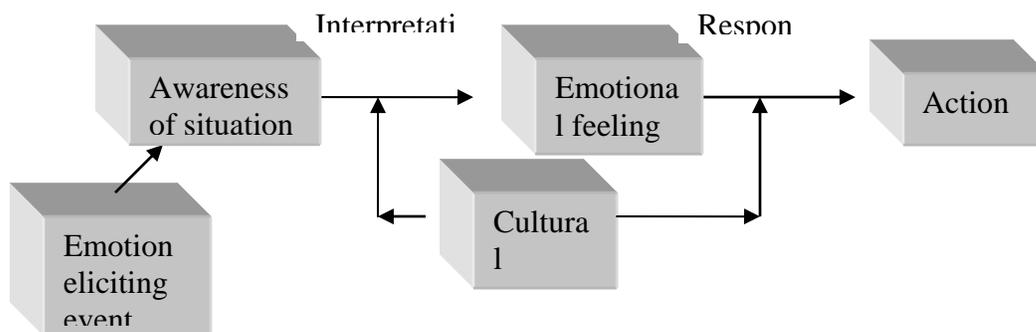
EI can also allow for a better understanding of each other. Being emotionally intelligent can be beneficial in conflict management, such as in union negotiations. When represented workers request changes in the terms of their contract, management may be faced with a highly emotionally charged “they versus us” environment. Taking into account not only the terms of the contractual requests, but also the emotions behind why these changes have been requested, may more quickly facilitate a successful outcome. Negotiations between parties that have a high level of mutual trust are much more efficient than negotiations between parties that continually question the motives of each other.

This article will widen the understanding of how to effectively manage across cultures through promoting an emotional intelligent approach, which also takes into account the influence of culture.

### Emotional Process Model

Recently, Druskat & Wolfe, (2001) developed an emotional process model, which suggests that both an individual’s response to an event and the subsequent response selection are impacted by prevailing cultural influences. This model, as shown in Figure 1, borrows from the theoretical representation of emotion in an anthropological framework. Anthropologists have long proposed that cultures have conventions and norms that influence the management of emotions (Ekman, 1980; Lutz, 1988). These cultural norms create commonality and predictability among individuals in their interpretation and response to emotional stimuli.

Figure 1  
Cultural Influences in the Emotional Process Model



In Figure 1 the first step is the awareness of an emotion-eliciting event. Culture may then filter the interpretation of that awareness such that an arousal or emotional feeling enters into the conscious awareness. Culture also influences the selection of an action or behavior as a response to the event. This model posits a connection between emotions and behaviors. It also provides an understanding of how both interpretation and expression of emotions are influenced by culture. This relationship is explored within the contemporary workplace where managers are faced with trying to understand, and often to anticipate, the emotional responses of their employees.

Several exploratory case studies were completed that recognize and / or make use of culturally tuned emotional intelligence. The data were collected through direct observation and personal interviews.

## **Culturally Tuned EI Case Studies.**

- **Organizational Cultural Tuning in Electronic Data Systems**

During the 2-year life of the Electronic Data Systems' (EDS) e-procurement startup, eBreviate, there were constant clashes between the organization cultures of the parent company and the California startup. eBreviate was formed in San Francisco, California as a startup, projected to go public within three years. eBreviate was part of the fast paced Silicon Valley culture, which included a lean, dedicated workforce, energized by the seductive possibility of completing an IPO. Corporate headquarter employees, associated with the mothership in Plano, slowly navigated their way through corporate policies and procedures before any decisions could be discussed, let alone made. These two cultures were almost virtually opposites of one another.

As an example consider the area of risk aversion. The whole existence of eBreviate had been built on a high-risk model with many unknowns. In addition eBreviate employees were recruited, in part, by the appeal of stock options that were likewise risky. This environment elicited emotions of motivation, excitement, and positive affectivity. While EDS HR professionals avoided risk at all costs, eBreviate was constantly requesting exceptions to the formal corporate policies. One EDS HR manager admitted she would get nervous and worried whenever she saw an eBreviate phone number appear on her telephone caller id and often would just not answer the phone. Risk created an environment of negative affectivity within the organizational culture of the parent company.

The eBreviate President was continually frustrated by the time it required to get decisions made by EDS management. Likewise EDS management were becoming hostile to the CEO's "pushy" management style.

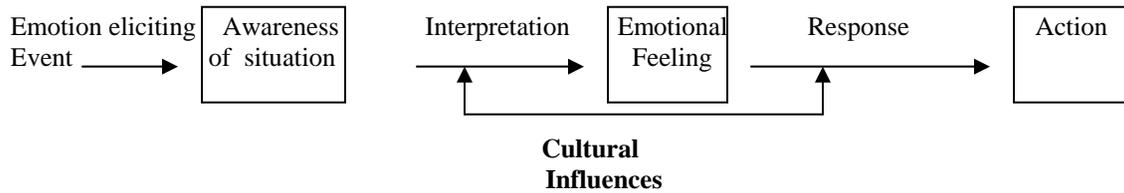
By using some degree of emotional intelligence, both management teams recognized a level of frustration and anger that was deteriorating their ongoing working relationship. Within eBreviate HR fine-tuned the CEO's emotional intelligence to take into account the differences in the cultural values associated with risk aversion and time orientation. Within the two different organizational cultures, what seemed like a tolerable level of risk in eBreviate was an unacceptable level of risk in EDS. What seemed like an adequate amount of time to make a decision by eBreviate's values and standards, felt too aggressive and rushed to EDS management. Neither group was wrong; they were just operating using different cultural values and beliefs.

The eBreviate CEO built in more lead-time in decision making with EDS and provided more thorough risk analysis on all proposals. Although decisions initially still took longer to make than was desired, by improving the working relationship between the two management teams eventually led to faster turn around on achieving concurrence.

- **National Cultural Tuning in Electronic Data Systems**

Another example within eBreviate involved national culture. Consider the example of a Spanish Vice President who managed a German sales force, but reported to an American CEO headquartered in California. Something as simple as showing up for meetings on time became an emotional issue. Feeling anger due to tardiness was not universal among the three cultures involved. The VP thought arriving late or sometimes completely canceling a meeting at the last minute was not sufficient reason to be angry. However, the German sales people had a different set of values that made them feel insulted and angry when the VP did not show up on time. The American CEO was frustrated that the two groups were always complaining about each other. The different cultural influences on the interpretation of the emotion-eliciting event and the associated response to that event are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2  
Cultural Influences on the Emotional Process: EDS Case Study



*Spanish VP tardiness at meetings*

- Spanish VP:
 

Not a big deal. Germans are over reacting	→	Frustration Disdain	→	Demonstrate control and power	→	Miss meetings entirely. Complain to CEO
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- German sales team:
 

He shows us no respect. He cannot manage	→	Disdain Feeling insulted Frustrated Angry	→	Demonstrate independence	→	Start meetings without him. Ignore his directives. Complain to CEO
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- US CEO:
 

These are troublesome employees who are taking up too much of my time	→	Frustrated Confused Impatient	→	Focus on other more important issues	→	Ignore their phone calls
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These influences were discussed with the members in a focus group approach facilitated by the HR professionals in eBreviate. Once the employees could view the issue from outside of their own cultural framework, it was much easier for each of the three cultural subgroups to modify their own behaviors in a way that respected the values and beliefs of the other cultures. The Spanish VP worked very hard to be at all meetings on time and when he could not, he always apologized. The German employees realized that starting meetings late was not a personal affront and always provided positive reinforcement to the Spanish VP when he was available to start meetings on time. The CEO was very pleased with the resulting increase in sales by this particular team.

- **National Cultural Tuning in Chevron**

Implementing 360-degree feedback systems was enough of a cultural challenge in the USA when the concept first became popular over a decade ago. More recently, a greater challenge was how to implement this performance management tool globally, within a multinational corporation such as Chevron. During my tenure as an internal management consultant within Chevron in the late 1990s, we struggled with designing an effective implementation plan for this tool. It could have been easy to mandate usage of the tool through all of the international offices, without taking into account any of the national cultural differences, but the success of such an American-based program would probably have been limited.

Two main national culture dimensions that may impact on the success of such programs include power distance and individualism (Hofstede, 1980). Countries with a high Power Distance Index (PDI) have a high acceptance of hierarchies. In other words, power distance deals with the emotive distances separating subordinates from their bosses. In cultures like the USA with a low PDI, subordinates generally prefer a horizontal organization structure rather than structures with numerous reporting levels between them and their boss. In these flatter organizational cultures subordinates are comfortable in providing

feedback to their boss, who may be considered more of a colleague. However, in a culture such as Indonesia that has a higher PDI, employees value and respect hierarchies within their workplace and are threatened by the concept of providing their opinion about someone higher up in the organization. They tend to feel a sense of disrespect to both the individual manager and the organization if they provide any criticism, which obviously leads to bias in any 360-degree feedback that is provided. Similarly, in national cultures that have a higher level of individualism (IDV), such as the USA, employees feel it is almost their right to have their individual thoughts and concerns voiced, including those about their bosses. In collectivist cultures in which IDV is lower, such as Indonesia, subordinates see themselves as part of the same team as their boss. The team speaks with one voice, usually that of the manager at the top of their hierarchy. For a team member to provide feedback concerning another team member is considered presumptuous and disrespectful. So once again a 360-degree tool would meet with limited success. In this instance the change initiative to implement 360-degree feedback in all countries was modified. In those cultures where it was anticipated that 360-degree feedback would create more emotional stress than emotional well being, it was made available, with the proviso that it was to be used solely at the discretion of local management.

Several overseas locations took advantage of this option and did not implement the 360-degree facility. Local management in both India and Indonesia expressed appreciation to me for our corporate understanding of their '*awkwardness*' in incorporating a tool that transcended hierarchical boundaries.

- **National Cultural Tuning in the US Air force**

The US Air force wanted to reduce their high turnover rate and the associated training and hiring costs, as explained to me by one of their regional recruiting managers. To facilitate this change they introduced EI into their recruiting process. The US Air force seeks individuals who can integrate diverse emotional perspectives within a variety of national cultures, in a manner that enhances innovation and allows for the effective management of the emotions of others. EI-based questions were tuned to reflect the specific situations in which this professional culture would have to handle stress in those they lead, as well as situations in which they would have to effectively regulate themselves in times of crisis management. It is acknowledged by the US Air force that their leaders may be more effective by taking into account how different national cultures respond to and emote stress. Questions posed during the recruitment process address the candidate's awareness of varying national cultural values. According to Robbins (2003), by using EI in their selection process, the US Air force was able to reduce turnover by more than 90% within a year, in addition to saving close to \$3 million in training and hiring costs.

- **Professional Cultural Tuning at Stanford University**

As Stanford University faced yet another year of double-digit healthcare inflation for 2004, my mandate was to change the focus from short-term annual design changes to more long-term reform solutions. Stanford's change initiative was based on the recognition that keeping employees healthy can reduce healthcare utilization, decrease absenteeism and increase productivity. The University also recognized that physical health and mental well being might be inextricably linked. To achieve these objectives a program was developed to identify and reduce employees' physical and emotional lifestyle risk factors. Commencing in January 2004, employees received access to a Health Risk Assessment (HRA) tool that highlights lifestyle risk factors. For example, when the emotion of stress is flagged as being a potential risk in terms of leading to hypertension, the employee is provided with personal coaching and additional tools to manage that emotion.

Part of the initiative to support healthier lifestyles, particularly reducing stress, required cultural tuning to recognize the differences between the faculty culture and the staff culture. To ensure that both groups were treating each other with mutual respect at all times, a respectful workplace program was developed that defines integrity as a core value for all managers in both cultures. Part of the program involves making both groups aware of how something as simple as how they

communicate with each other can inadvertently create stress. There is no tolerance for disparaging remarks, which can create a toxic emotional environment. Managers are expected to treat all members of the community with civility, respect and courtesy regardless of whether they are staff or faculty. We received positive feedback from both faculty and staff who attended the workshops.

- **Professional Cultural Tuning within Elite International Swim Organizations**

Elite swimming organizations such as United States Swimming (USS), Western Australian Swimming (WASA) and Federation International Natation Association (FINA) often use EI to purge emotions from stroke and turn officials. These officials closely observe swimmers for stroke and turn infractions that result in disqualification of the swimmer. It is vital to the unbiased nature of the job that officials show no overt emotions that may be interpreted as favoritism or impartiality towards any swimmer, team or country. Often the officials, especially at FINA-level events, are multinational. It was recognized that controlling or masking emotional responses was more difficult for officials from more emotionally demonstrative cultures such as the Italian culture, versus those from more reserved cultures such as the Japanese.

A change initiative was developed to focus on improving the quality of emotional purging across all officials regardless of their national culture. As part of this initiative we were provided with culturally tuned training about roles and responsibilities aimed at not just the technical aspects of the job, but also addressing the emotional aspects of it too. Having completed this training in both Australian and American cultures, I became more aware of my emotional responses while officiating. Subsequently, I was better able to regulate these emotions and hence demonstrate increased impartiality. It is vital to the unbiased nature of the job that officials show no overt emotions that may be interpreted as favoritism or impartiality towards any swimmer, team or country. Often the officials, especially at FINA level events are multi-national. The English official needs to keep all emotions regulated while officiating with an Irish swimmer in the pool. The American official must regulate his/her emotions when the U.S. swimmer is competing for the gold medal.

## **Conclusion**

This exploratory paper has not attempted to downplay the importance of emotional intelligence but rather has tried to enhance the effective use of EI through cultural tuning. Reframing emotional intelligence in terms of culture may better support cross-cultural management effectiveness. The case studies provide practical examples of national, professional and organizational cultural tuning in an exploratory research attempt. However more rigorous quantitative research is currently underway by the author to fully understand CTEI.

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