Gaining intercultural Competence in a global World

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Contents

1  The Definition of Culture........................................................................................................2
2  Cultural rules and norms.........................................................................................................3
3  Avoiding cultural stereotypes.................................................................................................5
4  Sources of culture determine our mental programming.........................................................6
5  History and the cultural lens...................................................................................................6
6  Linguistic competence vs. intercultural competence...............................................................8
7  Cultural dimension models.....................................................................................................8
8  Three models for classifying cultural dimensions.................................................................13
9  Conclusion..............................................................................................................................14
10 References............................................................................................................................14
1 The Definition of Culture

Intercultural competence or even intercultural management has been gaining more and more importance in recent years. We all know that different cultures exist and we see the differences in attitudes and expectations expressed by people from different cultures in our professional working environment. Those of us who have lived and worked abroad know the painful experience of cultural shock specifically when one is exposed to a foreign culture for the first time. Your initial expectations are not met. Your world view is mostly not shared and is more than often contested. In the course of time you learn to adjust and adapt to the new environment by learning rules, norms and shared beliefs in the new culture you are living in. This is the process of adaptation to the new culture which in an extreme case can result in assimilation. It could also lead to a state where you end up being very critical of your host culture (for example see Sana, 1998). In the global realm, some scholars such as Huntington (1996) divided cultures on the globe in different civilizations such as western, Hindu, Islamic civilizations, prophesying an inevitable clash between these blocks already in 1996. This was a bold theory which ended up as a very controversial one. Huntington believed that human beings are divided along cultural lines. From today’s point of view, I would like to stress that the main problem of dividing people in such blocks makes our classification a deterministic one fully ignoring the individual traits of human beings and also the universal values shared by them.

To understand foreign cultures, we need to be exposed to them and, in my opinion, it is best that you face them by being in a minority in a culture different from your own.

To work as a consultant in the field of intercultural management and competence, it is indispensable for you to speak the language of your host country or to have lived, studied or worked for a while in a country different from your native country.

Nevertheless, you do not need to live, to study and to work abroad to be confronted with this. Going on a simple business trip abroad shows you the differences immediately. At the same time working with international employees and colleagues in your own home country will also reveal these differences. So we know that different cultures exist and cultural relativity does not lead us anywhere to be successful in international settings. The crucial question is here whether there is a necessity to live abroad to see such differences, to work on yourself, and to develop a cultural sensitivity and awareness. All these are essential parts for gaining and developing an intercultural competence.

Even trying to establish a true definition of culture seems to be a challenging task. Before gaining intercultural competence we need to know the true meaning of culture. There are many different forms of describing the culture in the literature. One of them is very relevant as it explains:

"Culture includes all forms of living and acting adopted and practiced by people in their corresponding regions of the world at specific times, where these forms express the social development of every corresponding region" (see Neumair, Schlesinger and Haas, 2012, p. 253).
I would like to stress the fact that these forms are adopted and practiced and even shared by people in a specific region or country. This emphasizes that we human beings are “social animals.” We try to belong to certain groups to identify ourselves. We live in groups and try to integrate and be accepted in any relevant group by getting to know the rules of the tactics of inclusion and exclusion. Once we are part of any specific culture, we abide by the rules consciously or subconsciously not to be excluded from that group. On a national level these rules and norms of living together of human beings as social animals are shared and even strengthened by the media in any specific culture and country. In this respect, I would like to point out to the concept of “manufacturing consent” (see Hermann and Chomsky, 1988) where the mass media shapes and even engineers the ideas and values which are shared by the majority in any given society. Now you might ask why I am mentioning this in an article on intercultural competence and management. The importance is due to the very fact that no matter how much we think that we are individualistic, we are still influenced by people around us and the media we watch. Every culture provides us with a lens and through this lens or glasses we observe the world and correspondingly we judge and classify the information we are exposed to in our environment.

2 Cultural rules and norms

We are social animals and set up rules and expectations which prescribe the tactics of inclusion and exclusion in certain groups. This lens portrays these norms and expectations which have been shaped through our upbringing, education, interaction with our peers and superiors and strengthened by the media. Intercultural competence does not mean that we should take off our cultural glasses, but it should provide us with an awareness that we are influenced by them and, at the same time, to understand the position of our counterparts in the business world. To highlight this problem, I would like to highlight what I experienced in teaching “Practical Ethics” at a university in Frankfurt. I divided my MBA students who were taking the class into different groups. There were 10 groups and each group consisted of 5-6 students and they had to prepare a case study and present it together as part of their final examination. On the day of the examination, a Chinese student who was assigned to a group of five European students came to me and asked me to leave the seminar room for four times when his group was presenting the end results. I could see he was very upset. So I asked him the reason why and then after some moments of hesitation he responded: "Because they are going to show the picture of Dalai Lama as a symbol of ethics and I as a Chinese citizen cannot accept this". I looked at him and as I was aware of the controversy regarding Dalai Lama and the early armed resistance in Tibet (see Conboy & Morrison, 2002), I said that I understood his concerns and then talked to the group. After initial resistance, they all agreed to remove and replace the pictures. Later my Chinese student came to me and asked why I helped him as few would have done that in the west. I answered that I also taught intercultural competence and part of my job was to facilitate understanding and communication between different cultures and I was aware that different cultures had different understandings of the events in history and also how they define their social norms.
There are certain prerequisites to understand the nature of each culture. First, we should understand that culture encompasses values, ideas, habits and rules for living together and hence it shapes and determines our behavior and actions. This way culture becomes a shared phenomenon differentiating one group from another. This is exactly what we mean of the existence of a cultural lens. Similar to any leadership training, where we spend lots of time to show the difference between self perception and perception by others (see Kälin, 1999, pp. 21-34) and make participants to be aware of them, the goal of any intercultural training should be to make participants aware of their cultural lens and the cultural lens of the nation they are going to deal with. This can be done by using many simulation models. I would like to stress that the goal of any intercultural training should be to work on cultural lens and not to only give participants some superficial intercultural tips and etiquette rules (for tips and etiquette rules see for example see McClay and Irwin, 2008).

Another important factor is that culture is a social phenomenon which is learned and is not innate. Believing that cultures are an innate phenomenon will lead to preconceptions and biases. The social phenomenon of culture can be modified even by ideological and political thoughts but one should never forget that the concept of culture runs much deeper than the current ideological beliefs. Therefore, before entering any international negotiations involving intercultural differences, we need to do a thorough study of every target culture and be aware of their expectations, norms and rules. For example, in crucial discussions to reduce the arms race between the USA, the Soviet Union and China, Kissinger recognized the differences between the Soviet Union and China by saying:

"The Russians like general statements that can be interpreted in many different ways. The Chinese prefer declarations which can be carried out and like to state differences as well as agreements" (Burr, 1999, p. 42).

This information shows how important it is to be aware of intercultural differences and more importantly norms, rules and expectations in dealing with diplomatic contacts and negotiations.
3 Avoiding cultural stereotypes

Having reached this point, I would like to stress a very important point here. We need to be very careful when we apply the concept of cultural dimensions to different cultures. We should be careful not to make sweeping generalizations. Say we use the cultural dimension of “neutral vs. affective cultures” as proposed by Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner where Spanish and Italian cultures are classified as affective cultures and Chinese and Japanese cultures as neutral cultures. Although it is true that the general tendency and the norms of behavior of before-mentioned cultures require a certain set of behavior which requires showing more or less emotions in business context, I would like to stress that during my years of work as a consultant and trainer I have seen German managers who are much more affective than their Italian counterparts, as well as neutral Spanish executives. This is an important factor to mention here, otherwise, the very use of cultural dimensions could promote our stereotypes of Italians and Spaniards as being emotional and Japanese and Chinese as being neutral and not showing emotions.

This generalization fully neglects the fact that although cultures influence human beings and expect certain modes of behavior within every cultural setting, taking these dimensions at face value will end up in strengthening our stereotypes. Not long ago, the hypothesis of linguistic relativity known as Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, proposing that the structure of a language influences its speakers’ cognition, was widely accepted. A daring proposition as in its strong version the linguistic relativity holds that language has a deterministic influence on our thought processes and hence linguistic categories limit our cognitive categories. This theory is both criticized and refuted by a number of researchers (see Pinker, 1994, 59-67; Deutscher, 2014, p. 168) and should have no place in any intercultural training. Therefore, we should not reduce the individuals to their related culture and expect them to behave in a certain based on that classification.

To gain a better understanding, we should understand that cultures create a system of norms and expectations which every individual is exposed to. So different factors shape every individual and culture is only one part of the process. To understand this concept better, I introduce a mode proposed by Neumair, Schlesinger and Haas (2012, p. 254). This model holds that sources of culture determine our “mental programming”. The base consists of human nature which is universally shared by all humans. Further, these characteristics such as the need for love, sadness, etc are innate and inherited by all. The middle section of this pyramid contains culture encompassing features such as language, gender roles and values which are learned by members. These are group or category specific. The top of the pyramid is the individual level which is experienced and learned by each individual.
4 Sources of culture determine our mental programming

5 History and the cultural lens

One of the main goals of any intercultural management and training should be to gain a more open-minded view and attitude towards the perceptions of other cultures. One of the first steps to gain this competence is to be aware of our own cultural lens and the cultural lens of our business counterparts coming from a different culture. We do this to understand the position and attitudes of our business or negotiating partners to reach the best deal in business and diplomatic settings. A major challenge in intercultural management training is to fight a very basic human need for classification which might lead to preconceptions and later to prejudices. To stress it again, if we say that southern Europeans are more emotional than northern Europeans and take this as a general maxim which shapes our attitude towards them when we see them, this will lead to the creation of preconceptions and we will reach the very opposite of what we have originally planned.
One of the most important factors in gaining intercultural competence is to study the history of our target culture. Here I would like to refer to a major speech by the former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton who made a comparison between the Berlin Wall and restricted access to the Internet in China in a major speech in 2010. The Chinese answer to her speech was that the United States uses the Internet as a tool to shape worldwide hegemony which is influenced by Western values. Here we see two different cultural lenses at work. We should note that Chinastresses collective order, unlike Western cultures which emphasize individual liberties (see the cultural dimensions of individualism vs. collectivism by Hofstede). For Chinese leaders maintaining social order is much more important than concentrating on individual expressions.

To understand the Chinese reaction, I would like to point out two events in the course of Chinese history based on Kissinger's research. First, China is an ancient civilization with a completely different understanding of its past history and culture. Through its history China was never forced to deal with other cultures and civilizations which could even compare to the level of its sophistication and magnitude. India was known to the Chinese but it was mostly divided into different kingdoms. The massive Central Asian deserts separated China from Iran and Babylonia and the Roman Empire was even farther away. China and Japan shared a number of core cultural values but they decided only to curtail each other (Kissinger, 2011, p. 8). In contrast to European colonial powers, who looked outside to fight, gain and plunder resources of subjugated nations, China had no intention to do so. As Kissinger (2011, p. 8) rightly puts:

"The territorial claims of the Chinese Empire stopped at the water's edge".

Chinese considered themselves as cultured and actually to be Chinese for them was equal to being cultured and, based on this assumption, they believed that the rest of the world should show China respect (see Brezinski, 1997, p. 14). Although both the USA and China believed that they played a special role, China never followed the American concept of universalism to spread its cultural values across the world (Kissinger, 2011, p. 17). It only expected the other smaller nations to recognize the special status of China and pay tribute (Kissinger, 2011, p. 17). Second, the Chinese compare any western suggestion as practicing universalism and even western intervention by comparing it to the Opium Wars, where China was unjustly treated by western powers (for Opium War, see Kissinger, 2011, pp. 33-56).
6 Linguistic competence vs. intercultural competence

At this stage I would like to differentiate between "linguistic competence" and "intercultural competence". While learning the language of the target culture is a major asset, we should not be misled into believing that being fluent in the language of the target culture automatically grants us understanding intercultural competence. Although learning a language enables you to understand a certain culture in a better way, we should be aware that there are cases where people speak a language fluently but are biased towards the language and culture of the very country whose corresponding language they speak. I have seen many cases during my work as a consultant for intercultural relations. Intercultural competence means that we need to understand our own culture and cultural lens to work on our own self perception and then try to learn the cultural lens and expectations of another culture.

7 Cultural dimension models

In management practice we need to move away from an anecdotal approach and establish a systematic approach to observe cultural differences. Many models have been proposed to establish an analytical-scientific approach to study phenomenon of culture (expressed in numbers). One of them is a model proposed by Hall, which he has proposed in different publications, which contains the following cultural dimensions: a) Monochronic vs. polychronic, b) high context vs. low context and c) proxemics (high distance vs. low distance) (see Hall, 1976, 1966). The first cultural dimension of Hall includes monochronic vs polychronic cultures. In monochronic cultures, activities are planned in a way that they can be managed one after the other, it means that they are sequentially planned such as the USA. On the other hand, in polychronic cultures, time is perceived as a circular phenomenon where different time windows for doing different activities are open at the same time such as Latin American cultures. Differences of time concepts can be based on different factors such as religion (Abrahamic religions with their linear perception of time and life after death and Buddhism with its circular perception of time and re-birth) (for the effects of Confucianism on the Chinese culture see Kissinger, 2011, pp. 13-32). Differences of time concepts can further be influenced by history and historical events such as the effects of industrial revolution in Europe on sequential time planning, free enterprise system and its effects on short-term planning in the USA and long-term planning in China. Another thing which can influence the concept of time is the level of development in each culture such as the prominence of agriculture or heavy industry in a society.
The next cultural dimension proposed by Hall includes high context vs. low context cultures. In high-context cultures, individuals are involved in a dense network of relationships where communication and messages contain little explicit information but lots of implicit information. Even body language in these cultures reflect part of these implicit messages (such as Asian countries). On the other hand, in low-context cultures such as the USA, communicative messages contain direct and explicit messages where relationships have little meaning and they also change often between actors.

The next cultural dimension deals with proxemics. It is the study of how space is perceived and used when members of any specific culture communicate with each other non-verbally. For example, Hall (1966) distinguishes the private sphere which is an invisible circle surrounding a person which might not be intruded without prior consent. Another element which is studied is the concept of territory which describes places and objects that are considered by every individual as personal property. Hall (1966) describes territory as a space containing places and objects which are regarded as personal property by individuals and he further divides territory into: body territory (immediate space around us), home territory (continuous control over individual territory), interactional territory (informal congregations) and public territory (free entrance). To understand how territory and self-defense are understood differently in different countries, I refer to the "Castle Doctrine" or "Defense of Habituation Law" which is applied in most states in the USA and then criticized by many other people from other countries and cultures who do not know or are unaware of the existence of such a law.

Further Hall differentiates between low-distance cultures and high-distance cultures. People in low-distance cultures stand close to each other, keep a lot of physical contact, they open up their private sphere and they keep lots of eye contact (such as Italy and Spain). On the other hand, people in high-distance cultures do not stand close to each other, keep little close contact, make clear distinction between private and public spheres and keep relatively little eye contact (such as Norway and Sweden). I have tested this cultural dimension in many intercultural seminars. In a simulation, we had a consultant who played an employee from a low-distance culture. During the simulation of goal-setting interviews, the consultant tried to get close to a seminar participant from a high-distance culture. As observers, we were surprised to see the reactions of the participant. Each time the consultant got close to him, he tried to go back in spite of the fact that he was aware of the simulation. In such simulations we are able to observe and analyze the individual reactions of each participant and provide feedback via diagnostic tools and structured feedback process.
The next classification of cultural dimensions is proposed by Hofstede (1994). He distinguishes between the following cultural dimensions: a) high vs. low power distance, b) Individualism vs. collectivism, c) masculinity vs. femininity, d) uncertainty avoidance, e) long-term vs. short-term orientation and f) indulgence vs. restraint. Power distance is the degree to which members of each culture accept inequality in terms of power, prestige and wealth. We can observe high-power distance in centralized organizational structures where employees receive orders in a rigid manner. There are clear differences in terms of salary. Employees accept and respect authority and regard the boss as a "benevolent autocrat". In a general cultural setting we can observe the same where members of high-power distance cultures respect authority (see cultures in South East Asia and Central and South America). On the other hand, we can see low-power distance in decentralized structures and flat hierarchies. MBOs can be successfully implemented in these structures where employees are involved in decision-making processes. There is mostly equality between superiors and subordinates where the boss is considered as an "imaginative democrat" (see countries such as Denmark and Norway).

The next cultural dimension deals with the level of individualism and collectivism describing the level of strength of the relationship between an individual and the group and investigating the level of "we-feeling" in any culture. In individualistic cultures freedom of the individual is highly valued and there is a high level respect for the private sphere. Individualistic cultures consider tasks as more important than relationships. They accept challenges and individual rewards for good performance. As a very good example of an individualistic culture, I mention the culture of the USA and the corresponding "American dream". Many people who have not lived and worked in the USA fail to understand the mechanics of the American dream as a national ethos of the USA and its effects on individual members of the American society. On the other hand, in collectivist cultures, members of the respective culture highly wish to belong to a group where relationships are more important than tasks and keeping the group harmony is an important principle. I mention Japan as a collectivist culture in this case.

The next cultural dimension is masculinity vs. femininity which deals with prevalence of masculine or feminine values and also with traditional role divisions (working is mandatory for men but optional for women) in any specific culture. In masculine cultures, masculine values such as money and career are the main motivators. Conflicts are resolved with "Dog eat Dog" method. A typical masculine culture is the US culture. In feminine cultures, working is optional for both genders where successful women are respected and admired. Conflicts are resolved through compromise. The main motivators in feminine cultures are health and enjoyment (such as in Sweden and Norway).
Another cultural dimension in Hofstede’s model is uncertainty avoidance which deals with the way any certain culture regards uncertainty, risks and changes; it means whether it considers them as an opportunity or as a threat. Cultures with a high uncertainty avoidance level consider uncertainty as a danger and a threat. In these cultures, business relations are kept formal and are very well structured. We can observe a high level of micro management. Leaders are specialists and employees do not change jobs frequently. All these behaviors result in companies operating in a structure of being poor at inventing and good at implementing (Portugal is a culture with a high degree of uncertainty avoidance). On the other hand, cultures with low uncertainty avoidance accept changes and risks readily. Business relations tend to be informal. Leaders are generalists dealing with strategic decisions only. Employees tend to change jobs frequently. These cultures tend to be good at inventing and bad at implementing (for example USA).

Another cultural dimension in Hofstede’s model is long-term or short-term orientation which was added in 1991. Cultures with long-term orientation are self-disciplined and consider family as the basis of society. Generally, in cultures with long-term orientation, senior employees are more powerful than younger ones where long-term personal networks are of crucial importance. These cultures are face cultures where there is a high sense of shame and face. Members of cultures with long-term orientation value training and education highly (a culture with a such long-term orientation is China). On the other hand, cultures with short-term orientation focus on short-term profits and benefits and seek individual achievement. Accordingly, creativity and individualism are highly esteemed. Further, there is a limited sense of shame and face and based on business needs, loyalty might change.

The last cultural dimension by Hofstede is the level of indulgence or restraint, describing the extent to which people try to control their wishes and desires. This is based on the way they were educated and raised. When cultures have weak control, this cultural dimension is called “indulgence” and when cultures have strong control, they have “restraint”.

Another model for the classification of cultural dimensions is proposed by Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997). They differentiate between seven dimensions. Five cultural orientations deal with relationship to other human beings, one cultural dimension deals with time, and one cultural dimension deals with the environment. The five cultural dimensions deal with other human beings are: a) universalistic vs. particularistic cultures, b) individualistic vs. collectivistic cultures, c) achievement vs. ascription orientation, d) specific vs. diffuse cultures and e) neutral vs. affective cultures. The cultural dimension which deals with time is sequential vs. synchronic cultures and the cultural dimension which deals with environment includes cultures with internal control vs. cultures with external control.
The first dimension deals with universalistic and particularistic cultures. In universalist cultures, people focus on rules and not on relationships and accordingly, formal contracts are very important and deals are considered as deals. On the other hand, particularistic cultures stress relationships instead of rules and therefore, contracts can be adapted to the context. Relations are constantly developed and there are differences in views on reality. I remember when I mentioned these two cultural dimensions in a seminar on Iranian and German cultures in a German company, a participant from a family-run business in Iran started to argue that particularism is a matter of fact in employment practices as we have to employ people we trust and on the other hand, German participants were arguing that a high level of particularism would lead to nepotism and favoritism without paying attention to individual performances. This was a classical case of how both sides were operating through their own cultural lenses.

The next cultural dimension of Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner is individualistic vs. collectivistic cultures. This cultural dimension overlaps with individualism vs. collectivism proposed by Hofstede and therefore I will not go into detail here.

The next cultural dimension of Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner is the cultural dimension of achievement vs. ascription orientation. Achievement-oriented cultures use titles such Dr. and Professor moderately. Superiors are respected because of their performance, knowledge and tasks. Top managers are not necessarily the most senior in a company. Norway is an achievement-oriented culture. On the other hand, ascription-oriented cultures respect superiors as a benchmark for commitment in a company. Academic degrees are highly valued and titles are extensively used. India is an ascription-oriented culture.

Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner further differentiate between specific and diffuse cultures. Members of specific cultures prefer to directly come to the point where transparency and precision are highly valued. Principles and consistent moral standards are valid for all members and are independent of the person and their rank. Sweden is a specific culture. Members of diffuse cultures prefer an indirect communication style when dealing with problems. They accept ambiguity. Morality depends on the situation and on the rank of each person. Japan is a diffuse culture.

Another cultural dimension of Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner is neutrality vs. affection. Neutral cultures hide true feelings and thoughts and highly esteem self-discipline. Further, they reject physical contact. China is a neutral culture. On the other hand, members of affective cultures show emotions and express their thoughts freely. Transparency is used as a mechanism to solve tensions and problems. Spain is an affective culture. This cultural dimension overlaps with the cultural dimension of indulgence vs. restraint suggested by Hofstede.
Sequentiality vs. synchronism make up another cultural dimension proposed by Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner. Similar to the cultural dimension of long-term vs. short-term orientation proposed by Hofstede, this cultural dimension deals with the issue of time. The basic question is whether things are performed simultaneously or serially. Members of sequential cultures do one thing at a time and consider punctuality and detailed and rigid planning very important. They prefer to subordinate relationships to time schedules. Germany is a typical subordinated culture. On the other hand, members of synchronic cultures do many things at the same time. They schedule their appointments on a flexible basis and keep adjusting them as time schedules are subordinated to relationships. South Korea is synchronic culture.

The last cultural dimension of Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner deals with the environment dividing cultures with internal control vs. cultures with external control. The key question of this dimension is whether we can control the environment or the environment controls us. Members of cultures with internal control see conflicts as a chance and way to improve. They do not wish to be out of control such as the culture of the USA. On the other hand, members of cultures with external control consider harmony and adaptation of high importance. They focus on relationships with others such as partners and clients and accept (economic) cycles as natural phenomenon. China is a culture with external control.

8 Three models for classifying cultural dimensions

1. Monochronic/Polychronic
2. High context/low context
3. High distance/low distance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hofstede</th>
<th>Trompenaars/Hampden-Turner</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Power distance</td>
<td>1. Universalistic/particularistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Individualism vs. Collectivism</td>
<td>2. Individualistic/collectivistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Masculinity vs. Femininity</td>
<td>3. Achievement/ascription</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Uncertainty avoidance</td>
<td>4. Specific/diffuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Long term vs. Short term orientation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Indulgence vs. restraint</td>
<td>6. Sequential/synchronic</td>
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<td>7. Internal control/external control</td>
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9 Conclusion

Gaining intercultural competence is a multi-faceted endeavor. To begin with, we need to be aware of our own cultural lens and also to study the cultural lens of our target culture. We should analyze and investigate the religion, history, social structure, economic situation, and the media of the target culture. This enables us to be aware of the cultural lens of the target culture. In the next step, we need to analyze the target culture by applying three models of cultural dimensions. By comparing the scores of our own culture to the target culture, we will be able to adapt to and prepare for the reactions of people from the target culture. This enables us to lead successful negotiations in a global context and enable us to have a good understanding of our international counterpart.

10 References


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