

Executive summary

In today's globalised business world, being able to act competently across cultures is of major importance. Therefore, managers and employees must learn about other cultures at the same time as they must become more culturally self-aware in order to communicate and work effectively.

This case study illustrates some cross-cultural communication challenges faced by the Danish company Marel. Through video clips the company's employees exemplify their approach to and knowledge gained from cross-cultural communication and management issues.

The case study offers e-learning modules that provide insight into other cultures as well as approaches to gaining cultural self-awareness. Furthermore, it offers useful knowledge and strategies for cross-cultural management and for leading multicultural teams. These modules are based on the theories and value dimensions of well-known theorists such as Geert Hofstede, Edward T. Hall and Fons Trompenaars combined with a wide range of examples and recommendations.

Cross-cultural communication – cultural knowledge – cultural self-awareness – cross-cultural management – cross-cultural teamwork

Introduction

A Danish manager from a medium-sized export company had participated in a business meeting in Poland and reported to her colleagues after returning home: 'During the negotiation, my Polish counterparts suddenly started walking around, passing slips of paper to each other, and I felt completely lost. I wondered what this was all about. Are they satisfied or not? A Dane would have said if this didn't meet their expectations. We are used to being straightforward, whereas they were passing notes to each other. I felt like an onlooker to my own meeting.'

(Larsen and Svendsen, 2012)

Do such situations sound familiar? This manager is one of the many across industries and geographies who have been thrown into the world of intercultural communication without having the necessary tools to interact competently across cultures.

Given the globalisation of business and the increasing diversity within the workforce of so many industries and organisations, cultural knowledge and effective intercultural communication skills have become key components in order to work effectively in today's business world (KOMM magasinet, 2012).

Today's professional may easily encounter dozens of different cultural contexts in just one day. Consequently, a high degree of adaptability is needed to work with all of the cultures we encounter. In addition to working across many national and ethnic cultures, professionals have to navigate in various organisational contexts. And perhaps most importantly, effective managers and their employees need a strong awareness of their own cultural identity. Without the ability to understand and adapt to a growing number of cultures, managers and their organisations risk losing business opportunities. Rather than expecting individuals to master all the norms of the various cultures encountered, it is much more useful to teach them cultural competence skills that will help them develop overall strategies for more effective intercultural communication.

Taking a Danish company as the starting point, this case study will teach you the strategies for developing the intercultural competences needed to interact with other cultures. It will introduce you to what is different about leading in a global context as well as to the challenges of working in and leading multicultural teams.

The case study is based on the Danish subsidiary of the multinational company Marel, which is a leading global provider of advanced equipment, systems and services to the fish, meat and poultry industries. Through background information about the company, combined with video clips that illustrate the company and its employees' approaches to commonly experienced cross-cultural communication and management problems, you will gain insight into cross-cultural issues of general relevance to many other companies – and hopefully to yours as well.

Learning objectives

The case study offers e-learning modules that have been designed to provide you with hands-on, action-oriented learning experience. You will build useful knowledge and strategies on how to handle issues such as:

- The impact of culture on business interactions
- The necessity to develop cultural self-awareness, with particular focus on Denmark
- Cross-cultural management issues and strategies
- Cross-cultural teamwork issues and strategies

Case study



Number 1 globally
in advanced equipment and systems for poultry processing

Number 1 globally
in advanced equipment and systems for fish processing

Number 1 globally
in advanced equipment and systems for segments of further processing

Major global provider
of advanced equipment and systems for meat processing

About Marel

Marel A/S is a subsidiary of the multinational company Marel - a leading global provider of advanced equipment, systems and services to the fish, meat and poultry industries. Their brands – Marel, Stork Poultry Processing and Townsend Further Processing – are among the most respected in the industry, and together they offer the convenience of a single source to meet their customers' every need.

*The following background description about Marel is based on extracts from the company website. The aim is to provide you with the necessary information to understand the key issues of this case study communicated through **video clips and power point slides**.*

Sales network

With offices and subsidiaries in over 30 countries on six continents, a global network of over 100 agents and distributors, and manufacturing facilities in 16 locations worldwide, the

company works side-by-side with customers to extend the boundaries of food processing performance.



(Marel, 2013)

As a multinational company, Marel has over 4,000 employees worldwide. The business units are located in the Netherlands, Denmark, the United States, Iceland, Slovakia and Singapore. The largest number of their employees is based in the Netherlands, followed by Denmark, the United States and Iceland. The remainder is spread out across the globe – from Brazil and several other locations in South America all the way across to Australia and New Zealand in the Pacific. The Danish subsidiary, which will act as our starting point, has approx. 300 employees in Denmark.

Employee relations

Marel employs people from many different nations and backgrounds. A highly valued resource, this fusion of diverse cultures working together to achieve common goals plays a leading role in helping the company to fulfill its mission of providing their customers with the best solutions and services possible. Diversity has enabled Marel to build up a dynamic skills network comprised of experienced professionals drawn from a wide variety of disciplines and is one of the key values that welds the company together.

Key figures

In 2012 the company's revenue amounted to 714 M EUR and a gross profit of 34.9%.

Marel thrives on imagination and ingenuity. With their annual investment of 5-7% of income in research and development – far above the industry average – they are constantly pushing the envelope of what is possible.

Drawn from a wide range of professions and disciplines, the company's employees include over 400 highly qualified scientists and technicians in the fields of engineering and food technology.

Marel currently holds a portfolio of some 200 granted patents, a figure that continues to grow each year.

The market

Marel is a leading provider of equipment for processing the most efficient proteins, farmed fish and poultry. The company supplies cutting edge equipment and software components that help food processors of all sizes, in all markets, to operate at peak productivity. Many of the company's products have become industry benchmarks, helping processors to maximise product yield, quality and throughput, as well as optimising traceability and food safety. Marel is the market leader in an attractive and rapidly growing industry and holds a market share of 15%.

Core values and intercultural communication

As a global leader, Marel knows that their actions have a wide impact. Of course, Marel has an obligation to bring new technologies into the market and to increase value for their customers and their shareholders. But they realise that their responsibility extends far beyond that: to embrace sustainable and ethical business practices, and to ensure that their operations benefit society locally and globally. In pursuit of this goal, Marel's employees have worked out eight values which form the basis of Marel's commitment to provide long-term and sustainable value for all their stakeholders – customers, shareholders, employees and communities alike.



COMMITMENT

As members of the Marel organization, we are loyal and we honour the agreements we make. This commitment results from engagement and a sense of responsibility.



PARTNERSHIPS WITH CUSTOMERS

We work side-by-side with our customers to create lasting relationships based on mutual trust, openness and investment, as well as shared risks and rewards. The result is a competitive advantage for both of us and better business performance than each of us could achieve on our own.



DIVERSITY

The Marel family is composed of people and organizational units with distinct backgrounds and qualities. These differences can be a benefit and a source of strength for the organization.



TEAMWORK

Most tasks cannot possibly be executed by one person. Teamwork is therefore the key. Teamwork means working together with a group of people to achieve a common goal. There is no "I" in "team".



LEARNING & EXCELLENCE

People at Marel share a vision: to become the best in the industry. To accomplish this, we need to continuously improve and develop. Constant renewal, learning and innovation, combined with a long-term perspective, is what we strive for.



OPEN COMMUNICATION

The freedom to openly exchange opinions and ideas creates a constructive atmosphere. Honesty and respect for others are what open communication is based on.



HUMOUR & FUN

Working at Marel has to be a pleasure. Humour and fun can help foster an enjoyable working atmosphere. Try to enjoy work and celebrate your successes together.



SUCCESS

Success means achieving the goals we set for ourselves. It's not only measured in terms of money – profit and financial stability – but equally in terms of satisfied customers and employees.

(Marel, 2013)

As shown in the above figure, one of Marel's core values – diversity - builds on cherishing differences, distinct backgrounds and qualities as a source of strength to themselves and the company as a whole. With this in mind, the Danish subsidiary of Marel attaches great importance to incorporating cultural considerations into the company's values.

Please watch this video clip in which Lisbeth Elholm, Learning Consultant at Marel Denmark, explains about the company's values and their efforts to implement an intercultural strategy in the context of the [core values](#). Duration: 8:35 minutes.

For more information about Marel, please go to www.marel.com

Marel's intercultural management and teamwork challenges

Similar to the intercultural communication issue mentioned in the introduction, many of Marel's Danish employees have faced challenges when interacting with business associates across the world. In the following video clips you will get their account of sample problems faced in Asia and the experience gained.

- Keld Andersen, International Service Manager, talks about his business experience in Thailand. Focus is on [reaching agreement and expressing disagreement](#). Duration: 4:42 minutes
- Hans Jacobsen, International Project Manager, explains about his experience from doing business in South Korea. Focus is on [non-verbal communication, building trust and reaching agreement](#). Duration: 5:07 minutes

Now that you have watched some real-life cases about cross-cultural challenges, the next step is to learn more about other cultures as well as your own culture.

Background information in preparation for the e-learning modules

Knowledge of other cultures

There are several overall characteristics with which you need to familiarise yourself when you want to be able to understand the cultures that you are doing business with. The following tutorials will help you get an overall idea of what to take into consideration and how to act in different situations.

The tutorials are based on the theories of Geert Hofstede, Edward T. Hall and Fons Trompenaars combined with a wide range of examples and recommendations.

Module 1: Link to power point slides on the impact of culture on business interactions:
[Knowledge of culture and intercultural communication](#) . Duration: 31:12 minutes

In the following, you will find copies of some of the points mentioned in the slide show. Please consider yourself and discuss the points with your colleagues to strengthen your cross-cultural competences.

RECOMMENDED FOLLOW-UP CONSIDERATIONS AND DISCUSSIONS:

Please consider for a moment:

- What is culture to you?
- What cultural differences do you experience at work?

Points for consideration :

Consider yourself and discuss with colleagues:

- Which of the value dimensions mentioned do you need to pay particular attention to and why?
- What can you do as an individual, and what can your company do to become more culturally competent?

Cultural self-awareness

The next step to effective global communication is seeing ourselves as having been shaped by a particular environment and being able to apply this knowledge in a cross-cultural context. Those who are culturally self-aware can more readily escape the most basic mistake of all when communicating with people from different cultures: Assuming that others are like us and trying to communicate with them while looking in the mirror, using the method that would be most persuasive to ourselves.

By way of example, you will find this module to be based on Danish culture. If you are from a different culture, then keep in mind that you'll need to make similar considerations regarding your own cultural conditioning and its effect on your approach to and communication with people from other cultures.

The tutorials are based on the theories of Geert Hofstede, Edward T. Hall and Fons Trompenaars combined with a wide range of examples and recommendations.

Module 2: Link to power point slides giving background information about Danish culture: [The Danes – Who are they?](#) Duration: 18:41 minutes

Please consider yourself and discuss the points below with your colleagues to develop a strategy for cross-cultural encounters at your workplace. Some of the points are identical with the ones in the power point slides.

RECOMMENDED FOLLOW-UP CONSIDERATIONS AND DISCUSSIONS:

Consider the following points and if possible, share with colleagues:

- What are the characteristics of your culture, in your own point of view?
- What would you tell others about your culture?

- What do you find to be typical for your culture at your workplace?
- In which situations have you experienced that some of your cultural characteristics have created problems?

Points for group discussion in your company:

Consider individually (5 min.)

Discuss in groups (15 min.)

Sum up: (15-30 min.)

- Based on the cultural knowledge acquired, please consider whether and how the values of your company may be interpreted differently by foreigners than by native employees and business associates.
- Where might you expect problems?
- How can you build a common understanding of the company's values across cultures?

Points for group discussion in your company: What to keep and what to drop?

Based on the outcome of the points discussed above, please consider which of your cultural and/or organisational characteristics you find can be used successfully abroad since others may learn from them. Also consider which may be useful at home but less so abroad.

Please consider which characteristics you ought to adapt to other cultures or which you ought to drop because they are merely bad habits and do not enrich anybody.

These points for discussion are shown in the table below:

Abroad			
Bad	<p>Modify</p> <p>Consider which characteristics to compromise on and adapt to other cultures.</p>	<p>Disseminate</p> <p>Consider which elements of your culture others may learn from and which you want to disseminate.</p>	Good
	<p>Drop</p> <p>Consider which characteristics both you and others would benefit from dropping.</p>	<p>Keep at home</p> <p>Consider which characteristics are positive and useful within your national/organisational culture but less useful abroad.</p>	
At home			

(Adapted from Nørmark, 2011)

E-learning module

Now that you have gained insight into other cultures as well as your own culture, the following two modules will demonstrate how you can apply this knowledge when managing across cultures and when working in multicultural teams.

The purpose of modules 3 and 4 is to enable you to identify and build useful cross-cultural competence skills by means of hands-on knowledge, self-reflection exercises and recommendations.

Culture and management

The task of managing a diversified and dispersed workforce at home and internationally is a major test of leadership. Fostering good communication and building trust have always been two fundamental issues in management and leadership, but learning how to do so among a culturally diverse staff is a whole new challenge. Although leadership may transcend cultural boundaries, what constitutes effective management and leadership is nonetheless culture specific. In the following, you will learn about some pitfalls and strategies in international management.

Module 3

- Cross-cultural management issues and strategies. Link to power point slides on [culture and management](#). Duration: 16:48 minutes

RECOMMENDED FOLLOW-UP CONSIDERATIONS AND DISCUSSIONS:

Points for consideration:

- What management style do you find typical for your culture?
- Have you experienced different expectations to you as a manager abroad than in your home country?

Points for in-company discussion:

- Discuss which of the aspects mentioned in the tutorial you need to take into consideration when cooperating with business people and managing employees from other cultures.
- Are there any particular management styles in your company that may conflict with the cultures you cooperate with?

Further points for discussion:

- Discuss which management tasks you need to pay attention to in order to improve cooperation and communication between managers and employees across cultures.

Consider areas such as planning, organising, staffing, directing and controlling.

- Discussions may include:
 - How to involve employees in decisions?
 - How to motivate employees?
 - How to inform employees of expectations?
 - How to express recognition and praise?
 - How to give rewards?
- Do employees expect their manager to tell them what to do or do they expect to give their input?
- Should employees solve problems themselves or should they bring them first to the manager?
- Consider whether language barriers pose problems.

Multicultural teamwork

Companies rely increasingly on teams made up of people with highly diverse backgrounds. A key challenge facing modern organisations is how best to make use of the diversity that exists in their companies and how to manage multicultural teams. In the following, you will learn about the challenges of working in international teams and get some advice on how to cope with these challenges.

Module 4

- Cross-cultural teamwork issues and strategies. Link to power point slides on [multicultural teamwork](#). Duration: 16:43 minutes

RECOMMENDED POINTS FOR IN-COMPANY DISCUSSION:

Preferably discuss the issues in small groups followed by a plenary discussion. The purpose is through knowledge sharing to gain a better understanding of multicultural teamwork challenges and possible solutions.

<p>Preferred leadership styles in multicultural teams</p> <p>Share and discuss your experiences:</p> <p>How have preferred leadership styles had a positive or negative impact on the cooperation in a multicultural group that you have participated in? Discuss possible reasons.</p>
<p>National and organisational cultures in multicultural teams</p> <p>Share and discuss your experiences:</p> <p>Have you experienced that personal appearance, greeting behaviour, status issues, gift giving, communication behaviour or the like have caused embarrassment or frustrations? Give examples.</p>
<p>Preferred ways of resolving conflicts in multicultural teams</p> <p>Share and discuss your experiences:</p> <p>Pinpoint any conflicts you may have experienced working in a multicultural team. Which were solved successfully, which were not and why?</p>
<p>Preferred ways of making decisions in multicultural groups</p> <p>Share and discuss your experiences:</p> <p>Have you experienced that different nationalities in a team reach decisions in different ways? Please discuss the possible pros and cons of using approaches like majority rule, consensus or compromise, and how your attitude towards this issue may depend on your culture.</p>
<p>Expectations and values around interaction and team behaviour</p> <p>Share and discuss your experiences:</p> <p>In a multicultural team, have you experienced that the attitude towards meaningful participation, brainstorming sessions, time management, work motivation or the like may differ depending on national culture? Give examples.</p>

List of references

Browaeys, M.-J. and Price, R., 2011: *Understanding cross-cultural management*. FT Prentice Hall.
 Early, P. C. et al., 2006: *CQ Developing cultural intelligence at work*. Stanford Business Books.

- Ferraro, G. P., 2006: *The cultural dimension of international business*. Pearson, Prentice Hall, 5th ed.
- Gertsen, M. C. et al., 2012: *Global Collaboration: Intercultural experiences and learning*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gesteland, R., 2006: *Cross-cultural business behavior*. Copenhagen Business School Press.
- Kingsley, P., 2012: How to be Danish. Waterstones.
- KOMM magasinet, August 2012, no 65.
- Larsen, H. and Svendsen, H., 2013: *Interkulturel kommunikation – Vejen til succes*.
www.ucviden.dk.
- Larsen, H. and Svendsen, H., 2013: *Firmaer taber på manglende indsigt i andre kulturer*. BØRSEN Executive. 31. maj 2013.
- Livermore, D., 2010: *Leading with cultural intelligence*. AMACOM.
- Marel, 2013. *About Marel*. [online]. Available at: <http://marel.com/corporate>. [Accessed 10 June, 2013].
- Nygaard, B., 2010: *Kulturmødet på arbejdspladsen*. Gyldendal Business.
- Nørmark, D., 2011: *Kulturforståelse for stenalderhjerner*. Det Andersenske Forlag.
- Reynolds, S. and Valentine, D., 2004: *Guide to cross-cultural communication*. Prentice Hall.
- Samovar, L. A. et al., 2007: *Communication between cultures*. Thomson, Wadsworth.
- Schneider, S. C. and Barsoux, J.-L., 2003: *Managing across cultures*. FT Prentice Hall.