Multicultural Managerial Competence: Understanding the Potential Contribution of Cultural Mediators

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Competence in managing a multicultural workforce is a necessity for managers engaging in international expansion. Beyond expanding their linguistics skills, managers are expected to display cultural sensitivity, cultural intelligence, and master multicultural competencies. However, there is evidence that managers can also benefit from the use of cultural mediators, namely people who possess the requisite cultural knowledge and skills. Combining results from behavioural event interviews with 20 international managers, along with an extensive literature review on cultural liaisons and host country nationals (HCNs), this article seeks outline a comprehensive typology of competencies and behavioral practices that warrant the use of cultural mediators as they relate to 1) trusting relationships management, 2) business management, 3) team management, and 4) distance management. Ultimately, we aim to show that cultural mediators’ contribution could prove an essential complement to those engaging in international expansion.

JEL Codes: M12, M16

1. Introduction

Organizations now operate on a global scale. Though the results of globalization are difficult to measure due to discrepant indices, evidence shows that exports are rising and that while only a few exporters trade with 50 countries or more, they account for almost half of the export value (Kearney 2007; McHugh, DeCampo, Coleman & Ewing 2012; Vujakovic 2010).

Despite several success stories, we still observe high failures rates for those engaging in globalization, a problem that is partly attributed to the lack of multicultural competence at the management level. For instance, with regards to projects involving expatriates, it is estimated that success rates range somewhere between 6% (for projects in China) and 50% for overall foreign assignments (Kealey, Protheroe, MacDonald, & Vulpe 2006).

Clearly, potential financial costs associated with failure rates can be astounding. Some claim the costs are situated somewhere between $50,000 and $200,000 (Earley & Ang 2003; Mendenhall, Dunbar & Oddou 1987), with losses of up to a million dollars per expatriate failure. If these numbers aren’t troubling enough, we just need to add the significant personal or emotional costs associated to poorly adjusted expatriates to get a sense of the scope of the problem (Earley et al. 2003).

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The challenge with preparing managers for success on the international arena is tremendous, not only for expatriates who are called upon to spend extended periods of time overseas, but also for global managers who expand their businesses to several countries worldwide. In both cases, dealing with people from multiple foreign countries requires cultural competency and savvy. This explains why global companies employ a host of corporate strategies, such as cross-cultural training, to help their managers navigate unfamiliar cultural territories (Fortier 2009a; Kealey, Protheroe, MacDonald, & Vulpe 2003; Kealey et al. 2006).

There is general agreement that language fluency is a requirement for managers who participate in international expansion (Selmer 2006; Tung 1987). As well, there is a need for managers to develop transferable skills or competencies that include the ability to display cultural sensitivity and cultural intelligence (Egan & Bendick Jr. 2008; Earley et al. 2003; Earley & Gardner 2005; Earley & Peterson 2004; Fortier 2009a; Joshi & Lazarova 2005; Kealey et al., 2003, 2006).

In most cases, the onus for success in multicultural contexts is placed on managers themselves (Rollier and Nielsen 2004; Vance, Vaiman & Andersen 2009). However, there is recent evidence that managers seeking international expansion have access to alternatives that can prove very effective. Indeed, the use of culture mediators, also known as cultural interpreters, cultural liaisons, or cultural moderators, has proven a valuable complement multicultural competence. Either coming from outside the organization or selected in house, cultural mediators can provide considerable experience and contribute necessary cultural knowledge (Barkai 2008; Beamer 1998; Grosse 2000; Okamoto 2010; Parker 2011; Valle 2010).

Indeed, multicultural competence extends beyond managers themselves and is often associated to their capacity to identify people who possess cultural knowledge, often members of the organization, and to harness their power for message transmission or for getting work assignments accomplished (Fortier 2009a).

Despite the recognized importance of cultural mediators, less effort has been paid to their roles in international expansion. Therefore, this study seeks to fill a gap in the research by examining the fundamental competences needed by cultural mediators, namely the capacity for: 1) trusting relationships management, 2) business management, 3) team management, and 4) distance management (Fortier 2009a, 2010).

Based on results from a previous study on multicultural managerial competence that not only support the centrality of managers’ roles for best practices in international expansion but also the pervasive use of cultural mediators (Fortier 2009a, 2009b, 2010), this paper is organized as follows: First, we review literature and then recall the methodology used in the previous research. Subsequently, we propose an analytical description using a storyline crafted upon some specific themes related to cultural mediation. Next, we highlight the potential contribution of cultural mediators for multicultural managerial competence, combined with a description of the competencies and the behavioral practices warranting the use of cultural mediators. Finally, we conclude by discussing the research findings and limitations.
2. Literature Review

The main rationale for using cultural mediators stems from the limitations related to language fluency and communication ability. It has long been understood that language training is necessary to better prepare global managers. Indeed, fluency in the host country's language facilitates the development of a better rapport with host country partners, which in turn increases the odds of success with international expansion (Tung 1987). However, a thorough command of a foreign language might prove exceedingly difficult and require years of practice. Indeed, following interviews with 101 global executives about the main lessons learned in global business, it appears that communication and language are the biggest challenges regarding the development of global executives (McCall & Hollenbeck 2002).

Despite the fact that increased language proficiency in several host countries might facilitate communication for global managers, it might not guarantee clear communication or accurate interpretation (Selmer 2006). In fact, even examples of incorrect interpretations between parties speaking the same language abound. For instance, in his discussion on companies engaging in international expansion, Parker (2011) introduces the story of a Canadian eyewear company expanding their operations into Sweden. As such, following several meetings with their Swedish counterparts, Canadian executives were feeling really satisfied with the relationship. They felt like things were progressing smoothly until they hired a Swedish interpreter who explained that despite the appearance of progress, the Swedes thought the Canadians rude. Thus their foreign partners were not satisfied with this cross-cultural relationship.

One might wonder how such a discrepancy of interpretation can occur between two parties who communicate fluently in the same language. Turns out that Swedish people take a three- to five-second pause after making a comment so the person receiving the comment can internalize what has been said and think about it. Conversely, Canadians tend to speak quickly and move on to the next point without missing a beat. The result: the Swedes felt like the Canadians did not listen to them (Parker 2011).

The difficulty with correctly interpreting messages and communication norms is especially true with conversations involving parties from high-context and low-context cultures. Indeed, people from high-context cultures tend to make indirect statements, are averse to saying "no", and consider truths as circumstantial rather than absolute (Dozier, Husted & McMahon 1998). Conversely, people from low-context cultures usually prefer direct statements and value facts and "hard data". These differences point to contexting problems.

In light of these intercultural differences in contexting, message interpretation might prove challenging, often resulting in miscommunication (Rubin 2011). In fact, in a Forbes survey of senior executives, 67% of respondents cited miscommunication as one of the most significant consequences of language barriers (Rubin 2011). In the end, language barriers may contribute to inefficiency, lack of effective collaboration between employees, and lowered productivity.
Undoubtedly, to counter these communication problems expatriate and global managers can invest months in extensive cultural and diversity training, learning the cultural do’s and don’ts along with the cultural faux pas that should be avoided. However, this information is not only challenging to learn and implement, but its usefulness remains limited in scope. Accordingly, some argue that cultural training gives people a false sense of confidence (Bregman 2012).

Several scholars mention communication as an essential tool to intercultural competence (Adler & Bartholomew 1992; Mendenhal et al. 1987; Kealey et al. 2006), with some of them outlining a good deal of detail regarding the complexity of communication requirements (Thomas & Osland 2004; Kealey 2001; Yamazaki & Kayes 2004). Similarly, proponents of cultural intelligence argue that global managers should possess the ability to display flexibility and skill in order to adapt to novel cultural situations (Earley et al. 2003; Earley et al. 2004; Thomas & Inkson 2005).

Identifying a comprehensive repertoire of these specific behaviors was the goal with the first author’s study on multicultural managerial competence (Fortier 2009a). Based on behavioural event interviews, it was found that managers are called upon to display competence on several levels. Indeed, the resulting multicultural managerial competence typology points to the need for managers to build relationships of trust, to display business and team management, to be skilled in managing staff at a distance, and to possess expatriate competence (Fortier 2009a, 2009b, 2010).

An unexpected theme that emerged from this study is the pervasive use of cultural mediators (Fortier 2009a). Indeed, multicultural competence often extends beyond managers themselves and is often associated to their capacity to identify people who possess cultural knowledge, where options range from involving cultural mediators in coaching, to harnessing their power for message transmission or for getting work assignments accomplished. In other words, managers often turn to cultural mediators for advice, for assistance in conveying messages to organizational members and beyond, and to delegate authority to facilitate goal alignment and accomplishment (Fortier 2009a). These findings prompted us to further investigate the concept of cultural mediators.

Further literature support findings that those seeking international expansion have access to potential options or “shortcuts” that can prove very effective. One of these alternatives is the use of cultural mediators, also referred to as cultural interpreters, moderators, or liaisons.

Cultural mediators are individuals who possess considerable experience in specific cultures and who can, among other things, explain the meaning of each party’s communication (Beamer 1998). Cultural mediators can either be recruited from external sources or selected within the organization and can help people from different cultures resolve their problems (Grosse 2000).

In their study on knowledge management in multinational corporations, Vance et al. (2009) argue for the active involvement of host country nationals (HCNs) as cultural liaisons, a concept that parallels our definition of cultural mediators. In their view, given
that one of the challenges for organizations is the transfer of knowledge from the host to the home country, HCNs can play a key role in contributing know-how from the host site and transfer it back to the parent company (Vance et al. 2009). Acquiring the expertise of HCNs not only takes the focus off the expatriate manager as the sole global player in knowledge transfer, it also acts as a form of empowerment for those in the cultural liaison role.

Accordingly, there is the potential for several benefits when using the expertise of HCNs. Vance et al. (2009) outline five major components of the liaison role that can contribute to knowledge transfer as well as to the effectiveness of operations at the host site. These are categorized as cultural interpreters, communication facilitators, information resource brokers, talent developers, and change partners.

A) HCNs as Cultural Interpreters
First, as cultural interpreters, those acting as cultural liaisons go beyond offering translation to help expatriates understand culturally based activities and practices in the host-country location (Vance et al. 2009). As expected, because language skills are considered to be influential in communication networks and thus grant greater access to information, language skills are indispensable to cultural mediators (Okamoto 2010). Indeed, it makes sense that cultural mediators who possess the required language skills appear more empowered than foreign managers who only display limited language skills. The need for language fluency discussed earlier thus warrants the use of cultural mediators when dealing with a culturally unfamiliar workforce.

B) HCNs as Communication Facilitators
As well, those in the cultural liaisons role may also act as communication facilitators by fostering an atmosphere of trust between the expatriate and the host workforce (Vance et al. 2009). In essence, the key is the ability to grasp the nuances of communication norms.

In the example of miscommunication between the Swedes and the Canadians presented earlier, it was indeed a cultural mediator who clarified expectations between parties, in this case identifying the necessity of taking pauses. This person was aware of cultural nuances in communication and was able to explain the Swedes’ expectations of their Canadian counterparts (Parker 2011).

Cultural mediators were also found to play a key role in message transmission within multicultural teams (Fortier 2009a). When able to identify the groups’ informal leaders with the right cultural skills, multicultural team managers could then delegate message transmission to such leaders. In turn, messages were formulated according to group members’ cultural and linguistic preferences. Thus directions were better understood and followed. In short, cultural mediators usually know what to say and how to say it in order to get things done.

C) HCNs as Information Brokers
As information resource brokers, cultural mediators can help identify the right information sources (Vance et al, 2009). For instance, local cultural liaisons are often more familiar with local market conditions and can make an accurate description of local customs,
government regulations, and competitors. In their liaison roles, HCNs have been found to act as informal organizational knowledge sources who provide valuable information on the local organization culture.

D) HCNs as Talent Developers
Perhaps more importantly, HCN liaisons act as talent developers, providing formal and informal on-the-job coaching to expatriate managers to stimulate knowledge transfer, thus fulfilling the information resource broker role (Vance et al. 2009). Indeed, in her study on multicultural managerial competence, Fortier (2009a) found that managers using cultural mediators as executive coaches facilitated the transition into foreign international settings. The process of learning about businesses practices in a foreign land was accelerated and chances of making a cultural faux pas were decreased.

E) HCNs as Change Partners
Finally, as change partners, it was found that cultural mediators contribute to the accomplishment of organizational goals. Because they understand local acceptable work practices, these people are often in a better position to oversee work assignments (Fortier 2009a). A foreign expatriate might have a clear picture of where the company should go, but when it comes to how such a change should be brought about, the HCN liaison might possess more knowledge about how to formulate implementation plans custom-tailored to the local workforce’s culture, sometimes overcoming resistance to the proposed change (Vance et al. 2009).

Ultimately, managers who can harness the power of credible people, whether from the home or the host countries, and who seek the help of those who possess relevant cultural knowledge and skills can facilitate communication along with the alignment of organizational goals (Fortier 2009a).

Recruiting Cultural Mediators
While cultural mediators can be highly beneficial to expatriate managers, foreign managers must be interpersonally astute to find the right cultural expert among unfamiliar employees (Vance et al. 2009). Moreover, managers need to know who to contact in order to establish relationships with the host workforce. Whether sourced from outside the organization or selected in house, culture mediators need to meet several criteria: 1) they must be able to reconcile culturally different people, 2) they must display positive attitudes toward other cultures, and 3) they must have positive personal relationships with the mediated cultural groups (Okamoto 2010).

Moreover, it is argued that cultural mediators must have earned the trust of at least one of the cultural groups they are called upon to work with (Okamoto 2010), especially in high-context cultures where rapport-building time can be significantly long (Barkai 2008; Toh, DeNisi, & Leonardelli 2012).

However, selecting a cultural mediator should be done with care. For instance, in high power distance cultures, using a mediator of inferior position to the local employees could suggest a lack of respect (Barkai 2008). Such cases require that managers convey messages through HCN liaisons of an equally high status as that of the local employees.
Potential Downsides to Using Cultural Mediators

One might wonder why companies that engage in international expansion have underestimated the importance of professional interpreters or cultural mediators, instead requiring international managers to act as multilingual negotiators (Valle 2010). In fact, their reasons seem valid. Indeed, research indicates that interpreters hired from outside the company can be seen as intruders who alter communication between the parties (Kondo, Tebble, Alexieva, Dam, Katan, Mizuno, Setton, & Zalka 1997). As well, managers are often reluctant to rely on official interpreters as they are viewed as non-specialists who possess little familiarity with the corporate culture (Kondo et al. 1997). Finally, companies perhaps underestimate the importance of working with professional interpreters and instead prefer to cut costs by placing the emphasis on delegates to act as skilled negotiators (Valle 2010).

When managers judge that the potential strengths associated with the use of cultural mediators outweigh likely downsides, it is recommended that they provide official acknowledgement to cultural mediators (Okamoto 2010). Whether this means outlining their role in formal job descriptions, cultural mediators should receive official rewards or status for their assistance (Okamoto 2010).

3. Methodology

A qualitative method was chosen as the best way to arrive at a comprehensive repertoire of competencies and behavioral practices that warrant the use of cultural mediators. Interviews were the primary source for data collection. Using behavioral events approach, we interviewed 20 mid-to-high level managers who had:

a) Worked as a multicultural manager, either in their home country or abroad, in face-to-face contexts or at a distance using technology;
b) Had authority over people of at least two cultures different from their own;
c) Accumulated the equivalent of at least one year of full-time management experience with a multicultural workforce;

Participants included Chiefs of Services, Consultants, Directors, an Associate Vice-President, Vice-Presidents, a Chief Information officer and company Presidents. Managers come from 11 organizations representing a total of eight different industries. Managers reported having worked with a cumulative workforce made up of people from up to 50 countries.

The method of data analysis used draws on recommendation by Glaser and Strauss (1967) regarding coding and by Miles and Hubermann (1984) with regards to data condensation. We began the research by outlining a rough working framework based on existing literature, in conversation with other scholars in the field. We traveled back and forth between the emerging typology and the data.
4. Research Findings

In order to understand the potential contribution of cultural mediators to multicultural managerial competence, we integrated literature discussed in the previous section and adapted it to the content of the MMC typology (Fortier 2009a). Consequently, we were able to conceptually outline the value of using cultural mediators along four competency categories, according to the corresponding seven competencies and their ten behavioural indicators (see Table 1).

Ultimately, we aim to show that although cultural mediators will never be a substitute to multicultural managerial competence, their contribution could prove an essential complement to those engaging in international expansion. In other words, cultural mediators might offer a level of expertise and sophistication that multicultural managers might not otherwise be able to reach, thereby increasing the chances for success.

**Trusting relationships management**

The first competency category of the MMC typology calls for managers to display multicultural competence by building and continually sustaining relationships of trust with their foreign partners. As such, managers are called upon to display cultural sensitivity to the host workforce and build interpersonal relationships with them.

Let’s take a look at the two competencies and their corresponding behavioural indicators highlighting the potential contributions of cultural mediators to building relationships of trust.

**A) Displays cultural sensitivity**

Building relationships of trust entails, among others, having the ability to display cultural sensitivity towards others, an issue that has been emphasized both in the management and in the cross-cultural competence literature (Joshi *et al.* 2005; Kealey *et al.* 2006; McCall & Hollenbeck 2002; Vulpe *et al.* 2001; Yamazaki *et al.* 2004). The MMC typology sheds light on the requirements for this competency, namely displaying cultural sensitivity, by outlining the corresponding behavioural indicators (Fortier 2009a, 2009b).

Cultural sensitivity enables managers to make sense of differences rather than to be disturbed by them. Cultural sensitive managers genuinely try to understand others.

“Not only does it provide you with a certain sensitivity, it gives you a horizon, a context. At the same time, when it shows, and it shows easily, it brings you closer to the person because this person realizes that you are interested in him.”
### Table 1: Multicultural Managerial Competence: Integrating Cultural Mediators

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<th>COMPETENCY CATEGORIES</th>
<th>COMPETENCIES</th>
<th>BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS</th>
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| 1- Trusting Relationships Management | A) Displays cultural sensitivity | - Prioritizes listening, observing, and understanding  
- Displays positive regard towards other cultures  
- Respects linguistic and nonverbal norms |
| | B) Builds interpersonal relationships | - Invests time in relationship development, formally and informally  
- Creates an open, collaborative, and respectful climate |
| 2- Business Management | A) Negotiates win/win agreements for joint business projects | - Displays political astuteness when interacting with foreign partners, respects hierarchy |
| | B) Plans and organizes overall business projects | - Learns foreign partners’ business practices |
| | C) Monitors the accomplishment of overall business projects | - Focuses on results rather than on means, remains open to other ways of doing things |
| 3- Team Management | A) Builds relationships within multicultural teams team members | - Engages the help of cultural mediators within teams |
| 4- Distance Management | A) Coordinates geographically dispersed team members | - Brings cultural mediators to host site |

With regards to the literature discussed in the previous section of this paper, we argue that the three MMC behaviours that could be enhanced with the use of cultural mediators are 1) prioritizing listening, observing, and understanding, 2) displaying positive regard towards other cultures, and 3) respecting linguistic and nonverbal norms.

1) **Prioritizing listening, observing, and understanding**

Culturally sensitive managers begin by prioritizing listening, observing, and understanding before judging others. In other words, before offering their own views managers should...
try to make sense of a situation by being courteous and gracious and by asking questions. The reality is that cultural differences can sometimes be surprising and even shocking. Culturally sensitive managers are those who genuinely try to understand others, seeking to make sense of differences rather than be disturbed by them.

Given the many nuances and subtleties involved in multicultural interaction, it stands to reason that cultural mediators could be a valuable resource for managers. Indeed, it has been found that in their role as HCN liaisons, cultural mediators often have an extensive understanding of cultural norms. They are therefore in a good position to mediate between multicultural parties for instance by explaining the meaning of each party’s communication (Beamer 1998; Okamoto 2010; Toh et al. 2005). In short, managers who listen, observe, and seek to understand by working with cultural mediators increase their chances of truly grasping the cultural nuances and be in a position to display cultural sensitivity.

2) Displaying positive regard towards other cultures
Another behavioural requirement for culturally sensitive managers is having the ability to display positive regard towards other cultures. Indeed, it is not sufficient for managers to be open or accepting to differences, they also benefit from finding advantages to these cultural differences. Such positive regards often better enables them to navigate within differences.

“The goal is not to assimilate or disappear into other cultures but to be able to see their positive aspects and to display appreciation for them” (Fortier 2009, p. 91).

Because of their inclination to hold a positive attitude towards other cultures, cultural mediators have been found to show respect for cultures where they engaged in mediation (Okamoto 2010). Managers who carefully select- and willing to learn from-cultural mediators can tap into a pool of knowledge and a depth of appreciation that is likely to serve them well in foreign lands.

3) Respecting linguistic and nonverbal norms
The last behaviour associated with the ability to display cultural sensitivity and thus build relationships of trust is the ability to respect linguistic and nonverbal norms. One study participant explained the potential for misunderstandings this way:

“And we realized very early on that we were talking the same language but we meant very different things. If X and I were going to develop […], then we’d better get on the same page, you know the two sides better be speaking, not just the same language but with the same meaning.”

As discussed earlier, it is not always easy for managers to grasp the many nuances hidden within communication norms and patterns. Many times, foreign partners end up with completely different perceptions regarding the quality of interaction, especially during instances when communication norms were violated (Parker 2011). In such cases, lack of accurate communication can be equated with lack of cultural sensitivity. As cultural insiders, HCNs possess intimate knowledge of the cultural mores and accepted norms
that international managers may not be aware of. Sharing this information can increase awareness of what is socially accepted and avoid committing potentially serious cultural faux pas (Toh et al. 2005). Using the communication know-how of cultural mediators should therefore be a great asset.

B) Builds interpersonal relationships

At the core of building relationships of trust, we find the second competency, namely building interpersonal relationships. In other words, for managers to deal with their business partners on a professional level, they must begin at the interpersonal level.

The literature reviewed in this paper points to two MMC behaviours that could be enhanced with the use of cultural mediators for building interpersonal relationships are the following: 1) Invests time in relationship development, both formally and informally, and 2) Creates an open, collaborative, and respectful climate.

1) Invests time in relationship development, both formally and informally

Data collected for the MMC typology confirms that multicultural managers must often invest a great deal of time into building interpersonal relationships with international partners. For instance, a North-American manager working with the Chinese indicated that it has taken them two years to build the interpersonal relationship necessary to get both organizations to work together. For a North American manager, this can seem like an eternity.

Ranging from time spent in formal business meetings to time spent in far less formal contexts, managers often need to be coached or at least reminded of this requirement in international expansion efforts. This is where engaging the help of cultural mediators can be useful. Whether they are natives from a foreign site, as with HCNs, or long-time expatriates with foreign culture experience, cultural mediators have often witnessed the result of maladjustment, many of them having experienced first-hand the common frustrations associated to living abroad.

In the case of HCNs, we are dealing with local cultural mediators who tend to enjoy developing relationships with foreign managers. Indeed, HCN liaisons often sympathize due to their own adjustment challenges with foreigners (Brislin 2003). As such, they have been known to offer social support and in some cases even friendship. Thus HCNs can assist in the foreign managers’ socialization process (Toh et al. 2012). Cultural mediators who have had previous experience as expats are well aware of the drawbacks associated to violating the time investment norm. It is expected that cultural mediators could help steer the international managers’ focus on relationship development.

2) Creates an open, collaborative, and respectful climate

The third behavior required to build interpersonal relationships corresponds to showing respect for people in general. It is safe to say that in most cultures, people appreciate it when managers seek to understand their expectations, consider their points of view and show respect, even if it means that managers must play a more authoritarian role than they are used to. Openness, collaboration, and respect are about meeting expectations.
Accordingly, in their role as liaisons, HCNs may help develop ongoing relationships of trust and credibility to assist managers as well as the local workforce in promoting professional growth and career development opportunities (Vance et al. 2009). They are likely to help foster a climate of openness, collaboration, and respect.

Developing Strategy for Business Management
The second competency category looks at the strategic aspect related to managing business projects and highlights some of the issues that are inherent in international expansion. Though the role of cultural mediators is likely to be limited to only one competency and one behavior, we believe that their participation might still become key to the success of foreign partners.

A) Negotiates win/win agreements for joint business projects
Business management in international expansion should be grounded in negotiating win/win agreements that are beneficial to all parties. This process often begins on the political level, hence the need for the following behaviour.

1) Displays political astuteness when interacting with foreign partners, respects hierarchy

For global managers, the need to display political astuteness when interacting with foreign partners is nothing new; the international management contexts simply increases the level of complexity for playing the political game related to organizational hierarchy. In international expansion, being politically astute and respecting hierarchical structure starts with identifying who is in a position to answer questions to understanding who has the authority to make decisions. Sometime it can be as simple, or complex, as knowing whom to sit next to in a formal or informal meeting (Fortier 2009a). The issue becomes all the more challenging when trying to integrate foreign workforce into the parent company's culture.

One of the participating managers confessed to using internal cultural mediators: “Every time we brought in international delegations, we have actually gone into the organization and found somebody that is from Malaysia or found somebody that speaks Mandarin Chinese that can help us effectively not only translate the conversation but navigate the political space and the protocol space.”

When on foreign soil, HCNs, as local insiders, can also be reservoirs of unique and valuable information (Toh et al. 2012). In their role as cultural informants, they can be particularly credible and thus effective in facilitating the transmission of the parent's organization practices and values to the host unit (Toh et al. 2012).

Moreover, as change partners cultural mediators can contribute to the accomplishment of organizational goals. As discussed above, their understanding of local acceptable work practices places them in a credible position to oversee work assignments (Fortier 2009a). Cultural mediators have a good sense regarding how change should be brought about and can contribute to overcoming the host workforce’s resistance to the proposed change (Vance et al. 2009).
B) Plans and organizes overall business projects
With international expansion projects, managers must go ahead with business projects. This requires that they begin to planning, organizing, and execution.

1) Learns foreign partners’ business practices
International managers are sometimes ill suited to formulate specific implementation plans to bring about desired change with operations in foreign countries. In some cases, it might be best if they limit themselves to setting goals and objectives along with intended outcomes. In such cases, allowing the cultural mediators to execute the change in a way that best fits conditions of the local workforce and their environment might be their best course of action.

One of the study participants explained it this way:

“I asked for a coach, I asked for a local coach here, somebody to explain to me the organization how it works, with the lines of power, what the challenges were […]. A guy spent many hours with me telling me what works well, what doesn’t work well […], what processes they follow, how rigorous they are, etc.”

Indeed, Vance et al. (2009) claim that autonomy should be given to HCNs in their role as Executors. More specifically, it is believed that in this fundamental way HCNs serve a vital liaison role in implementing strategy and bringing about effective change (Vance & Vaiman 2009). Of course, HCNs must be held accountable for change outcomes and means of change as these are essential to success in international expansion.

As change agents, HCNs have also been found to help overcome potential workforce resistance to change. By instructing local employees about the purpose and nature of the intended change, along with explaining how employees will be affected, HCNs may greatly decrease workforce resistance (Vance & Vaiman 2009). In this role, cultural mediators are known to play an Internal Alignment Facilitator role.

By using frequent, open communication HCNs are often perceived as more credible than foreign managers. They have been found to be in a good position to regularly keep employees informed before and during the change process which tends to overcome resistance to organizational change efforts. This process results in increased understanding about change can help the level of employee contribution and commitment (Vance et al. 2009).

C) Monitors the accomplishment of overall business projects

1) Focuses on results rather than on means, remains open to other ways of doing things
In terms of monitoring the accomplishment of overall business goals, the MMC typology illustrates that managers should emphasize results. However, when it comes to the ways in which plans should be carried out in a foreign setting, more leeway is often required as
multicultural partners’ work methods might prove diametrically opposed. Many times, other people’s methods are not that different, they are simply conceptualized differently (Fortier 2009a, 2010). Multicultural managers must insure that deadlines are respected, that results meet specific criteria but they must learn to relinquish control with regards to how things are done.

By observing cultural mediators at work, managers who participated in the MMC study said they gained a deeper understanding of team members’ work processes. For instance, it was explained that instead of getting things done by carrying out a three-phase process in an A-B-C fashion, team members from a foreign culture might require five steps to reach the same goal, knowledge that cultural mediators are likely to be privy to.

Vance et al. (2009) present similar findings and justify the use of cultural mediators. They explain that when working with HCNs, all managers need to do is to indicate their goals, objectives, or intended outcomes and then allow the HCN to execute the change in a way that best fits conditions of the local workforce and external environment (Vance & Vaiman 2009). This is what the authors call the Executor role. Clearly this behavior is easier said than done. In practice, letting go of ‘tried and true’ work methods might be the greatest multicultural challenge of all.

Team Management
When teams combine people of different cultural backgrounds, managers often need to facilitate teamwork. The paradox related to this type of team management is that it sometimes requires a hands-on approach, with the manager at the center of this process, or a hands-off approach; Thus the need for cultural mediators.

A) Builds relationships within multicultural teams
This competency deals with the development of the social aspect of teams and its ability to be productive. The goal is to create teams by looking at strong talent combinations both in terms of technical, social, and cultural skills and guide them to goal accomplishment. Indeed, competent managers seek to build on various strengths associated to individual and cultural backgrounds while remaining sensitive about issues of compatibility between team members.

1) Engages the help of cultural mediators within teams
When asked about their best practices in multicultural settings, managers confessed that they greatly benefitted from the help of those in the organization who are both fluent in a foreign language and they are deemed credible by team members, usually because they share the same cultural background. In other words, the cultural mediators are often brought in to establish common ground with the rest of the team members. This process can enhance message transmission and facilitate the accomplishment of tasks (Fortier 2009a).

Indeed, participating managers explained that cultural mediators establish closer ties with members of different cultures. In turn, when message transmission is delegated to
cultural mediators who are also native speakers, messages are likely to be clearer and better received by team members.

Ultimately, integrating the help of cultural mediators also proved highly valuable to task accomplishment. Indeed, delegating information transmission and even formal authority to a native speaker or to a member from the same cultural background managers insured the accomplishment of tasks. In other words, using cultural mediators was fairly straightforward: managers targeted credible team members and harnessed their relational influence on their team members (Fortier 2009a).

Distance Management
This fourth competency category has emerged from current organizational structures where team members are geographically dispersed, often working in multiple time zones. Working in this ‘flat’ world, an expression coined by Thomas Freidman, calls for managers to manage at a distance, often within global virtual teams (Fortier 2009a, 2010).

A) Coordinates geographically dispersed team members
This competence addresses the coordination of team members who are geographically dispersed, in other words people who often speak different languages, who are used to different work practices, and often operate with different resources. There potential for culture clashes is thus exacerbated in this organizational structure. In fact, there is a lot of evidence that creating opportunities for face-to-face meetings can enhance teamwork (Fortier 2009a).

1) Brings cultural mediators to host site
As mentioned above, cultural mediators have been found to build relationships within multicultural teams. When viewed as credible by their peers, either based on hierarchy or on informal social skills, cultural mediators have been shown to have a positive effect when they are brought to remote sites.

Cultural mediators can facilitate work by conveying messages to host site group members and by guiding managers regarding appropriate ways to motivate and reward their multicultural workforce. In short, they can insure a better interface between managers’ expectations and host team members.

Finally, another option that has proven successful is to bring cultural mediators from the host to the home site so they can work with the executive team. Indeed, cultural mediators are in a good position to explain the reality of how things are done both on remote and home sites. This process can also facilitate the accomplishment of work projects when cultural mediators are in direct communication with team members working on the host site.

5. Discussion and Conclusion
The goal of this paper was reflect upon the potential advantages of using cultural mediators as a complement to managers engaging in international expansion. Indeed, research shows that cultural mediators might offer a level of expertise and sophistication
that multicultural managers might not otherwise have access to and could greatly benefit from. However, the reader should note that we do not claim that cultural mediators could ever be a substitute to multicultural managerial competence.

During the interviews for the MMC typology, several examples of cultural mediators were noted. Managers discussed how they benefitted from involving people within their organization who knew the culture first-hand and were already deemed credible by their team members, as in the case of natives, or calling on external coaches who had relevant work experience (Fortier 2009). We have shown in this paper that research with other types of cultural mediators, for instance Host Country Nationals (HCNs), points to similar results.

Clearly, should one decide to work with cultural mediators, one must carefully select them in order to identify people who possess the right knowledge and skill set. It has been argued that, whether sourced from outside the organization or selected in-house, culture mediators need to meet several criteria. For instance, it is believed they must 1) be able to reconcile culturally different people, 2) display positive attitudes toward other cultures, and 3) have positive personal relationships with the mediated cultural groups (Okamoto 2010).

However, the profile of the right cultural mediators is contingent on the right fit with a given culture. For instance, in high power distance cultures, using a mediator of inferior position to members of the local workforce could suggest a lack of respect (Barkai 2008). It is therefore recommended that managers convey messages through HCN liaisons of an equally high status as that of the local employees. In sum, there doesn’t appear to be a clear-cut description of the competent cultural mediator. Managers must make a judicious choice when deciding whom to work with.

The current model is strictly conceptual in nature. It needs to be confirmed with study participants and must be validated according to a research framework designed specifically for that purpose in order to gain empirical support.

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