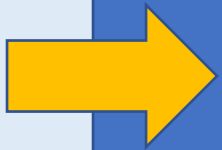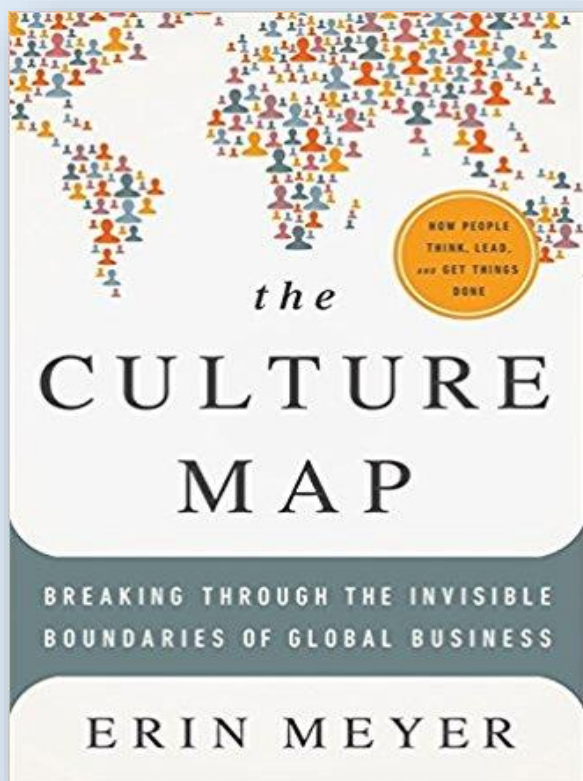# Executive Book Summary

The Culture Map

BREAKING THROUGH THE INVISIBLE BOUNDARIES OF GLOBAL BUSINESS

By Erin Meyer

OVERVIEW

Erin Mayer's book is focused on how successful leaders can navigate through the complexities of cultural differences, which indirectly can impact their work. The author explains how leaders can improve relationships with their international partners by analyzing the following cultural aspects: communication, evaluation, persuasion, trust, disagreement, leading, scheduling, deciding. Meyer presents one scale for each of these aspects, describing different trend in different cultures. The author shows how different cultures can place themselves in opposite positions about the same aspect. Finally, strategies are suggested and offered in order to deal with these cross-cultural differences.

EADM 892

Executive Book Summary

Lisa Focardi

November 24, 2018

Erin Meyer is an American author and professor living in Paris. As professor, she works at INSEAD, an international business school with campuses in France, Singapore and Abu Dhabi. She is specialized in the field of cross-cultural management, international negotiations and multi-cultural leadership. During her life, she lived and worked in Africa, Europe and United States. Her main research interests are focused on communication structures used in different countries. Meyer has worked with several executives all around the world to decode how cross-cultural complexities impact their work life. Moreover, she has trained them to deal more effectively across these differences. Meyer was selected by Thinkerrs50 as one of the 50 most influential business thinkers of 2017.

THE CULTURAL ASPECTS:
1. Communicating: low-contest vs. high-contest
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

"Today, whether we work in Düsseldorf or Dubai, Brasília or Beijing, New York or New Delhi, we are all part of a global network (real or virtual, physical or electronic) where success requires navigating through wildly different cultural realities. Unless we know how to decode other cultures and avoid easy-to-fall-into cultural traps, we are easy prey to misunderstanding, needless conflict, and ultimate failure." (Mayer, 2014).

In this chapter, Meyer describes the different levels of communication used by people from different cultural backgrounds. The author shows, through some experiences made around the world, how the skill involved in being an effective communicator vary from one culture to another. Meyer presents a scale, identifying two main opposite ways to consider a good communication, ranging from low context and high context. Meyer (2014) describes it as:

- **LOW-CONTEXT**: "*Good communication is precise, simple and clear. Messages are expressed and understood at face falue. Repetition is appreciated if it helps clarify the communication*" (p.39).

- **HIGH-CONTEXT**: "*Good communication is sophisticated, nuanced and layered. Messages are both spoken and read between the lines. Messages are often implied but plainly expressed*" (p.39). FIGURE 1.1.

US	Netherlands	Finland	Spain	Italy	Singapore	Iran	China	Japan
Australia	Germany	Denmark	Poland	Brazil	Mexico	France	India	Kenya	Korea
Canada		UK		Argentina	Russia		Saudi Arabia	Indonesia

Low-context ←————————————————————————→ High-context

As a way of example, Meyer describes the differences related to communication between Asian cultures and Anglo-Saxon cultures. In many Asian countries, including India, communication is made by implicit and unexpressed messages. On the other hand, communication in the United States and other English-speaking countries is more explicit and direct.

Moreover, the author describes that in some contexts being a good listener is a fundamental skill. This is the case of Japan where people learn to communicate between the lines and to listen between the lines as well when other are speaking. Therefore, they have to be able to understand the atmosphere, trying to catch whether someone is implicitly communicating disagreement or discomfort. Japanese use the expression "one who cannot read the air" to describe a person who does not have the ability to read between the lines.

CHAPTER TWO:

EVALUATING

In the second chapter, the author explains the differencies in various parts of the world related to giving effective performance evaluation and negative feedbacks. Meyer explains that people from all cultures believe in constructive criticism. However, the author reflects on the fact that the same behaviours are considered construictive in some cultural contexts but in some other cultural contexts are considered distructive. For instance, French people give negative feedbacks more directly compared to the American people who are more cryptically indirect with negative criticism. Moreover, the author shows that listening carefully to the type of words people use can help us to understand how a culture handles negative feedbacks. This is the case of Germany where people use "upgraders", which are words that make the negative feedback stronger (e.g., *abosultely, totally)*. In other countries like the UK, people use more "downgrades", words that soften the criticism, for instance "*kind of, sort of"*. British people, in fact, use frequelty downgrades and this aspect creates confusion among listeners from other cultures.

Also, the authour presents an evaluating scale ralated to the use of negative feedback in different cultures. The scale describes the trend between two edges: direct negative feedback and indirect negative feedback, as shown in Figure 2.1.

FIGURE 2.1.

Meyer (2014) describes the two main points.

DIRECT NEGATIVE FEEDBACK: "*Negative feedback is provided frankly and honesty. Negative messages stand alone, not softened by positive ones. Absolute descriptors are often used (totally inappropriate, completely unprofessional) when criticizing. Criticism may be given to an individual in front of a group*" (p.69).

INDIRECT NEGATIVE FEEDBACK: "*Negative feedback is provided softly and diplomatically. Positive messages are used to wrap negative ones. Qualifying descriptors are often used (sort of inappropriate, slightly unprofessional) when criticizing. Criticism is given only in private*" (p.69).

The author combinetes the Communicating scale with Evaluating scale giving us four quadrants. As shown in Figure 2.2: low-context and direct with negative feetback, low-context and indirect with negative feedback, high-context and direct with negative feedback, high-context and indirect negative feedback.

LOW-CONTEXT AND DIRECT NEGATIVE FEEDBACK: Cultures in this quadrant values explicit communication and, for this reason, they are easy to decode.

HIGHT-CONTEXT AND DIRECT NEGATIVE FEEDBACK: These cultures have the ability to speak and listen beetween the lines. However, they are direct when they give a negative feetback.

LOW-CONTEXT AND INDIRECT NEGATIVE FEEDBACK: Cultures in this quadrant like Americans use precise and simple communication. However, they soften negative criticism with positive messages.

HIGHT-CONTEXT AND INDIRECT NEGATIVE FEEDBACK: The communication is sophisticated, nuanced. In this case, any negative feedback should be given in private (Meyer,2014).

FIGURE 2.2.
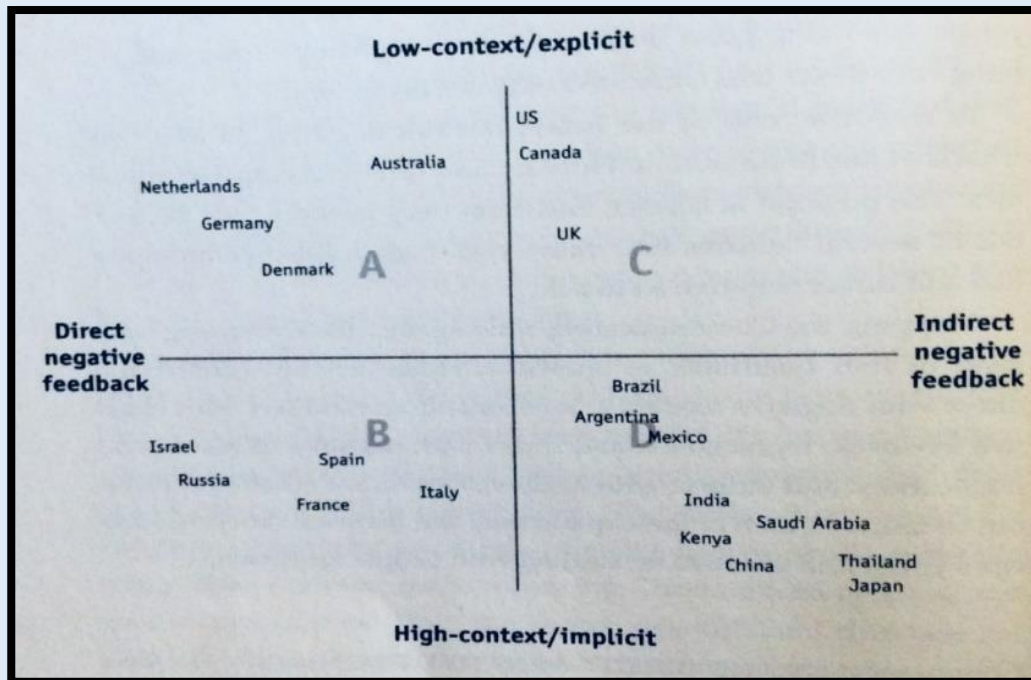
The author explains that particular cultures can be found in each of these quadrants, and there are different strategies to deal with people from countries in each quadriant. For instance, Meyer suggests some strategies for dealing with people from quadrant C (low-context and indirect negative feedback) like Americans and Canadians. She suggests not to express the negative feedback until you have also expressed the things you appreciate, to try being balanced in the amount of positive and negative feedback you give and, finally, to talk about the cultural differences that explain more your communication style (Meyer, 2014).

CHAPTER THREE:

PERSUADING

In this chapter, the author describes the aspect related to the ability of persuading others to support our ideas. The author explains that this ability depends, in particular, on the way people build their arguments. The author presents some of her experiences showing us that the art of persuasion is based on the culture. Meyer (2014) identifies two main styles of reasonig: principles-first and applications-first.

PRINCIPLES-FIRST: *"It is also called deductive reasoning. Individuals are trained to first develop the theory or complex concept before presenting fact, statement or opinion. The preference is to begin a message or report by building a theoretical argument before moving on to a conclusion, The conceptual principles underlying each situation are valued"*(p.96).

APPLICATIONS-FIRST: *"It is called also inductive reasoning. Individuals are trained to begin with facts, statement or opinion and later add concepts to back up or explain the conclusion as necessary. Discussion are approached in pratica, concrete manner. Theoretical or philosophical discussions are avoied in a business enviroment"*(p.96).

Meyer believes that most of the people are able to use both the approaches. However, people are influenced by their culture's educational structure. Meyer provides some examples. One of the examples is about teaching and learning mathematics at school. The first approach, "principles-first", enfasizes more the use of theoretical concepts and less on their applications. That means a learner spends 80 percent of the time on the concepts and 20 percent of the time applying those principles to concrete problems. That is the case of the school system in Western Europe, Latin America and Germanic countries. On other hand, mathematics taught by using the "applications-first" approach focuses first on learning the formula and praticing its application. Then, this approach focuses to understand the theoretical concept. In terms of time, this results in spending 80 percent of the time on

focusing on tools and how to apply them, and 20 percent of the time on theoretical explanations (Meyer, 2014).

FIGURE 3.1
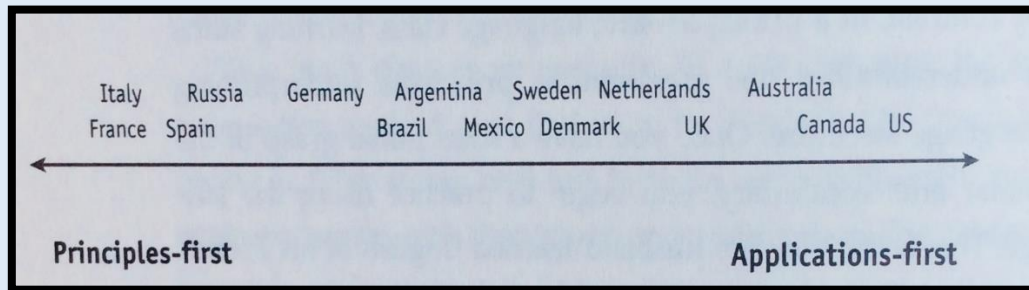
The author explains that some countries like Italy and France use principles-first approach. Other countries like Canada and US use application-first approach. Meyer presents some examples. For instance, if you have to write an email to Canadians collegues you should be direct and get the point. However, if you write an email for French or Spanish collegues you should spend more time explaining the background before jumping into the conclusion. Another example that the author describes is the one related to presentations during a conference. The author gives a piace of advice: if you make a presentation in Canada you need to show some pratical examples and people will learn from those examples. If you do a presentation in Italy first you need to explain the basis of the framework.

As we can see on the diagram, there are not Asian cultures because Asian view is completely different compared to the rest of the world. The author describes the Asian approach to persuasion, called it "holistic thinking". Through presenting different experiences, the author shows that Asian people give more attention to backgrounds and the relationship beetween the backgroungs and people compared to the Amaericans that are more focus on the people, separete from their enviroment. Consequentely, during a conversation these two different ways of thinking can create misturanderstanding between Asian and Westerners cultures. For Meyer the result could be that, Americans could think that Asians go around the key points without speak about that directely. On the other hand, Asia people could think that Americans make decision by isolating a single factor and ignoring significant interdependences (Meyer, 2014).

The author describes different ways to consider a leader and the relationship between leader and followers. The author presents different examples related to the relationship between boss and subordinates in various cultures. Meyer identifies two opposite approaches that consider the boss in a different way: egalitarian and hierarchical.

EGALITARIAN: "*The ideal distance between a boss and a subordinate is low. The best boss is a facilitator among equals. Organizational structures are flat. Communication often skips hierarchical lines*" (p.125).

HIERARCHICAL: "*The ideal distance between a boss and a subordinate is high. The best boss is a strong director who leads from the front. Status is important. Organizational structures are multilayered and fixed. Communication follows set hierarchical lines*" (p.125).

FIGURE 4.1.
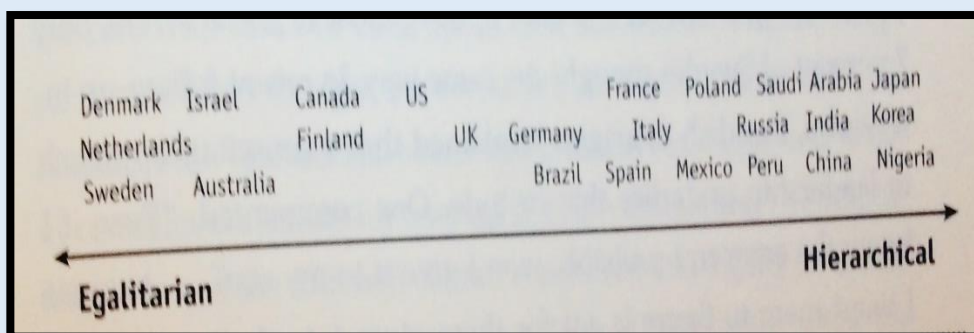
Most of the North European countries are in opposite point compared to Asian countries. However, there are also many different inside the European countries because they have a different history that has contributed to create different approaches of leading. The author presents a clear example of this differences talking about a man from Denmark. He used to work as company's leader in Denmark where there is no distance between boss and subordinate and every decision is taken by different people, it depends on the circumstances. After many years, he went to work in Russia and he had some problems there. His friendly attitude was not appreciated by the subordinates that described him as weak and ineffective leader. The author presents some suggestions to overcome problems like that. Meyer believes that a good leader needs to know and manage both of the approaches together, understanding the cultural differences and leading differently in order to motivate the followers (Meyer, 2014).
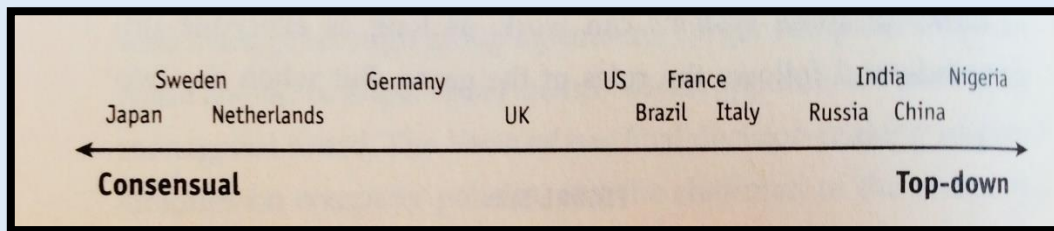
CHAPTER FIVE:
DECIDING

In this chapter, the author describes different approaches to make decision in a group or company. Meyer (2014) identifies two different approaches called *consensual* and *top-down*.

CONSENSUAL: "*Decision are made in groups through unanimous agreement*" (p.150).

TOP-DOWN: "*Decision are made by individual usually the boss*" (p.150).

FIGURE 5.1.

In a consensual culture, making decision takes more time compared to the top-down culture because everyone is consulted. The decision's moment is really important and after that, the idea's development is rapid because everybody is conscious about what to do. On the other hand, in a top-down culture the decision is made quickly by only one person. However, that decision is easy to be revisited from the others. Therefore, the idea's development goes slowly (Meyer, 2014). Meyer describes the particular case of Japan. In Japan there is a strong distance between boss and subordinates, but people spend much time taking a decision together through a long process.
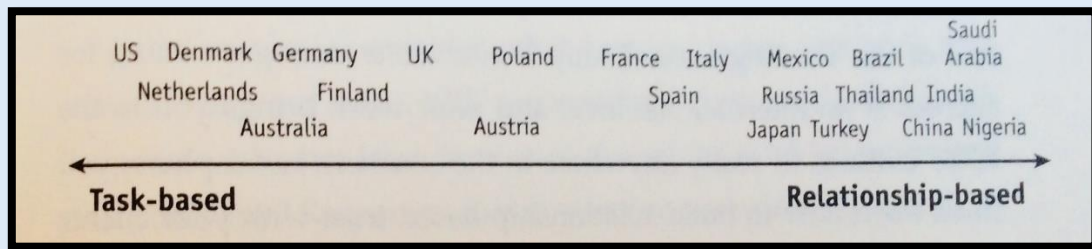
CHAPTER SIX:
TRUSTING

The author reflects about one of the most relevant elements of business: trust. The author shows that trust is created by people differently. It depends on the countries and how people develop the sense of trust for others. Meyer (2014) identifies two main approaches related to trusting: task-based which is common in the US and relationship-based which characterizes Chinese culture.

FIGURE 6.1.

US Denmark Germany   UK   Poland   France Italy   Mexico Brazil Saudi Arabia
Netherlands   Finland   Spain   Russia Thailand India
Australia   Austria   Japan Turkey   China Nigeria

←——→
Task-based   Relationship-based

TASK-BASED: "*Trust is built through business-related activities. Work relationships are built and dropped easily, based on the practicality of the situation. You do good work consistently, you are reliable. I enjoy working with you. I trust you*".

RELATIONSHIP-BASED: "*Trust is built through sharing meals, evening drinks, and visit at the coffee machine. Work relationships build up slowly over the long term. I have seen who you are at the deep level, I have shared personal time with you. I know others well who trust you. I trust you.*"

The author describes the development of trust in China. In China the business relationships are very personal, and they are built through experiences and social events lived together. Therefore, it takes sometimes for Chinese people trusting completely. On the other hand, Americans build the trust through activities only related to business. Therefore, they do not show their personal emotions.

The author presents also the different choices to communicate that can influence trust in a positive way. Meyer explains that in a task-based society, email, telephone or face to face meetings are all accept, but the message has to be clear. However, in a relation-ship based, Meyer suggests communicating as much as possible in informal settings. Then when you have built a good trusting relationship you can move to use email or other formal means of communication (Meyer, 2014).
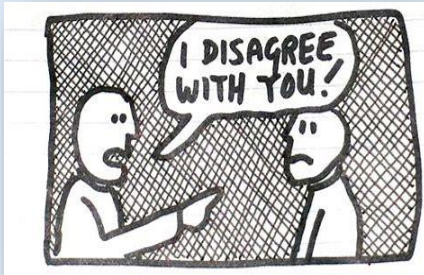
In this chapter, the author describes the differences relate to express disagreement.

Meyer (2014) presents a scale of disagreeing with two different main extremes: confrontational and avoids confrontation.

CONFRONTATIONAL: "*Disagreement and debate are positive for the team or organization. Open confrontation is appropriate and will not negatively impact the relationship*" (p.201).

AVOIDS CONFRONTATION: "*Disagreement and debate are negative for the team or organization. Open confrontation is inappropriate and will break group harmony or negatively impact in a relationship*" (p.201).

FIGURE 7.1.
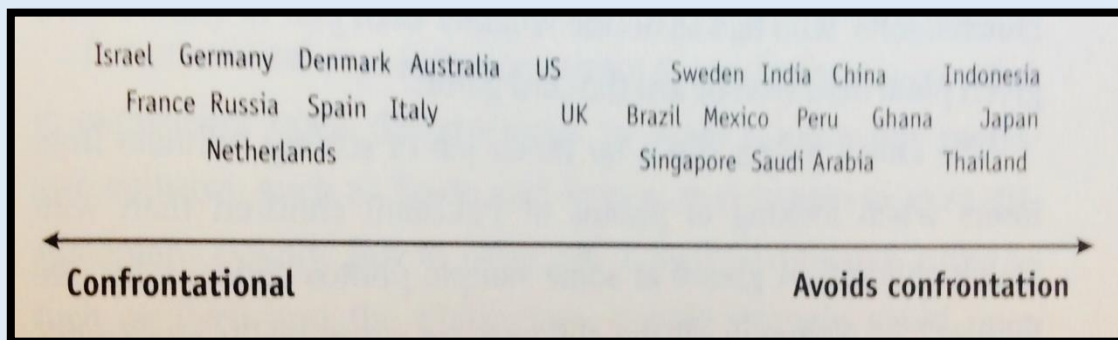
In some countries, like France or Israel, disagreeing openly is a common attitude. In other countries, like Japan and China, people prefer to avoid confrontation. Finally, in some countries, like the US expressing disagreement is something between these two extremes.

Moreover, the author presents some studies about being emotionally expressive or emotionally unexpressive. The author shows how people use their facial expression and body language through different levels. The author explains how the two aspects, disagreement and emotion, are combine in

a different way in various cultures. For examples, Germans are open to confrontation and disagreement. However, they are not emotionally expressive. Therefore, it is more complicated understanding their behavior.

CHAPTER EIGHT:

SCHEDULING

In the last chapter, Meyer describes scheduling and cross-cultural perceptions of time. Meyer (2014) identifies two main points of the scale about scheduling, called *linear-time* and *flexible-time*.

LINEAR-TIME: "*Project steps are approached in a sequential fashion, completing one task before beginning the next. One thing at a time. No interruptions. The focus is on the deadline and sticking to the schedule. Emphasis is on promptness and good organization over flexibility*" (p.227).

FLEXIBLE-TIME: "*Project steps are approached in a fluid manner, changing tasks as opportunities arise. Many things are dealt with at once and interruptions accepted. The focus is on adaptability, and flexibility is valued over organization*" (p.227).

FIGURE 8.1.
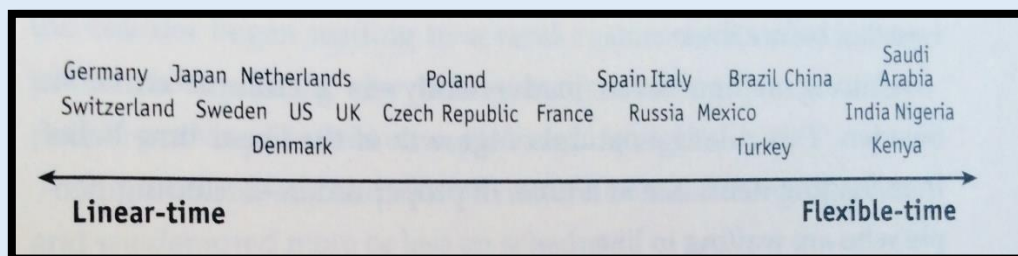
Meyer presents some examples that reflect these two different approaches. The author describes the differences about a business meeting in linear-time cultures and flexible-time cultures. A business meeting in the United States or in Germany goes following an agenda. Therefore, everybody knows

what subjects will be discussed in the meeting and in what order. Moreover, people have to respect some rules like not taking cellphone calls during the meeting or not speaking at the same time someone else is talking. In flexible-time cultures like South America or Africa, there is not expectation that the meeting will go in a linear manner. Usually, people know the agenda only before the meeting and it can change to follow a different direction. Moreover, some subgroups can be formed to discuss different subjects.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

In my opinion, "The culture map" is an extremely interesting book that everybody should read. The book can help people who work with colleagues from different countries or it can help people who work in a different cultural environment. Furthermore, I believe that this book can also help people to overcome their biases, exploring cultural differences and creating useful relationships by using them. Meyer's research describes every aspect of communication describing them in great detail. She makes use of her work experiences around the world, presenting various examples of situations, interviews, and reflections. The different scales presented by Meyer are easy to understand and they help readers to have a scientific approach to this topic. However, she does not generalize the results only investigating two main categories, but she presents specific case studies with characteristics like peculiarity and uniqueness.

References

Meyer, E. (2014). *The culture map: Breaking through the invisible boundaries of global business.* Public Affairs.