

**CROSS-CULTURAL MANAGEMENT: FOCUS ON CROSS-CULTURAL  
COMPETENCIES AND KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER**

**Work-in-progress**

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### Background

The paper introduces a research that is being performed in Finnish companies operating globally. This research is based on theoretical and practical needs to increase knowledge about international business and cross-cultural competence. In the past research on cross-cultural management have been single culture studies or comparisons between countries, focusing on national characteristics. Instead, in international business it is relevant to build theoretical understanding on what competencies facilitate cross-cultural interaction and how companies gain competitive advantage from engaging in cooperative processes such as cross-cultural learning and knowledge sharing and transfer. There is a need for competencies that help create forms of cooperation, structures and possibly new kinds of business interactions. Productivity and competitive capacity entail knowledge and capability transfer within and between multinational companies (Björkman, Stahl, & Vaara, 2007; Holden & Glisby, 2010).

### Significance of the Research

This research has the potential to deepen cross-cultural management theory, particularly to fill the gap in regard cross-cultural competencies in international business (Johnson, Lenartowicz, & Apud, 2006), and it will seek to unfold cross-cultural management from a practical perspective. In Finland competence tends to focus on technology and innovation. In addition to those, cross-cultural competence and ability to engage in knowledge sharing and creation are needed in foreign trade and international joint projects. In modern economies immaterial assets, such as knowledge, are increasingly critical for productivity and competitive capacity. During and after the research, the goal is to develop tools to assess and develop cross-cultural competencies and knowledge transfer to be used in cross-cultural business operations.

### Theoretical Background

Earlier cross-cultural theories have highlighted the differences and conflicts, and how they can be avoided (Kemppainen, 2009). Several authors (see, e.g, Hofstede, 1994; Trompenaars, 1993) refer to cultures being different from each other, for example, by their communication and leadership style. Although the culture as a difference approach pays attention to cultural strengths, it is assimilative in nature. This approach tends to contrast cultures. It may categorize cultures and create country clusters, such as in Hofstede's (1994) classic cultural dimensions.

Newer theories stress being involved in interaction (Holden, 2002; Friedman & Antal, 2005) and receiving result together (Holden, 2002), which is the reason for group existence in international business. In the international business context it is relevant to focus on cross-cultural competence.

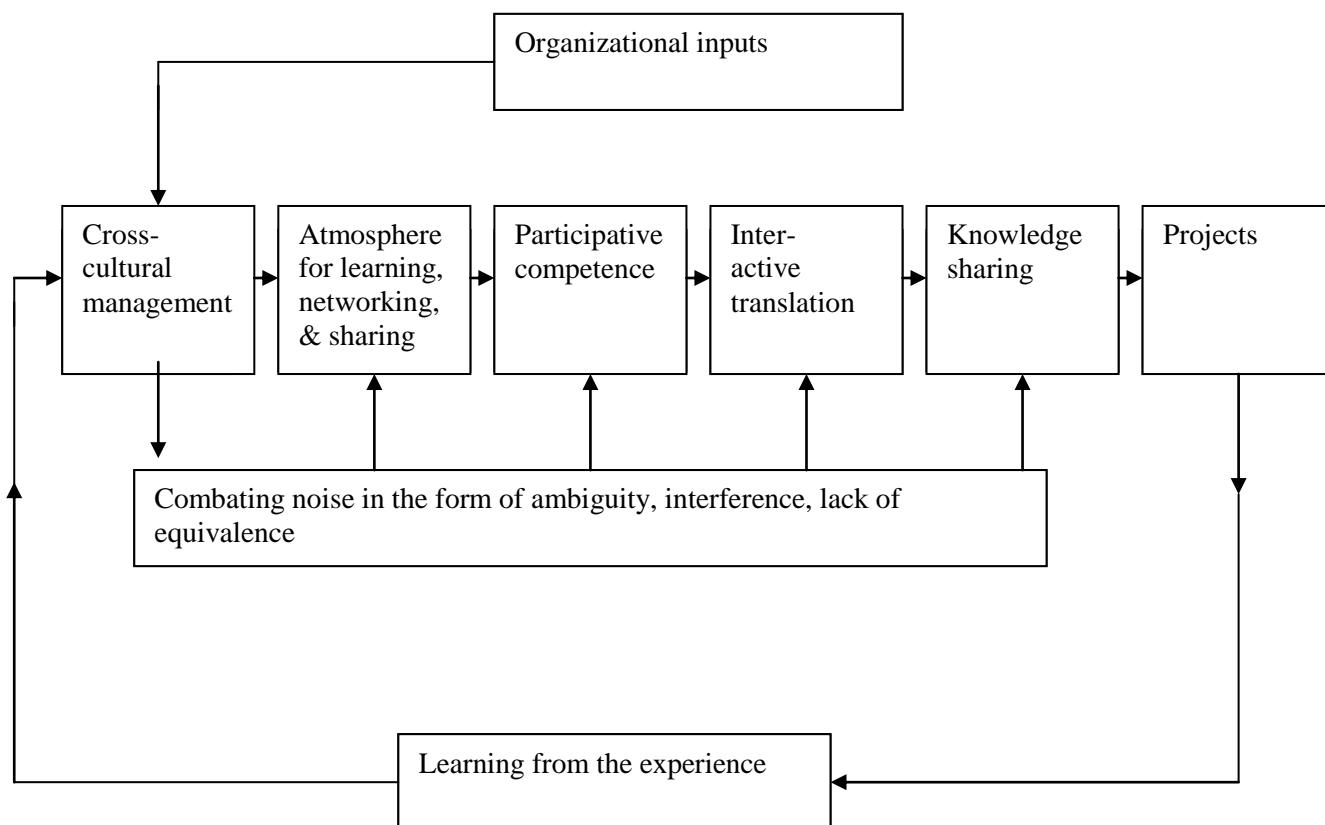
There are several definitions for cross-cultural competence. For example, Gertsen (as cited in Johnson, Lenartowicz, and Apud, 2006, p. 526) see cross cultural competence as an "ability of individuals to function effectively in another culture." The definition suggests a direction for this research; however, this research emphasizes cooperation, reciprocity, and interaction. Johnson, Lenartowicz, and Apud (2006) draw a model of cross-cultural competence, which consists of three areas of competencies: personal attributes (values, beliefs, and personality traits), skills (abilities

and aptitudes) and cultural knowledge (general and specific). Personal values and attitudes can play a significant part in cultural behavior (Kemppainen, Ferrin, Hite, & Hilton, 2008.) Knowledge includes macro level knowledge about society and the way of life (Kemppainen, 2009; Teunissen, 2006) and micro level specific knowledge, e.g., about a particular company (Holden, 2002). Today, the business context highlights the area of skills or know-how competencies (Holden, 2002). The competencies are antecedents or prerequisites for cross-cultural competence. It is not enough to possess such competencies but to apply them in different situations. How well a person is able to apply these competencies, i.e., how competent a person is, depends on institutional ethnocentrism and cultural distance. This research focuses on cross-cultural competencies, particularly on interactional skills and knowledge.

The business context highlights, along with language skills, such competencies as interactional abilities and knowledge sharing and transfer (Holden, 2002; Koehn & Rosenau, 2002; Sercu, 2004). Cross-cultural competencies also include the ability to interpret and experience a connection with things and people. They contain the ability to find new, to interact with, to acquire and process new information in real-time communication and to metacognitive strategies to direct ones own learning and performance. The ability to critically evaluate approaches, practices and products both at home and that of another culture is a part of the skills level competencies. (Sercu, 2004).

The objective of cross-cultural management is to facilitate interaction. According to Holden (2002), the cross-cultural management core competencies include participative competence, interactive translation, cross-cultural networking, collaborative cross-cultural learning, transfer of cross-cultural knowledge, experience and values, and creation on collaborative atmosphere. Graph 1 shows Holden's basic model and how the competencies are linked to each other (See Holden, p. 274 and p. 276).

Graph 1: Holden's basic model of cross-cultural management (Figure of the basic model of cross-cultural management, supplemented by the role of atmosphere)



According to Holden (2002), participative competency is an ability to be involved in and be a part of interaction – even in a nonnative language. Along the same line, Fantini (2000) includes the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately without changing the significance of the message as a cross-cultural competency. Koehn and Rosenau's (2002) transnational listening requires that native speakers understand non-native speakers, even when they do not use the language in a correct manner. Sercu (2004) believes that the ability to find new things and to interact and to acquire and manage information, skills and attitudes in real-time communications is a central cross-cultural competency.

Holden's (2002) interactive translation, namely the ability to negotiate the meanings can be compared to Friedman & Antal's (2005) negotiating reality. Negotiating reality is a strategy, which tries to bring to light tacit knowledge and hypotheses. Nonaka (1994) describes that acquisition of tacit knowledge includes observation, imitation and training. Friedman and Antal's cross-cultural competency includes the ability to examine silent assumptions and the openness to test a range of thoughts and practices.

The ability to operate in networks, collaborative cross-cultural learning and knowledge transfer are closely linked. As Holden (2002) sees the ability to operate in networks as a core cross-cultural competency, Koehn and Rosenau (2002) similarly refer to people acting in networks. They associate networks with knowledge sharing, in which participants are givers and recipients. Networks are critically important for the success of international business operations. According to Koehn and Rosenau (2002), people build networks in the expectation of mutual learning. At the individual level the use of metacognitive strategies, for example, awareness of one's own learning promotes learning (Sercu, 2004). For Friedman and Antal (2005) cross-cultural competencies involves perceiving differences as a cultural resource, which allows learning from others. Cross-cultural context and diversity and different practices, are an excellent foundation for learning together.

Boland and Tenkasi's (1995) concepts of perspective making perspective and perspective taking can contribute to creation of new knowledge and transfer of knowledge. Expression of perspective is a process by which a knowledge community develops and strengthens its own knowledge and its own practices. Competitive advantage is achieved in cooperation where people with various backgrounds appreciate and take advantage of synergetic perspective taking. In this process, individual knowledge is converted, developed further and integrated with other knowledge bases.

For Holden (2002) the significance of atmosphere is highlighted at critical stages. Creation of trust is an important factor for collaborative atmosphere (see also Björkman, Stahl, & Vaara, 2007). Davis and Cho's (2005) study brings a pragmatic addition to atmosphere and creation of trust. According to them, linguistic flexibility can help the speaker to use expressions through which one can build trust and show respect.

Cross-cultural competence is a key element in professional skills today. Holden's (2002) model provides important understanding of cross-cultural competencies, particularly interactional skills. His focus on behavior and interaction competencies has implications both for practice and theory development. In this research the model described above is expanded by Holden's and Glisby's (2010) elaboration on tacit knowledge and its impact on cross-cultural knowledge transfer and cooperation.

Learning is constant and progressive activity which helps create connection between the reality and the vision. Tacit knowledge can be translated to explicit knowledge for a competitive advantage of a company (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Holden & Glisby, 2010). According to Holden and Glisby tacit knowledge has the potential of providing long-term business value. Tacit knowledge is broadly applicable in several contexts, it may create differentiation, and tacit knowledge more easily protected than explicit knowledge. Shared knowledge becomes knowledge of the network. Collective knowledge potentially provides grounds for organizational learning. The international market creates another level to knowledge creation or co-creation, involving cross-cultural combining of information. According to Holden and Glisby all knowledge transfer starts with transformation of tacit knowledge.

Knowledge is shared to create competitive advantage. Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) describe the process as one where knowledge from outside is collected, shared, stored and used, for example, in product and technology development. The source of innovative power comes from constant conversation outside and inside. Innovation then can lead to competitive advantage. The use of culture and cross-cultural knowledge can be a strategic choice for a company through which it seeks for new markets and customer awareness (Kemppainen, 2009). According to Holden and Glisby (2010), cross-culturally created tacit knowledge intangibles themselves are the mediating force in the process. Such intangibles are mutual trust, conducive working atmosphere, motivation of interacting participants and values. Similarly intangibles are perceived as significant elements in capability transfer in an acquisition situation (Björkman, Stahl, & Vaara, 2007).

### Research Objectives

The aim of this research is to test Holden's process model of cross-cultural management, with emphasis on knowledge transfer, and to implement a pilot study using Holden's model in Finnish enterprises.

The objectives of the research project are to test and implement Holden's process model of cross-cultural management, identify cross-cultural competencies in teams and individuals in the participating companies, particularly from the perspective of knowledge sharing and transfer, investigate perceived needs related to cross-cultural competency development in the participating companies and to investigate the relationship between tacit knowledge and knowledge transfer.

The research questions are the following: 1) What known competencies related to cross-cultural management do the individuals and teams have in the participating companies? 2) What hidden competencies related to cross-cultural management do the individuals and teams have in the participating companies? 3) What type of competencies do the individuals and teams perceive as areas of development in cross-cultural management? 4) How do companies transfer knowledge in their cross-cultural processes? 5) How does tacit knowledge facilitate the knowledge transfer?

### Research Methods and Material

The study is cross-sectional by nature. The research is a case-study in three Finnish companies. The selection of companies is based on the criteria of international activity; in addition, the companies are supposed to function in different fields.

### Sampling

Sampling aimed at finding Finnish companies, which function at international arena and involve

transfer of knowledge as part of cross-cultural management. Initial identification was carried out through meetings and telephone conversations. There will be three companies selected for the research, which are not competing with each other. Two companies were identified for the research early on; they are a Finnish high tech corporation with headquarters in Finland and with 35000 employees globally, and a formally Finnish company in chemical business that was recently acquired by a foreign corporation with the total of 8000 employees. The third company is being identified.

In one of the companies selected for the research, the informants represent the whole company, while in the second company the participants represent one unit of this large corporation. Key individuals in regard cross-cultural management have been and will be identified in each company together with the HR directors and HR staff. The interviewees have represented different units, hierarchy levels and countries.

### Data Collection and Research Material

The data collection started in 2008. In two companies data collection is nearly finished. The data collection is based on interviews, video recordings and a small-scale survey. The known and hidden cross-cultural management competencies will be mapped in interviews and video recordings. Up to 20 people, six or seven people from each company will be interviewed. The video recordings will take place in multicultural negotiations and project teams. Both the interview and the survey questionnaire are based on Holden's theoretical model on cross—cultural competencies and Holden and Glisby's (2010) knowledge transfer. The survey questions will be designed during the project with increased understanding and themes coming from the interviews.

The interview data is the primary source of research material. The video material from authentic cross-cultural meetings will provide additional data to investigate the research questions. The goals of the video material analysis are to learn from the flow of tacit knowledge, the flow of explicit knowledge, and from establishing common ground between the participants.

### Data Analysis

The interview material will be analyzed by the means of discourse analysis. The video recordings will be analyzed as interactive situations by the means of conversation analysis. The survey-questionnaire will be analyzed with basic statistical methods.

### Initial Results

The interviews are completed in two companies; so far 13 in-depth interviews have been performed. The interviewees worked at middle management or senior level positions. Out of 13 informants, two were females. Altogether the interviewees came from six countries, however, three of them living and working currently in a country other than their country of birth. All interviews had several years experience of working in international business, and many of them had lived abroad.

The analysis of the interview data is at initial stages. The following section will present some of the first examples of findings, mainly related to the research questions: what known competencies related to cross-cultural management the individuals and teams have in the participating companies, how companies transfer knowledge in their cross-cultural processes, and how tacit knowledge facilitates the knowledge transfer. In addition to the competences suggested in the theoretical model, a few emerging themes are introduced.

## Cross-cultural competencies

A look at the interview data indicates that when talking about work in the international arena, the informants bring up competences suggested in Holden's model of cross-cultural competences.

### *Participative competence*

Informants refer to participative competence on some occasions. Informant 3 emphasizes common grounds and helping others as a basis for participation.

So that is really a good culture in our company, we try our best to do that in a common language, but if we are not that good, everyone helps too. That is for me very helpful. Or was helpful when I was even worse in this language. I think we have also --- I like at least a good culture that we don't preparing the roots for these kind of meetings, we have a common understanding. Everybody is at least listening, and give the right to everyone to express her or his arguments, concerns, whatever.

Informant 1 describes participative competence and the lack of it some contexts in the following way:

Means that let's say that there is a lot of people, means also that there is a lot of let's say discussions going on in different areas, there is no need actually for individual person to speak, and in that cases I quite often prepare to listen people and not so much speak myself, and it's actually quite interesting also to listen what people are saying. But when the team is smaller, for example four or five people only, then it means that let's say there is only one discussion going on, and then it's actually expected that everyone participates in that same discussion, and through that actually I think also myself that I in a way participate, that discussion and it's quite easy for me, no problem in that. But I recognise this that in the bigger group I tend to start to listen.

This informant is aware of participative competence and sees that he has it when working in small group, whereas in a large group he becomes more passive. Altogether the theme of participative competence is not appearing often in the speech of the informants. However, language skill, which can be perceived as a component of the participative competency, is a regularly mentioned competency among the informants. For example, informants 1 and 3 respectively describe the significance of the English language knowledge for business dealings:

First of all --- for me is relatively easy to follow these discussions, we have at least a common platform that is English language.

I have pretty good knowledge of English language, still I find there are always some difficulties really to let's say to really understand thoroughly. And especially difficult it is if there let's say it's native English-speaking person, because their vocabulary is so much wider than my vocabulary...

The latter talks also about the challenge of different Englishes and the divide between the native and foreign-language speakers.

### *Cross-cultural networking*

The theme of cross-cultural networking is appearing often in the speech of the informants. For example informant 3 states:

We pursue audience all over the world. And by this push to international networks, it makes at least --- it makes easy for us to deal also with foreign people.... We are close to 8000 people all over, so it should be enough. It's never enough, you have to have also some people deal with outside network. So, of course we have areas, uh where people are working with universities, researchers, associations, nongovernmental organisations, all these things.

Informant 7 perceives the value of networking competency:

And that is maybe one of the not so strength, but at least something you have to relate to, so, people get used to being part of international network. I think actually that is at least for people who find that fascinating is part of the employee proposition if you like...

### *Collaborative cross-cultural learning*

One of the most regularly mentioned competencies is collaborative cross-cultural learning. Informant 1 found synergies in integration:

...and also that to try to find out the let's say areas where we can take let's say so called synergy benefits...

Informant 3 perceives working together and the ability to learn as success factors:

And that is, we had not to say clear red line to follow, as we have so many opportunities, we have to make it sure that people work together to discuss, to join, to seek together, to work on conferences.... The key factor to be successful is the ability to think different. And to have the ability to learn that is one key factor.

Informants 7 and 9 emphasize learning from differences:

...there was a different culture. And to see there are things they can bring to the table and things they can learn, they're on board, now we are part of an international company that is even in the industry.

The good thing is that based on the fact that our processes are continuously developing, the influence from different culture will bring this kind of process rich and also eh the process we are using in, or the processes that we are using being enriched by different culture...

Informant 11 points out what the employees in an international company can learn from each other:

Okay, now one main thing [Finnish culture impacted the local culture] is to be assertive. As I believe, Indians are very flexible. I mean, we are used to --- say yes for everything, even if it is a tough job which we cannot complete in one month, we say: "Okay, yes, we will try that", or not, we try. But in Finland, they'll say vaguely at... Yeah, plenty, they're [the Finns are] taking some points from Indian. For example, the speed of operation.



### *Collaborative atmosphere*

Creation of collaborative atmosphere may be intentional or come as a result of activities together. Informant 3 introduces the ability to create atmosphere in a colleague:

So he's very much focusing in persons. And by that he creates an atmosphere, which, it makes it very, very easy to talk open.

Creation of collaborative atmosphere takes time together in different activities. Informant 1 relates what is pleasant about multicultural contexts:

Of course when we have this international field, especially when there is meetings, when there is plant visits, and that kind of situations, there is also let's say quite a lot these let's say discussions outside work working time, means that we stay together with eh people eh in hotels, discuss there with people and a have joined eh dinners, maybe have possibility to discuss not only work related items but we'll discuss variety of different things, covering everything.

Informant 7 emphasizes relationship building and respect, and informant 3 recounts the importance to show respect to national customs and to use local language in greetings:

And when you start talking to individuals on a more maybe outside office, and connect with people... obviously it's a good for company in the sense that relationship is important, and there's some bonding there... And of course that is also a journey, because you want to combine your respect for people and you listen to people, with also the problems and manage the problems... we'll have this family feeling, which is, I think I can also contribute to also the professional side and when it comes to whether you stay in that position or stay in the company or believe in performance and progress. And, but I think at least in a global context, the way of looking at this is one thing to do with us people, it's strength to the company because of that.

Especially last year when it was 90 years independency celebration, so you have to respect it... this this minimal platform to have respect for others... "I would like to welcome you" or "Good morning" in the local language. It's also helping you, ja.

According to informant 11 courtesy creates the atmosphere of respect:

Whenever somebody visits, so we used treat them as a guest and be lot of respect and also take care of comfort.

Creating trust is important for atmosphere in cross-cultural work not only within teams but generally within the organization, as informant 1 states:

Things like this, and to prepare these type of moves [job rotation] takes quite a lot of for me, I'm trying to work on trust, building up trust, to know the organisation, I'm travelling a lot and taking, don't know, 200 days around I think now to see people, sitting in meetings like I have today to see, observe people, to see how they behave. To have a much better discussion department with the line, when it comes to the strong and the weak sides of the people.

### *Transfer of knowledge*

Transfer of knowledge means encouraging the exchange of ideas, as informant 9 claims:

I would say the encouraging is done by more or less by everybody. This kind of encouraging, it's, okay, myself, ... the team, the management team of technology is encouraging this kind of sharing ideas and putting on the table eh new way of looking at the way of we are working.

A concrete way of sharing knowledge is sharing of best practices. For example informants 1 and 11 describe sharing of best practices in the following way:

I would say that people are aware of this possibility that we will get the benefit, when we are able to transfer this knowledge. Both ways. At the moment actually, because there are anyhow quite a lot differences in the way of working inside parent [company] and the former [company] plants. So at the moment the main direction in a way is that let's say these best practices are eh transferred from from [the parent] company ... That's the main direction. There are some specific areas where it's some specific knowledges, which is opposite way...

That forum we openly discuss, so what's happening in my unit, this is what I've done, work on the problem. Like the China also talks, do we understand it, what is the best and which practice has given the good result. And then it is adopted in other units.

Informant 3 points out to the significance of sharing also errors for organizational learning:

Sharing success is okay, you share also mistakes or something. That is something I really think. But you should, then you should respect, and you should put not on person that you made the mistake, person who made the mistake. That doesn't help you.

### *Use of tacit knowledge*

The informants bring up significance and transfer of tacit knowledge. Recognizing tacit knowledge is expressed in the comparison of university knowledge and experience-based knowledge as informant 3 put it:

As I said, we are a technically based company, so production of fertilizer is nothing you can immediately take from the university and then you are a champion, it has to do with experience and also getting experience back or positive also.

The informant elaborates on the ways of transferring tacit knowledge:

by either sending a good, competent person from one site to those site which has a problem, but also execute exchange by sending out newcomers to sites where they have a good knowledge that even without having a problem, there's a knowledge transfer from elder, senior people to a newcomer.... But also working together in this group means exchanging knowledge and force the experienced ones and newcomers to work together. That the elder one has of course deputy or a person he can he can educate or train and of course the younger person has always kind of mentor he can work together with to avoid to repeat failures the elder one has made 20 years ago and immediately you say: "Oh, why have you

done that, I know that is wrong". So that is really step what is close, and we believe that that's a, we believe that is the fastest way to share experience. Knowledge you can you can get from university or even by books, but at the end it's not only knowledge but also the experience.

Similarly informant 1 describes transfer and learning of tacit knowledge:

Well of course the main thing is eh learning by doing. That's the main let's say main part of course, then eh let's say also uh let's say different training forces that this one one one uh way to increase you knowledge. And uh also uh let's say participate for different eh conferences, exhibitions, and so on, --- different place, but uhm I would say that uhm, clearly, the biggest part is learning by doing.

### *Emerging themes*

There are several new themes that emerge from the data. The fact the informants have a vast experience in international business is perceived in their attitudes and views. For these informants acting in the global environment is customary. They do not express stereotypical views, and they tend to see the complexity of behavior as a combination of several levels. They often refer to behavior of foreign colleagues as personal traits instead of talking about national characteristics. For example informants 1, 3 and 7 reflect on the phenomenon in the following way:

...but maybe leave that part out 'cos that is normal which is really coming from the task, it's nothing eh to do with eh nationality, and that kind of questions. So I would say that all differences are tasks related, not nationality related. --- And eh for me, I have worked in these kind of let's say national, uh international teams very much since mm, about 2000 onwards, so for me it's very natural also that that I don't have any problems in that international.

So the the it is not international problem, I would say so. The problem is more or less these persons.

I think that it comes down to, be around these cultural differences, I mean people are people.

One significant addition to the competencies is the ability to think in a new way. Informants 1, 3 and 9 talk about a new mindset and way of thinking:

...during that first month I couldn't actually really learn that how Indian persons are thinking, but during that second month actually which was afterwards or it was extremely good that I had to be there two months, because during second month I already started to see some eh differences and some reasons why they are doing things like that.

...you have to have the ability to accept challenges and to handle them. And accept that people think different, accept that people are smart even if you don't have heard about this person before, he could still be a champion, don't believe that you are the best. I think that is, for us it is important. And --- I think we are quite good in that, at the moment I would judge us as above average in at least our area of competence.

I have a kind of attitude to look uh, to the different culture as a as a kind of possible learnings. And that is my personal behave. But also [company] way is really again, even if

we are really strong Finnish way of doing the business, [the company] way is also, very strongly promote this cross border thinking and cross border integration, let's put it in this way. So, again, everybody has the right to say what you is thinking, and everybody has the right to perceive what is better or is the best things that for him. For sure the attitude also it's of single people, it's I would say adding something, something kind of added value. The personal behave in my opinion is an added value to what is the company company way of doing this cross border.

## Summary

The interviewees have a broad international and cross-cultural experience. They do not anticipate encounters with stereotypical views but understand the complexity of cross-cultural management and interaction. They are able to distinguish between multiple factors in a person's behavior, personal, organizational or national culture-based behaviors.

Analysis on the interview data is at initial stages. However, at this stage examples of several competencies indicated in Holden's model and in Holden's and Glisby's notion of tacit knowledge were found in the interview data in these two Finnish companies: participative competence, cross-cultural networking, collaborative cross-cultural learning, collaborative atmosphere, transfer of knowledge, and use of tacit knowledge. In addition to these themes, the data suggest further themes, such as ability to think in a new way.

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