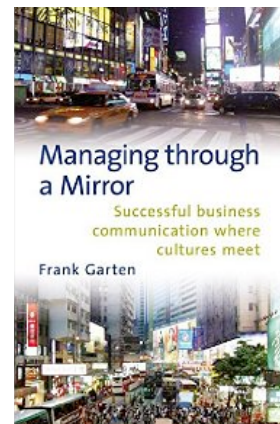


Garten, Frank, *Managing through a Mirror: successful business communication where cultures meet*

(2014) <http://frankgarten.com/> available both in hard copy & Kindle, in both English and Dutch editions.

Reviewed by Dr. George Simons at diversophy.com

The sage advice, "Know thyself," has echoed down throughout the ages, with a variety of meanings, from the Oracle at Delphi to the present day global team teleconference. Frank Garten has put it up front as the title of this comprehensive book on communicating across cultures. Stressing the importance of self-knowledge, particularly that of one's own culture and how it shapes one's thinking and behavior, is an essential ingredient for developing communication competence across cultures in a global society. In classical times the phrase also implied that one should "know one's place" in the order of things. This meaning can serve effectively today to remind us that vaunting our own culture, its values and practices above those of others is both colonial and dysfunctional. Finally, Plato cited this admonition as an exhortation to speak plainly and clearly rather than being buried in abstractions and irrelevancies.



In the 1970s I experienced a kind of enlightenment when, despite the fact that I had been teaching communication and influence skills already for a number of years, I was introduced to several insights that linguistics brought to bear on the effectiveness of the words I spoke and wrote. From a linguistic perspective, there are things that we do with language that are called "performative" speech acts. These are expressions by which our words actually do or create what they say. For example, if I say, "I promise you..." I am making a commitment to deliver what is promised according to the terms we have agreed on. If I say, "I assert that..." I am making

commitments to the accuracy, the verifiability and reliability of what I am asserting. If I say such a simple thing as, "Welcome..." I'm declaring a state of affairs, in this case as to how I intend to treat my visitor. Finally, we make requests with expressions like, "I ask you to..." Obviously, all of these depend on the power of intention, namely the solidity of our commitment to what we are saying.

Garten, when looking at the individual's behavior and interaction, draws on this performative model at the outset, calling it the "I dimension". When we are preoccupied with what we want to communicate, it is easy to forget, however, that there are two other dimensions. The "You dimension", where our comprehension of the situation is developed as we listen and ask questions. Finally there is the "We dimension," where we connect with each other by sharing our own needs and feelings and acknowledging those of others.

It would be fine and certainly make life easier if everyone in their various cultures and languages understood and used such a model when communicating not only with each other but when crossing cultural boundaries. However, this model, though Western in origin, is not per se native to any particular language, and we are faced with an almost incomprehensible diversity of thinking speech and behavior around the world. It is the curse of the babble of Babel. We are not always sure, or even aware of it, when someone is making a promise or declaring a state of affairs in the terms of their own linguistic rules and speech patterns and intentional framework. Gestures and emotional expressions across cultures may obfuscate rather than clarify intentions. Thus, we need to acquire knowledge of the other, which is no easier than looking in the mirror to know ourselves. Often, we need to return to this mirror when parts of ourselves, which we have not noticed before, come to the foreground only when we have stumbled into difficulty with others' differences.

Today there are many intercultural frameworks for understanding and responding to the differences we encounter around the world or even across the conference table at home. Garten has chosen to present and

work with the Hofstedian dimensional model, probably the best-known and easiest to present, though currently under heavy fire for its conduciveness stereotyping, which Garten warns strongly against. One can use Hofstede's cultural profiles, at best, as a series of clues rather than a set of certainties, whether we are looking at our own reflection in the cultural mirror or trying to understand our interlocutors.

We must never forget that we are all the product of socially constructed realities, worlds in which we live and breathe and do business, worlds that we take for granted. Their "reality" relies on common, often unconscious agreement as to the state of affairs in which we find ourselves. A recent *New Yorker* magazine cartoon well illustrates this human condition. It pictures a stereotypical tycoon lecturing another, with the words, "Sure, money may be imaginary – but at least it's got everybody imagining it." These worlds, even when partially shared, are far from uniform across cultures. Cultural competence on either side will depend to a great degree on our ability to identify them and come to grips with the degree of absoluteness or relativity that we and the others accord them. This requires a very large mirror and a high degree of tolerant observation of each other.

Effective communication is the remaining human resource and framework that we have for creating an environment in which to operate together. We can use it to assess and, where needed, create perspectives beyond the social constructions we are immersed in order to agree how we will go forward in both business and life. On this depends our success or failure. Needless to say, we live on a planet where these many socially constructed worlds are in mortal conflict, not only in the marketplace but being acted out with boots and bombs and genocide. So, the importance of what can be learned in this volume, while directed at successful business transactions, has larger implications.

Garten's book is far too extensive to outline in a simple review. Fortunately it is organized in major sections. The first half of the volume, in two parts, first deals with the structure of communication and its personal dimensions and then with the implications of differing cultural contexts for how we

communicate. This broad groundwork perspective is then harvested and brought home in Part III, essentially the second half of the book, addressing "The Manager's Work in a Cross-cultural Context", specifically, managing in four contexts: Performance, Teams, Change, and Negotiations.

The question arises as to how digest and use 400 pages of communication advice sporadically illustrated by the exploration of real stories and mini-case studies. While it reads well, Garten's book might also be considered a reference work to be consulted according to the demands of the managerial tasks at hand. Fortunately, the book comes in both hardcover and Kindle editions, enabling the end-user to choose according to his or her learning predilections. Though well organized in the paper version, some may value the electronic version for its searchability.

One of the book's great assets is the punctuation of the text with numerous highlighted tips, checklists, and suggestions for reflection, which provide an effective resumé of the important points of each preceding section, both incisive and practical, helping the reader to both sum up and apply what has been learned.

Who might benefit from using it? Aimed at practicing managers, the book can also provide a useful overview for those who want to assess their effectiveness in social, political, and diplomatic professions as well as those whose business is to help others learn in the classroom and training room.