

Connecting intercultural learning with personal development: Insights from the Intercultural Readiness Check

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1 Introduction

Organizations are increasingly interested in intercultural learning interventions that combine transfer of knowledge with development of intercultural competences. To respond to these needs, we have developed the Intercultural Readiness Check (IRC; © 2001-2009 Intercultural Business Improvement), a valid and reliable questionnaire designed to assess vital intercultural competences (Brinkmann & van Weerdenburg, 2003; Brinkmann & van der Zee, 2002; van Weerdenburg & Brinkmann, 2004; van der Zee & Brinkmann, 2004). By integrating the IRC in our programs, our work has become considerably more interesting:

1. Personal feedback sessions with clients help to uncover existing strengths, subtle pitfalls, and hidden barriers to intercultural development.
2. Group profiles may reveal behavior patterns that will influence the group's performance
3. Large-scale analyses of the IRC database reveal country-specific patterns of needs that internationally operating organizations should be aware of.

Based on case studies and research findings, I will argue for systematically integrating group-based learning and individual sessions in intercultural management development, and for planning intercultural trainings, and organizational change programs, with a view to country-specific preferences for certainty.

2 The Intercultural Readiness Check

The Intercultural Readiness Check is a valid and reliable self-assessment questionnaire that assesses four vital intercultural dimensions:

IRC dimension assessed	Definition
<i>Intercultural Sensitivity</i>	The degree to which a person takes an active interest in others, their cultural background, needs and perspectives
<i>Intercultural Communication</i>	The degree to which a person actively monitors own communicative behaviours
<i>Building Commitment</i>	The degree to which a person actively influences the social environment, concerned with integrating different people and personalities
<i>Preference for Certainty (low scores desirable)</i>	The degree to which a person prefers a predictable and homogeneous environment

Answers to the IRC items are based on a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from ‘strongly disagree’ to ‘strongly agree’), ensuring independent measurement of dimensions and allowing for complex factorial analyses.

The IRC was validated by correlating respondents’ results on the IRC scales with their results on the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (van der Zee & van Oudenhoven, 2000), their answers to an 8-item International Orientation Scale, and their previous experience abroad (ranging from ‘never been abroad’ to ‘more than 2 years abroad’; see Brinkmann & van der Zee, 2002, and van der Zee & Brinkmann, 2004), for details of the validation study).

Over the past eight years, more than 13,500 people from all over the world filled in the IRC, answered key biographical questions, and filled in the International Orientation Scale. At three different cut-off points, we analyzed the database to test the reliability of scales across groups of respondents from different countries, and to gain new insights into factors impacting on the development of intercultural competences (Beirens, 2009; Kohne, 2008; van Hemert & Brinkmann, 2006/2009). These analyses confirmed the reliability of the IRC scales (van Hemert & Brinkmann, 2007), uncovered gender-, country-, experience-, and industry-specific effects (van Hemert & Brinkmann, 2009; Kohne, 2008) and confirmed the existence of a 4-factorial structure with a split-half analysis involving two separate groups of 5,000 respondents combining explorative and confirmatory factor analyses (Beirens, 2009). Together, these studies show that the IRC is a powerful tool for discovering the strengths and developmental needs of people confronted with the challenge of performing in an international work environment.

The goal of my presentation is to show that the IRC is also immensely practical.

3 Nothing is as personal as cultural learning

Our intercultural training programs are built on the intercultural competences assessed by the IRC. In the course of the program, participants receive personal written feedback on their IRC profile. In many programs, they then also have the opportunity to explore the meaning of their profile with an IRC certified trainer in a feedback session of about 30 minutes. The sessions often provide new and unexpected insights into personal barriers to intercultural development.

Case 1

One client was a manager who had worked abroad for 18 years. At the time of the intervention, his company was in the midst of a post-merger integration phase, and as a result, the manager was confronted with an exceptionally high work load and numerous changes for himself and his team.

His behavior during the program suggested that he was a reasonably sensitive person, responsive to people’s needs and not inclined to push through his own objectives at the expense of others. Given this impression, and knowing that he was a seasoned expatriate, one might have expected fairly high scores on the first IRC dimension, i.e.,

Intercultural Sensitivity. However, his results were slightly *below* average. At the same time, his scores on the 4th dimension, Preference for Certainty, were elevated.

His IRC profile was even more surprising in view of findings from our database analyses: IRC respondents having spent more than two years abroad have significantly higher scores on Intercultural Sensitivity, and significantly lower scores on Preference for Certainty than IRC respondents who have never been abroad (van Hemert & Brinkmann, 2009). The manager's IRC profile thus clearly indicated that opportunities for intercultural development had not been seized. What was the problem?

During the personal debriefing, we could identify that his main issue was overload: He suffered from an intense work load and multiple demands at the same time, very typical for his work and for the post-merger integration phase his company was going through. When faced with overload, he would 'shut down', try and ignore complexities, also those in the intercultural domain. Our advice was to accept as a given that numerous, simultaneous work challenges are more difficult for him than for others, and that he should not heighten the pressure by trying to pretend that this did not affect him, or by worrying about his being sufficiently intercultural competent. Instead, he should strive for a clear structure in his work wherever possible and strictly protect his free time. In addition, he should pay attention to the timing of difficult situations with his staff, e.g., consequently avoiding performance feedback sessions when the pressure was high, and regularly check whether his behavior may have had a negative effect on his relationships with his team that he would need to 'repair'.

Case 2

Combining group interventions with individual IRC assessment creates opportunities to explore issues that group interventions tend not to offer. For example, after a 1-day seminar, a Swedish participant asked for individual feedback on his IRC profile. Nothing in his behavior during the program had suggested that he may have participated with mixed feelings; instead he seemed genuinely interested in the topic and discussions.

The individual feedback session held a surprise for both of us. Asked about some prior experiences with people from other cultures, he immediately brought up a project involving a Swedish and a German team. The project had met considerable difficulties and had to be completed under intense pressure. His expectations about constructive teamwork had been less than met – in his perception, the German team had simply shown foul play. Most likely, the pressure, a range of cultural differences, the geographical distance, and the existence of faultlines between subgroups (see, for example, Gratton, Voigt, & Erickson, 2007, and Lau & Murnighan, 1998, for the impact of faultlines on the productivity in diverse teams) conspired to negatively impact the cooperation. The project had been completed more than two years earlier – and there the memory was: back with full force.

Our objective in using the IRC is to provide constructive support to people who are faced with intercultural challenges at work. Many of them just have to deal with whatever situation they find themselves in, without receiving the appropriate

organizational support (through on-the-job coaching, cross-cultural team consulting etc). Feedback sessions on the IRC are most constructive when the participant's answers are seen as the beginning of a dialogue that allows the participant to voice experiences, feelings, and thoughts he or she may otherwise not be able to express in a group-based training program. The feedback session helped the participant to understand why he was not as open to other cultures as he felt he should be, and to put his experience into perspective. The session helped me to argue even more strongly towards clients to ensure that they provide professional intercultural support for members of geographically and culturally dispersed teams who need to learn to work together.

4 Why does this exercise not fly? Implications for cross-border mergers

The task of an intercultural trainer is manifold. Complex topics have to be packaged to make them look easy; abstract research on cultural differences has to come alive; differences between cultural groups have to be addressed without enhancing or even creating stereotypes and defensive attitudes (Bennett, 1993). In addition, many groups consist of people from a range of different cultures, so the style of the training style, its structure and pace have to match the learning styles and interaction habits of participants from a range of different backgrounds.

IRC group profiles can highlight in advance specific needs of a group. Most groups tend to include some people with high IRC scores, some with low scores and several with intermediate scores. When participants are diverse in terms of IRC scores, they will usually help each other in coming to terms with some of the emotional challenges that the topic of culture always has in stock. With a seasoned intercultural trainer, and a well-developed program, most groups will greatly benefit from the event.

However, IRC scores do indicate problems with specific training elements when the majority of group members have high scores on Preference for Certainty. Highly engaging and involving role plays, with detailed role instructions to participants, tend to take a different course in these groups. Whereas such role plays (e.g., Bafa Bafa simulations) usually create energy and fun, relieve tensions and bring people together, they may elicit utter silence when most group members have high scores on Preference for Certainty. Participants may worry about whether they understood the rules correctly, be afraid to make mistakes, and not dare to improvise as they see fit. They may secretly double-check their instructions or look for the trainer for help, thereby losing the very momentum the exercise is designed to bring about.

It is one client organization in particular when I can safely assume that participants will have high scores on Preference for Certainty. I do not predict these scores because of the nature of their work (e.g., pilots or chemical engineers, for whom a higher Preference for Certainty may not be entirely unwelcome to stakeholders). Instead, it is the countries from which participants of this client company tend to come, i.e., countries that are less economically developed, less democratic and less happy than the countries of Western Europe, where the majority of my participants come from.

Analyses of the IRC database revealed a significant country effect on the Preference for Certainty scores of respondents (van Hemert & Brinkmann, 2009). Numerous indices of socioeconomic factors - including Purchasing Power Parity, the Corruption Perception Index, the Gender Related Development Index, the Human Rights Index, and the Level of Democracy – all correlate negatively with the IRC measurement of Preference for Certainty (that is, the lower the Purchasing Power Parity of a country, for example, the higher the scores on Preference for Certainty for people from that country).

Further research is necessary to explain these findings carefully and judiciously; initial conclusions may be wrong or at best not very enlightening. What our findings do indicate already, however, is an additional dimension that needs to be taken into account when initiating large-scale organizational change, as is the case in cross-border mergers and acquisitions. Cultural differences as such are by now widely acknowledged as strongly impacting on the success of cross-border M&A (see, for example, Buono & Bowditch, 2003; Cartwright & Cooper, 1996, and Bekier, Bogardus, & Oldham, 2001); and the strategic and operational management competences required for the post-merger integration phase have been examined (see, for example, Deller & Klendauer, 2008. See also Brinkmann & Klendauer, 2008, for the relationship between operational management competences and intercultural competences, and tools to assess and train intercultural competences). But in addition, there are country-specific differences in how much certainty people need when being confronted with organizational change. Managers from wealthy, happy, and democratic countries who are charged with a cross-border integration process may have a substantially lower Preference for Certainty than staff members in the countries they are about to confront with that change.

The IRC: Combining a macro- and a micro-level of analysis

The Intercultural Readiness Check offers new insights into how individuals may be helped or hindered in their intercultural development. IRC competence profiles reveal individual developmental needs – needs that must be taken seriously by the organizations they work for. Intercultural learning interventions are much more effective if group interventions are integrated with individual assessment and personal feedback. A long-term developmental perspective, integrating assessment with training and coaching, is most likely to provide the desired return on intercultural investments for organizations.

The IRC research has also revealed country-specific *collective* needs – socioeconomic factors influence the degree of certainty people prefer, which in turn may influence how they respond to organizational change, and how much support they should receive in times of change.

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