Don't get lost in culture translation

In an increasingly globalised world it's vital you know how corporate and regional cultures will work together, Erin Meyer tells JENNY ROPER

It's an enviable situation: your company, after starting from humble beginnings, has been growing rapidly over the last few years. You're ready to expand internationally, convinced of the appetite in numerous other countries for what you do. The world is very much your oyster.

But there's one small stumbling block. You've got expansion strategies, you know how new global outpostings should be structured and resourced. But you haven't yet thought about how your company culture might translate elsewhere. You haven't thought about whether your HQ and Asian office employees will actually get along…

For Erin Meyer, senior affiliate professor in the organisational behaviour department at INSEAD and a 2016 HR Most Influential Thinker, this is more than a small obstacle. It's something that could dictate the success of a new global venture.

Despite this it's not something many companies have ever considered, she reports. Meyer herself only recently had the eureka moment of realising the importance of differences between corporate and geographic cultures.

INSEAD's Erin Meyer has researched how business cultures compare around the world

Lightbulb moment

So far Meyer's work has focused on helping leaders navigate the complexities of cultural differences on a more individual level. She has taught thousands of executives from five continents to decode cross-cultural complexities, and to lead more effectively across these differences. She's provided insights into how managers might do this via cultural mapping in her 2014 book *The Culture Map: Breaking Through the Invisible Boundaries of Global Business*.

Meyer's most recent lightbulb moment came when she was working with an unnamed but well-known Silicon Valley company who moved into more than 100 new countries at once last January. The crucial revelation was that it was possible to map a corporate culture far more easily than Meyer had previously assumed. (See charts, right.)

"I used to think it would be really hard to map out a corporate culture on a model like that," she says. "But I realised if you have a mass of people who know the culture well – we took the top 50, but I think it could be any 50 as long as they're representative and working in the main parts of the company – then it's actually quite easy."

She adds: "How many companies have analysed how their culture actually matches up with the country they're expanding to? I don't think many are doing that."

Critical nuances

Meyer uses the example of her undisclosed Silicon Valley company to illustrate just how important understanding the nuances between corporate and country culture might be. "What you see is [that the company is] very direct on the direct to indirect feedback scale. But the countries it's moving into – Asia, Latin America – are really indirect parts of the world," says Meyer. "So the discussion it's having, which I think all companies should be having when they're moving into other countries, is: does our corporate culture, which is so successful in the US, need to change? And is it ok to take our culture and push it into these environments, and if so at what cost?"

The Silicon Valley firm is a good example of where a company might potentially take this awareness, says Meyer. "I don't think they'll change the direct element, because they believe so strongly in it. But at least they're thinking about it."

Meyer adds that in this instance the business might just need to make sure it strongly leans towards the relationship-orientated – rather than task-orientated – side of the trusting scale. "If you've got really good trust and you've got really effective bonds then you can forgive people for being so direct with you," she explains.

Home comforts

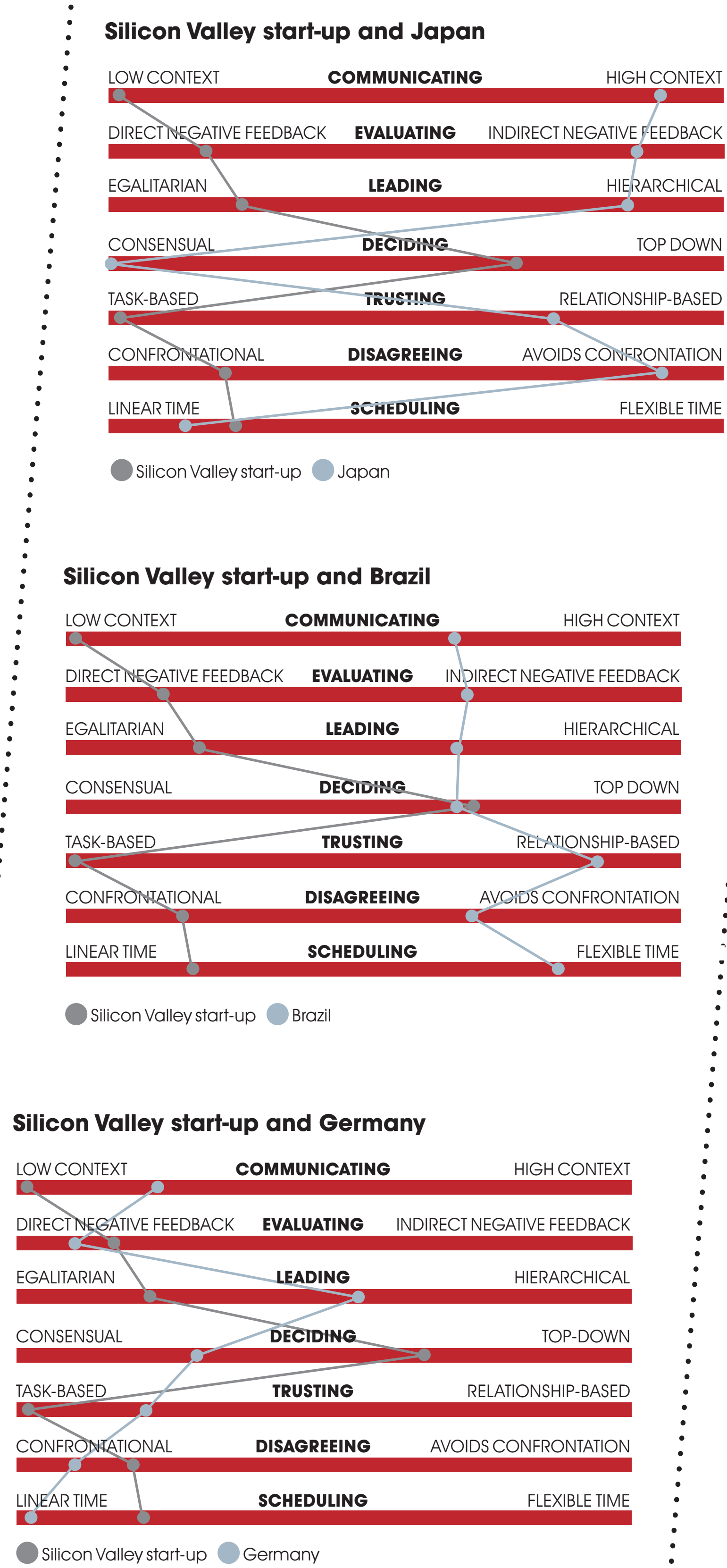
Some companies might want to apply this knowledge to dictate which countries they branch into in the first place, she says. "I definitely think that for a smaller company that doesn't want to take a big risk, choosing countries that have similar maps to your corporate culture is very useful," Meyer says, adding that this formalises a gut instinct many are already following.

"A lot of organisations have done that without knowing what they're doing," she adds. "An example is that most American companies when they move into Europe come to the UK because they share a common language, but beyond that it's common for them to hire Scandinavians to manage their European operations. That's because if you look at their culture maps Scandinavia is quite close to the US. They're almost as task-orientated. So they're comfortable there.

"Companies can take this culture information and analyse the world," says Meyer. "So beyond just looking at the things they normally look at – whether people want their products in the place, whether the institutions are ready for their products – they can also look at whether they're ready to do the work necessary to adapt their corporate culture to the national culture they're moving to."

If they decide they are ready it'll be about "deciding [they're] going to be very careful and aware of how [their] corporate culture may be at odds with the country," and hiring people "good at bridging" between the two cultures, says Meyer. "They're not looking for fit, they're looking for bridges," she reiterates.

Culture mapping in practice



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The company should then "make a conscious effort to be more decentralised," she says. "They have their corporate culture at HQ but then they recognise that in Indonesia the corporate culture's going to be [different]."

Flexibility is critical. "The one thing you have to do is train your execs at home to be more flexible, to have more authentic flexibility. Any company has to focus on that."

Culture eats strategy...

A small handful of businesses will be able to get away with not flexing their corporate cultures, says Meyer – but very few. "Let's say you are a British company and you're super task-orientated, which British companies tend to be, and you're moving into Nigeria. You go in and hire the most task-orientated Nigerians you can find. That's great because they will work very closely with people at your HQ. But it also means they won't be as close to people in their local market. So are they actually going to be able to sell your products and negotiate your deals?

"But someone like Google doesn't have competitors so it doesn't matter. Nigerians only have one product to buy – it's Google."

The above scenario shows, however, how important it is for the many non-Googles of this world to get cross-cultural bridging right. "I think there's a lot more awareness now than 15 years ago that corporate culture is important," says Meyer. "It's the whole 'culture eats strategy for breakfast' idea."

Next steps for Meyer involve working with more organisations to help them compare their corporate culture to the country culture of their various territories, with this work forming the basis of her next book.

Some companies, she explains, will be able to check how their corporate culture compares just by plotting their HQ country's characteristics (so British characteristics for instance) against other territories. "If you don't have a strong corporate culture then that's enough," she says. But she adds: "If you do have a strong corporate culture you have to take that into account [and map this separately]."

With culture becoming a competitive advantage for so many firms, balancing global, local and corporate will become ever more critical. Luckily Meyer is here to help. **HR**

If your organisation would like to work with Erin Meyer to map your corporate culture versus the national culture of your regions, find out more and get in touch via www.erinmeyer.com