

Fons Trompenaars

An interview with one of the most influential management thinkers in our day



Anglo-Irish playwright Oscar Wilde famously stated “I can resist everything except temptation.” This little phrase summarizes an ageless human dilemma: how do we deal with the contradictory forces within ourselves?

On the whole, people in the West have been taught not to waste time with eccentric riddles; life is serious and should be treated with Cartesian “either-or” logic. And the bi-polar mindset worked fairly well in the industrialized world until the dawn of globalization. From then on, however, people (and companies) were continually confronted with bizarre codes of behavior.

It didn't take long for individuals like Fons Trompenaars to look for ways to reconcile seemingly incompatible cultural traits. Born and raised in a Dutch-French family, he understood the contradictory lifestyles of Amsterdam and Paris and eventually wrote a doctoral thesis on the effect national culture has on corporate culture. Generating seven dimensions, he detailed how groups often hold values that are mirror images of one another.

He later teamed up with Charles Hampden-Turner to write the best-seller “Riding the Waves of Cultures” which identifies seven “opposing” value dimensions and the problems they create, then suggests solutions that often foster wealth-building. While scholars point out that the work

is not as rigorous as that of a Geert Hofstede, it has become a major reference. The humorous, easy-to-read style and the countless case studies examined make it a highly stimulating must-read for those in international business.

Fons Trompenaars' landmark research in international management has him very much in demand all over the world. Getting a hold of him wasn't easy but thanks to the advances of smart-phone technology, I was able to share an early-morning (virtual) coffee with him in Barcelona.

What childhood experiences led you to the intercultural field?

Having a Dutch father and a French mother, my brother and sisters and I learned to shift between the two cultures and considered them equally real. Our summers were spent with my grandparents near Paris and two uncles, an aunt and seven cousins also lived there. It was a huge house with great feeling. It was also interesting as the subculture of families was so different in France.

Everyone sat down for two warm meals a day together, which wasn't very Dutch. And it tasted good, which wasn't very Dutch either! And there was wine at the table, which was a no-no in Holland.

One time I went to France alone and when I came back I

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The grand manoir in Paris, where Fons Trompenaars spent his summer holidays

forgot to speak Dutch to the taxi driver--I was really inundated by French culture. It also came with problems. When I was 18 or 19, I was still living with my parents and my Dutch friends at university had all moved out of the house. I knew I couldn't do the same out of respect for my mother.

So those early experiences laid the foundation. But what exactly pushed you into a lifelong career of cross-cultural research?

It happened accidentally. I studied economics with a major in organizational behavior. When I finished at the Free University of Amsterdam in 1978, one of my professors told me about a PhD scholarship in the States. I was fairly young and decided to try. The jury consisted of top professors from all over Europe: André Laurent, Geert Hofstede, Giorgio Inzerilli, Gunnar Hedlund. I hardly knew them. Anyway, to cut a long story short, the jury gave me the scholarship. Afterwards both Laurent and Hofstede said, "For your PhD, why don't you look into the cultural side at the Wharton Business School in Philadelphia?"

Having been raised in a Dutch-French environment, everything fell into place. Laurent with his French enthusiasm encouraged me to go into this field and Hofstede handed me a pack of articles. I loved reading them and thought his work was fascinating. That's when I got the cultural virus. My idea was to write a thesis, entitled "The organization of

meaning, the meaning of organization." The organization of meaning being culture, and the meaning of organization being corporate culture. So my dissertation was about how national culture affects corporate culture.

On the cultural side, I developed something, based on Max Weber's thinking and Toennies' *Gesellschaft und Gemeinschaft*, that I called left brain versus right brain. And for corporate culture, I took Hofstede's Four Dimensions. Hofstede was not known at that time and the panel asked me to defend his concept. So I went back to Hofstede, to whom I owed a lot, and asked "Why those four dimensions?" His answer was simple — he got angry.

It was obviously the weakness of his research; it was not deductive, but inductive. His work was based on other types of research at IBM that he statistically analyzed. That was the sensitive point. Hofstede has been very important for the field of cross-cultural management because he started it, but he also closed the field. If you are in multicultural management, you should be open to other approaches. If people criticize my work I usually learn something. The trouble with Hofstede is that you can't have a discussion with him.

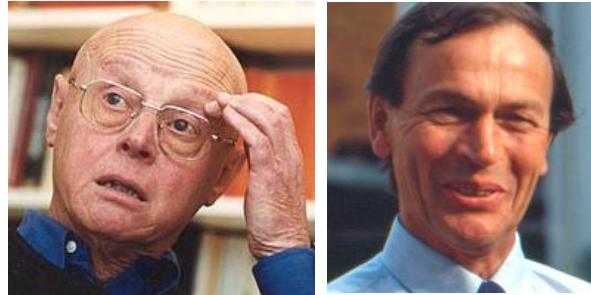
So I had to develop my own stuff. I took Hofstede's work and added that of others. If you want my deeply scientific discourse on how I came to the Seven Dimensions, it's

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Geert Hofstede and André Laurent were most influential in Fons Trompenaars' choice to study cultural differences.



simple. I took all the existing models, many overlapping, put them into a basket, shuffled them and came up with the seven that are always mentioned. Parsons, Hall, Hofstede, Kluckhohn, Strodtbeck.

As for my research, it was comparing Shell refineries throughout the world. I received a scholarship from the company but they didn't interfere with my work. I developed my own questions and tried not to be ethnocentric. I had my questionnaire tested by multicultural groups and what we call focus groups today. I also used existing parts of questionnaires on, for example, internal and external control, the validates locus control questionnaires by Julien Rotter and so on.

What did you do after finishing your doctorate?

I worked in Human Resources at Shell in their main office in Rotterdam and the Research Center in Amsterdam from 1982 to 1989. The latter was a big organization with 2200 people of 30 different nationalities. I later wrote "*Managing People Across Cultures*", a look at how the company adapted to cultural differences.

I continued my research there. For example, I examined how two social researchers at Shell had developed the HAIR L system. 'H' stands for helicopter quality, the ability to look beyond the problem (see the big picture), then land on the problem (see the details), a sort of lateral thinking.

'A' stands for power of analysis, 'I' for imagination, 'R' for a sense of reality and the 'L' at the end for effective leadership. All the bosses and managers were graded on these five basic qualities, what are now called competencies. And when we recruited people, we looked at their currently estimated potential (CEP), the job group they'd belong to at 50.

I correlated the five appraisal qualities with the people's potential. If you do straight correlation, everything correlates so you have to do multi-variate analyses, to arrive at partial correlations. In the Netherlands only analysis and imagination correlated and imagination correlated negatively. I remember my first boss at Shell who said, "Fons, you are OK. But there's only one problem — you score very high on imagination and that is very bad for your career at Shell."

The company was essentially saying imagination was bad for potential. Cynics would say, "Imagination will make you a great researcher, but not a good manager."

We found that imagination scored much better in France. Analytical ability also scored high in France but the sense of reality was low. In Germany, on the other hand, leadership scored the highest. So the system is culturally biased. What do you do if people in the London or The Hague headquarters look at a wonderful French candidate, but find he scores high on imagination? French management

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Wharton Business School in Philadelphia, where Fons did his PhD on how national culture affects business cultures



appreciates this trait but the British and Dutch look at each other and think, “We can’t move him to the next level.”

I could explain this sort of behavior with my research, Hofstede’s research, Andre Laurent’s research, Edward Hall’s research, all the research, but the question became “So what?” In other words, what do we do now? I think the big problem in our field is we see the world on a bi-polar scale. Everybody’s great at explaining why people are different and why something doesn’t work but they don’t have a clue how to make it work.

So what did you do to resolve this problem?

I think we are getting into the core, where my calling is. While at Shell I read an article by Charles Hampden-Turner, one of their consultants. “*A Tale for Two Paradigms*” was a bit about East versus West and ended with, “It creates dilemmas. What can we do to reconcile those dilemmas?” This five-page article not only summarized my four years of research and my dissertation but went far beyond it.

I sent Charles my thesis and he came back a few days later and said, “I think we can work together. I reconciled all of your seven dilemmas.” I said to myself, “What the hell is this guy saying?” And he gave me a crystal-clear example, asking why an individualist couldn’t be a collectivist at the same time.

“If you an individualist without collectivism, you’re an egoist and it doesn’t work. If you’re a collectivist with connecting yourself to an individual, you’re a communist and it doesn’t work.”

The meaning of life is in how you combine opposites. Great individuals are individualists and offer the fruits of individual greatness to the team. And great teams are those which nurture individual excellence. Why don’t we measure how good nations are by connecting opposites? It took me 15 years to really understand that.

Could you explain in more detail what you mean by combining opposites?

We have made the world bi-polar. Take the Myers-Briggs questionnaire, which has four categories: introvert – extrovert, thinking – feeling, judging – perceiving, sensing – intuitive. There are observable differences in personality according to national origin. The predominant type in British management is ISTJ (Introverting, Sensing, Thinking, Judging), while in the U.S. it’s ESTJ (Extroverting, Sensing, Thinking, Judging).

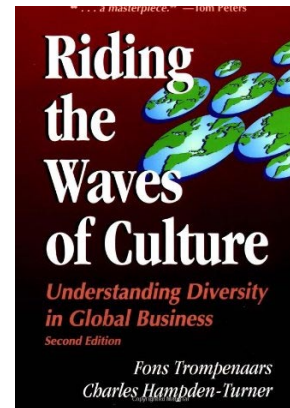
Myers-Briggs fans find solutions in the team, complementarities of types, or they refer to the fact that the types are only preferences and all is potentially within the individual.

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Written with Charles Hampden-Turner, "Riding the Waves of Culture" was the first book to show professional managers how to build cross-cultural skills.



But why were the questionnaires designed on mutually-exclusive values in the first place? Our Western way of thinking is based on Cartesian logic: "either-or", not "and-and." This is in contradiction to what Carl Jung had in mind when he construed the underlying conceptual framework behind MBTI.

Any Myers-Briggs person I meet, I ask "Does scoring high on thinking mean I need to score low on feeling? Why is my thinking done at the cost of my feeling? And why should I score low on collectivism if I score high on individualism?"

Take the U.S. It's very individualistic on every score but if you look at volunteer work and community groups, it's great. Icons like Bill Gates and Ted Turner make a lot of money but they also give back to society.

This is the paradigm I used at Shell. If you have imagination, it's the vertical bar on the grid, the y-axis. Sense of reality is the horizontal axis. You measure people on the combination. A person with imagination but no sense of reality is a "daydreamer". A sense of reality with no imagination makes you a "landed mole". We made grids for analysis and synthesis, as well as intuitive and sensing and it worked everywhere: great leaders are those who combine. That's true in Germany, in France, in America, even in Japan.

Coming back to my original example of the French candidate,

his challenge is to go from imagination to reality. For the Dutch, it's the other way around. We call it dilemma reconciliation.

Do you see interculturalists moving toward dilemma reconciliation?

Not really. I live in Amsterdam where 60% of people under 18 don't have Dutch parents. So the majority is diverse — Dutch, Moroccan, German, Turkish, Italian, what have you. We can explain, Turks are like this, Moroccans are like that. So what? What we need is a paradigm that connects them. That's what my company is all about. When we do our workshops, participants say "Wow, dilemma reconciliation is what we need!" Clients understand we not only offer a model for showing differences, but an approach toward dealing with the difference.

I have to laugh when I go to conferences, it's all about what's the best model. And I'm thinking "Are you still at that stage? You still don't get it?"

In my opinion, if you look at our field in the last 30 years there hasn't been a major breakthrough in thinking. In academia, it's peanuts what they do today. They quote each other in great admiration and don't allow any criticism.

What we need is to have a fundamental discussion on how we can get the bi-polar models into a third way of combining.

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Fons Trompenaars with the English actor and comedy writer John Cleese, from whom he learned that humour is essentially the result of two opposing logics becoming both logical.



Who cares what model you use. Give me insights on how to deal with the differences. I would love to discuss what is the best model and it will be a wonderful discussion. But I also want to have a discussion on what are the next steps. Third-culture reality is dilemma reconciliation.

We had a time where the half logics we developed in the US, France, Nigeria and Japan were OK for local people because they stayed home. Today we need to develop a paradigm that works in multi-cultural groups. We have to go beyond linear thinking and think about how to develop trans-cultural competence, the competence to recognize, respect, reconcile and realize cultural differences. A competence model that doesn't include the competence to connect different viewpoints is useless.

How does SIETAR fit into all this?

I think SIETAR can play a very important role but it should go beyond following an existing pattern. I went to a national SIETAR event recently and was dumbstruck at how people are still explaining cultural differences. It's a bit like going to a doctors' conference where they all smoke. I told them they had to become more effective at dealing with those differences. Cultural awareness helps but let's not exaggerate its importance.

In SIETAR we need to practice what we preach. We need

to say "It's wonderful to have different viewpoints. Let's combine them and reconcile dilemmas."

We have responsibilities to the world. All the problems we are facing — wars, religious conflicts — have to do with intercultural issues. Let's have a good discussion and let's not exclude people. Even if you don't reconcile all the dilemmas, at least you're in a dialogue between cultures. In the long run, it will certainly help.

Last question: Is there anyone else who has been a source of inspiration, apart from the intercultural thinkers?"

I often write with Neil Young's music in the background. The combination of hard rock, soft acoustics and great lyrics is overwhelming. I had the privilege of meeting him on the boardwalk in Santa Cruz in 1978 and after a concert in Rotterdam three years later. In 2001 I gave him the first copy of 21 Leaders for the 21st Century--it's dedicated to the "ever inspiring" Mr. Young.

There's also John Cleese. We did a series of workshops together a few years and he taught me that humor is essentially the result of two opposing logics both becoming logical. It's an important message for organizations like Sietar.

Interview conducted by Patrick Schmidt

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