

The

IMPORTANCE OF INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS IN BUSINESS

# CORRIDOR

## Magazine

**'Embracing each other's beliefs creates positive pathways to work together'**

**H.E. Marten van den Berg**

*Embassy of the Netherlands in New Delhi*

**'First time in India? Let's conquer the cultural differences'**

**Luc Jones**

*Randstad India*

**'Harnessing the potential of intercultural awareness to achieve Sustainable Development Goals'**

**Sathya Sankaran**

*Urban Morph*

**'Lessons on cultural awareness from the import and export industry'**

**Raju Joseph Pulikkunnel**

*Aarding India*

### ALSO INSIDE:

**'Challenges in doing business with state governments and local municipalities in India'**

**Rob Tholenaars**

*SweepSmart*

*p. 47*

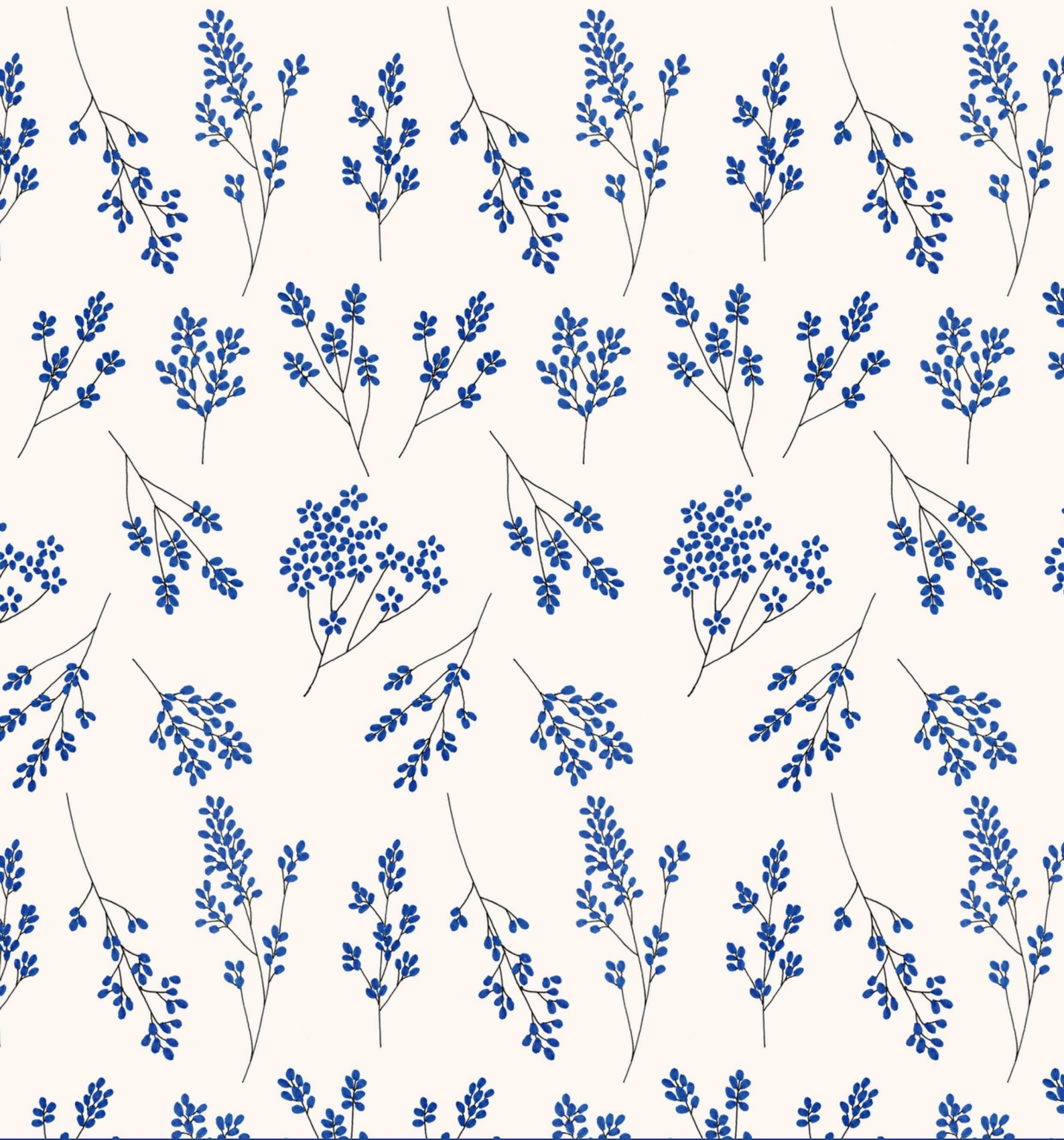
**Awareness is the first step to bridge the gap between cultures'**

**Monika Gogna**

*Nyasa Solutions*

INDIA NETHERLANDS BUSINESS CIRCLE BANGALORE (INBCB)





# 5 Golden Rules

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## Attention!

Before continuing to read the magazine, I would like to draw your attention to the following 5 GOLDEN RULES.

**Everyone is unique.**



**We are all human.**



**People are not stereotypes.**



**No culture is superior to another.**



**Culture is what it is. Accept it and move on.**



Paying attention to these rules is crucial because it is almost impossible to talk about culture without generalizing. However, by generalizing I do not want to stereotype, categorize or pigeonhole people or countries.

**Happy reading!**  
**Editor & Designer - The Corridor**  
**Monika Gogna**



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>06</b>	Board INBCB	<b>25</b>	Raju Joseph Pulikkunnel, 'Lessons on cultural awareness from the import and export industry'
<b>08</b>	Mission & History INBCB	<b>27</b>	Sathya Sankaran, 'Harnessing the potential of intercultural awareness to achieve Sustainable Development Goals'
<b>10</b>	Flashback 2022	<b>29</b>	Shreyas Vasudevan, 'An Indian working in the Netherlands'
<b>11</b>	Editor's Note	<b>31</b>	Luc Jones, 'First time in India? Let's conquer the cultural differences'
<b>12</b>	Monika Gogna - 'Accepting cultural differences: a prerequisite for a true intercultural understanding'	<b>34</b>	Vijay Kumar, 'Cultural diversity in business environments'
<b>14</b>	Statement President INBCB	<b>37</b>	Marianne J. Franzen, 'The magic of underground 'cable connections''
<b>16</b>	Dutch Diplomatic Representation	<b>43</b>	Viswanath P.S., 'A big 'Proost' to intercultural awareness'
<b>17</b>	Ewout de Wit - 'An Introduction'	<b>45</b>	Arun Srinivasan, 'Strength lies in differences, not in similarities'
<b>19</b>	H.E. Marten van den Berg - 'Embracing each other's beliefs creates positive pathways to work together'	<b>47</b>	Rob Tholenaars, 'Challenges in doing business with state governments and local municipalities in India'
<b>22</b>	A glimpse of different perspectives	<b>49</b>	Monika Gogna, 'Awareness is the <u>first</u> step to bridge the gap between cultures'
<b>23</b>	Dr. Ernst Graamans - 'Understanding Indian culture: Inconceivably one and different'	<b>52</b>	Crossword
		<b>55</b>	Quiz



# COLOPHON

**Copy Editing**

Monika Gogna

**Concept & Design**

Monika Gogna

**Crossword & Quiz**

Jamuna Ravi

**Special Thanks to the Contributors**

H.E. Ambassador Marten van den Berg

Ewout de Wit

Dr. Ernst Graamans

Raju Joseph Pulikkunnel

Vijay Kumar

Luc Jones

Viswanath P.S.

Rob Tholenaars

Monika Gogna

Marianne J. Franzen

Arun Srinivasan

Sathya Sankaran

Shreyas Vasudevan

**BOARD INCBC**  
**THE CORRIDOR**



# INBCB

## BOARD



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President & Board Member

Regional Director South-  
East Asia and Africa

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Management Pvt. Ltd.



**Karthik Balachandran**  
Vice-President & Board Member

National Manager -  
Alliances & New Business  
Initiatives, Multinational  
Clients Group

Kotak Mahindra Bank



**Monika Gogna**  
Secretary & Board Member

India & Netherlands  
Business Strategy  
Consultant, Mediator &  
Corporate Coach

Nyasa Solutions



**Jamuna Ravi**  
Treasurer & Board Member

Independent Executive  
Advisor DEI

questW & Others



**Vinita Bhatia**  
Board Member

Strategy Consulting and  
Marketing Expert

Brand42



**MISSION & HISTORY**  
**INBCB**



**THE CORRIDOR**

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## Mission & History INBCB

Monika Gogna

**NBCB**

The India Netherlands Business Circle Bangalore (INBCB) was established in Bangalore in 2011 by a passionate group of businesspeople from India and the Netherlands (Mr. Irfan Vazirally, Mr. Raju Joseph Pulikkunnel, and Ms. Catharina Rustema) with the vision and foresight to realize the important relations between the two countries. Since 2011, INBCB has been at the forefront of economic and social activity within the Indo-Business Corridor in southern India. In the succeeding years, INBCB led various industry-focused efforts to strengthen the business relationship between India and the Netherlands.

Today, INBCB is one of the most prominent business circles of its kind in India. Our membership is drawn from a diverse group of individuals, businesses, and organizations, including globally recognized brands; companies both large and small in various sectors e.g., agriculture, water, waste, energy, and so on; service organizations involved in banking, finance, law, information technology, and coaching as well as educational and cultural organizations.

**Mission**

INBCB's mission is to enable individuals and business organizations in India and the Netherlands to forge and advance trade, commerce, investment, and partnerships through advocacy, information/resource sharing, and networking opportunities.

**Mandate**

To be the leading business circle for trade, commerce, and investment missions between India and the Netherlands (as the Gateway to Europe), enhanced by connections and expertise.

**Focus**

The Board is focused on the following:

- providing a platform wherein commercial and social associations between India and the Netherlands are promoted and in which the members' interests are safeguarded.
- encouraging and facilitating cooperation between businesses engaged within the India-Netherlands Business Corridor.
- imparting knowledge, information, and advice through workshops, live events, and field visits.

# FLASHBACK 2022

2023

A LOT MORE TO  
COME IN 2023. STAY  
TUNED!

NOW

INBCB'S NEW YEAR'S  
RECEPTION & LAUNCH  
OF THE CORRIDOR,  
ISSUE 02

01/2022

INBCB INTERNATIONAL  
SUSTAINABILITY EVENT ON  
CREATING SUSTAINABLE  
BUSINESS MODELS AND  
LAUNCH OF THE CORRIDOR,  
ISSUE 01

04/2022

WORKSHOP ON  
LEVERAGING SOCIAL  
MEDIA FOR  
BUSINESSES

12/2022

LIVE WORKSHOP ON  
HOW BUSINESSES CAN  
MAKE THEIR WEBSITES  
A MONEYMAKING  
MACHINE AND MORE.

06/2022

LIVE EVENT ON  
SOLVING INDIAN  
CHALLENGES WITH  
DUTCH INNOVATION

10/2022

EDUCATIONAL FIELD  
TRIP TO UNITED  
BREWERIES PLANT IN  
NELAMANGALA,  
BENGALURU

07/08/2022

SUMMER BREAK AND  
BOARD TRANSITION

09/2022

INBCB AGM + LIVE EVENT  
ON THE IMPORTANCE OF  
INTERCULTURAL  
AWARENESS IN BUSINESS



**EDITOR'S NOTE**  
**THE CORRIDOR**



## THE CORRIDOR

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## Editor's Note

### Accepting cultural differences: a prerequisite for a true intercultural understanding

Monika Gogna

#### **Cultural differences exist**

We can't pretend that we're all the same. It seems that people are finding it increasingly difficult to accept that we, *Homo sapiens*, are a group animal and that we ultimately like to live in groups and think in boxes. Research has proven time and time again that people feel more at peace with themselves and their surroundings when they know which group they belong to. That makes life comfortable and clear.

Likewise, the majority of people around the world find it difficult to accept that communication between people from different (sub)cultures is fundamentally different from communication between people of the same cultural background. Precisely by denying or minimizing the cultural differences between (sub)cultures or people from other countries, we approach each other in a way that is 'normal' for us.

According to a general consensus, 'deep down we are all the same', which is absolutely not true. Deep down, in our basic assumptions about how the world works and how the world should be, we are sometimes radically different from each other, and sometimes even diametrically opposed. Almost everyone believes that they are 'right' or 'behave normally' from their own perspective, and yes, they are. There is no right or wrong when it comes to cultural differences. This misconception is the reason that miscommunication and frustrations arise, which often lead to conflicts.

Considering the growing bilateral trade and investment between India and the Netherlands, knowledge about culture, cultural differences, and intercultural competences appears to be even more important than ever. For instance, it should be common knowledge that a 'yes' means a 'yes' in the Netherlands while in India, it may just be an acknowledgment of what you have said/or asked for, which may very well end up being a 'maybe' in many cases. Another example is that the Dutch mainly want transparency in business, but you often don't get that in India because an Indian first wants to build trust.

#### **Intercultural awareness is underrated**

Learning about intercultural competences and communication in the business world is grossly underestimated. Intercultural competence is the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people from other cultures. It is the recognition and understanding of the differences between cultures. It includes the know-how of different cultural perspectives and worldviews, as well as the ability to adapt one's communication style to suit the needs of the situation. It is about being aware of how people from different cultures may have different interpretations of the same message, and being able to adjust communication and behavior accordingly.

It is difficult and usually takes years to master intercultural competences. One of the biggest pitfalls of intercultural awareness is that people initially think they can do it without outside help and that learning intercultural competences is actually redundant. As I said before, this is because people have a hard time understanding that people from different cultural backgrounds are fundamentally different and have the right to be so. The problem arises when we want to change others, impose our own norms and values as if they were superior, and want others to 'integrate' into our culture to be respected and accepted.

## THE CORRIDOR

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Only when people have actual contact with people from another culture for a longer period of time, for example when they live and work in another country or work for an international company, do they realize over time that their way of doing things does not seem to work! There is no 'one way' between people from different cultures. The result is that people become frustrated, goals are not achieved, and multicultural teams fall apart and function poorly or not at all. Expats return disappointed and disillusioned to their countries of origin.

Experience shows that in a multicultural environment, having intercultural awareness and competences is the biggest determinant of the difference between success and failure. With exceptions, intercultural competences are not self-evident: they must be learned and practiced. Hence the need for this magazine. Intercultural communication is a lot more difficult than people think, especially when the corresponding competences are missing.

To develop intercultural awareness, people need to become aware of their own culture, as well as become familiar with the beliefs, values, customs, languages, and traditions of other cultures. By understanding the impact of culture on business, we can avoid stereotyping, judgments, and biases that can lead to misunderstandings and conflicts.

### **Why this magazine**

This issue of the Corridor attempts to delineate the broad and difficult field of intercultural awareness from theory and a few practical examples – assuming that in practice we never deal with a 'typical' Dutch and an Indian.

No matter how stereotyped the theory and practice presented in the various articles may seem, we have aimed to understand people's behavior from the perspective of their own specific backgrounds. The first piece of advice to the business community, therefore, is not to sacrifice this cultural background to reach a certain business goal but to allow everyone to share their perspectives to understand each other better.

Not only in the 'multiculturality' of international business but also in the context of globalization and the exchange of people with different cultural backgrounds, some familiarity with the pitfalls and acquired insights of intercultural awareness is necessary. Especially to create a mutual understanding (on the basis of reciprocity) and to at least recognize the danger of monoculturalism and preferably to be able to deal with this proactively. This not only involves the obvious stumbling blocks, but also the so-called 'rules' of intercultural awareness in business situations with people from different cultural backgrounds.

As an entrepreneur, mediator, and coach, I discovered that a lot of information in books and websites is very general and is limited to the repetition of existing theories and concepts. Companies and professionals within the India-Netherlands Business Corridor are left with the question of what exactly they need to do to function and communicate properly in an intercultural environment in India and/or the Netherlands. How do you convert theoretical models and cultural knowledge from literature into practical skills? Little has been written about it. In this second issue of the Corridor, we have therefore, together with our contributors, tried to propose practical solutions.

My thanks go to all the contributors who have brought together an understanding of cultural awareness competences from their own viewpoint in a way that is not only straightforward but also practical to comprehend.

Thank you.

Monika Gogna

Secretary Board & Trustee Board Member INBCB

India & Netherlands Business Strategy Consultant, Mediator & Corporate Coach



**STATEMENT OF THE  
PRESIDENT**



## THE CORRIDOR

## Statement of the President

Rob Tholenaars

**Looking at the past year, we can conclude that a lot has happened. We could resume our lives and return to pre-covid 'normal'. Most of the measures were eased or are not applicable anymore. Traveling has become easier domestically as well as internationally. As many Dutch companies present in India have changed their expatriate policies, many people moved back to the Netherlands. At the same time, we saw new businesses with roots in the Netherlands set up shop in India. We also witnessed initiatives supported by the Dutch embassy and consulates encouraging business ties between both the countries.**

Apart from these developments, INBCB also went through its own transition. Our former President, Prof. Drs. Marianne J. Franzen, left India for new challenges in Portugal and hence INBCB was left with the task to appoint a new President. The Board and the members chose me to execute that task. Therefore, being the President and the ambassador of INBCB, I have taken the overall executive responsibility to fulfill this task to the utmost of my ability, to continue to create and build INBCB into a business circle that is valuable for members and potential members to be a part of.

The Board also decided to expand itself with two more board members, i.e., Jamuna Ravi, (treasurer), and Vinita Bhatia (board member) who will focus on sales and marketing activities with the aim to have more focus on growth and increase in membership.

Even in 2022, the Board – together with the members – focused on various sectors within the Indo-Dutch corridor through knowledge exchange e.g., live events, workshops, and field visits to enable our members to showcase their businesses and engage with each other in a productive manner. The aim is to continue to strive to maintain and improve the quality of the member experience for the financial year 2023-2024 with the support and active participation of our members.

As you know, the first issue of the Corridor got launched in February of 2022. With this second issue, we aim to raise cultural awareness through storytelling. We are grateful to the contributors who have shared their personal and professional experiences to elaborate on their intercultural journeys within the India-Dutch Business Corridor.

We believe, communication vehicles like The Corridor play a vital role in building and strengthening the business relationship between India and the Netherlands.

I do hope that each of our members (and non-members) will enjoy this second issue of The Corridor and on behalf of the board of the INBCB, I hope to see each one of you at our future events.

Finally, I wish everyone a successful and healthy 2023, may it bring what you expect from it.

Thank you,

Rob Tholenaars  
President INBCB

**DUTCH**  
DIPLOMATIC  
REPRESENTATION





## THE CORRIDOR

## 'An Introduction' Netherlands Consulate General in Bangalore

Ewout de Wit  
CONSUL-GENERAL OF THE NETHERLANDS FOR SOUTHERN INDIA

**My name is Ewout de Wit, and in August of 2022, I took up the position of Consul-General of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Bangalore, with responsibility for Southern India. Previously I was posted as Deputy Ambassador in Nigeria and Kuwait, and I worked at the Permanent Representation to NATO in Brussels and the Embassy in Egypt, as well as at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in The Hague. Before I joined the foreign service, I studied economics in Maastricht and studied for a semester in Berlin, Germany. Having lived and worked on three continents also means I have been confronted with the need for cultural awareness at various points in my life.**

But for me, this 'confrontation' had started much earlier in my life. Although born in Heerlen, in Limburg, in the deep South of the Netherlands, my parents were from Rotterdam and The Hague. As a child, we lived near Rotterdam until I was fourteen. Then we moved back to Heerlen. That was my first encounter with a form of culture shock, and the need to adapt. The school atmosphere in Heerlen for example was quite different from Rotterdam. And I noticed I was less flexible than my younger brother, who – unlike me – was able to pick up a Limburg accent very quickly.

We tend to think that cultural awareness is more important when we operate in a culture that is very distinct from our own. But I find that in such cases, we are often more aware of differences because we are out of our comfort zone.

I also lived in Germany and Belgium, our two closest neighbors. We might assume that just because these countries lie in close proximity to the Netherlands, there would be no need for cultural awareness. And yet, a German university is quite different from a university in the Netherlands. Certainly, in the 1990s. In Maastricht, we addressed professors on a first-name basis, at least among the small group of economics students. In Germany on the other hand, the professor was always *Herr Professor Dr.* There were not many female professors at both universities at that time. What does this say about cultural awareness?

In my view, it just means you have to be aware of the people around you, at all times. And in every setting. Try to understand the people and observe the smaller details in their behavior. Ask when you see things you don't understand. Because, although cultures may differ, people all over the world are not so very different. People do not get offended if you don't judge and show that you have a genuine interest in them and their culture.

Undoubtedly, there can be important differences in business culture between countries, or even within countries. Especially in countries as big as India. For Dutch businesses trying to expand into new markets, it is important to be aware of these differences. As embassies and consulates, we also try to advise companies on this aspect. That can mean different things.

## THE CORRIDOR

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For instance, in Kuwait, I advised Dutch businessmen to dress up, especially if it was a first meeting with a potential new customer or business partner. Appearance there is more important than it is in the Netherlands. And in Belgium, unlike in the Netherlands, lunch is more than two sandwiches with a glass of milk. As I am still new in India, I am learning what works here. To wrap it up, what is essential everywhere is as follows: getting to know your business partners. Invest time in getting to know them, and learning their backgrounds.

Build a relationship of trust. For diplomats, that is slightly different of course. While we also try to build relationships, we don't always have to reach a deal. What is important though, for all of us, is to understand where your counterpart is coming from. What he or she requires, and wants to get out of the exchange.

In the end, to contribute to better decision-making, cultural awareness is key!



Mr. Ewout de Wit is the Consul-General of the Kingdom of the Netherlands for Southern India since August 2022. Before his move to India, he worked as a Counsellor/Deputy Head of Mission at the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Abuja, Nigeria. Among the many engagements that he has had, he has also been a Policy Coordinator for the Gulf States, Iran and Yemen, North Africa, and the Middle East Department for the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

## THE CORRIDOR

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## Embracing each other's beliefs creates positive pathways to work together Netherlands Embassy in New Delhi

H.E. Marten van den Berg  
NETHERLANDS AMBASSADOR FOR INDIA

**India and the Netherlands have been steadily working together by strengthening the long and strong socio-economic ties for 75 years. Yes, this year we celebrate 75 years of the establishment of diplomatic relations with India. In a rapidly growing world that brings both opportunities and challenges for society, the mutual business between India and the Netherlands – as global players and leading economies – is of growing importance. The possibilities are immense, and the cultural divide is wide.**

Should you travel to India for business or pleasure with no homework, then be prepared to experience a real surprise. India is a very diverse country, and each place has its own unique identity, unlike the Netherlands, which has one culture across the country. When traveling to different states in India, it is important to know about the state and people beforehand. In these many years, India caught my attention in different ways but one thing that I admire is that people here are more religious and spiritual, which is reflected in how they do business or meet. For example, lamp lighting and sometimes prayers are part of big events and have a connection to beliefs/spirituality. Back in the Netherlands, religion and business are not usually mixed. However, these elements create lots of space to connect, and I believe one needs to come to India with an open mind, open heart, and positive intention.

Doing business in India can be challenging. Just like everyone else around the world, Indians are very proud of their culture and history. But what sets them apart is that culture, tradition and

history form an important part of communication and relationship building. Communication in the Netherlands is very direct, precise, and simple, and is meant to be expressed at face value. In India, communication is sophisticated, and one needs to read the messages between both spoken and written communication.

When it comes to leadership, the Netherlands has a low context of distance between the employees and manager. In India, the scenario is completely different as group-orientated/hierarchy presence is very high. It is important to understand the dynamics of the group and hierarchy and the final decision will always be made by the boss or the highest person in charge. As mentioned before, in India, as one unknowingly tends to mix business with personal life quite often, it most often leads to quick decision-making.

Hence, it becomes important to be flexible when you meet people and do business. During my tenure as a diplomat, I have seen that when two countries work together, they embrace each other's beliefs and create positive pathways to work together.

Patience is a keyword as doing business in India takes time. When I meet Dutch companies that have successfully entered the Indian market, they often stress the importance of devoting significant resources to identify a suitable local partner. Local partners can provide a network and connections that are hard to access for foreign entrepreneurs.



## THE CORRIDOR

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This also means that Dutch companies don't have to invest additional resources in creating a network from scratch. Another key part of doing business is negotiating contracts and agreements. The terms to be negotiated are not cast in stone, and it is common that clauses are renegotiated. The intent, based on a relationship, is ultimately more important than the signature.

To work better and build long-lasting relations including diplomatic relations, it is important to know, understand and respect each other's beliefs, approaches and working styles.

I believe that the Dutch can learn flexibility, hospitality, and customer orientation from the Indians. The Indians on the other hand can learn to communicate more directly, and structurally and plan more realistically than optimistically.

India and the Netherlands have unique identities and ways of working, they have always managed to create wonders when they come together. When East meets West, it does create magic!



Before H.E. Mr. Marten van den Berg became the Dutch ambassador to India in 2018, the colors, smells, and intensity of the country made a deep impression on him when he traveled as a backpacker more than 30 years ago. India has fascinated him ever since. He also likes to highlight a side of India that many in the Netherlands are unfamiliar with, e.g. the innovative strength of Indian businesses. Before his ambassadorship in India, he worked as the Director-General for Foreign Economic Relations at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Economic Affairs.



## QUOTES TO NOTE



Although cultures may differ, people all over the world are not so very different. People do not get offended if you don't judge and show that you have a genuine interest in them and their culture.

**Ewout de Wit**

What one finds peculiar is only peculiar against one's own peculiar background. For people that aspire to build long-term business partnerships in India, it is crucial to develop such a self-reflexive attitude. Indians do the same in their dealings with others, as they do not expect others to automatically feel what is customary. By mutual self-reflexive practice, business interactions can run smoothly from the beginning and develop into strong relationships over time despite the cultural differences – or maybe because of the differences these cross-cultural relationships are often so vibrant and interesting.

**Dr. Ernst Graamans**

**INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS IN BUSINESS**  
**A GLIMPSE OF**  
**DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES**



## THE CORRIDOR

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*Understanding Indian culture: Inconceivably one and different*  
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU)

Dr. Ernst Graamans (PhD)  
PROFESSOR OF CULTURE AND LEADERSHIP

**During one of my very first visits to India, now thirty years ago, I stayed in the home of a traditional North-Indian family. The paterfamilias was by his own accord not used to receiving Westerners, but he did his utmost to accommodate me and make me feel at home. As a sign of appreciation, I brought him and his family a few gifts. He accepted them but did so hesitatingly. In his split-second hesitation, I could notice his gaze on my left arm instead of the gifts. I did not give much meaning to this occurrence at the time. As we grew more accustomed to one another, he felt comfortable enough to retrospectively explain why the use of the left hand is considered a bad omen. As I was also eating with my left hand – without utensils as is customary – it was also seen as ‘unclean’. Thus, I learned that left hands are used for unsavory functions.**

I have visited India many times since and even lived there for a while. India has always attracted me and still does. As an outsider, I am amazed by its rich culture, the diversity of the people, and their traditions. I'm also drawn to India by its spiritual aura; an aura that is so palpable, but very difficult to put into words.

Then again, I do not want to romanticize India either, because these same aspects, which I admire, can make smooth social interaction particularly challenging at times. Miscommunication can occur quickly if one is not aware of local social arrangements, which are not uniform and can differ widely across India, even in many echelons of Indian society.

One can learn a lot about Indian culture by studying its history, politics, economy, religions, and traditions.

Culture though is primarily a matter of embodiment, meaning that what I understand to be the core of culture is the way people attune behavior among one another locally based on feelings, preferences, and tastes. It is in local communities that our senses, including our minds, become calibrated in unique, group-typical ways. These ways cannot really be understood from a book or through academic endeavors.

Embodiment is literally about how our bodies get attuned to the groups we belong to and identify with; how our bodies get affectively structured to notice things without necessarily needing to put them into words. Expressive bodies of fashion, ornaments, mannerisms and class can both facilitate and hamper smooth interactions. Our affectively structured bodies immediately tell us what is agreeable or disgusting, and negligible or worth paying attention to.

Since India is made up of diverse groups as per the fault lines of religion, class, caste, and region, with each their own very refined, recognizable practices – in art, cooking, adorning, offering, languages, and dialects – a one-size-fits-all handbook on Indian culture would surely contain too many misrepresentations and oversimplifications.

That said, stating that there is not something that unites India would also be inaccurate. There is something that characterizes India in all its beautiful complexity, on the one hand, and its confusing messiness, on the other. And yet after all those years, I have not been able to figure out and articulate what it is that forms the core of the Indian identity.

## THE CORRIDOR

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As a well-wishing outsider, I tentatively hold that it can be best summarized by the adage of a fifteenth-century Bengali mystic as 'inconceivably one and different.' For this mystic, the statement pertains to describing a transcendental reality, but it can, I think, be equally applied to describing the tangible land in which this mystic has lived an embodied life. I, for one, accept that some things, such as India's cultural identity, will remain inconceivable and mysterious. The mystery is what characterizes India the most, in my opinion. It's no coincidence that some of the greatest mystics of human history arose from Indian soil.

To be clear, mysteriousness does not imply that there is nothing to be said with a reasonable amount of certitude about cultural practices typical to India. However, these outside-in reflections should always be mirrored against the taken-for-granted background of one's own cultural upbringing. What one finds peculiar is only peculiar against one's own peculiar background. For people that aspire to build long-term business partnerships in India, it is crucial to develop such a self-reflexive attitude.

Indians do the same in their dealings with others, as they do not expect others to automatically feel what is customary. By mutual self-reflexive practice, business interactions can run smoothly from the beginning and develop into strong relationships over time despite the cultural differences – or maybe because of the differences these cross-cultural relationships are often so vibrant and interesting. Starting thirty years ago up until now, this has been the case for me – despite my initial left-hand dealings, so to speak.

In 2022, on my latest visit to India, where I came as part of a delegation on behalf of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam to look for collaborations with some of India's best scientific institutions – of which there are many: a cross-cultural mission par excellence. Although it was the first time I visited India in a professional capacity, the same principle – of self-reflexivity – applies. We exchanged company gifts and talked business. But because things went well, I was also invited to people's homes, where we ate together – with and without utensils, where we shared stories, and where we formed informal ties; new cultural ties that are the foundation of long-term partnerships.



Dr. Ernst Patrick Graamans is an assistant professor of Culture and Leadership at the Department of Management and Organization, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU).



## THE CORRIDOR

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*Lessons on cultural awareness from the import and export industry*  
**Aarding (India) Pvt. Ltd.**

Raju Joseph Pulikkunnel  
MANAGING DIRECTOR

**For international business between a developed & a developing country like the Netherlands & India, we need clear awareness of both cultures that include intellectual awareness.**

**In my last 3 decades of business experience between India & the Netherlands in the engineering field, some of the very critical areas to be addressed are:**

- **Expectations of Dutch clients & Indian capabilities;**
- **Deliverables in terms of quality and on-time performance by Indians;**
- **Technical challenges;**
- **Commercial expectations.**

Dutch clients are 'straight on the face' about what they want, whereas Indians tell things diplomatically without wanting to 'lose' the client. Often, this can create a lot of misunderstandings. The Dutch need a 'yes' or a 'no' answer. Indians on the other hand say 'yes' without doing the homework and later cut a sorry figure. That's not at all acceptable in Dutch business deals. It is better to say 'no' to an inquiry that helps the Dutch business partner, clients, or colleagues to cultivate trust with their Indian counterparts.

For example, India has a lot of uncertainty in logistics, but the Dutch expect everything to be 'ON TIME' with respect to production, shipping, and delivery, just like in the Netherlands. Mostly, the Indian side doesn't make a sufficient effort on these points considering the uncertainties they have to deal with themselves.

So, when Indian deliveries reach late, the Dutch client is not interested to hear excuses due to a lack of cultural awareness.

Based on our experience, this can be overcome for *exports* by making a very detailed study on 'hidden variable factors' and *delivery time* through *early planning*. Through this strategy, we have achieved almost 98% on-time logistics planning for our clients in Europe.

*Quality and on-time delivery performance* is part and parcel of the European business. It is not a subject to be discussed. Therefore, it is important to clarify all technical specifications well in advance and ask for any deviations, before accepting the order. Here again, the Indian side may assume that small deviations can be explained later. However, it is always better to ask for deviation acceptance before the shipment than after the product has reached the client.

Technical challenges should not be covered up but openly discussed with European clients. Let us accept that for now, Indian production machinery and our exposure to the latest technological advancement may not always be very up to date. At the same time, Indian knowledge in certain areas of production in traditional ways is more efficient and cost-effective. Many engineering products that were produced in automated machines in Europe can be produced with traditional production knowledge in India with semi-automation at a lesser cost. Such products can be supplied in the world market more competitively.

## THE CORRIDOR

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Hence, it is important to have a patient approach by both sides in order to fully utilize individual strengths. Hence, it helps when the exchange of ideas has an open technological approach.

The Dutch suppliers of equipment (to India) must realize the necessity of giving sufficient training to their Indian colleagues to provide proper maintenance and after-sales service. Though the Indian market is big, the maintenance and service mindset is not up to par with Europe. This can lead to product failures. For instance, in the case of equipment, the interruption in the supply of electricity needs to be addressed with stabilizers. If the product is not tropicalized, it needs to be kept in air-conditioned rooms. Situations like these are often overlooked.

Considering the low labor cost in India, the Dutch expect Indian production costs to be extremely low. This is an indication of a lack of a clear understanding of the low human efficiency in tropical climates, inefficient infrastructure, and differences in the work culture. Furthermore, one may not be always aware of the absence of governmental social security schemes for the labor class which is mostly covered by the private factories that employ them. In my experience, the production efficiency factor is sometimes quite low in India compared to the Netherlands. In the Netherlands, companies not only invest in improving efficiency with constant training but also provide better production tools to their employees.

It is therefore important to include clear commercial terms in business contracts before initiating business deals. Europe does not work on Letter of Credit for exports anymore. Most exports are executed in good faith.

The payment is received after the supply of goods by negotiating the export documents through the Bank. It is very important to check the financial credibility of the Dutch client before supplying. As far as the retail price of the product to be supplied is concerned, Indian suppliers must be content with a *reasonable profit* so that competitors will not take away their business. When the Chinese 'invasion' happened to Europe at the beginning of the 21st century, this strategy saved our exports. India has a lot to offer in terms of value addition and product improvement without affecting the cost of the product.

Dutch exporters to India must also be very careful of the 'flamboyant, unscrupulous' Indian businesspeople who make tall promises but deliver none. Don't blindly trust the words and outward appearances, as there are enough 'wolves in sheep's clothing'. It is important to check the credentials carefully and secure the commercial terms properly in writing. In case there is a dispute, it can take Indian courts years to settle disputes due to the burden of a backlog of cases.

Last but not the least, short-term business gains are not possible in India. For the Dutch to do business with India successfully, they need to find the right resources (business partners and or employees) and actively invest in training and development. A long-term result-oriented approach and holding on to truthfulness – e.g. not falling for corrupt practices for short-term gains – will go a long way. One must respect and follow the law of the land. If one can avoid these pitfalls while doing business in India, they will not only thrive but will also have peace of mind in the long run!



Mr. Raju Joseph Pulikkunnel started his career in The Netherlands as an Engineering trainee at Aarding BV in 1988. He came back to India to start a representative office of the Dutch company in Bangalore in 1990. It was a pre-liberalization period in India. Aarding (India) Pvt. Ltd. was registered as a joint venture company in 1994 and ever since they ventured into Import and export of various engineering products to and from India, serving companies in the Netherlands, Germany, Italy & Spain. Aarding has its own Dutch sister concern that takes care of the European market needs of 'Just in Time' delivery. For more information, visit [www.aardingindia.com](http://www.aardingindia.com).



## THE CORRIDOR

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*Harnessing the potential of intercultural awareness to achieve Sustainable Development Goals*  
Urban Morph

Sathya Sankaran  
CO-FOUNDER OF URBAN MORPH

**The internet has made available petabytes of information at one's fingertips and brought people closer. Yet, there is increasing intolerance and misunderstanding between countries and cultures. This is partly fueled by decreasing attention spans of people and instant communication, ironically through the same internet. Culture is defined as the ideas, customs, and social behavior of a particular people or society. The internet is in the initial stages of trying to open up cultures across borders.**

Over the past 50 years, globalization has brought businesses to new borders. These days, startups with young founders have access to global markets very early in their journey. This makes the need to understand each other a business imperative at a scale not seen previously. The climate change crisis has also required the entire world to coordinate action. But how do you achieve coordinated action in a world with hundreds of different cultures? Here, intercultural awareness plays an important role and is the first step of intercultural dialogue, which as such is defined as 'the ability to effectively and appropriately execute communication behaviors that negotiate each other's cultural identity or identities in a culturally diverse environment' (Chen & Starosta, 1998, p. 28).

As a co-founder of Urban Morph and the Bicycle Mayor of Bengaluru, I have had the opportunity to work with businesses, citizens, and governments across the world. I have seen the pre-internet days of working across borders and

the contemporary, information-rich world of collaboration. In my work as a Bicycle Mayor to promote bicycling as a solution to air pollution and congestion issues in heavily populated urban areas in India, I have always been fascinated by the progress the Netherlands has made in making cycling an integral part of the Dutch culture. However, bicycling is viewed differently in India. The identity and value of the bicycle in India are different from the Netherlands. This is heavily influenced by various factors like economic status, collective social norms, and individual cognitive biases. The ability to translate success in mitigating climate change efforts from one part of the world to another, even if it is my own, has been a huge learning experience. I have had to tweak my approach greatly in my country with different starting points which can address the cultural differences. I have also had to help make funders from outside the country understand why the approach has to be calibrated differently here.

The ability of people in one country to relate to habits and norms in another country is the first barrier to realizing the acceptance of solutions to problems. While democratic underpinnings are the same across Europe and India, the diversity in India makes it more complicated to think of culture as a monolithic entity. The social norms in urban India are different from rural India. Even in urban India, it's different in the South versus in the North of the country. Hence, dividing the target demographic on the socio-economic prosperity spectrum makes it easier to communicate developments – that can

## THE CORRIDOR

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benefit Indians and India – from other countries from a relatability standpoint.

I have been successful to a certain degree in communicating the acceptance of cycling as a mode of transport to a section of the urban elite who are well-traveled through technology, e.g. tools like the Cycle To Work platform. However, I have yet to make inroads into making cargo bicycles (*bakfiets*) an acceptable product because the people involved in transporting cargo are unable to relate to it due to their socio-economic status in Indian society. The lesson from this is, whether you are looking to make a social change or sell products, understanding culture from a product-market fit perspective helps one ease into the transactional conversations from where a broader understanding of regional behaviors can be understood.

The effectiveness of any intercultural awareness is to conduct broad-based sessions among the public.

Today's culture is spread via the media. Print, audio, and video are being delivered via social platforms like websites, LinkedIn, Spotify, YouTube, etc. These need to be leveraged to examine how people live. A lot of expats who have migrated are making vlogs about food, culture, places, etc. Podcasters are talking to people from across countries on contemporary issues. I have also been showing people videos of Indians using Dutch non-motorized transport infrastructure (that has been implemented in some parts of the city) to bicycle around. Their testimonials have warmed people up to new possibilities and potential. The key is to leverage new methods and popularize them.

It is easier in today's world to make information available, but we have to be deliberate about what we are communicating and not be frivolous about it. Else there is a risk of squandering the opportunity to make intercultural awareness a fundamental tool to promote trade and coordinate actions for a better world.



Mr. Sathya Sankaran is the Co-founder of Urban Morph working on SDG and ESG goals for companies and governments using a mix of Design, Technology, and Policy in the areas of Transportation, Energy, and Waste. Over the past decades, he has worked across continents primarily Europe and UK to deliver solutions in these domains to startups and government entities. You can learn more about his work at [www.urbanmorph.com](http://www.urbanmorph.com).



## THE CORRIDOR

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### *'An Indian working in the Netherlands'* Gpi Engineering India Pvt. Ltd.

Shreyas Vasudevan  
GENERAL MANAGER

**An excellent understanding of culture is a key contributor to managing a successful business. Many managers would agree that this is something that can either take a company to great heights or lead to the cessation of its operations.**

#### **What is culture?**

Culture can be vaguely defined as the 'generally acceptable practices' by a set of people. The set can be formed on the basis of a specific geography, beliefs, faiths, or educational background to name a few. For these people, the so-called actions are part of their day-to-day life and are their normal way of life. Changing the factors on which people are divided can result in a completely different culture and behavior. Culture develops over an extended period of time, usually over generations. These are invariably a result of humans' reactions to their external environment.

#### **What makes culture so important for businesses?**

Since businesses, in almost all cases, deal with selling or offering products or services to people and/or communities, understanding the likes and dislikes is vital. The connection that a business creates with people is a key factor for a business. For example, a company that sells an incredibly useful product, but has managed to put off a major section of its target market with a culturally unacceptable advertising campaign will face immense challenges and resistance in getting its products to the users. Even within a company, if a manager is unable to understand

and respect his team members' beliefs and cultures, he will have to navigate through a bumpy road to get efficient and optimized output from the team. To summarize, it can confidently be said that knowledge of culture is directly linked to the bottom line of a company's financial statements.

For a company operating in multiple geographies, the challenge is much more potent, as managers have to have a very good understanding of each culture and take decisions that 'fit' each culture.

#### **Indo-Dutch Cultures**

The culture in India and in the Netherlands is opposite and apart in most aspects. People working within the India-Netherlands business corridor experience this very early in their careers. Rajeev Kohli, Lead Engineer at Gpi India shares the following snippet:

*'As part of a Dutch company, I have experienced a flat organizational structure with a 'non-bossy relationship' between team members and the manager. Such a culture was missing in my former employer who followed a hierarchical organizational structure. As a result, the communications were usually directional and we had very limited opportunities to propose new ideas during meetings.'*

*The flat structure helps an employee to voice his opinions, concerns, and improvement points, which in turn helps him/her to grow more in the professional setting.'*

## THE CORRIDOR

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An Indian working with Dutch colleagues should know that 'time' is a very important aspect for the Dutch. While punctuality is very important, private 'family' and 'me' times are paramount. One should keep these in mind while scheduling meetings and planning work.

For the Dutch, a personal commitment is as important as a professional one. Private time is looked at as their right and the Dutch will do everything in their capacity to make the most of it. That being said, the Dutch are expert planners and are highly efficient while working. They manage to make the most of the available time, before going on to enjoy their private time. During my time at a Dutch university, I was surprised when some of my fellow students rejected multiple timeslots for group projects as they had already 'blocked' that time for sessions at the gym (while this would be looked at as a sign of carelessness and irresponsibility in India, it is completely acceptable in the Netherlands). Despite having challenges in finding suitable time slots for the group projects, I realized that we invariably managed to meet the estimates

which were agreed upon at the start of the course. This was possible mainly due to having complete focus on the work during the time allotted for that.

On the other hand, someone raised in the Netherlands should realize that the hard line between work and private time is very vague for his/her Indian colleagues. They will be ready to sacrifice many personal commitments to meet professional targets. Though this is a major cause of burnout, most Indians do not acknowledge this because of the fear of getting into the bad books of their managers. This eventually leads to poor performance and is not favorable to the business. Therefore, a Dutch manager – should he/she wish to do so – has to go the extra mile of communicating with the team in order to establish an employee-friendly work culture. I feel such a culture opens up space for new ideas which is seldom a bad thing. In today's fast-changing world, we never know which of these bright ideas may come from one of the world's youngest countries, i.e. India, that might change the course of our businesses.



Mr. Shreyas Vasudevan is the General Manager of Gpi Engineering India Pvt. Ltd (Gpi India), an Indian subsidiary of a Dutch group. Additionally, he also executes his duties as a Product Owner within Gpi Group. Since moving to the Netherlands in early 2019, he spends most of his time there and travels to India frequently. A Mechanical Engineer with a Master's in Digital Business and Innovation, he is well-versed in both the Indian and Dutch ways of working and is always eager to talk about this topic. For more information, see <https://gpi-tanks.com/in/>.



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 THE CORRIDOR
 

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## *First time in India? Let's conquer the cultural differences* Randstad India

Luc Jones

HEAD OF SENIOR LEVEL PERMANENT STAFFING

**My career and travels have taken me all over the world, to well over 150 countries and I haven't even hit my 50th Birthday yet. Wherever I go, locals love to tell me how 'our country is different', and then happily inform me that 'this won't work here'. Whilst every region is fascinating in its own right and it's true that no two nations are alike, there are fortunately many more things that unite us than divide us. Let's face it, it would certainly be a dull world if we were all the same.**

When asked why I moved to India and don't work in Europe/North America, the simple response is that back home everything works, but nothing happens. OK, that's an exaggeration, but there are huge benefits to investing in, and working in India. The trick is to come in big – you won't get far by simply dipping your toe in the water here.

Whether purely on a business trip or if planning to relocate for a lengthy period, here are some tips for Dutch businesspeople when preparing for a trip to India:

- As soon as you exit the airport, get ready for the full-on India experience, which can be overwhelming if you haven't visited India before. Indians have described their country to me both as 'organized chaos' and 'permanently under construction'. Personal safety shouldn't be an issue, but one needs to be attentive while e.g. crossing the road. However, as always, if in doubt, follow the locals.
- Indians are hugely welcoming to foreigners and as is typically the case throughout Asia, are incredibly hospitable. Whilst we could certainly learn a thing or two from such behavior, it can feel somewhat intrusive to people of a more reserved nature. For instance, one can expect to be asked personal questions (sometimes from complete strangers), but in the majority of cases, it is perfectly harmless and stems from a genuine curiosity about what you are doing in India, and how you like it here.
- As Indians always aim to please, it's rare to immediately hear the word 'no' as the answer to a simple question. If the reply is 'yes, Sir' this doesn't automatically mean that you have been understood and that the person will do what you asked them. It's quite possible that 'yes, Sir' simply means that the person is listening to you, or perhaps hasn't even understood you. Also, anything other than a direct 'yes' (such as 'yes, but' or 'I'll look into it') probably means 'no'. Feel free to double-check if you feel unsure.
- The bureaucracy in India is legendary (blame the British) and can be quite overwhelming to the uninitiated. Fortunately, huge strides have been made and much of it has been digitized in recent years, but do take advice from your local staff or partners.
- Prepare yourself for huge numbers of TWAs (three-word acronyms), some of which may be unfamiliar to you, or are false friends.

## THE CORRIDOR

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Some of the more common ones I've come across include:

(A)CTC - (Annual) Cost to Company: this refers to 'gross salary'.

IST - India Standard Time: (NOT Istanbul airport)! India is three and a half hours ahead of CET during the summer months, and four and a half hours ahead during the winter, as there is no daylight saving in India.

MNC - Multinational company

FTE - Full-Time Employee

GCC - Global Competency Centre (NOT Gulf Cooperation Council)

- Familiarise yourself with the Indian numbering system, which can take a bit of getting used to at first:

1 lakh = 100,000

1 crore = 10,000,000

So, 1 million would be quoted as 10 lakhs and 50 million as 5 crores.

There are several hundred languages spoken in India as it's a hugely diverse country with every region (there are 28 of them) with its own identity. Nevertheless, from a business perspective, English is the connecting language, so you shouldn't have any issues in making yourself understood. At the same time, remember that if someone hasn't understood you, it's unlikely that they will tell you. On that note, it's a fairly top-down society. If you're responsible to run the office as the boss or the manager, what you say goes, and you are unlikely to be challenged by your subordinates.

Finally, regardless of the length of your trip, do take some time to explore life outside of the workplace. Challenge your palate to a delicious regional cuisine, visit a temple, or simply haggle on the price for a ride around town in an auto-rickshaw ('auto' for short - avoid calling it a tuk-tuk; that's a tourist expression).

Best of luck growing your business in India and hope to meet you sometime!



Mr. Luc Jones is currently based in Bangalore, heading up Randstad's Executive Search department, and handling senior-level roles throughout India. Luc is a British/Canadian national, speaks 4 foreign languages (French, Spanish, Polish & Russian) in addition to his native English & has 24 years of international recruitment experience. For more information about Randstad India, visit [www.randstad.in](http://www.randstad.in).



## QUOTES TO NOTE



As Indians always aim to please, it's rare to immediately hear the word 'no' as the answer to a simple question. If the reply is 'yes, Sir' this doesn't automatically mean that you have been understood and that the person will do what you asked them. It's quite possible that 'yes, Sir' simply means that the person is listening to you, or perhaps hasn't even understood you. Also, anything other than a direct 'yes' (such as 'yes, but' or 'I'll look into it') probably means 'no'. Feel free to double-check if you feel unsure.

**Luc Jones**

A long-term result-oriented approach and holding on to truthfulness – e.g. not falling for corrupt practices for short-term gains – will go a long way. One must respect and follow the law of the land. If one can avoid these pitfalls while doing business in India, they will not only thrive but will also have peace of mind in the long run!

**Raju Joseph Pulikkunnel**

## THE CORRIDOR

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### *Cultural diversity in business environments*

Vijay Kumar

INDEPENDENT ECONOMIST & INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS STRATEGY CONSULTANT

**The term culture means different things to different people. This is simply because people come from different backgrounds, and different countries, speak different languages, have different accents, behave or react differently to different situations and have very different perspectives based on their own environment. Culture varies depending on religious values, beliefs, traditions, and the immediate environment of individuals and groups of people. On [businessculture.org](http://businessculture.org), the following words describe culture beautifully and concisely: 'Culture illustrates the accepted norms and values and traditional behavior of a group. The culture of each country has its own beliefs, values, and activities. In other words, culture can be defined as an evolving set of collective beliefs, values, and attitudes.'**

#### **Why culture in business matters**

Issues related to culture in business are generally grouped into two important elements. The first relates to business culture. Business culture is all about how a company functions and interacts with its employees and its stakeholders. The second, cultural diversity within an organization, is the main focus of this article.

*I once came across a Dutch gentleman that had set up a company with an Indian partner. But strangely, though the Dutchman invested a considerable amount of money in the Indian company, he did not think it necessary to do this formally through a law firm and did not*

*have any documents to prove his investments as he thought the Indian partner was a wonderful person, a great friend, and hence, he felt, he had nothing to worry about. In a few years' time, the Indian partner quietly registered the company in his name, with no mention of the Dutch partner, changed the location of the company, and stopped responding to the Dutchman. The Dutchman came to us for help and only then realized that he had no document to prove that he had invested in the Indian company. Ultimately, he lost all his money simply because he did not register a legal entity and trusted his partner totally.*

#### **Cultural diversity**

Cultural diversity is a far more complex issue and is an extremely important factor for large corporations that have operations across the globe. It is also important for companies that have staff from very diverse backgrounds. As mentioned earlier, culture describes the accepted norms of a group of people in a particular region. But what happens when you have people working for you in many countries and they all come from different cultural backgrounds? Accepted behaviors within a particular country or region or group can be totally different in other countries or groups. This could lead to different perspectives, misunderstandings, inefficiencies, and conflicts.

When you are doing business internationally or working with people of different nationalities, business etiquette too will have its own diverse and widely varying characteristics.

## THE CORRIDOR

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This makes it vital for every company which is spread across many continents to be culturally sensitive and accept, recognize, and appreciate these differences. Let us look at the various ways in which cultural diversities in business can be programmed into a company's operations and how this can enhance the capabilities of the employees of the company and eventually benefit the company.

### Acceptance

The first and most important step is to accept that people from varied backgrounds will respond differently to the same situations. This is natural and a company must ensure that through various training programs, any misunderstandings are eliminated.

*I have faced several situations where the Dutch, who are extremely trusting, did not realize that when doing business in a foreign country, they should take cultural issues into account and not just trust anyone and everyone simply on their claims. Many years ago, there was this Dutch company that set up a joint venture in Bangalore with an Indian company. When I came across the news, I immediately alerted the Netherlands Embassy in Delhi and sent them a detailed report on the fraudulent activities of the Indian company and information on the cases filed against them in India. But the Dutch CEO responded by saying that they trusted their Indian partner and thought that they were the right company for them. In two years, the Dutch company lost their entire investment in the Indian joint venture as their Indian partner, who already had a criminal background, had swindled them.*

### Communications

Efficient and effective communication is very important in business. It becomes even more crucial when working across international borders. Training in communications can be a

very useful tool in bringing people together and getting work done faster. It is also important to understand that due to cultural issues, many people may not always be open and forthright. For example, in Asia, the culture is never to be very frank or say no as this is considered to be rude. In Europe, it is the exact opposite where people just speak their minds.

*I once made a presentation to an audience of companies in the city of Eindhoven in the Netherlands on cultural differences between the Dutch and the Indians. After the presentation was over, a senior executive of a large multinational with offices in India came to me and said 'You have put a mirror in front of my face. I now understand why we were sometimes not able to understand our Indian colleagues. I realized that it is we who have to change our mindset and take cultural differences into account when we work with our overseas colleagues'.*

### Hierarchy

This is another vital cultural issue. In almost everywhere in Asia, hierarchy is commonly accepted and the bosses are always shown respect and addressed formally. In contrast, in most western countries, there are no hierarchies, organizations are flat and people call each other by their first names. Understanding hierarchies and respecting the cultural aspects behind such traditions is vital to building good professional relationships.

### Business etiquette

Etiquette at the workplace is another essential cultural issue. A senior human resources manager of a very large Indian company told me about some of the company's employees who were posted in the USA and did not realize that when they opened their lunch boxes in their workplaces, the smells of the food did not go well with their American colleagues.



## THE CORRIDOR

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The old saying 'When in Rome, do as the Romans do' is very relevant here. When you are in a foreign country working with colleagues with a different culture, you should be open to adjusting if needed.

### **Cross-cultural training**

Cross-cultural training should be an integral part of any company that operates globally. This helps to bring employees from various cultural backgrounds together, understand and respect each other's cultures, and helps in team building and creating a friendlier environment.

*Many years ago, when I went to meet the CEO of a large Dutch multinational that had recently set up in Bangalore. He told me that he was very happy to have set up a branch in India and the talent was excellent. But he also said that they faced one particular problem that the company did not face in their European locations. He told me that as they only recruited the best engineers from the IITs in India, most of them preferred 'I' to 'We'. Everyone wanted to claim that something was achieved only because of him or her and not by 'them' as a team. Self-promotion was the name of the game. He told me that they had to have special training programs for the Indian recruits to function as a team, work together and share responsibilities as well as credits.*

### **Conclusion**

The significance of cultural differences and any business environment cannot be ignored. It is imperative that all companies that operate in multi-cultural environments take the differences seriously, make a sincere effort to understand these cultural issues and sensitize the management as well as the employees through training programs and other positive actions to create a healthy and happy business environment which in turn will lead to greater efficiency, professionalism, and profitability.



Mr. Vijay Kumar is an independent economist and international business strategy consultant, currently associated with SAS Partners Corporate Advisors as an adviser for India entry and international affairs. He is also an advisor to the Office of The Hon. Consul of the Netherlands in the state of Tamil Nadu. More information about SAS Partners can be found on <https://saspartners.com>.

## THE CORRIDOR

## *The magic of underground 'cable connections'* Franzen & Partners

Marianne J. Franzen  
Professor in Change Management & Consultant

In the fast-moving world we currently live in, it is often a challenge to create magical 'underground cable connections'. We hear you thinking, underground cable connections? Well, connecting us, humans, with each other in the right place, at the right moment through invisible wires. These invisible wires represent the relationship between us and the way we do things that reflect our identity, mission, ambitions, values, experiences, attitude, and last but not least our behavior. The question is whether we are actually doing the right things in the right way. (Paul Ingram and Yoonjin Choi, HBR November-December 2022). Perhaps a provoking question that we would like to answer always with a big YES, especially organizations. However, reality has shown us often enough that staying on track requires a reset, a reinvention, a reframing, or a reconnection of some sort of human wires. And sometimes we need to do this more often than we think.

Let me share some stories with you about magical 'underground cable connections' I have experienced throughout my life where I was keen to break through dysfunctional cultural patterns. I would like to leave you with some inspiration to set the tone for a magical 2023 in your own way.

### The Story

I walked into the auditorium of a brand-new university in New Delhi. A crowd of more than 250 students of different nationalities stood up and greeted me with a perfect 'Good morning, Professor' in a choir. It was almost as if they'd been practicing it. I smiled from cheek to cheek and kindly requested to sit back and relax for a couple

of minutes before kicking off the two-week change program called *Embracing Change*. I gazed toward my right and caught a few sweating and stressed IT professionals eagerly trying to connect cables for a proper sound. Over the years, I got used to last-minute stress in India and I have managed to unlearn my Western approach to be perfectly prepared for everything upfront.

In the end, everything will turn out just fine. The pile of wires only got bigger and bigger trying to connect almost 10 loudspeakers including 8 microphones, yet still, there was no result. Time was short, so I moved onto the stage and requested the audience if a tech-savvy human could stand up to help fix the sound. Many heads turned right and left, and after a minute or so a skinny, tall Indian student wearing a white t-shirt with 'I LOVE NY' in bright red approached me and said, '*let me try, ma'am*'.

He stared at the pile of wires for a few seconds and started unplugging wires, reconnecting wires, downloading an app, spoke to the IT team, and suddenly grabbed the mic to say, '*Hi guys, it's working, isn't it?*' The audience burst into applause and the student went back to his seat. The 'show' could begin.

The show could indeed begin with the famous Indian Classical violin player Sharat Chandra Srivastava and his tabla player, both of whom are part of the band Mrigya (1).

## THE CORRIDOR

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Sharat had a quick glimpse at the cables, smirked, and said to the audience *'well done, folks'*. He had brought a Norwegian Jazz band along even though they met for the first time in India, right then and there, and were about to do their first performance together. Despite the novelty of their encounter, they shared grand hugs and somehow came up with the idea for an unexpected jam session. There was laughter, some more hugs and they looked at me as if to say *'well, when can we start?'* I nodded. They exchanged some ideas, tuned their instruments, and had great fun while anticipating the first tune to start the mini-concert for the students. I noticed a magical familiarity between creative human beings who have the ability to create music and establish new underground cable connections. During my pep talk, I had only one assignment for Sharat and his band members: to uplift the students' hearts, whatever it takes. Without any more words (9), the first tune set in, and everybody unaware of how it would end.

After 35 minutes, the musicians stopped playing. The audience was quiet. You could hear a pin drop. I approached the student with the 'I LOVE NY' t-shirt to ask him what just happened and how he felt about the performance. He was clearly touched and with tears in his eyes he grabbed the mic and said *'...I was able to help with the actual cable connections, but I feel you, as musicians, help connect diverse, human hearts and wires magically. I just decided that I want to become the best sound engineer in India enabling more musical cable connections. For the last 35 minutes, I felt I'm not the only one who can fix complex things. We all can do it, provided we are connected and that's magical...'*

This kick-off program with enthusiastic students and musicians reminded me of an interview that I had read with the well-known Indian economist Mr. Raghuram Rajan. In his opinion, the responsibility for knowledge institutions and their

core businesses are to teach students how to think. (Chennai Deccan Chronicle, 'Education should teach us how to think', 30 March 2019). However, in my opinion, it is more than how to think. Triggering hidden competences in students of different backgrounds requires emotional experiences, not just thinking (6, 7, 8).

### The Challenge

Covid forced us to view the world in a different way where it is a *sine qua non* to focus on intercultural aspects to manage and sustain successful international businesses (15). This is for instance highlighted in an interview (18) by Greg Foran, CEO of Air New Zealand, where he elaborates on the fact that *'...we are living in a completely new normal. Customers are not looking for things to come back exactly as they were or expecting to...'*. Despite the post-covid challenges, Greg Foran had the guts to reinvent the culture of Air New Zealand, knowing that an airline company can only survive by creating a magical journey for its passengers while meeting the many culturally different expectations up in the air. These cultural differences can best be managed on the level of 'underground cable connections' between humans, in this case, the passengers. Differences only can be 'seen' on the underground cable connection level (16).

Apart from Greg Foran, another example that comes to mind is that of Roz Brewer, the CEO of Walgreens Boots Alliance. In a recent article in the Economist, she shares that *'...recent upheavals provide a chance to rethink corporate culture (5). Years ago, company culture was viewed as light and fluffy stuff. But the facts and data show that a healthy company culture delivers results, and this has never been clearer to me than right now...'* (The Economist, 'The World Ahead 2022', December 2022).

Melinda French Gates also elaborates on how the main condition to manage the different



## THE CORRIDOR

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foundations she owns is a spectrum of international partners. *'...While supporting all those international stakeholders, the vision of a collaborative becomes bigger than its individual parts and has the potential to improve the lives of millions.'*

Here we see that Melinda Gates can see beyond the differences in the short term to achieve the vision and mission in the long run. That means reconnecting, rewiring, and resetting the current underground cable connections of individual partners to create that magic to save the lives of others. Imagine the impact that her vision can have globally and not only in the non-profit sector. An exchange of learning will constantly be key from the perspective of reconnecting human 'wires' (5, 13, 14).

Toto Wolff, one of the most successful principals in the Formula One Motor racing competition is very clear about the culture including the behaviors of his team consisting of 1800 people during the interview with Professor Anita Elberse (Harvard Business School, November 2022): *'...When they make a mistake, I want our people to know they don't need to lie in order to retain their jobs. We live by the mantra: see it, say it, fix it.'* This reminds me of another story in which 'see it' wasn't the problem, however 'say it and fix it' was (16).

### Vicious Patterns

During the process of a friendly takeover in the renewable energy sector, four round table sessions were organized in Paris and New Delhi within a record time of around 12 months. I moderated these sessions. The headquarters in Paris decided to explore 'the things we do around here' (2, 3, 4). The director, in his forties, understood the risk of ignoring cultural differences between the French and the Indian way of doing business very well. The sensitive R&D professionals needed extra attention and care. Therefore, before rewiring and reconnecting any underground cable system present in the company, the director started

conducting dialogues and listened carefully to all the stories and experiences of each individual. Taking over an Indian family business needs a human approach.

In the third session, one of the French directors asked a mid-level Indian manager to share his opinion and sought his personal feedback about his behavior as a leader and how to tackle some market opportunities. The Indian manager got shy and decided to focus on sharing his factual and vast market knowledge ignoring the personal feedback question. After a second request for feedback, the Indian manager remained silent. I, as the moderator of the session, requested a time-out with the Indian team to find out the root of the problem. *'...It is not done in India to share my personal opinion or feedback to our superior or senior managers, ma'am...'* was the reply. I instantly changed the workshop program in order to create an opportunity for both teams to discuss 'underground cable connections'. We had to create an atmosphere to re-evaluate the way we do things around *here* and, to grasp how they do things around *there*. The ambition was to create an overall new way of doing things together in the same location. With *chai* and a marigold biscuit, the French director re-opened the session by sharing his personal experiences regarding habits in cultures, and his observations about the take-over process so far. His openness about his hurdles in the process supported new cable connections between members of the audience (10). Breaking through stubborn vicious circles of existing patterns and finding new ways to connect to create a new common culture was key during the rest of the afternoon. The saying and fixing part was tackled.

### The Approach

We can ask ourselves whether there is a single approach or perhaps a uniform methodology to reset cultural differences in the field of human underground cable connections. Is McKinsey correct in their opinion that a single approach

## THE CORRIDOR

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may not fit all (11, 15, 17)? My answer to this question is both yes and no. The approach depends on whether the cables need to be transformed entirely where we should distinguish the content (the 'what' of the business we are in) from the process (the 'how' we are doing the business). The content perspective always needs a tailor-made approach, often multiple approaches, to reset cables, irrespective of the core business of the organization and its units and partners. A process-oriented approach (keep in mind the French take-over process in the energy sector) can be more uniform and used as a single methodology while trying to rewire connections.

In general, the technical and more engineering-oriented minds feel it is a challenge to become aware, understand, approach, manage, and rewire the way we do things around here. Focusing on business content (facts and figures) is rewarding for these minds. Focusing on how to transform the business in which rewiring cables is a precondition is not (yet) a habit in organizations.

### Rewiring cables

You must have heard about Philip's turnaround process in the '90s. The shift was from an electronically driven company to a life-science and health-driven company. For almost a decade, Philips had to reset all its technical and human underground cable connections. I was supporting this transformation and I still remember a tough conversation with one of the responsible managers on KPIs to 'reset the human cable'. R&D, technology, finance, and culture had to be measured with KPIs during the Planning and Control (P&C) process. Endless pilots, tryouts, and long discussions later we were – despite the tough resistance – able to break through dysfunctional and vicious patterns in order to turn the ship around.

To stay ahead of the competition in a world consisting of critical consumers, stakeholders, and a young yet mature generation of future leaders, rewiring cables has become a main condition to sustain the business.

### Young leaders

In this day and age, we have a different profile of leaders born with a set of multi-colored wires. They are not afraid to reflect on themselves and ask the question 'Am I doing the right thing?' or 'Am I doing things right?' We talk of leaders who are also not afraid to support others on how to rewrite processes, or leaders that learned to take the first step in rewiring connections even if the cables are completely tangled and full of old habits. These leaders have experienced overcoming cultural differences or respecting these differences while finding newer and fresher connections. These are leaders that feel confident to share personal stories about their weaknesses and strengths, about losing and winning within a business context. Leaders who feel comfortable connecting with the magical mantra: *if you don't change in time, time will change you.*

We all know that in international business, it is key to focus more and more on the cultural aspects of the organization (12), amplified by many international reports talking about global trends. Businesses need to step up on societal issues, societal leadership is now a core function of business, distrust is now societies' default emotion and business must lead in breaking the cycle of distrust, just to name a few (Edelman Trust Survey 2022 [www.edelman.com/trust](http://www.edelman.com/trust)). Are you one of those new (young) leaders that can make this happen?

## THE CORRIDOR

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With more than 35 years of international experience, Prof. Drs. Marianne J Franzen lives by the motto: *if we don't change in time, time will change us*. Currently working and living in Portugal, she is an international visiting professor in Business, Change management, and Innovation. As a psychologist, an executive coach, a visionary, a board member, and a mother of two lovely daughters, she enjoys sharing her knowledge and experiences with the future generation of leaders, by coaching students of B-schools, universities, and young leaders of companies. Through continuous applied research on Female Leadership in Change and Innovation processes in the public and industrial sectors, Marianne guides female leaders to implement their hidden talents and make dreams come true. For more information about Franzen & Partners, visit <http://franzepartners.com>.



## QUOTE TO NOTE



I once made a presentation to an audience of companies in the city of Eindhoven in the Netherlands on cultural differences between the Dutch and the Indians. After the presentation was over, a senior executive of a large multinational with offices in India came to me and said 'You have put a mirror in front of my face. I now understand why we were sometimes not able to understand our Indian colleagues. I realized that it is we who have to change our mindset and take cultural differences into account when we work with our overseas colleagues'.

**Vijay Kumar**

it can confidently be said that knowledge of culture is directly linked to the bottom line of a company's financial statements. For a company operating in multiple geographies, the challenge is much more potent, as managers have to have a very good understanding of each culture and take decisions that 'fit' each culture.

**Shreyas Vasudevan**

[...], it would be prudent to reconcile the fact that there is no superior or inferior culture. Culture is not static. Like everything else in this universe, culture is also constantly evolving. That being said, a lot can be accomplished if we take some time to understand the culture of the place we visit or do business with and show respect to the host culture. It will enhance one's acceptance into the community and break down barriers.

**Arun Srinivasan**

THE CORRIDOR

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*A big 'Proost' to intercultural awareness*  
Randstad India

Viswanath P.S.  
Managing Director & CEO

**Recently, our APAC Regional Head visited India for the first time. It was a whirlwind week of crisscrossing the country to get a first-hand and on-the-ground understanding of our Indian operations. At every location, our leader was given the 'Big Fat Indian' cultural welcome with its individual regional flavor. As far as business outcomes were concerned, the trip was a tremendous success — but even more successful was how we converged the different elements of intercultural engagement into this trip.**

**That set me thinking as I sat down to pen this article on intercultural awareness. Every business entity across the world is a sum of its behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs that make up its culture. In my 32 years of working in multinational and multicultural environments, I have found one consistent truth. We can have the best strategy, but if we do not have the right complementing culture, we cannot succeed. In a business landscape of diverse cultures, when we merge differences with respect and understanding, we can weave a wonderful fabric of invisible but inclusive business values.**

**More similarities than differences**

When we pause to ponder, we become aware that similar values pervade every culture. Discipline. The curiosity to learn. The courage to move out of one's comfort zone and take risks. The confidence with which one never fails to fail but restarts to succeed. The humility of bowing

down to listen and understand. The grace to include differences and create an environment of belonging. That is the beauty of intercultural engagement. The goals of success are the same. Different cultures work with a long list of similar values to reach the same destinations. The difference lies in how we practice them. Being aware of these factors can go a long way in creating a great cultural confluence.

I think of culture as the wind — invisible but strongly felt. It is how well we manage the turbulence of headwinds and assimilate the smooth learnings of tailwinds that lay the foundation of intercultural awareness.

**Small things matter**

Intercultural awareness starts with the belief that small things matter. Like when someone takes the first steps into our office. How can we make the person feel welcome and cared for? Can we keep the foyer at the right temperature as the first small step? And then follow it up with attentiveness and responsiveness to convey our full involvement — from the way we complete the visitor registration process, to taking them through our office and conducting meetings?

In short, when we make our actions the major language of our communication, the words automatically fall into place. Recently, I had a great opportunity to see how our teams practiced inclusiveness. For an HR offsite meeting that we hosted in Kerala, one of our team members, who was physically disabled, was accompanied by his mother so that he

## THE CORRIDOR

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could be helped better. We picked up the cost of hosting the family member and I feel very proud of how our organization acted.

### **Culture-adds, more than culture-fits**

When we talk about intercultural awareness, we look at how we can create and leverage points of culture-fit. While this is very important, I believe we should look further at 'culture add'. What can each of us bring to the other — as individuals, as teams, and as organizations in different parts of the world — to complement our culture, add to it and make it more enriching? We all know that culture evolves over time, and if we do not make these positive culture-adds, at some point we will have to face disruption.

Personally, I have enriched myself with many such culture-adds. I have learned to respect formal appointments for meetings, be business-like even in informal cafe settings, taken down notes to ensure accurate understanding (in addition to the warm 'head nods!'), and the value of immaculate time management.

Creating intercultural awareness is like a movement. It all starts with feeling positively dissatisfied with the status quo and wanting to bring in improvement. As a leader, I believe that culture cannot be created by issuing a mandate or by writing a statement of purpose. We have to create a movement, starting at the top. As leaders, we must ask ourselves, "What do we want to influence?" "Where do we want to create momentum?" At Randstad, I have created an empowering LTDA philosophy — which reads 'License To Do Anything'. It encourages our employees to experiment with

culture-add, without the fear of failure, and I hope this will become a movement.

### **Communication, the lifeline to intercultural awareness**

Communication is absolutely critical in creating intercultural awareness. For the Global Operations business of Randstad India, this helped it to grow from a 'one-person' start to an 80-person team supporting major regions across the globe. The team has successfully worked through the challenges of business communication (as against just English communication), setting, understanding, and responding to expectations, and being positively assertive.

In my communication with multicultural teams, I have designed an 'Answer First' technique, which has helped me in good stead. I get to the pith of my message right in the beginning and help my audience clearly understand what I am saying. Supporting statements quickly follow my main message, and I have found this to work very well.

Intercultural communication is also important in helping teams to deal with performance challenges. It is in such moments that the leader needs to step up and help teams understand the value of what they are doing well amidst what did not go so well.

An African proverb wisely says, 'The stranger sees only what he knows'. Intercultural awareness is a brilliant philosophy that transforms our ignorance as strangers and helps us challenge our source of 'normal' for 360-degree awareness.

So, here's to cultivating intercultural awareness, the art of independently thinking and working together!



Mr. Viswanath P.S. (or Vishy) is a business and finance veteran with over 28 years of experience across multiple industries. Vishy joined Randstad India in 2014 as the Head of Shared Services Centre (SSC) and was subsequently elevated to CFO in 2016. He was appointed as MD & CEO, of Randstad India in July 2021. Prior to Randstad, Viswanath held several leadership and management positions with industry titans including General Electric, Motorola, and the TVS Group. A Chartered Accountant from the Institute of Chartered Accountants of India, Vishy is unsurprisingly a certified black belt in Six Sigma. For more information about Randstad India, visit [www.randstad.in](http://www.randstad.in).



## THE CORRIDOR

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### *'Strength lies in differences, not in similarities'* Vasan & Sampath LLP, Chartered Accountants

Arun Srinivasan  
Partner

**To be able to understand the significance of intercultural awareness and the pervasive role it plays in interpersonal relationships, one needs to perhaps get a better understanding of what culture is.**

The Britannica has a more Western definition of culture and defines it as a 'behavior peculiar to *Homo sapiens*, together with material objects used as an integral part of this behavior'. Thus, culture includes language, ideas, beliefs, customs, codes, institutions, tools, techniques, works of art, rituals, and ceremonies, among other elements. The Britannica also defines the human being, as a culture-bearing primate classified in the genus *Homo*, especially the species *H. sapiens*. Simply put without culture we would be relegated to primates.

The ancient Indians also referred to culture as *samskāra*. While there is a multitude of views on the actual import of the word *samskāra* between schools of Indian philosophy on the specific mechanisms of how *samskāra* operates at the subconscious level, the commentary on the Upanishads simplifies this and defines *samskāra* as the conditioned automatic way of thinking and responding to events of life around us.

The sum total of *samskaras* is personality or nature and dictates behavior to the point it becomes conditioned behavior.

Very Broadly speaking cultural perspective can be classified as:

#### 1. Relationship oriented

- Concern for avoiding hurting the listener's feelings;
- Concern for minimizing imposition;
- Concern for avoiding negative evaluation by the listener.

#### 2. Task-Oriented

- Concern for clarity;
- Concern for effectiveness.

#### 3. Focus on the individual versus focus on the group

#### 4. Indirect communication versus direct communication

Workplace cultures can be characterized as adhocracy, clan, customer-focused, hierarchy, market-driven, purpose-driven, innovative, creative, and many more.

We can safely conclude that there is no single culture. There are dominant characteristics in a particular region, a particular group of people, an organization, and so on. It is equally safe to state that while there are dominant characteristics there will be exceptions. There would be nuances to culture and differences too.

## THE CORRIDOR

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Therefore, it would be prudent to reconcile the fact that there is no superior or inferior culture.

Culture is not static. Like everything else in this universe, culture is also constantly evolving. That being said, a lot can be accomplished if we take some time to understand the culture of the place we visit or do business with and show respect to the host culture. It will enhance one's acceptance into the community and break down barriers.

Intercultural Awareness will move us to ponder *Intercultural Readiness* and the competencies to be more effective across cultures in a business setting.

*Intercultural sensitivity – how well are we aware of different cultural perspectives?*

- Cultural awareness
- Attention to signals

*Intercultural communication – how well can we adapt how we communicate?*

- Active listening
- Adapting communicative style

*Building commitment – how well do we bring people together around shared goals?*

- Developing relationships
- Reconciling stakeholder needs

*Managing uncertainty – how well do we deal with the uncertainty of intercultural interactions?*

- Openness to cultural complexity
- Exploring new approaches

Every community and every country is bound together by a set of individual values, norms, and a specific history. To understand their culture is to understand them.

Therefore, as Stephen R. Covey would say:  
'Strength lies in differences, not in similarities'



Mr. Arun Srinivasan is a partner at Vasan & Sampath LLP, an audit and accounting firm based in Bengaluru. He is an experienced Chartered Accountant from the Institute of Chartered Accountants of India. He also serves as an Independent Director on the Board of many companies in different parts of the world. For more information about Vasan & Sampath, visit <https://www.vscaglobal.com>.

**THE CORRIDOR**

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*Challenges in doing business with state governments  
and local municipalities in India***SweepSmart Waste Management Pvt. Ltd.**

Rob Tholenaars

Regional Director SweepSmart

**First, let me put out a disclaimer that this article is solely based on my own perception and assessment of things in terms of what I have experienced in the past 5 years in India. Needless to say that my perspective may not apply to everyone, but in general terms, some people may face the same issues while doing business in India with the state or municipal governments.**

Compared to the Netherlands, doing business with Indian governmental institutions requires more time, patience, flexibility, and endurance. It is as if you enter a wilderness of regulations that are not only rigid but excessive and difficult to keep track of. Moreover, things get even more complex due to a multilayered approach while dealing with government officials. As the outcome of a project may depend on whether you are speaking to the right person or not, a lot of time may go wasted determining whether that person is a decision-maker or whether he or she depends on another decision-maker for approvals. Consequently, lead time to execution time is generally very long and could easily be extended to more than 2 years.

On the other hand, if we look at a project timeline in the Netherlands, while it may not be easy to do business with the government institutions and one will have to deal with a similar bureaucratic red tape as in India, the processes are very straightforward. Once you start a project, it will not only be clearly defined but one can easily rely on the fact that it will be executed. Also, once you have a deal or have won a tender, you can be assured that the government (institution) will make sure that all involved are proactively kept in the loop about the ongoing execution of the project. Anything that has been agreed upon and signed for is seen as a formal reciprocal agreement (and honored as such). There is no escape from it for the parties involved!

In India however, you will be confronted with non-compliance from the (local)government more often than you would like to or would have expected. They also might ask you to do more than what has been agreed upon. In my opinion, it is a mentality or a habit issue. They seem to be used to being non-compliant. In this regard, you need to understand that a 'yes' or a confirmation (even if it has been signed for) is to be considered as a 'maybe'. A 'maybe' could become a 'yes' more easily if you are willing to solicit anything of value to influence the action of a government official in the procurement process or in contract execution, e.g., offer a bribe.

Bribing or corruption is a huge obstacle in doing business in India, and it can be seen everywhere, from low to high-ranking officials. Furthermore, as the (local)government officials tend to move from post to post, one may need to build relationships from scratch again and again. This is a time-consuming process that not only ends up requiring a lot of effort but also leads to delays in projects.



## THE CORRIDOR

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Another area that is of utmost importance while dealing with government officials is time management. While making appointments with the relevant officials, one needs to consider that even here, a 'yes' may most probably end up being a 'maybe'. It is therefore recommended to always check in time whether the appointment is still going ahead. Even then, one might have to wait for a long time or even be embarrassed that something more important may have come up due to which the official may not have seen you on that particular day/time.

Having elaborated on my experiences above, it is important to mention that it does not mean there are no opportunities. It is just that one should be aware of these challenges while dealing with the Indian government institutions/officials, have a lot of patience, have no time limits (deadlines) as they will not be met, and have enough financial capital than anticipated or budgeted.

Note: the article is based on experiences with the Karnataka State Government and the local Municipality in the city of Bengaluru (BBMP). It would be fair to say that the experiences in other states may be different. At the same time, based on my interactions with colleagues in other states, the above described may in some cases also be applicable in other states and/or municipalities.



Apart from being the President of the INBCB, Mr. Rob Tholenaars is the Regional Director for Southeast Asia and Africa for SweepSmart Waste Management Pvt. Ltd. As an executive and a spirited entrepreneur, he has over 40 years of management experience in port operations and waste management, both locally and internationally. He uses his European background and international experience to create the best of both worlds. For more information about SweepSmart, visit [www.sweepsmart.org](http://www.sweepsmart.org).

THE CORRIDOR

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*Awareness is the first step to bridge the gap between cultures*

**Nyasa Solutions**

Monika Gogna

Consultant, Mediator & Corporate Coach

In my work as a consultant and (conflict) coach, I have met entrepreneurs from various parts of the world. I gradually discovered how I constantly perceived the world around me from my own cultural frame of reference and that I acted on the basis of 'ingrained' cultural habits and behavior patterns. In these fascinating conversations, it became clear to me that the Dutch norms and values with which I had grown up – and which were so obvious and normal to me – often had a completely different meaning in other cultures.

The culture we are brought up in determines how we look at the world, and how we think the world looks at us. It also influences how we communicate. It is therefore not surprising that culture is often a source of connection and conflict. I had to learn to look at the world differently. This was confrontational and at the same time enormously enlightening. It was the beginning of my own cultural self-awareness journey.

For me, the most important step toward intercultural competence was to accept that cultural differences are inevitable and are allowed to exist. Instead of shunning, we should embrace them. We as humans are a complex mix of many cultural influences woven together. It is, therefore, impossible to define a person by a single cultural label. Similarly, as our cultural histories are sifted by individual psychological experiences, even those sharing cultural similarities are truly unique!

### **Culture**

We could see culture as the lens or spectacles through which we see life: it influences how we act, how we communicate, how we experience other people's behavior, what we consider normal and abnormal, and what we value. Due to globalization and technological developments, we increasingly encounter other cultures – both privately and in our work.

Social psychologist Hofstede described five domains that culture influences: power distance, collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation, and masculinity versus femininity.

*Power distance* is about the extent to which we find hierarchy normal and pleasant. *Individualism* is about the extent to which we see ourselves as loners or as part of the larger group. *Long-term orientation* is about the extent to which we focus on the fulfillment of needs near or far. And *uncertainty avoidance* determines the extent to which we tolerate unpredictability and ambiguity in our lives.

What is important to realize is that everyone has a unique personality, also within a cultural context. That personality determines whether you like to learn new things and gain new experiences. Or how you deal with emotions.

## THE CORRIDOR

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### **Dealing with cultural differences**

There is no one best way to deal with cultural differences, but we do see that curiosity, open communication, mutual understanding, and respect are important prerequisites. An example: when a Dutch manager (of course addressed by his first name) takes an important decision, he knows his teammates expect to be informed about it. Not only because the manager believes that this has a motivating effect on his team, but also because a strong hierarchy in the workplace could put his colleagues off. In my practice, when one of my Indian clients went to work in such a Dutch company, he was shocked by it. In India, a large power distance is much more normal, and people usually work in a top-down order in which everyone has a clear place. This arrangement needs no further explanation or justification: employees expect to be told what to do. These conflicting values and behaviors caused confusion and misunderstanding for my client from India.

### **What is the best way to resolve such a conflicting situation?**

The solution starts with a mutual curiosity and the desire to understand each other. For example, when you are trying to challenge stereotypes, you can ask if the other person is comfortable discussing a cultural topic. In such cases, open communication – being honest about what you think and feel in a respectful way – works best. The top of an organization can play an important role in this by facilitating or encouraging such conversations.

My client from India I just talked about was not used to addressing his supervisor directly and by his first name but decided to give it a try anyway. We practiced with a roleplay in which he could turn his hesitation into curiosity by asking questions such as: 'Why do you do it that way?' or 'Why do you call each other by the first name?'. It also helped to specifically ask the manager what he expected of his Indian colleague. This created a conversation about similarities and differences, which made the Indian employee feel more at home and understood. At the same time, it also gave the Dutch manager more insight into how to deal with certain cultural differences.

### **Tips for dealing with cultural differences**

#### **1. Be neutral**

Looking objectively at other cultures is a choice. Try to be aware of stereotypes or prejudices as much as possible and actively put them aside. The first step is usually: accepting that you have prejudices. Then challenge your mind by asking yourself, what am I basing my opinion on? Is this a fact? What evidence do I have for this?

#### **2. Immerse yourself**

Gaining a better understanding of something often goes hand in hand with knowing more about something or someone. Occasionally immerse yourself in other people's cultural customs, festivals, and rituals. For instance, as with conformity, all people maintain certain customs. These customs may differ based on region and religion, but all people may agree that traditions matter.

#### **3. Learn from each other's background and culture**

In researching and exploring another culture, you can reflect on values or lessons that are like your own – or different. Think about what you can learn from that other culture.

#### **4. Make it negotiable**

Take (or create) a moment to discuss any differences with people from the other culture you are dealing with or find yourself in. You can indicate before the conversation that you would like to learn more about their culture, and that you are curious about what the other person thinks about that.



## THE CORRIDOR

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The 'I'-form works best here: 'I notice that I am curious about how you celebrate certain festivals, and I would love it if you could tell me a little more about this, would that be ok with you?'

### 5. Have an open attitude

To prevent the other person from feeling criticized – and to show your good intentions – it is important to communicate with interest and respect. You can do this by, for example, making eye contact, turning to your conversation partner, nodding 'yes', and smiling.

### 6. Be curious

You do this by listening carefully, asking questions, and showing interest. It is more likely that your conversation partner will feel seen and heard and will therefore gain more confidence to open up in the conversation.

### **Transcending regional cultures**

Understanding your employees' cultural differences can also help you avoid developing a company culture that is incompatible with the local cultures of some employees. Instead, you need to build a culture based on widely shared beliefs and values. For example, if you are used to a more competitive or even confrontational approach to business, you should consider adjusting your approach to encourage a more cooperative mindset in your team, as that mindset is more common across cultures. It may help to think about what researchers have identified as basic human values[1] as held in one form or another across all national cultures. One of these values is universalism. While some leaders may value focusing on how people relate to others in their 'in-group', universalism involves a concern for the well-being of others and the world at large.

For companies, it is essential to reflect on what form these values will take in their teams. For example, how do you ensure that employees feel (psychologically) safe and are stimulated by challenges and transitions? How do you encourage conformity to certain values and practices as well as openness to differences? What values will you emphasize to help your company and your employees thrive?

If you're feeling overwhelmed by all the cultural differences in business, there's good news. According to Harvard research[2], some areas of organizational culture are consistent across continents. Survey responses from over 12,800 employees around the world revealed that one corporate culture style was particularly popular across all regions and that is *caring*. Corporate cultures that care about the well-being of their employees (irrespective of the cultural background) often underline positive relationships and mutual trust. This leads to employees who feel comfortable with their colleagues, supported by their leadership, and encouraged to contribute as team players!

[1] Shalom H Schwartz, 'Individual Values across Cultures', Hebrew University of Jerusalem, July 2017; [[www.researchgate.net/publication/312655574\\_Individual\\_values\\_across\\_cultures](http://www.researchgate.net/publication/312655574_Individual_values_across_cultures)]

[2] J. Yo-Jud Cheng and Boris Groysberg, 'How Corporate Cultures Differ Around the World', Harvard Business Review, 8 January 2020; [<https://hbr.org/2020/01/how-corporate-cultures-differ-around-the-world>]



Apart from being the Trustee Board Member and Secretary of the INBCB, Ms. Monika Gogna is the founder of Nyasa Solutions where she provides services such as strategy consulting for businesses interested in doing business in India and or The Netherlands (or internationally), conflict resolution/training and corporate coaching. Having a strong connection with both Indian and Dutch culture, she is fluent in Dutch, English, Hindi, and Punjabi. Monika is a postgraduate in law from the University of Amsterdam, SIMI certified/accredited mediator, and an ICF certified/accredited senior coach. For more information about Nyasa Solutions, visit <https://nyasa.solutions>.

## QUOTES TO NOTE



[...] if we look at a project timeline in the Netherlands, while it may not be easy to do business with the government institutions and one will have to deal with a similar bureaucratic red tape as in India, the processes are very straightforward. Once you start a project, it will not only be clearly defined but one can easily rely on the fact that it will be executed.

**Rob Tholenaars**

The ability of people in one country to relate to habits and norms in another country is the first barrier to realizing the acceptance of solutions to problems. While democratic underpinnings are the same across Europe and India, the diversity in India makes it more complicated to think of culture as a monolithic entity. The social norms in urban India are different from rural India. Even in urban India, it's different in the South versus in the North of the country. Hence, dividing the target demographic on the socio-economic prosperity spectrum makes it easier to communicate developments, that can benefit Indians and India – from other countries from a relatability standpoint.

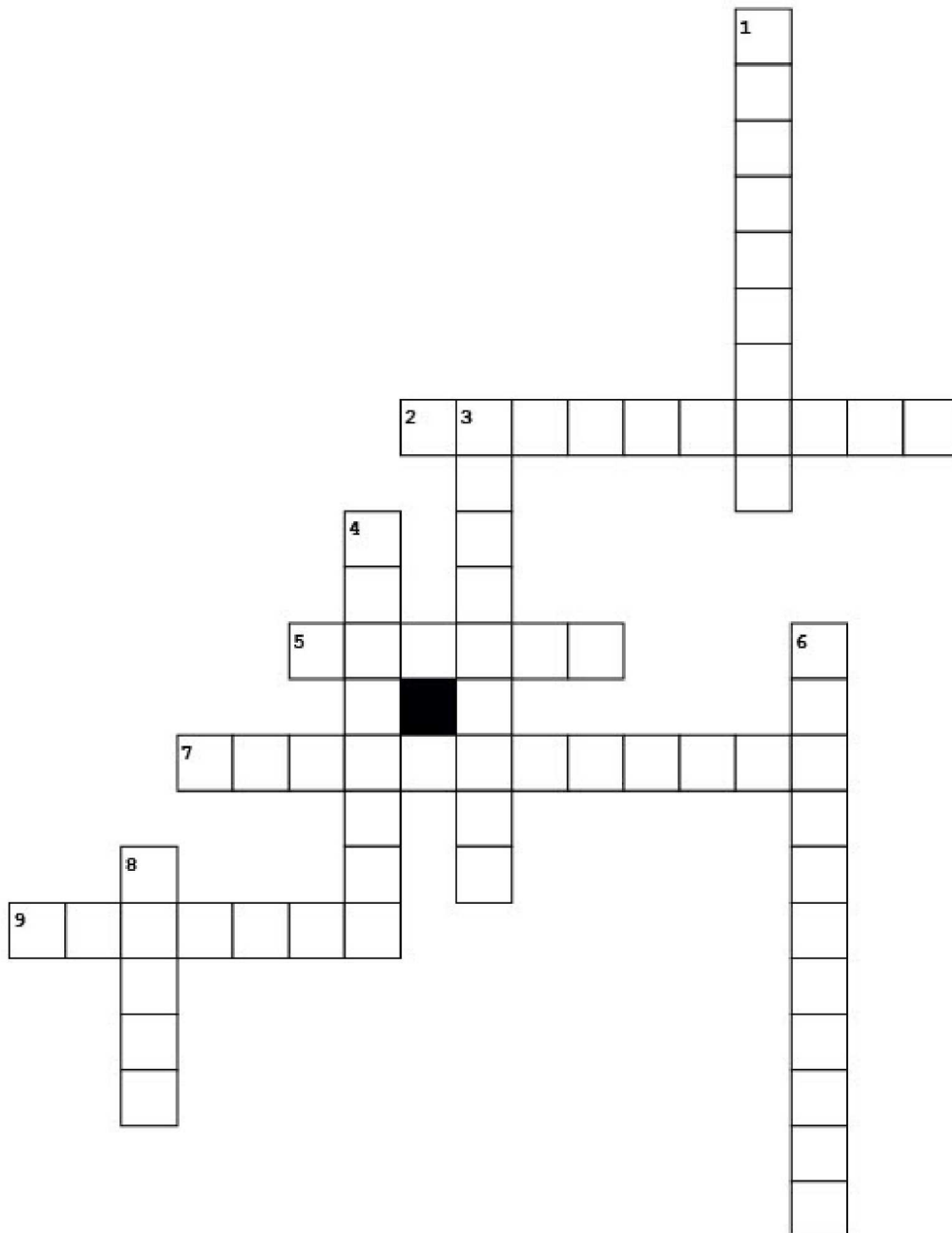
**Sathya Sankaran**

Creating intercultural awareness is like a movement. It all starts with feeling positively dissatisfied with the status quo and wanting to bring in improvement. As a leader, I believe that culture cannot be created by issuing a mandate or by writing a statement of purpose. We have to create a movement, starting at the top. As leaders, we must ask ourselves, "What do we want to influence?" "Where do we want to create momentum?"

**Viswanath P.S.**

# CROSSWORD

Clue: India-Netherlands Business Culture



Note: answers can be found on the next page.

## Across

2. Result focus in Dutch businesses
5. Creative ad hoc working models common in India
7. Preferred Indian style of working in groups
9. High Priority accorded in Dutch culture

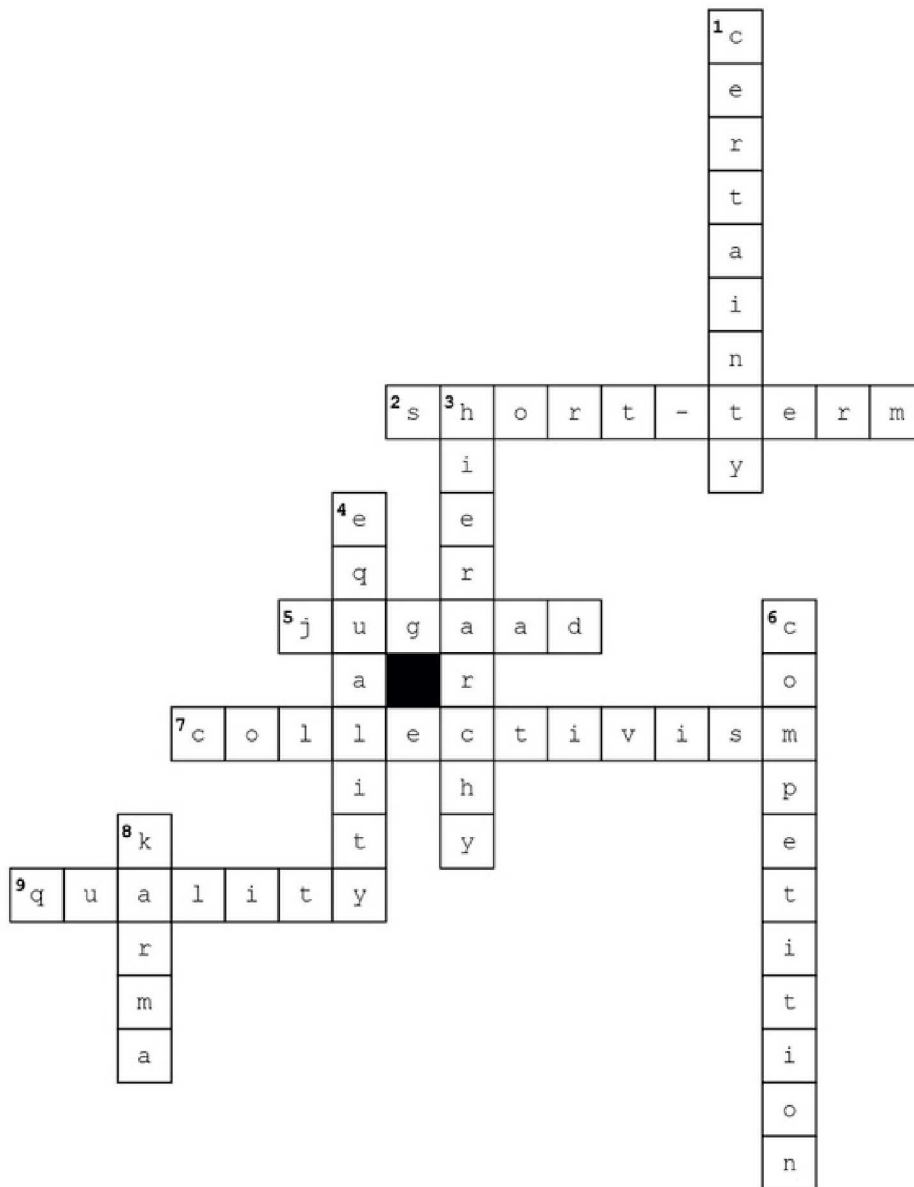
## Down

1. Strategy preference in Dutch businesses
3. Indian Business accepts this power distribution
4. Key principle to distribute power in Dutch businesses
6. Constantly encouraged in Indian companies
8. Long term orientation aligns well with this Indian philosophy



# ANSWERS

Clue: India-Netherlands Business Culture



# QUIZ TIME

**How well do the INBCB-members know each other?**

Clue: Choose the member that fits the given description!

1

This company was formed in 2021 through the merger of two big brands in India and the Netherlands respectively. The name of a bird is strongly associated with the company!



Heineken United Breweries



I don't care  
what they say



I write a response  
ofcourse!

2

This company has transformed itself over the past decade into a leader in health technology. Its office is situated in one of the most well known industry parks in Bangalore.



Bangalore Plants First Pvt. Ltd. Pharmacheck Consulting Services  
Pvt. Ltd.



Philips Electronics India Ltd.



3

Food security for humanity is a long-term goal. Research and development is also the main focus for this company in Bangalore.



Quavac India Foundation Pvt. Ltd.



Syngenta



Marel India Pvt. Ltd.

4

This company is key for the airlines industry and is part of a well known global brand. It started its operations in India around 15 years ago.



Shell MRPL Aviation Fuels and  
Services



Eco-Chem Laboratories Ltd.



Aarding (India) Pvt. Ltd.

5

It was founded as an investment and capital services company in 1985 by a well known industrialist in India, and joined by another well known industrialist in 1986. It has been constantly broadening its horizon and acquired its Dutch connection in 2014.



NXT Trade & Agency Services  
Pvt. Ltd.



SAS Partners & Corporate  
Advisors



Kotak Mahindra Bank

# QUIZ TIME

**How well do the INBCB-members know each other?**

Clue: Choose the member that fits the given description!

- 6 This company is a Dutch-Indian social enterprise that focuses on one of the key challenges in global sustainability today. It has been in existence for over 6 years and is executing some key pilot projects in Bangalore.



The Dutch Door



SweepSmart



Urban Morph

- 7 This INBCB member is highly ranked globally and has a strong focus on collaboration with Indian universities as well.



Saxion University of Applied Sciences



Rigved Business Solutions Private Limited (OPC)



Syngenta

- 8 This company is known for its biological solutions for a range of crops and contributes to the health of people and the planet by partnering with nature.



Bangalore Plants First Pvt. Ltd.



Koppert Biological Systems



Anthropology B Consultancy

- 9 This company is a 100% export oriented unit that offers a product that adds a unique flavour to food. The manufacturing and related operations are done in a village around 50 km away from Bangalore.



Koeleman India Pvt. Ltd.



Syngenta



Rijkzwaan

- 10 This company specializes in introducing new engineering products to the Indian market such as low cost construction, easier movement of the differently abled, energy optimal solutions, etc.



GPI Tanks



Aarding (India) Pvt. Ltd.



Philips Electronics India Ltd.






#### **Answer 1-5**

1. Heineken United Breweries
2. Philips Electronics India Ltd.
3. Syngenta
4. Shell MRPL Aviation Fuels and Services
5. Kotak Mahindra Bank

#### **Answer 6-10**

6. SweepSmart
7. Saxion University of Applied Sciences
8. Koppert Biological Systems
9. Koeleman India Pvt. Ltd
10. Aarding (India) Pvt. Ltd.






THE END

YOU HAVE REACHED  
THE END





THE END

YOU HAVE REACHED  
THE END



ISSUE 02

# THE CORRIDOR

Importance of intercultural awareness in business

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