

Nancy Adler



A conversation with one of the foremost authorities on cross-cultural management

Thirty years ago, cross-cultural management was virtually an unknown field. It was widely assumed that American techniques were state-of-the-art and therefore could be applied to run any company anywhere in the world; saying otherwise was tantamount to heresy.

In the mid-1970s, Nancy Adler was beginning her PhD in management. She already sensed that global complexity couldn't be reduced to American assumptions of universality. She began researching how culture affects global business behavior and chose to write her doctoral thesis on re-entry transitions.

Her research was highly praised, leading several U.S. universities to offer her a professorship...on the condition that she agree not to teach "that intercultural stuff" to their students. But McGill University — in bilingual, bicultural Montreal — appreciated the importance of her work. McGill hired Nancy to teach cross-cultural management, an approach that has since become a staple of MBA programs worldwide.

Her first book, International Dimensions of Organizational Behavior, hit the mark. A million-seller, now in its fifth edition, it's become the standard reference on how the various dimensions of culture impact the managers' and organization's behavior worldwide.

Adler went on to conduct research on female leaders—presidents and prime ministers of countries and CEOs of global firms — as well as on what supports successful cross-cultural leadership. In a highly unusual convergence, she now integrates artistic approaches into management education and executive seminars. Drawing on her passion for painting, she found that art allows managers to reflect, to move beyond the "limiting, dehydrated language and behavior of traditional management".

Her latest book, Leadership Insight, is a journal, combining words of wisdom from world leaders, images of her paintings, and blank pages for readers to add their own insights, whether verbal or visual.

Author of ten books and more than 125 articles, Adler is also a first-class communicator. She was named "Outstanding Senior Interculturalist" by SIETAR in 1991 and has received McGill's Distinguished Teacher in Management award...twice!

Nancy is from an intercultural family (Austrian mother, American father). Her mother was one of the few members of the family who escaped and survived World War II. Even with this history, her parents managed to envelope their children in a "bubble of love", which provided them with the impetus to pursue their dreams and also with the compassion with which to understand them.

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As a child, Nancy Adler received a solid classical music education in violin, certainly not part of the 1960s California culture.



Her perspective was influenced by the California culture she grew-up in: “laid-back” values, combined with a striving for excellence, that has led to innovation and, in some cases, radical change. In her family’s home, the music of the Beach Boys and The Doors played against a backdrop of a classical music, with both Nancy and her sister playing violin from the time they were children.

Wanting to know more about what made her atypical, I began the interview with her early upbringing:

What experiences in your childhood steered you into the intercultural field?

In order to understand my interest in intercultural studies, you have to view both sides of my family. My mom is from Vienna and my father is American, which meant I grew up in an intercultural home.

I remember one particular incident when I was just starting elementary school. On the first day, like the rest of the children, I brought my lunchbox. My favorite sandwich was pumpernickel bread with cream cheese and olives. I sat down for lunch with the other children and they all started laughing at me because I was eating a dark bread sandwich. All of the other children had white bread sandwiches with peanut butter and jelly or baloney.

I returned home upset because my classmates were laughing at me and my sandwich. So my mother, who wanted me to be happy, bought white bread and peanut butter and jelly. At school the next day, I proudly took out my sandwich, ate my first bite, and immediately decided it tasted awful.

After school that day, I told my mom I hated the white bread. She responded by saying, “OK, what you need to do tomorrow is explain to your friends that dark bread is ‘very special bread’.” The new description worked instantly. Now the other children all wanted to taste my special black-bread sandwich. From then on, my mother had to send me to school with extra sandwiches!

My mother, being an immigrant, figured out what I needed to do to fit in. Not going into the melting-pot; I was not going to attempt to be exactly like ‘the locals’. Rather, the question was, how can I stay me without threatening the other children? From the perspective that you and I have today, we can easily decode what was going on. What I was doing was taking a foreign object (black bread) and explaining it to “the natives”. As opposed to them continuing to think that black bread was weird and awful, I (with the help of my mother) turned the bread into something special. The children immediately became comfortable with it; the bread was now interesting, rather than “foreign”.

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McGill University, located in bi-lingual Montreal, was the first institution to recognize the importance of Dr. Adler's work on cross-cultural management.



Were there other intercultural experiences?

There were many. Because my mother was Viennese, the arts and culture were very important to her. Although my family didn't have much money (and certainly not enough to spend on symphony tickets), my mother discovered that the Los Angeles Philharmonic offered free dress-rehearsal concerts on Wednesdays that she could take my sister, brother and me to. None of the neighborhood kids had ever gone to a classical music concert, so she always invited some of our friends! Once again, it became a special adventure--going to hear classical music—at a time when classical music was certainly not part of mainstream California culture.

Both my sister and I took violin lessons, starting when we were very little all. The talent, however, went to my sister. She became quite good and her son is now a professional violinist.

My mother also regularly took us art museums. Those experiences influenced me profoundly, as I am now both an artist and a professor. From an intercultural perspective, my mother was constantly capturing what was precious about having grown up in Vienna and passed it on to us within the context of America's culture.

Being polite and speaking correctly is another example of

an early childhood influence. In general, there is a higher level of formality in Europe than in the United States. As children, we were taught to speak correctly and politely, in a way that is more common in Europe than in California. A constant refrain in our home was, "Don't use the word 'yeah'. Civilized people don't speak like that!" In our home, any time you said 'yeah' instead of yes, you had to put a penny in the small jar my parents had placed on the table. The rule applied to our friends as well as to us. Every few months, my parents would buy us ice cream or something else special with the money. Although this was the opposite of California's informal culture, all our friends knew that they needed to use proper language in our home..

When I reflect on my childhood, I realize that it gave me a very good grounding for my later writing and speaking. Today, when I lecture to international groups, they often comment that I'm easy to understand. I don't tend to use contractions or slur my words. It comes in part from learning English from my mother, who spoke it as a foreign language.

Would you say this contributed to you receiving two Professor-of-the-year awards?

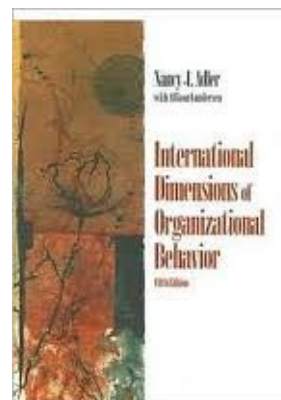
That explains part of it, but, if I were to use our cross-cultural vocabulary, I'd say that the more important piece is making ideas easy to understand. Luckily, I was coached that the most important aspect of teaching is what people understand

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Her book *'International Dimensions of Organizational Behavior'*, first published in 1986, has become a standard work for international MBA studies.



and learn, not simply what is presented. So, instead of acting like a more traditional academic (“I’m smart about this topic and I’m going to give you a lecture on what I’m smart about”), I always try to start with what the audience is most interested in; what they have questions about. I try very hard to use everyday language rather than academic jargon.

Using the terminology of “push-pull”, I try to create pull strategies. Ideally, the audience should want to pull from me what they most want to learn, rather than me attempting to simply push what I know towards them. I therefore often use questions – similar to the way you started this interview (with “Why would a child steer toward the cross-cultural?”) The art is to have the audience ask itself, “What cross-cultural skills do I need?” “What can I contribute to the world using my cross-cultural skills?”

I wrote *International Dimensions of Organizational Behavior* for the first cross-cultural course I taught at McGill in the early 1980s. Each chapter was a module in the seminar. When I designed the course, I imagined that the people listening to my lectures and reading the book were intelligent people who knew absolutely nothing about the topic. It was my job to get them excited and knowledgeable about cross-cultural management.

This is quite different from traditional university teaching.

Yes, it is. Perhaps this is another influence of California culture. California traditionally has had considerably less hierarchy—with more of a learning culture than an expert culture—both in comparison to much of Europe and to traditional academia. It is not surprising that Silicon Valley flourished in California.

I was raised and educated in California. I received all three of my university degrees from the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA). During that entire period, I was inside of California culture. I remember taking a freshman course at UCLA called “The Jew and the Changing American Society”. The course, with hundreds of students enrolled, was presented by a psychologist, sociologist, historian, and rabbi. Their purpose was to give us skills at making sense of contemporary society. It wasn’t a traditional course in which students assume that the professor (or the textbook writer) already knows all the answers. Rather, the fundamental premise of the course was a question: how do we understand contemporary society. Everyone contributed their expertise and perspective, professors and students alike, to try to help us collectively make sense of reality.

You did your PhD on the re-entry process, which in the mid-70s was an unknown topic. Could you tell us a little more about how you came to focus on that topic?

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Her latest book, "Leadership Insight", takes an artistic approach to management education. It encourages leaders to reflect and express their thoughts and feelings visually or verbally.



In the 1970s, the field of intercultural management didn't exist. The only international management topics that were taught were international finance and marketing. For instance, at a very basic level, international marketing taught that, with the advent of competition from Fuji, Eastman Kodak needed to use the local language on their film boxes in non-English speaking countries. Very, very basic understandings.

At that time, international organizational behavior wasn't taught. Cross-cultural leadership, cross-cultural team building, cross-cultural negotiations...none of these fields existed. However, even though the field did not yet exist as an academic discipline, my MBA experience as an intern with the Ministry of Culture in Israel (and then getting caught in the Yom Kippur War), left me highly motivated to figure out how cross-cultural interaction and transitions really worked.

When I suggested doing my doctoral dissertation on re-entry – on how to manage the cross-cultural transition back home from a foreign assignment – UCLA's management faculty was surprised. Nobody had ever conducted a study on re-entry. The cross-cultural literature at the time focused primarily on outbound transitions and cultural shock. UCLA made a deal with me: I could study re-entry if I also became an expert on research methodology. UCLA assumed that if I was going to research a topic that was so new that it didn't even exist yet, then it was particularly important that

I become knowledgeable in the best available approaches to research. So I became well-trained in both quantitative and qualitative methodology, which has served me very well throughout my career.

I formed my Phd committee with professors with a broad range of expertise. I chose a top international business professor, a cross-cultural psychologist, an anthropologist, and even went to the East-West Center in Hawaii to study with Richard Brislin, one of the luminaries of cross-cultural studies. At that time, the cross-cultural knowledge that was beginning to come into management was primarily comparative. The very notion of intercultural interaction, rather than comparison, that I was interested in, simply didn't exist.

The field's emphasis on comparison was understandable, but not helpful. Early academic studies on international organizational behavior were based primarily on anthropology. Anthropologists' models have historically been primarily descriptive or comparative. Anthropologists usually ask the question 'How can we understand the people who live in this particular place?' Anthropologists rarely investigate what happens when people from one culture interact with those from another culture.

So, if I understand you correctly, you were increasingly

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*"We all need to transcend parochial tendencies
(as illustrated in this 18th century British caricature)
and see the world from a global perspective."*



moving toward what we today would label as intercultural questions. "How can people from around the world work effectively together?"

Correct. I was not simply interested in "How do we understand people from other cultures?" I wanted to know how people from different parts of the world could succeed in getting things done together. How could they negotiate together? How could they work effectively in teams together? What kinds of leadership worked best when teams included people from various cultures?

I was strongly drawn toward management models because business has the overarching goal of getting done what needs to get done. There has been stronger pressure on business to interact effectively cross-culturally than on other sectors of society. The business model invokes such questions as: 'OK, if, as a European company we are merging with a Japanese firm, how do we get the work done?' The underlying assumption is that there is always an answer; the challenge is to find it.

Let's turn to "International Dimensions of Organizational Behavior". Were you thinking of writing it when you started at McGill?

No, the concept for the book came about accidentally. I was invited to my first Academy of International Business meeting and my new colleagues introduced me to David

Ricks, editor-in-chief of the "International Dimensions" book series. When he learned I was developing a cross-cultural management course, he invited me to write a book on international organizational behavior. The first edition was published in 1985. Initially, it had no competition, as there was no field yet. Perhaps the reason *International Dimensions of Organizational Behavior* has done so well over the last 25 years is its message: that we all need to transcend parochialism — no matter which country we come from — and see the world from a global perspective.

What do you feel are the challenges facing the SIETAR movement in our globalized world?

It's a fabulous question. I think an analogy is the pumpernickel sandwich I described earlier. For many people, when they hear the term cross-cultural, they confuse melting-pot and domestic-multiculturalism strategies. So, the first question for SIETAR and the field is clarity: what is the field aiming at? Is it aiming at everybody attempting to be the same? Or at everybody, no matter how different they are, being able to live and work successfully together? Those are two very different models. SIETAR's primary contribution have been in using the later perspective.

The second fundamental cross-culture challenge for SIETAR and the field is: How do societies recognize differences and use them to build something better – better

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Sarajevo, prior to the Yugoslavian Civil War, had one of the most positive network of relationships among Christians, Muslims and Jews.



teams, better organizations, better communities, better countries, and a better world. Implicit in that challenge is the need for education. Today, both in Europe and North America, issues of class and politics are now confounded with cultural dynamics. Many immigrants, due to class and poverty issues, have not had access to adequate education, language learning, or good jobs. That does not mean that immigrants cannot contribute. It does mean that people without access to society's resources, including, most fundamentally, a good education, find it very difficult to contribute, no matter who they are.

Once a society establishes inclusive systems of good education, including the learning of languages, it can focus on supporting people in working effectively together. We need to ask what we, as a global society, can learn from the communities in which inclusive strategies have worked? If, for example, we were to study Sarajevo prior to the invasion by outside forces, we would immediately learn that it had one of the most positive networks of relationships among Christians, Muslims and Jews, with the three religious communities successfully working together within individual institutions and the community as a whole. It was fabulous, yet much of the world fails to recognize why it was so successful.

We have a dangerous tendency to blame problems on

others, and particular, on those we consider "outsiders". In the economically-privileged countries of Europe and North America, for example, we have seen an increase in the popularity of anti-immigrant sentiment and legislation. In most cases, "blame" masquerades as problem-solving. The question we need to ask ourselves is "How do we, as a global society, achieve and maintain inclusive lifestyles in flourishing societies? It's dysfunctional to blame and counterproductive to accept such simplistic statements as "The reason we're losing ground is because of immigrants" as problem-solving.

I'm thinking along the same lines. My feeling is that economically-advanced societies aren't really willing to put in the effort and resources to make multiculturalism work. Those in power say, "No, we can't afford that. We aren't going to raise taxes for these immigrants!"

Unfortunately, such attitude are riddled with fallacious thinking. They assume, for instance, that immigrants will simply go back to where they came from and not cause 'my country' any more problems. Similarly, they assume that rising unemployment and levels of violence in one country will stay in that country and not impact their neighbor's economy or society. As country after country is discovering, the assumption that isolation will cure everything may have worked in the 19th century, prior to global inter-connectivity, but such assumptions and the behaviors they foster no longer work in the 21st century

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“The fundamental cross-cultural question is how do we recognize differences, values and build them into something better.”

What would you recommend SIETARians do?

I would say again what I recommended at the end of the speech I gave at the SIETAR Europa Congress in Granada: “Intercultural skills are more important today than they have ever been before.”

Multiculturalism is not simply about understanding: “Oh, I recognize you’re different; that’s okay, you’re nice.” Rather, it requires that we ask the question “What is the advantage of working together with people who are different from me?” “How do we leverage our differences to the benefit of all of us?” For the world to thrive, it no longer has a choice not to succeed at multiculturalism.

Unlike what some politicians would have us believe, we cannot throw out the cultural diversity that exists in the world, nor make people who are different from us disappear. We cannot throw out immigrants and assume that we will have a successful society. That’s not an equation that has worked or will work; it’s founded on a fundamentally false premise.

One of the next steps for SIETAR is to consistently adopt a multi-level perspective, simultaneously considering events and dynamics from the perspective of the world, region, country, and organization, team and individual.

SIETAR has tended to be better at offering explanations for working effectively at the micro (individual) level; and at developing skills for individuals and teams. SIETAR has focused less frequently on developing the skills and understanding needed for working successfully with organizations and their overall strategy, with countries in achieving their overall goals, and with what is the most important for the world as a whole. There is no question that if SIETAR broadens its emphasis on historic, micro-level competencies, it can make significant contributions in the 21st century.

If, however, SIETAR remains circumscribed at the micro-level, it risks becoming irrelevant. That would be a shame, since, to state it from the perspective of a kindergartner: the world needs people to learn to play nicely with each other.

Interviewed by Patrick Schmidt

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