



about corona, leadership and cultural elements

We have been experiencing a pandemic for several months. While everyone expects world leaders to unite in a joint **whatever-it-takes** approach, the reality is quite different. Every country does take measures, but these differ greatly from country to country, even if the relevant countries are in a similar situation. **Every country wants its own grip on the flu.** How is that possible? The answer to this question is at the same time quite complex and yet quite simple, namely **cultural differences**. In this article we will briefly discuss a number of observations and look for some explanations (inspired by the insights described in the book "**The Culture Map**", by author Erin Meyer).

As a leader of a cross-cultural team with members from different countries or continents, you will probably recognize something here and there.

East versus West

First of all, let us start from the observation that Asian countries such as China and South Korea have tackled the crisis quite quickly with a firm lockdown approach. In Europe and the US, on the other hand, things have been allowed to take their course before switching gradually to a higher pace. Why this difference?

First of all, the social structure plays a role. The Asian countries are **organized hierarchically**. Moreover, they use a **"holistic view"** of the world. The latter means that one starts from the bigger picture, the universe, and then expects each individual to live in harmony his environment (from macro to micro). Leaders play a paternalistic role in this by offering protection to all subjects, possibly at the expense of individual freedom. Consequently, people rarely criticise authority figures.

Translated to the workplace, this means that each individual is part of "a close team". Individual and team are dependent on each other. In Asian cultures, great importance is therefore attached to the relationship between 'the team members' (also outside work). You may know the stories about Japanese colleagues who often spend an entire evening after work (knowing that the team leader eventually pays the entire bill). The leader of the team has a role as coach and mentor.

In such a society everyone also reads easily between the lines, quickly understands his or her place or contribution, and then only does what is asked or allowed. The ambiguities that remain are then interpreted as "don't!". This approach moves mountains, but it does have one major drawback, namely that it has little incentive to generate new ideas and hinders the search for 'excellence'.

In our Western society, on the other hand, **"specific thinking"** is paramount. This means that we assess each situation, based on facts, and that we easily disconnect each object or individual from its environment (from

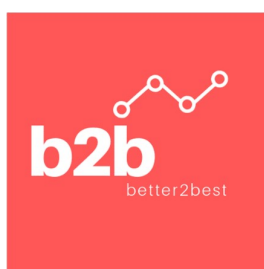
micro to macro). We also use a rather **egalitarian structure**. We all consider ourselves equals and are part of one or more open teams. The question of whether or not to join a "community" depends on the specific arguments and information that are presented. The individual comes first. In corona terms, this means concretely that we all at first needed to be gradually convinced (of the necessity). Leaders then first look for "buy-in". In an egalitarian society, authority is also utterly criticized if the "reason why" is not clear. This also explains why the ski travelers, returning from Italy, were not immediately isolated. The fact that hundreds of workers and hundreds of children could not or should not go to work or school, without the social necessity being clear, had undoubtedly provoked outrage and misunderstanding. In this type of society, people typically start from self-interest, look for creative solutions and sometimes dare to do something that is not expressly prohibited ...

the Why versus the How

The difference in approach between a range of countries including the US, UK, the Netherlands and Sweden on the one hand and countries such as France, Italy, Germany and our country on the other is also striking in the corona crisis. One group strives for group immunity. The other isolates its inhabitants. Where does this difference come from? A possible explanation lies in the education system and the learning method used.

Education in the Anglo-Saxon and Northern European countries is based on **practical evidence**. Practice and **how** people do things are paramount. In concrete terms, this means that people learn by doing. You learn to swim in the water, as it were. The theory then follows from practice. For the corona approach, this means that policymakers are more likely to learn from their observations in the field. That is why the virus is first allowed to evolve and policy makers only intervene or adjust on the basis of the findings made.

The method of proof in our own educational system and that of other Southern European and Germanic countries is based on the **theory**. We first try to thoroughly understand the theory before applying it. We first learn the formula and only then translate it into practice. We first learn the swimming style on dry land before jumping into the water. Because we start from the theory, we always want to know in detail why we do something. That is why, for example, our virologists strive to first understand the virus from an isolated environment. The learning phase then takes a little longer, but the pressure on our health system is less. Simple, isn't it? 😊



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b2b - www.better2best.be – Alain Surkol 0032 497 591333 – alain.surkol@telenet.be
