



**CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE  
AND STONE AGE BRAINS**

By Helle Katholm Knutsen, Dennis Nørmark and Heidi Andersen



In the first two issues of Detail on Retail we chose to investigate the retail potential respectively in Nordic Food and Heath Shopping. The third voyage takes you to a topic that tends to be overlooked or at least underestimated. It's time to revisit the importance of culture, the problems and the business potential. The main source of inspiration and research for the articles is Living Institute; a Copenhagen based company, conducting research-based cross cultural training and counselling. Among their specialities is the reduction of expat failures and developing and teaching intercultural cooperation skills.

DoR talked to the founder and creative director, Heidi Andersen and anthropologist, chief consultant and author, Dennis Nørmark. What is really at stake when you experience culture encounters? How do you make sure that cultures don't collide? How do you benefit from diversity and avoid being a cultural bulldozer? What is culture anyway? Why are human beings so inclined to stereotype? Why do we know so little about our own cultural oddities? How do we sharpen our cultural consciousness and musicality? How do we avoid being overwhelmed by cultural complexity? And why does time pass slower the closer you get to Equator?

“Despite popular beliefs to the contrary the single greatest barrier to business success is the one erected by culture”.

Edward T. Hall, anthropologist

# KEEP AN OPEN MIND BUT NOT AN EMPTY HEAD

**Research shows that companies can increase their innovative level considerably by hiring people from different cultures. This research, however, does not show the complications caused by mixing a multitude of cultures or by taking brands to markets with totally different culture codes.**

Having to deal with a multitude of cultures may not be an advantage to start with but most companies simply have to face reality and do it anyway. They are forced to get familiar with the cultural challenge and learn how to minimize the problems and harvest the fruit of intercultural cooperation to compete in the global market.

The human brain was formed 200,000 years ago on the sa-

vannah of Africa. It might come as a surprise to some, but biologically not much has happened since then, despite the indisputable cultural development. Human beings are not born with cultural intelligence, on the contrary. We are born with a potential ability to co-create and take part in a culture and once we have been spun into the network of codes, meaning and values constituting that specific culture, we are very reluctant to realize that others may have as good or even better ways of relating to the challenges of contemporary life – let alone change our thinking and behaviour.

“Cultural intelligence is essential to modern business and learning about culture ought to be an integrated part of employees’ education”, says Heidi Andersen. “It is absolutely appropriate to challenge each others thinking and behaviour across cultures, but it will never work out well

unless we start by realizing our own “oddities” and then take the time and effort to learn about the others. Culture is an instrument that groups of people use to interpret reality, organize activity and create identity and this instrument plays different tunes that might sometimes sound extremely strange, even to cultural neighbours, until you get to know them”.

## **Start looking at your own backyard**

Many companies have found themselves knocked out after attempting to enter a new market. Having to do business in cultures different to your own is a fascinating and frustrating experience but what happened to the assumption that cultures would be diluted as globalization flooded the markets? Dennis Nørmark’s answer is crystal clear: “Globalization is a reality and cultures

are as alive and kicking as ever. The more we involve ourselves in the life of “the others”, the more we understand who we are ourselves. This can lead to conflict or cultural intelligence and co-existence, depending on the way in which we exploit our experiences.

Cultural understanding and a pragmatic way of working in a multi cultural environment requires first of all self-insight. If, in spite of what you delude yourself into, you have no idea how your culture affects your behaviour, reactions to different cultural codes and often fertilize your prejudices and stereotypes – you are lost in translation”.

### **Shortcut culture differences with human commonalities**

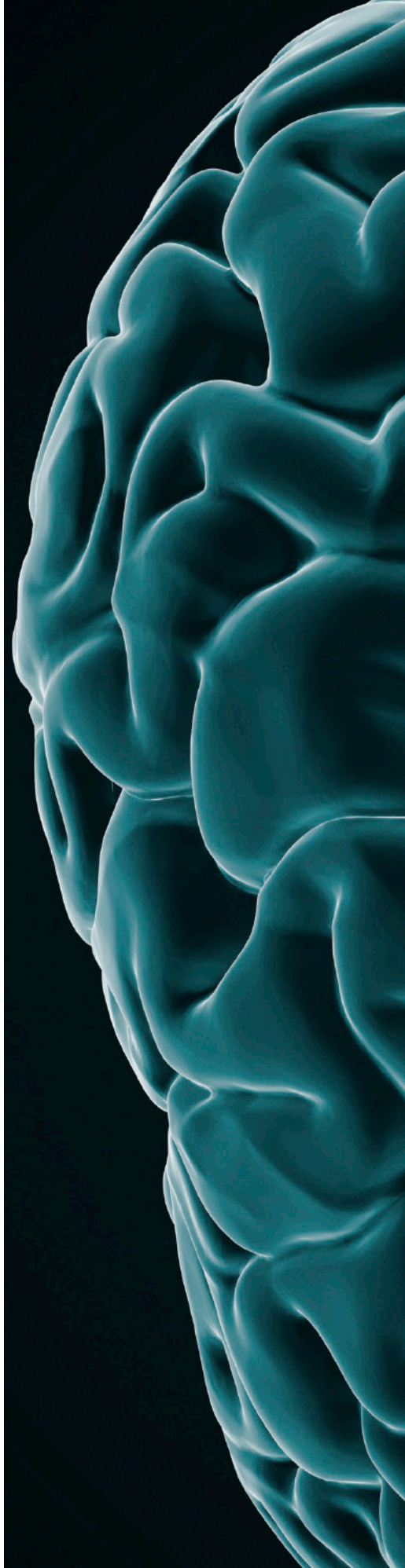
Nørmark continues: “Once you start learning how cultural issues can throw sand in the machinery, your first impression might be that cultural differences are only hurdles that you have to overcome. That is not true at all. If you don’t bother to make your cultural homework, you are bound to get in trouble, but if you do, knowledge about culture will not only be a valuable inspiration to your personal and professional life, but might actually open sources and global perspectives in your brand that you have never been aware of.

I am thinking about the entire common-good that human beings share across cultures and geography - the pan-cultural or The Human Universals as they are called. Let me give you an ex-

ample. When foreigners come to Denmark to work they often find that we are incredibly lazy, leaving our jobs in the early afternoon, but once you explain to them that we give family very high priority, a new understanding is dawning. Family is a universal human value and even if Japanese men spend only 20 minutes a week with their children they still consider the priority important and thus are able to appreciate the concern.

Among the universals which are shared by all cultures throughout the globe are art, children’s fear of strangers, daily routines, conceptions of death, appreciation of generosity, hospitality, body art, using play to strengthen different abilities, magic to win love, music, envy, nepotism, poetry, preference for sugar, interest in sexuality, gossip, pain, sorrow, pride, attempts to control traffic, jokes, tools, tenderness and so on.

The more than 300 well-documented human commonalities form a pool of inspiration. If your brand represents one or more of these common areas of interest, you can talk about them, and people all over the globe will relate to your message whether they practise the universals or just want to. Getting to know the universals and thus learning what is not decided by cultural characteristics is just as important as understanding why and how cultures differ. Very often you will be able to shortcut the differences by relating to something universal. What we appreciate and do might be very similar - whereas the way we do it differs a lot”.



Start digging into the meaning of cultural issues and you are constantly confronted with two equally important messages: Human beings share an amazing amount of understanding and behaviour across cultures all over the globe. The more than 300 well documented commonalities.

Human brains tend to exaggerate cultural differences and misinterpreting culture codes can make the commonalities shrink and almost drown in stereotypes and failed cultural encounters. Both facts may inspire conclusions: Either culture doesn't matter, especially in a so-called globalized environment – or simply that foreign cultures are so strange and the risk of failure so evident that you should stay away. Both are wrong.

# PUT YOURSELF IN THE SHOES OF THE OTHERS

If you want to stick to the illusion that you personally don't have any Stone Age brain left, you had better hop off now. The anthropologist Dennis Nørmark is not at all gentle when he characterises the modern man. "We say that we love challenge, but we don't.

We seek the circles where we are confirmed. Where we recognize behaviour and can predict

what's going to happen. We prefer people who are similar to us. Then somebody suddenly does something unexpected and we get offended and conclude that this person has not learned how to behave properly.

We tend to think that superficial differences in norms (which is culture) say something about the morals and ethics of others.

Our Stone Age brains still consider cultural differences dangerous because cooperation in spite of considerable communication differences was much too risky when hunting for gnus on the savannah. Not today, but our brains don't know that".

## **Cultural differences are "need to know"**

"We pretend to be global minded but stay in social bubbles that are sometimes narrower than ever and in those bubbles you neither search for, nor find self-insight. We protect ourselves against the "dangerous" situation that we might find out that what we have been doing was not very smart and that others might have found better ways to do it.

Of course it's essential to protect your culture and the more conscious you are of what should never be compromised, the less you risk losing the important stuff. Meeting other cultures has the potential power of helping us understand who we are.

We want so much to be special, and what we consider part of the personality in our own case, we tend to see as cultural characteristics in "the others". Cultural intelligence is not just something nice to learn. It's all about which reaction you want and how you make sure that you get it. How do you interpret your core or DNA in different cultural scenes?

How do you express what you can offer in a way that is appealing to the culture in question? Actually on commercial stages differences are perceived more positively than in society in general. We travel not to see what we have at home but to be surprised and entertained and meet new interpretations of well-known brands.

We don't want too much challenge in our every day lives but when we travel our minds are more open. This means that find-

ing out how your brand should be staged and "behave" in a new cultural context will potentially appeal to both the locals and tourists, thus killing two birds with one stone".

## **Don't be a cultural bulldozer**

Nørmark continues: "Understanding where your brand values harmonize with the human universals can be a ticket to global business opportunities and cracking the culture codes is not brain surgery. However the latter means that you have to start with an exercise that might hurt a bit.

Any kind of cultural learning and understanding starts with self-insight and even if you consider yourself very international, closer inspection might reveal another story - which is quite all right. This just proves that you are part of a culture. The cultures special ways of doing things are so woven into our lives that we hardly think about them and often we don't remember exactly why we shake hands or waggle our heads or dance around an evergreen bush on Christmas Eve or read poems to a meat dish or consider time to be an inexhaustible source.

The important thing is that you might find what the others are doing is weird, disgusting or even unethical, but that's just until you understand how these others see your silly behaviour. The way out of misunderstandings and lost opportunities is cultural intelligence. Don't be a cultural bulldozer. Get to know yourself and then place yourself solidly in the shoes of the other. To put

oneself in someone else's place is an ability that occurred along with the first "homo" – the first real human species. The genetic differences among human culture groups are very superficial, so how can a species with such a tiny specializing adapt to so widely different climatic and geographic conditions? The answer is culture.

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# HIGHWAYS IN THE CULTURAL MAP

There are several overall characteristics with which you need to make yourself familiar to be able to read the cultural map of the country or region you intend to get to know on a deeper level.

**1.** Power distance. It is about whether the culture is mainly hierarchical or egalitarian, how you obtain status and privileges, and in which way important decisions are made.

**2.** Level of confidence. It is about whether you trust people in general and don't need too much formality to make agreements or you trust only those close to you.

**3.** High or low context cultures. It is about whether focus is on relations or formal agreements. In high context cultures the important thing is whom you are dealing with. The person is the key and the guarantee. Networks are everything. In low context culture you communicate with lots of people that you don't know very well and you need to be very specific, formal and make legally tenable agreements.

**4.** Individualistic or collectivist. In collectivist cultures the family (which includes more than parents and kids) plays a very important role and collectivist cultures

are often very generous and conscious of giving back to the community.

**5.** Level of uncertainty avoidance. A high level means high stress and anxiety, resistance against change, predilection for well-known ways of doing things. Low level means benevolence towards change and innovative thinking.

**6.** Neutral or expressive. Are you allowed or even expected to show your emotions freely and boldly?

**7.** Masculine or feminine. To which degree has the masculine competitive values succeeded in oppressing the feminine care and support to everybody?

**8.** A polychrome or monochrome time perception. If you don't understand this difference it is likely to drive you crazy. In short the polychromes have all the time in the world and the monochromes are scared to death about being ten minutes late. The closer you get to Equator, the slower time passes.

## Watch out for the Scandinavians

If you consider doing business in Scandinavia and you are not familiar with the Northern tribes you should be aware that in all of

these aspects they are extreme. They have a very low power distance, very high level of confidence, they are low context cultures and very individualistic, they have a low uncertainty avoidance, are extremely feminine and monochrome.

If you are Scandinavian and consider conquering the US or Japan or India, be aware of how culturally extreme your culture is compared to mainstream which means most of the cultures in the world. 85 per cent of all the cultures practice polygamy in some form and by far most of the cultures in the world have a polychrome time perception and a predominantly masculine culture. So poke a finger into the soil and leave it there until you find yourself an informant, because nothing beats local knowledge.

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*The cultural multitude is not endangered. We are not moving towards increasing uniformity, even if loads of old cultural heirlooms are discarded. The human creativity can't be stopped. Our need for staging our own self-absorbed cultural creativity is much too big.*

# NOTHING BEATS LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

When anthropologists enter unexplored cultures they depend on so called informants. If you have read the bestseller novel "Shantaram" by Gregory David Roberts you have met a charming version of the phenomenon, Prabaker. When the protagonist, who has broken out of prison in Australia, arrives in India, he meets Prabaker who is very eager to become the favourite informant of the newcomer. When the Australian robber asks: "Do I need you?" Prabaker answers: "Oh yes. You so very need me, I am almost crying with your situation! Only God knows what terrible things are happening to you without my good self to guide your body in Bombay".

Asked what the informant can do for you in a foreign culture, Dennis Nørmark says: Everything! If he is the right person and knows the secrets and unspoken codes his value to you cannot be exaggerated. In most cultures personal relations mean the world. Even in cultures where it is commonly agreed that "we only act professionally when doing business". Underneath more or less nepotistic needs are accommodated. Remember caring predominantly for the people closest to you is a universal value.

## **So rule number one:**

Make sure that your man on the spot is not a socially isolated outsider even if that kind of guy is often the one most eager to be your local friend. You will want someone who knows the cultural codes by heart and who is influential in the important places and with people who are important to you. Finding the right informant is about the right professional position but also very much about confidence, intuition and chemistry. In most cultures the professional and the private spheres are a mess, and a mutually pros-

perous relation with an informant is often like a friendship crossing the borders of life.

## **Rule number two:**

Watch out for inequality in the relation. You want somebody who is a part of the culture and who is at the same level as you are which means that he is familiar with the character of your task. Some think that they are better off finding a fellow-countryman but that is a bad idea that will just keep you in your common cultural cheese bell.



## **DETAIL ON RETAIL RECOMMENDS:**

Send your German employee who seems to have Italian blood in his veins to Rome if you need a man there. It'll smooth the cultural encounter. Buy good video-conference equipment and use it for education and frequent meetings with your informant and employees/dealers in other cultures. Don't guess, ask, politely and open-minded.

### **Rule number three:**

Spend time with your informant like you would with a friend. And if you have to do that you might want to make sure that you have a few common areas of interest. Be generous and accept generosity but do not necessarily accept suspiciously expensive gifts.

### **Rule number four:**

In relation focused, high context societies knowing the right people and the unspoken rules is the name of the game. In India, China, the Middle East and of course Africa, the position of the informant in the hierarchy is very important. Otherwise he might reduce your status and you don't want that. You are who you are with!

### **Rule number five:**

Work hard on the honesty level of your relation. The informant has to have the courage to tell you when you are about to – or have already – put your foot in it. For many people it is difficult to say something, which is inevitably going to embarrass another person. It takes confidence that you don't shoot the messenger.

### **Learn to gossip and be a small talker**

Here is a list of subjects apart from the purely professional to consult the informant about:

- Custom/common practise/what is polite and what is not. Do you look a person directly in the eye or don't you?
- Prices of things and services
- Dress codes
- Gossip – never underestimate “le cancan du quartier”
- What goes on in the popular culture? Books, movies, sports. Invaluable knowledge for small talk and you had better be good at that.

*So how do you make your UK born brand play by the rules in India and yet recognizable and exciting to your fellow country men shopping in Mumbai? Get to learn the cultural codes and let yourself be inspired by the way the Indian culture expresses the universal values of your brand*

*The natural human dispositions for religion, conservatism, contempt for women, racism and considering your own family more important than anybody else is directly opposed to democracy and the ideals of Enlightenment – universal rights, humanism, equality, sense, progress and controlling impulses.*

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