

## HRD Forum — Book Review

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# Cross Cultural Management: the Case for Curiosity not Certainty

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There are many books about cross cultural management, from academic analyses to practitioner guides. Why, then, in this crowded field, do I recommend Jasmin Mahadevan's *Cross Cultural Management*, an addition to the excellent "Very Short, Fairly Interesting, Reasonably Cheap" series, as essential and timely reading? There are a number of reasons. The international nature of business and commerce continues to expand, and to be relevant to an increasing number of us. Cross cultural working now includes, alongside scenarios such as managerial expatriation or cross border negotiations, more complex and possibly ambiguous situations. For example, international project collaboration with culturally diverse, often geographically dispersed, teams. Cultural diversity continues to matter, and continues to be implicated in both positive and negative outcomes. Cross cultural training is an industry (of which this reviewer is part, and which is the subject of thoughtful and somewhat sobering analysis in this book).

Whereas the field continues to develop in complexity, the resources available to students and practitioners, however, have broadly approached the issues from two main perspectives: comparative cross cultural management, or intercultural interactions and competence. In this book, Professor Mahadevan, herself multi-lingual, multi-ethnic, with experience of a wide range of cultures and with a career spanning research, intercultural training and consulting, and academia, both acknowledges the strengths of these standard perspectives, and, crucially, argues that encountering the complex settings of modern cross cultural management requires something more. She argues that we need a critical approach, and an awareness of additional perspectives plus the ability to manage an interplay between them. In setting out her argument, Professor Mahadevan has written a book that will appeal to a wide range of readers who are engaged in "managing and living across, between and beyond cultures".

In calling for a "critical" approach, the author stresses that her stance is not "anti", something, nor are its aims to replace current thinking (p. 1). Rather, it implies examining what we know, acknowledging different perspectives, and recognizing a range of contexts, including the power relations implicit in them. The structure of the book (across five chapters) is to present each of the perspectives Mahadevan considers essential to investigate and navigate culture. In each case, she provides an admirably concise history of the field and the paradigms which inform it. Rather than privileging a particular perspective, she demonstrates the strengths and weaknesses inherent in each, and illustrates with concrete examples how each approach may be useful in specific circumstances. Whilst pointing out that "cultural dimensions" have been criticized as an approach by a number of scholars, she suggests that they nonetheless have value if used not as prescriptions, but as concepts.

Two of five perspectives explain the approaches most likely to be familiar to readers, that is, comparative and interactional/competence. Whilst these overviews are skillfully written, a real strength of the book is the addition of three further perspectives. The first is an approach, based in anthropology, to a holistic account of the nature of culture, as “the way we do things round here” (p. 12), as “complex whole” (p. 13), as learned, social, shared, embodied, material, as community of meaning or knowledge. There follow chapters on Diversity and Identity, and Power, both concepts familiar in other areas but less frequently included in analysis of cross cultural management.

The exposition of each of the five perspectives enables and invites the reader to engage with what Mahadevan convincingly argues should be a guiding principle of cross cultural management, interplay. Interplay, she explains, means:

moving back and forth across perspectives. Firstly, you should ask yourself what these perspectives have in common; secondly, you should analyse how they are different; finally, you should ask yourself how these different viewpoints can enrich your understanding of a specific context (p. 132).

The practitioner is thus encouraged to consider whether there is evidence of any cultural “dimensions” (time, hierarchy etc.) in an interaction, then whether there are further insights to be gained from adopting an ethnographic, observational approach, what dynamics of identity and power might be at play, and then to consider how these perspectives might come together in making meaning.

In inviting the reader to engage in this way with the interplay of a number of perspectives, Mahadevan acknowledges that this is not easy. A strength of the book, however, is that she not only poses the task, but suggests by way of concrete examples how we might approach it. Whereas there are no definitive answers in this work to seemingly simple questions such as whether to “Kiss, Bow or Shake Hands” (Morrison et al., 1994), there are arguably much more valuable discussions of how to approach cross cultural management. Mahadevan calls for us to develop an “ethnographic” frame of mind, to become cultural detectives, replacing certainty with curiosity. And to be informed by notions of what culture is (and is not), as well as an awareness of what is in our own “cultural backpack”. She invites us to consider not only the nature of culture and difference, but what this means for each of us.

She articulates, for example, a dilemma faced by many of us as we negotiate a global environment, which demands that:

you will need to carefully ask yourself when to adapt, when to be changed by others and when to remain who you are ... with regard to your skills and competencies, you will have to find out what to adopt, what to discard and what to keep (p. 3).

Mahadevan presents a complex range of ideas in a way that is accessible and readable (“as simple as possible, but no simpler”, to quote Einstein). Her style is conversational, and she grounds concepts in real life, seemingly mundane but often arresting examples. Reasons for reading this book might indeed include its size (fits easily into a pocket), its reasonable price, or that it’s more than just fairly interesting. Even better reasons, though, to this reviewer, are the wealth of scholarship, the food for thought, and the possibilities it offers for all of us to learn, by reflexive practice, more about the world and ourselves.

## References

- Mahadevan, J. (2017). *A Very Short, Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap Book about Cross Cultural Management*, Sage
- Morrison T., Conaway W. A., & Borden, G. A. (1994). *Kiss, bow, or shake hands how to do business in sixty countries*, Holbrook, Mass.: B. Adams.

## The Reviewer

Dr Ann Means combines coaching and corporate consulting with research and teaching. Coming to academia from an earlier career spanning government service and consultancy, she now lectures at colleges and business schools in the UK, India and Malaysia, and has worked with clients in a range of industries. Her interests in both research and practice are cultural diversity, cross cultural management, international teams, and organizational research methods.

