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## Review of Richard D. Lewis, *When Cultures Collide: Managing Successfully Across Cultures.*

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## REVIEW

Lewis, Richard D. *When Cultures Collide: Managing Successfully Across Cultures*. London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 1996. Hardcover. 333 pages. ISBN 1-85788-086-2

As business is becoming ever more global, the need for intercultural awareness is increasingly recognized. Written by a non-academic, *When Cultures Collide* is a major contribution in this area and is far more than a simple compilation of the do's and don'ts of international business. Lewis is thoroughly familiar with the works of the Halls and of Hofstede, but mainly writes from his own extensive personal experience as an international cross-cultural and language trainer. His credentials are impressive: he is chairman of a communications firm with offices in 30 countries, founder of the magazine "Cross-Culture", he speaks 10 European and 2 Asian languages and has lived and worked in Japan for 5 years.

Clearly, Lewis is very familiar with the national characteristics and the business practices of nationalities around the world. His style is direct and concise. He admits that anyone writing about cross-cultural differences "is treading a minefield of inaccurate assessment and surprising exception." He does not shy away from necessary generalizations: "In this book, with the object of making meaningful comparisons between different cultures, I have made certain generalizations regarding the national characteristics of one people or another. Such generalizations carry with them the risk of stereotyping as one talks about the typical Italian, German, American, etc. It is evident that Americans differ greatly from each other and that no two Italians are alike. However, my experience during 30 years of living abroad and rubbing shoulders with individuals of many nationalities has led me to the conviction that the inhabitants of any country possess certain core beliefs and assumptions of reality which will manifest themselves in their behaviour" (3).

*When Cultures Collide* does a remarkable job of exposing these "core beliefs and assumptions" as well as many of their manifestations in a frank and often humorous manner. Lewis often exaggerates in order to make his point in a convincing manner. There are numerous examples of cross-cultural incidents; one of the most poignant is in the preface, entitled "Us and Them."

Part One of the book, "Getting to Grips with Cultural Diversity," explores the question of how the human mind is conditioned culturally at an early age. Frequently making international comparisons, Lewis discusses concepts and issues such as common sense, truth, ethics, and fair play. He analyzes the relationship between language and thought and argues with Benjamin Whorf that the language we speak determines our way of thinking, rather than merely expressing it. Through numerous

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examples he argues convincingly that language is indeed the key to understanding a foreign culture.

Part Two, "Managing Across Cultures" classifies the world's cultures into three "rough categories:" (1) Linear-actives, those who plan, schedule, organize, pursue action chains and do one thing at a time, e.g. Germans and Swiss; (2) Multi-actives, "those lively, loquacious peoples who do many things at once, planning their priorities not according to a time schedule, but according to the relative thrill or importance that each appointment brings with it, e.g. Italians, Latin Americans and Arabs;" (3) Reactives, "those cultures that prioritize courtesy and respect, listening quietly and calmly to their interlocutors and reacting carefully to the other side's proposals, e.g. Chinese, Japanese and Finns." The concepts of time and space are pervasive themes in this part, as are the issues of status, leadership and communication patterns in meetings. Again there are numerous references to the national characteristics of many peoples. Scandinavians, Germans, Southern Europeans, Americans, British, Arabs and the Japanese are featured prominently in this section.

The third part of the book offers separate chapters on the following countries and regions: United States; Britain; Australia, New Zealand and South Africa; Finland; France; Germany; Italy; Portugal; Russia; Spain; Sweden; Arab countries; Japan; China; India and Southeast Asia. In each of these chapters, Lewis states his observations of the various national characteristics and provides possible explanations, based on the various countries' histories and geography. He then provides practical suggestions, geared at helping a foreign business traveler mastering business interactions in that country. The do's and don'ts of these chapters focus on meetings and negotiations.

The book closes with an epilogue, entitled "Achieving Empathy." He discusses the need for genuinely multicultural executives who can evolve beyond a culturally myopic stance to a more empathic attitude, accepting differences and building on them in a positive manner.

*When Cultures Collide* is a remarkable book. It presents a synthesis of research on intercultural theory and extensive personal experience by the author. Lewis is a keen observer of cultural conditioning and presents his findings in a straight-forward and highly readable manner.

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