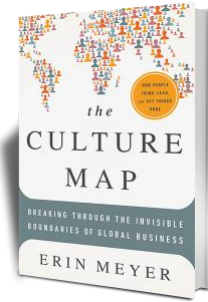Someone recommended Erin Meyer's "The Culture Map" to me, so I borrowed a copy from the National Library and read it. I've since decided to purchase the book, and this brief review shows why.

Erin writes in an informal, down-to-earth manner and provides for a really easy read. After the Introduction portion setting the stage for the rest of the book, she plunges right into the eight scales outlining different areas of intercourse common to all of us. These eight scales are:

1. Communicating: low-context vs. high-context

2. Evaluating: direct negative feedback vs. indirect negative feedback

3. Persuading: principles-first vs. applications-first

4. Leading: egalitarian vs. hierarchical

5. Deciding: consensual vs. top-down

6. Trusting: task-based vs. relationship-based

7. Disagreeing: confrontational vs. avoids confrontation

8. Scheduling: linear-time vs. flexible-time

All eight chapters, as well as the Introduction, are liberally sprinkled with stories about Erin's own cross-cultural experiences, and they include both success stories as well as initial shenanigans. I won't describe any of the stories here, so that you can enjoy them for yourself, but more than one definitely made me chuckle. I do want to emphasize one of Erin's points here, which is that of what she calls *cultural relativity*. People from a certain culture may see themselves as high-context on the communicating scale, but may be seen as low-context by people placed to the right of themselves, that is, people who are rated as more high-context than themselves. It is important to remember this.

What I think about the concepts presented.

I used to think that culture mattered a lot less than the "Character Quotients" and personality preferences of individuals. Erin has managed to change my mind where that is concerned. Reading the book and relating what I read to my own experiences as well as to anecdotes gathered over the years, I do realize that culture does have a lot to do with how we all communicate with and relate to one another. It really depends on what level you're looking at. Think about what we see all around us every day. Then imagine taking flight to 31,000 feet and looking down and around us. Then go to the stratosphere, look down at the Earth and then out into space. Go out to the edge of our own Solar System and look in. Now look out. Go to the edge of the Milky Way. Now go out into intergalactic space. Think about how different things look when we are at different places. Even levels of perspective fade away. Now, let's start our journey back to Earth. Plunge into the atmosphere and start taking winged flight

instead of burning up. Come back to the place where we started. Now plunge into our right hand. Go past the skin, nerves, tendons, muscles. Go in some more. See the intricate workings of just one of our cells. That's yet another viewing point, a place from where to observe. Things look different from different places.

Looking at how people interact from a cultural perspective is like looking down from the stratosphere toward Earth. We start seeing cultures, geographical locations, as distinct entities, each with a life of its own. Are there similarities? Yes. Are there differences? Of course. Erin has merely shown us that each culture is like a unique organism, with a life of its own. Manifesting each of the eight scales in its own way.

Communicating: low-context vs. high-context

I think that the greater the level of intimacy, the greater the tendency for a culture towards high-context type of communication. Great levels of intimacy are achieved only by members of a culture deliberately being open to both speaking as well as listening. Members must have worked together or else interacted in some way for some time before deep intimacy is achieved. Where rudimentary cognitive skills and processes are concerned, the development of "Standard Operating Procedures" or SOPs, as they are often called, is practically expected. However, as we go up the scale of complexity where communicating is concerned, members must deliberately "Say what you mean and mean what you say" in the initial phases, before genuine intimacy is reached. Only then can members gravitate toward a high-context style. Having said that, applying the Law of Entropy here, it is essential that, even in a normally high-context culture, some amount of low-context communication would be essential in order to ensure that what is thought of as high-context, as in "You should know that", would remain as high-context communication.

Evaluating: direct negative feedback vs. indirect negative feedback
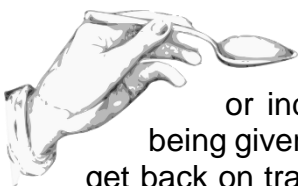
Here it is essential to ask the question "Does he need to hear that or do I need to say it?" Whether feedback is given directly or indirectly is not as important as the reason why the feedback is being given. Am I giving you feedback because I genuinely want to help you get back on track instead of falling off a cliff, or do I just need to let off steam? Personally, I prefer to give direct negative feedback in the context of us helping each other get better. The American preference for indirect negative feedback has been influenced by, I think, the false notion of the "sandwich" method of giving feedback, where a "praise" is given, followed by the negative feedback, followed by a "praise" to make the "medicine" easier to swallow. That's a baloney sandwich to me! Better to render praise where praise is due and to give negative feedback when that is due, too! What do you think?

Persuading: principles-first vs. applications-first

This is similar to the low-context versus high-context style of communicating. Cultures that prefer applications-first persuasion already know, or think that they know, what the underlying principles are when presenting their applications. Cultures with a principles-first approach to persuasion might be able to move toward more of an applications-first style once all members are certain that everyone is already familiar with the said principles.

Leading: egalitarian vs. hierarchical

The style of leadership any culture adopts is not important. **How** the said culture adopts its preferred form of leadership, whether egalitarian or hierarchical, says something about how much its leaders value its people. If a culture tends to be more egalitarian, is it because its leaders wish to give as many opportunities for leadership development to its people, or is it because leadership has absconded responsibility for making tough decisions? If a culture tends toward the hierarchical, is it because the leadership, recognizing that their people need more guidance as they rise toward their own greatness, treat with them as parents would young children? Or are they more hierarchical because they want to remain in power? You discern!

Deciding: consensual vs. top-down

When I first saw the "deciding" scale next to the "leading" scale, I was wondering why there were two different scales, for is not decision-making one of the natural functions of leadership? Reading further helped me to understand why Erin kept them separate. Most cultures that are more on the egalitarian side of leadership also tend to be more consensual when it comes to deciding, and that pattern also holds for hierarchical leadership being more top-down in the way they make decisions.

Erin's example of Americans being more egalitarian and yet being top-down in decision-making, and of the Germans being more hierarchical, yet more consensual, was something totally new to me. I immediately thought of the *Bundeswehr's* emphasis on *Auftragstaktik* and *Innere Fuhrung* as manifestations of a benevolent hierarchy wanting its children to develop and grow up. The American way seems to be "You're all grown up, and you know what to do. I want these results, you go get them for me." Either way, again, it is the **why** that is of paramount importance. Being aware that egalitarian/ top-down and hierarchical/ consensual do exist would certainly help if we ever find ourselves helping teams which are so composed!

Trusting: task-based vs. relationship-based

Developing trust is an essential in any relationship. Erin has found that in different cultures, people tend to trust each other either on the basis of demonstrated competence and dependability or on the perceived quality of the relationships that have been developed. I think that initial trust should be based on demonstrated competence and dependability, and that high quality relationships ought to spring up from that manifested soundness. However, when dealing with people who will develop trust based on the perceived quality of the relationship, one has to invest in that direction first. I found this to be a very helpful point for me personally, since I have been brought up to always put my money where my mouth is!

Disagreeing: confrontational vs. avoids confrontation

For me, it is not so much whether or not a "confrontational" or "non-confrontational" style is preferred in any given culture. What matters is whether the disagreement in question is about raising the bar. Any other type of disagreement is a sign of pettiness and a symptom calling for attention to a deeper issue. So, whether people yell at each other or speak euphemistically, the intent must always be that things need to get better around here!

Having said that, it is very important to apply the understanding that, in confrontational cultures, don't take things to heart, and in non-confrontational cultures, walk softly and carry a big velvet stick.

Scheduling: linear-time vs. flexible-time
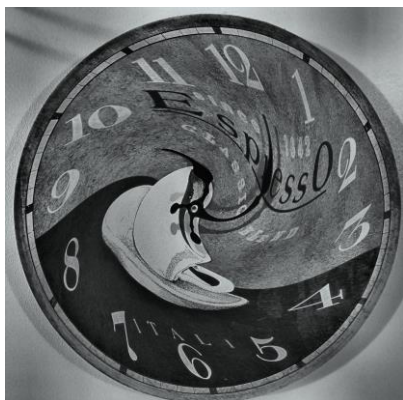
Having lived most of my life in linear-time mode, I loathe tardiness. To me, it is a sign of disrespect. Erin has helped me see that, in cultures where flexible-time is the norm, deep relationships help to assure the one who might be waiting that the other party is not being tardy, but has been held up by circumstances truly beyond his control and is doing his utmost to do the right thing by you. Had I realized this earlier, I might not have had to endure the negative feelings that always biled up whenever I had to wait for someone else. A few relationships could have been made better as a result.

Now, having said that, I don't think that people on linear-time mode are absolutely inflexible where timings are concerned. Keeping one's ultimate goal in sight helps to offset the effects of being thrown off one's schedule, especially if it was effected by someone else!

To Sum Up

I think "The Culture Map" is a good read for you, whether or not you need to deal with cross-cultural teams. Even within cultures, group subcultures exist and applying similar principles to what Erin has elaborated so well would very likely be helpful!