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CONSULTING IN INTERNATIONAL CONTEXTS: EXAMINING AND TESTING ASSUMPTIONS

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This article examines the impact of assumptions that consultants, coaches, and trainers (CCTs) make when consulting with clients in cultures that are unfamiliar to them. Three groups of assumptions are examined: (1) assumptions that CCTs make about their clients and the societies in which they are embedded, including (a) culture and customs, (b) organizational structure and size, maturity of national economies, organizational systems and subsystems, and individuals, (c) religion, population, and generational demographics, gender, and language, and (d) national economic and political systems; (2) assumptions about the relationship and expectations between CCTs and their clients; and (3) assumptions about effective leadership, learning, and political and economic systems. Assumptions in the first group refer to areas of *ignorance and misunderstanding* about culture, customs, and economic and political systems, and assumptions in the second and third groups refer to differences in *expectations* about the relationship between CCTs and their clients as well disagreements about the *effectiveness* of divergent beliefs about learning and political and economic systems. The impact of CCTs believing that these assumptions are true without testing them or, worse, not being aware that they are working with untested assumptions is explored. Case examples are included.

Keywords: consulting, international, culture

Virtually every consultant, coach, or trainer (CCT) has been surprised, perplexed, and frustrated at times when working outside of his or her home culture and business environment. We also

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would not be surprised if many international clients wonder how the high-priced experts and "gurus" they hire can be so clueless about the ineffectiveness of their interactions and interventions with them and their organizations. In most instances, both sides of the helping relationship chalk up these bad and sometimes painful experiences to ignorance rather than bad intentions. After all, what professionals are purposefully going to hurt, insult, or patronize clients?

Although we agree that many of these consulting/coaching/training failures are the result of ignorance or false assumptions about culture, customs, and business environment, we suggest that there may be many more fundamental issues that create a substantial number of difficulties in the helping relationship. We argue that both helpers (i.e., CCTs) and helpees often hold fundamental assumptions, not only about culture and the business environment, but also about leadership and learning. These assumptions are frequently unstated and unexamined, leading to a misalignment between CCTs' interventions and clients' expectations. When such fundamental failures in fit between practitioner and client assumptions and resulting expectations occur, one can hardly expect success or satisfaction.

In the following sections, we examine three sets of assumptions CCTs make that often are unstated and untested[1]: Fn1

1. Assumptions about aspects of the client's society,
2. Assumptions about the relationship between and expectations of CCTs and their clients, and
3. Assumptions about effective leadership, learning, political, and economic systems.

The first assumption relates to the ignorance or unawareness by CCTs of significant aspects of the culture in which they are working. This type of assumption substantially affects the way interventions are perceived and, therefore, the effectiveness of their actions. Improvement in outcomes related to these issues can be obtained by adjusting normal practices to local culture. A number of authors have provided a compendium of tips for conducting business in a wide variety of countries (e.g., Lewis, 2006; Moran, Harris, & Moran, 2010; Rapaille, 2006; Solomon & Schell, 2009).

Assumptions associated with the second and third categories, however, require a more profound adjustment to the way CCTs conceptualize problems and interventions. The second assumption deals with the expectations that CCTs and clients have of each other. In these situations, more in-depth dialogue (Bohm, 1996) is required to reach a sufficient degree of shared understanding to allow for effective consultation. Inevitably, some negotiation and adjustment of process and priorities are required.

The third assumption involves some potentially large disagreements regarding important psychological, educational, political, and economic theories and practices. For example, CCTs and their clients may not agree about what works, what does not work, and what needs to be changed in relation to leadership, learning, organizational change, and the consultation process. In these cases, adjustment and minor renegotiation may not be sufficient. CCTs are faced with educating clients about the goals that they would like to achieve and processes they would like to use. This achieved, CCTs then need to persuade their clients to either change their views or give them the benefit of the doubt long enough to prove that their theories and interventions will work. In cases in which neither CCTs nor their clients are willing or able to adjust their convictions, the parties may come to the conclusion that a working contract is not possible.

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[1] In these discussions, we do not explore additional assumptions about working for governmental and not-for-profit organizations (e.g., associations and nongovernmental agencies). Most CCTs have experience in their own countries in dealing with these types of organization and realize that the assumptions that hold for profit-making companies often do not hold in these organizational environments. In this article, however, we focus on the assumptions that apply in international contexts that are foreign or unfamiliar to CCTs without the complication of examining the interaction between profit/not-for-profit and international context.

Assumptions CCTs Make About Their Clients and the Societies in Which They Work

When CCTs work in cultures that are not familiar to them, they are faced with the problem of making sure that the assumptions that they consciously or subconsciously hold with regard to these cultures are accurate. An additional problem is recognizing the assumptions that are embedded in the judgments or inferences that they are making. Argyris (1990), in discussing his well-known "ladder of inference," described the problem of "jumping to conclusions" without recognizing, much less considering, whether assumptions that are embedded in a decision-making process are currently valid. Many of the assumptions that CCTs should consider when working in countries with cultures unfamiliar to them are discussed in this section.

Culture

Many definitions have been offered for the social construct we call *culture*. Most emphasize the importance of learned behaviors, beliefs, values, and attitudes that are characteristic of a particular society or population (e.g., Ember & Ember, 1985; Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1963). We prefer a definition that includes the transmission of learning, beliefs, and values through acculturation and socialization for new and future members. This definition provides the mechanism for how culture is deployed by the current generation and passed on to future generations.

"Culture is defined as the shared patterns of behaviors and interactions, cognitive constructs, and affective understanding that are learned through socialization. These shared patterns identify the members of a culture group while also distinguishing those of another" (CARLA, n.d.). Kluckhohn (1954) suggested that culture is related to society as memory is related to individuals.

Hofstede has provided well-known cultural typologies to organize systematically the behaviors, beliefs, values, and attitudes of country cultures around the globe (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). Hofstede and colleagues' (2010) most recent treatment of international culture identified five cultural dimensions.

Power distance. This dimension is defined by a cultural expectation and acceptance that power is distributed unequally. In other words, in high power distance countries, there is an expectation and acceptance of an unequal distribution of power between people in that society. Germanic and Scandinavian countries are considered to have low power distance cultures, whereas Latin America and Eastern Europe are seen as having high power distance cultures. The United States (U.S.) has a power distance rating that is moderately low on this dimension.

Power distance dynamics may not be immediately apparent to CCTs when working in a foreign culture. For instance, Singapore is high on the power distance dimension. CCTs, therefore, need to understand that it is very difficult in Singapore to maintain a neutral, noninvolved stance while standing in front of a group or class. By virtue of the power accorded by standing in front, the audience/class expects that CCTs are willing to reveal their opinions, ideas, and solutions. By deflecting these requests, CCTs may likely be viewed by their audience as coy, rude, or worse, ignorant (and, therefore, not worthy of the power accorded them).

Individualism versus collectivism. Individualism on this dimension refers to a preference for a loose-knit social structure that values personal freedom, competition, and individual initiative. Collectivist cultures are characterized by cooperative action and mutual support in exchange for loyalty and accepting the priority of societal or corporate interests and needs over those of the individual. As would be expected, the U.S. and the United Kingdom are particularly high in individualism, and China, Singapore, Vietnam, and Malaysia are particularly high in collectivism.

Collectivist cultural attitudes can play out in unexpected ways from the perspective of consultants from Western cultures. For example, one of us (HSL) was conducting a simple decision-making exercise in a Hong Kong graduate-level class. Each member of the team was asked to offer a topic that the team would discuss. The decision-making task was to decide which of the topics the team would most like to explore. The instructor was expecting a discussion about personal interest in each topic, the value of talking about each issue, the importance of each topic, and so forth.

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Instead, there was complete silence for a minute or so as team members looked at each other. At the end of the short silent period, one of the team members said, "Okay, we've decided that we will talk about. . . ." The instructor was flabbergasted. How could the team decide which topic to pursue with no discussion or apparent nonverbal gestures? It turned out that the spokesperson for the team, based on prior working experiences with other team members, studied the looks that the other team members gave to each other, and on that basis, made a judgment (accurate according to the other team members) about which was the most appropriate topic. In further discussion, it became apparent that the value of coming up with a collective and harmonious choice was much more important to this team than engaging in a relatively divisive discussion on the relative merits of the various topics under consideration. It was expected that individual opinions and preferences were to be suppressed in order to achieve the desired team cohesiveness and harmony.

Masculinity versus femininity. According to this typology, the masculine pole of this dimension represents a desire for achievement, heroism, assertiveness, and material reward. Femininity, on the other end of the dimension, represents a desire for cooperation, modesty, caring for the weak, and quality of life. The U.S., the United Kingdom, Germany, China, India, Japan, and Mexico have cultural values that are considered more masculine, whereas the cultures of Norway, Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark, South Korea, Guatemala, and Nigeria have values that are considered more feminine.

Uncertainty avoidance. This dimension indexes the tolerance of a culture for uncertainty and ambiguity. Cultures high in uncertainty avoidance prefer conservative practices and predictable situations. Uncertainty avoidance is lowest in a number of Asia countries (e.g., China, Vietnam, India, and especially low in Singapore) and is moderately low in the U.S., the United Kingdom, Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia, and Australia. It is high in a number of other Asian countries (e.g., Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand), a number of countries in the Middle East (e.g., Egypt, Israel, Iraq, and Turkey), and a number of European and Latin American countries (e.g., Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Mexico, France, Belgium, and Greece).

Long-term versus short-term orientation. At a behavioral level, this dimension reflects a focus on achieving immediate, short-term results versus a long-term orientation that reflects a desire to save, invest, be thrifty, and persevere to achieve long-term and difficult goals. At an attitudinal level, a short-term orientation reflects a concern for establishing absolute and invariant truth. This attitude reflects respect for tradition and is exhibited by concrete, black-and-white thinking. Long-term orientation, at the attitudinal level, promotes the belief that truth is relative to the situation, context, and time. These cultures are willing to adapt tradition as appropriate to the conditions. Although this dimension tracks fairly closely with the conservative versus progressive political attitudes in Western countries, the dimension has also been related to Confucian thought and the search for virtue. As one might expect, a number of Asian countries such as China, Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan can be described as long-term orientation cultures. As also may be expected, many North American and European countries such as the U.S., Canada, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Sweden, Czech Republic, and Austria have short-term orientation cultures.

The astute reader will note the permutations and combinations of the five Hofstede et al. (2010) cultural dimensions make it difficult to draw simple generalizations about other cultures. When CCTs work predominantly in one culture, it may be difficult to understand the profound cultural differences, for example, between relatively close neighbors in Asia that share so many intertwined connections in history, philosophy, and language. For instance, Dorfman, Hibino, Lee, Tate, and Bautista (1997) reported important national distinctions in terms of prevalence and impact of various leadership behaviors in three Asian countries (Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan). These cultures are heavily influenced by similar Confucian thought and philosophy about leadership. The assumptions based on simple commonalities frequently lead to misguided and ineffective CCT interventions. For instance, although all three cultures are both heavily influenced by Confucian philosophy, China is low on uncertainty avoidance, whereas Japan and South Korea are high on this dimension. Japan and China can be described as masculine cultures, but South Korea would be classified as a feminine culture. The interplay of only three of the Hofstede et al. factors makes prediction of how people in each culture will respond to the

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same situation surprisingly difficult. An example of how the Hofstede et al. dimensions can be used is provided in a following section (Assumptions About the Relationship and Expectations Between CCTs and Their Clients).

Customs, Norms, Values

We define *customs* as habitual or ritualized practices that are prescribed by culture as appropriate for a certain situation. Customs are often transmitted through religious/philosophic teachings and myths, as well as through tribal, ethnic, societal, and corporate socializing rites and practices. Cultural values, norms, and customs are generally supportive and consistent with each other. Customs and norms may develop to support important cultural values. Conversely, rituals and customs may require certain values and norms for the two systems to be consistent with each other.

CCTs need to avoid making value judgments based on their own cultural customs in interpreting the customs of others. For instance, U.S. and Western European (WE) CCTs tend to interpret arranged marriages as "quaint," unprogressive, and an abrogation of personal freedom. In cultures in which arranged marriages are common (e.g., India), natives of that culture may not perceive or feel any compromise in an individual's freedom or feel that their marital customs are out of step with modern life.

Other customs may also be very foreign to CCTs accustomed to working in global corporations, especially ones based in the U.S. In China, for instance, it is customary to provide free time after lunch to allow participants in training programs to rest and relax. Consequently, local training programs frequently provide a 2-hr lunch break. One of us (JW) observed a CCT who worked largely in U.S.-based global organizations return from lunch at 1 p.m. to find the training room darkened and participants lying on the floor asleep. The CCT reacted by turning on the lights and waking participants so that he could continue his program. Although the participants complied with the CCT's intervention, they disengaged from the program and considered the CCT to be a "typical Westerner" pushing his agenda on them.

Promptness and the management of time can create much misunderstanding and frustration when working across cultures. U.S. and WE CCTs perceive time as a valuable commodity to be managed efficiently. In addition to the factor of productivity, many U.S. and WE CCTs interpret tardiness as a lack of respect for their valuable time. Many other cultures (e.g., South and Central America, India, and Japan) view time as an asset in developing the necessary trust and comfort to conduct business. These cultures also view time more elastically. For example, if a program starts late, it is acceptable to extend the time to compensate for the loss of time at the start of the scheduled event.

One of us (CSN) observed an Australian manager stationed in India who had a rule that he would walk away from a meeting if he was not seen within 15 min of the scheduled appointment time. He justified this practice by invoking the value of respect for the time of others. Although customers tolerated this behavior (what else would you expect from a Westerner?), the same behavior was not tolerated when practiced by members of his sales team (native-born Indians) as required by their Australian boss. Not only did the practice prove to be an ineffective sales approach, but many of the Indian sales representatives left the organization because of the personal dissonance this norm created for them.

It is also common for U.S. and WE CCTs to misunderstand the cultural norms and values in relation to personal privacy and space. Many CCTs from Western cultures may assume that their foreign clients and associates share these values. CCTs need to realize that many cultures do not honor these cultural boundaries and expect the CCT to openly share information about age, marital status, salary, and so forth. This type of information is not considered sensitive or secret in many cultures. Similarly, participants may ask for copies of all materials in the workshop and may not understand or appreciate the concepts of private ownership or intellectual property rights. They may not view the "borrowing" of these materials and ideas as theft or as an effort to gain economic advantage. In these cases, the act of sharing is more important than confidentiality or intellectual property rights.

This cultural norm also can be very nuanced. For example, although clients in some foreign cultures may expect CCTs and clients to share the facts of their lives, clients may be reluctant to share their personal feelings about their own lives or others they associate or come in contact with. It may, therefore, be difficult for U.S. and WE CCTs to know what they are expected to share (e.g., the specifics of their situation) and what is off limits (e.g., how they truly feel about their situation and those with whom they interact).

Religion

Although U.S.- and WE-based CCTs may be sensitive to the nuances of how religion impacts the reactions and receptiveness of clients, they may make broad and erroneous assumptions about what religious beliefs their clients hold. Because clients rarely volunteer or speak publicly about their religious convictions, CCTs may not understand the religious diversity in Asia (e.g., the large populations of Christians in South Korea, Taiwan, and China, or subtle distinctions between Shinto and Buddhism in Japan). It is also difficult to gauge the impact of religious beliefs and convictions in India because of its diverse mix of Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Jains, Buddhists, and Zoroastrians. These complications are in addition to any differences between the religious or philosophical beliefs of the CCT and the dominant religious and philosophical beliefs of the client/society. Furthermore, religious and philosophical beliefs between a client and its clientele and between a client and its local community can differ.

Population and Generational Dynamics

Although U.S.- and WE-based consultants may have an understanding and competency in dealing with generational differences among employees and managers in their home cultures (i.e., baby-boomers, gen X & Y, millennials), they may make erroneous assumptions about the generational dynamics in an unfamiliar culture. For instance, CCTs, using assumptions based on their own culture, may not appreciate the impact of the huge size of the population under the age of 25 in many developing countries. It is estimated, for example, that 65% of the population in Africa and the Middle East is under the age of 30 (Dhillon, 2008). U.S.- and WE-based CCTs have few reference points to understand the effect of these huge numbers on poverty, economic class, education, and the personal and collective goals of their clients.

One of us (HSL) recalls the reaction of an attendee from China at a recent conference to complaints about the rapid economic rise and dominance of China. This participant was dismayed by the reaction of the audience (mostly U.S.-based CCTs)—"You are all so worried about China getting ahead of you when what we [China] are mainly concerned about is how to feed all of our people!" (paraphrased). This example demonstrates the importance of CCTs understanding the impact of population and generational dynamics from the client's viewpoint rather than basing their assumptions on an understanding of their own culture.

Gender

In our experience, most U.S.- and WE-based CCTs are very sensitive to the economic, social (e.g., family and parental roles), and political equity issues related to gender. They may, however, be less sensitive to the interaction of gender and religion with social and economic status in many parts of the world. For instance, in Malaysia, a Muslim country with strong gender-based values that determine occupational roles, most of the teaching faculty in polytechnic universities are female and the administrators are predominantly male (personal communications with participants at conference, Leading World Class Vocational-Based Learning in Polytechnics, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, May 17, 2010).

Language

In our experience, a common error made by ethnocentric consultants (mostly North American) is to assume that words have common meanings by members of all social and organizational cultures and will be understood the same way. However, many of us with cross-cultural experience have stories

that demonstrate how inaccurate and misleading this assumption can be. A corollary assumption is that every culture has the same or functionally similar concepts. This is not always the case. We have found it helpful to ask client system members to paraphrase what a foreign consultant says. This enables us to identify when a word, phrase, or concept is misunderstood or when people attribute different, unintended meanings to the same word.

For example, just before and for some time after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, one of us (AMF) was retraining psychologists who worked for the Russian Ministry of Atomic Power and Industry to serve as organizational development and consultation (OD&C) practitioners. At one point, he asked whether they knew about *brainstorming*. At first they all said no. However, as the consultant began to explain (but could not complete) the process, several Russians interrupted and said, "Da. Da. We know this thing. We call it *brain attack*." After a brief discussion, the American consultant asked the Russian psychologists to form teams of six and brainstorm as many actions they might take to reduce the human errors that led to the tragedy of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant. They did that and completed this task after 40 min. The consultant asked a representative of each team to describe their results. One of the team representatives, let's call him Ivan, read out the results (from a list of actions the team had offered): "No. 3. . . . No. 7. . . . No. 14. . . . No. 21. . . ." "But Ivan," asked the consultant, "What about the other ideas?" "Oh," replied Ivan, "I don't agree with them!" So much for common cross-cultural understanding!

Although having a common language (English) can facilitate integration and common understanding, CCTs should not assume that organizational members for which English is a second language have a common and shared understanding of the nuances of English. One of us (JW) observed an organizational dispute that emerged as one Asian manager (from Korea) was talking to another Asian manager (from Singapore). The first manager referred to a product as "useless," when she really meant that it was not relevant to the Korean market. The manager from Singapore, however, did not understand how she was using the word and complained to her management that the manager in Korea was "rude."

In many cases, CCTs must be familiar with nonverbal as well as verbal modes of communication in the local culture. For instance, in some Indian cultures, expressions of thanks or appreciation are delivered simply by a smile or pressing hands together. Moreover, as a practical matter, CCTs should avoid using idiomatic terms and examples (i.e., "water under the bridge," "many ways to skin a cat," or referring to American movies and TV shows that are not familiar to the audience). CCTs also need to be careful not to assume that starting an interaction or program with a couple of easily memorized local phrases (e.g., *ni hao*[2] and *konnichiwa*[3]) is sufficient to bridge the cultural divide between themselves and their audience. Fn2,3

Organizational Issues

Distinctions between these business classifications are important in our understanding of how national or regional cultures interact with internal corporate cultures. Global companies are located in multiple countries but maintain a large headquarters in one, usually the home country (Hines, 2007). Taking advantage of economies of scale, they standardize products to minimize cost and use a global marketing strategy with a common message that bridges local tastes and preferences.

Global organizations frequently have people from many different cultures deployed throughout the organization's headquarters and regional offices. Because global corporations have many internal tensions related to multiple cultures, a number of influential authors (Deal & Kennedy, 2000; Kotter & Heskett, 2011) have made a strong case for creating a unified internal corporate culture. To this end, many global corporations often adopt a common business language (English) and corporate culture (U.S. or WE). English is spoken as a first language by approximately 375 million speakers and as a second language by another 375 million speakers (British Council, n.d.).

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[2] "Hello" in Chinese.
[3] "Good afternoon" in Japanese.

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English is also the preferred language in business schools around the globe (Carvajal, 2007). The facts that so many global corporations (144 U.S. or Canadian [28%] and 170 European [34%]; CNN Money, n.d.) are based in North America or Europe and that so much of the export market is in the U.S. or Europe have led to the de facto adoption of U.S. and WE corporate culture norms, policies, and practices.

A number of authors (e.g., Deal & Kennedy, 2000; Kotter & Heskett, 2011) have argued that the adoption of a common language and corporate culture also helps to promote system and process integration. It also mitigates the danger of fragmentation of corporate vision, goals, and strategy. In global corporations with a common language and corporate culture, employees and managers from nondominant cultures (i.e., non-U.S. and non-WE cultures) are expected to adapt to the dominant culture in order to achieve acceptance and influence. A number of authors (e.g., Dorfman, Hanges, & Brodbeck, 2004; Howes, 1996) have also provided evidence that a significant convergence in corporate cultures has taken place.

Multinational companies also have a presence in multiple countries (usually sales and marketing offices in addition to raw materials acquisition and manufacturing sites), but do not make an effort to provide an overarching global marketing strategy. Instead, they make an effort to adapt their products and services to local markets (Hines, 2007). In these companies, senior executives and managers are most often nationals of the country in which the parent company resides. Locals of host countries are usually subordinate and may have little influence. In multinational organizations, there is a much higher priority on getting the cultural fit between client and product or service right, and less need or interest in creating a coherent corporate culture across national or business unit boundaries (Hines, 2007).

Transnational companies have a central headquarters and develop a global marketing strategy with a common message. Regional and national business units, however, are given considerable latitude in making operational, research and development, and sales/marketing decisions. In our experience, because local leaders and managers are making key operational decisions, cultural issues are frequently "baked in" to transnational organizations.

National and regional companies only operate within national or regional boundaries. Because leaders and managers are invariably chosen from these nations or regions, cultural issues may not emerge or be apparent. Nevertheless, in large countries such as the U.S., China, or India, the natural regional variations in culture can be quite important.

In our experience, serious errors are made by CCTs when they make assumptions based on their experience in global corporations when working in multinational, transnational, and national or regional companies. Because so much of their consulting work is conducted with global companies, CCTs may bring this mindset to their work without fully appreciating the effects of local and regional cultures, customs, and business environment.

Economic Issues

Economic structure—capitalism, nationalism, and socialism. By and large, global companies with their U.S. and WE bias embrace a more laissez faire capitalistic economic philosophy that relies on market forces to regulate and inform economic and business decisions. Companies operating primarily in WE are more accepting than the U.S. of government regulation and involvement in protecting and supporting what is viewed as the physical, economic, and social needs of its citizens.

On the other end of the spectrum, socialism, and its more extreme variant, communism, hold that the basis of economic decisions should be what is best for the citizenry of a country. The basis of socialism is social or state ownership and cooperative management of production (O'Hara, 2003). Pure communist ideology holds that socialism is merely a transitional state to a classless society in which economic decisions are made on the basis of need and ability (Marx & Engels, 1848/2011).

Most national economies fall between pure capitalism and pure communism. Notable capitalist countries such as the U.S. have some socialistic aspects (e.g., Medicaid, Medicare, and Social Security in the U.S.). Conversely, the strongest communist economy, China,

embraces many free-market principles. What can be confusing to CCTs from the U.S. and WE is that many Chinese companies that look like private sector enterprises (e.g., Sinopec Corp. with $273 billion in annual revenue in 2010; Woolridge, 2012) are actually state-owned enterprises. In 2008, the percentage of state-owned enterprises in China was 44% (Xu, 2010). Other noncommunist countries also have substantial state ownership of major companies (e.g., Russia and Brazil; Woolridge, 2012). CCTs sometimes fail to understand that the executives and leaders they talk to in contracting for and delivering services may not be the ultimate decision makers. For instance, in China, the real decision makers are members of the ruling Communist party, not the individual listed in organizational charts provided to the public. Consequently, CCTs should ask additional questions about who will be making decisions about a project rather using their experience in capitalist global corporations for reference in making assumptions about ownership of a project.

Level of economic development of countries. This issue is similar to the issue of organization, team, and individual maturity. A sophisticated consulting approach that works well in large global companies will not work as effectively in a country with an emerging economy such as Nigeria. One factor is that in emerging economies there is an inevitable lag in the introduction of new ideas and technologies. Two of us (HSL and AMF) were surprised to learn recently that managerial grid theory (Blake & Mouton, 1964) was being presented as contemporary OD theory by a major training firm in Asia.[4] When working in underdeveloped countries, U.S.- and WE-based CCTs may make false assumptions that their clients have a knowledge and understanding of basic organization and psychological concepts. Fn1

Systems of Political Governance

The variation on this dimension includes hereditary leadership transition (e.g., monarchies, dictators installing offspring as heirs), ethnic or tribal alliances (e.g., countries that require leadership to come from or be shared between certain ethnic groups or tribes), nonhereditary dictatorship, democracy, and mixed systems (e.g., titular monarchy with parliamentary governance). CCTs who typically practice in global companies may assume that decisions ultimately are made to maximize shareholder or owner profit. In many countries, however, maintenance of the status quo or succession issues are much more important than profitability or economic competitiveness. In many countries with a market-driven, if not capitalistic, economic system, certain companies and industries are supported or propped up by subsidies to favor certain individuals, families, and ethnic groups. In other cases, national currencies are artificially pegged to other currencies to make national products more competitive. China has been accused of these policies and behaviors to favor the general economic development of the country, and other countries engage in these practices for personal or family gain and/or succession.

Assumptions About the Relationship and Expectations Between CCTs and Their Clients

CCTs and representatives of prospective client systems typically negotiate terms of engagements. Regardless of the type of consultative services under consideration, clients usually treat them as commodities and want them to be quick, cheap, and high quality. Providers try to manage these expectations so that clients will accept services that meet only two of the three criteria. Because it is impossible to deliver on all three expectations, the client systems' leaders will need to consider trade-offs and make choices.

Various types of CCTs assume their clients will understand, accept, and accommodate their specific requirements and preferences. Similarly, clients assume that their consultants will deliver what the clients

[4] This comment is not a disparagement of managerial grid theory. We continue to teach managerial grid as an important step forward in OD with conceptual elements that continue to be relevant and timeless. We also recognize that there continue to be refinements to the model (McKee & Carlson, 1999). It would be a stretch, however, to characterize managerial grid as a contemporary OD technology.

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think they need in the manner they expect (Freedman & Zackrison, 2001). Table 1 provides a summary of the contrasting assumptions CCTs and their clients frequently make about each other. T1

In examining Table 1, the reader will note that the CCT and the client often have very different notions about what to expect from each other. This observation would be true whether the CCT and the client come from the same culture or whether they come from very dissimilar cultures. The problems of testing assumptions and agreeing on a working contract are hard enough when the CCT and client have a shared culture. The problems become exponentially more difficult when working across cultures.

Imagine a situation in which a CCT is trying to mediate a contract dispute between a French architect and a Swedish engineer-contractor about whether the contractor was building a multibillion-euro trade center according to the architect's specifications. During the meeting, the French architect attacks and insults the Swedish engineer-contractor for failing to comprehend the glorious vision the architect had conceived. The Swede, in turn, returns the insult, calling the architect an arrogant fraud who simply copied second-rate Italian architects. This situation quickly spirals symmetrically out of control, leaving the CCT at a loss to know what to do to resolve the conflict.[5] Fn5

The CCT tries all the mediation strategies and tactics that s/he has learned in many mediation workshops. For example, the mediator has the two parties sit at less confrontational angles to each other and asks them to give evidence for the slurs and insults they are hurling at each other. Nothing works.

Considering the cultural match (or mismatch) of the two protagonists, using the Hofstede et al. (2010) dimensions would help the CCT understand the underlying cultural issues and assumptions involved here. This, in turn, would provide a basis for achieving a working relationship between these two parties (even if they will never become best friends!).

Figure 1 suggests that the Swedish culture is much lower than French culture on the power distance dimension and both are moderately high on individualism. The Swedes are very much lower than the French on uncertainty avoidance and far more feminine than the French. Both the French and the Swedes are moderately low on time orientation. These mismatches undoubtedly play some role in the conflict that the two parties are experiencing. F1

Add to these discrepancies the mismatch between the native U.S. culture of the CCT and the reader can imagine the level of complexity that is involved. Specifically, most Americans prefer a moderately low power distance—between the Swedes (low) and the French (moderately high). Americans are considerably higher in individualism than the French or Swedes—something of a mismatch—and moderate in uncertainty avoidance relative to Swedes (low) and the French (high). Americans are moderately high in masculinity relative to the French (moderately low) and the Swedes (very low)—another moderate mismatch. All three societal cultures are moderately short term in their time orientation.

One promising intervention would be to start by having the parties, including the CCT, share their views of what they expect from each other and then engage in dialogue and discussion to understand, if not resolve, any differences in expectations. Building on this success, the CCT can then help the parties "reset" their relationship by (a) sharing their ratings of themselves and the other party on the Hofstede et al. (2010) cultural dimensions, (b) examining the implications of the matches and mismatches, and (c) creating ground rules and practices to build on their areas of agreements and mitigate or work around their areas of disagreement.

Assumptions About Effective Leadership, Learning, and Political and Economic Systems

The discussion so far has focused on mistaken or inaccurate assumptions that CCTs make about cultures that are foreign to them (i.e., assumptions CCTs make about their clients and the societies

[5] Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967) would describe this as a symmetrical communication interaction, which typically spirals out of control and results in a dysfunctional conclusion.

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Table 1
Assumptions That CCTs and Clients Frequently Make About Each Other

Technical expert	Organizational development & change	Leadership development trainer	Action learning coach
		CCTs often assume their clients will	
• be cooperative	• defensive about their role in the problems	(students)	(organization)
• fully disclose what they know about the problem	• prevaricate and withhold pertinent information	• be essentially ignorant of the subject matter	• provide real-life critical and urgent problems and appropriate teams
	• need to gain trust of client to gather necessary information about the system or problem	• show up on time	(teams)
		• be attentive and curious in class	• be tentative and skeptical of the process
		• complete homework diligently	• nonetheless, show up on time, follow the guidelines, and actively contribute to crafting viable solution
		• demonstrate they have mastered the prescribed knowledge, skills, and aptitudes or attitudes on the job	• be capable of self-management and solving problems without a direct coach intervention
			• senior management will support throughout the process
		Client often assume that CCTs will	
• conduct diagnostic process	• comprehend the organizational problems without having to reveal sensitive information and efficiently lead them to the goals or desired state	• deliver all the KSAs that they assume keep their employees from performing their jobs effectively	(team and organization)
• prescribe a technical, structural, or procedural solution			• function as a task or process facilitator
• execute the required corrective actions if necessary			• provide direct coaching for team and team members when the team is unable to initially solve a problem

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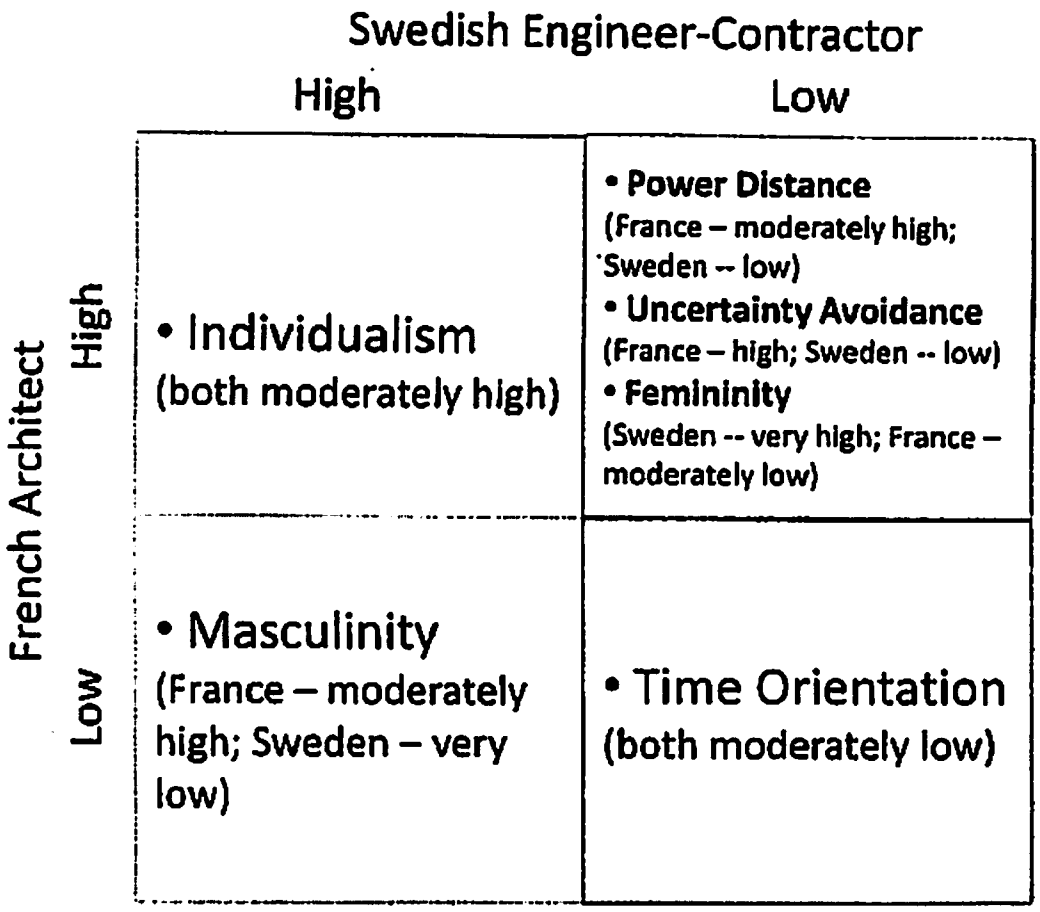

Figure 1. Fit between consultant and client preferences and expectations based on Hofstede and colleagues' (2010) cultural dimensions.

in which they work) or consulting problems that are based on cultural misunderstandings (i.e., assumptions about the relationship and expectations between CCTs and their clients). In contrast, the issues in this section relate to fundamental disagreements between CCTs and their clients regarding the most effective way to learn, govern, or conduct business.

Models for Learning and Teaching

Many CCTs have found that developmental experiences that are seen as engaging and useful in one cultural context fail when transported and delivered in another. De Vita (2001) suggested that one of the reasons for this is a "mismatch between the instructor's teaching style and the student's learning styles" (p. 165). There is a large body of literature supporting the notion that culture (Triandis, 1989) or, more specifically, language (Ji, Zhang, & Nisbet, 2004) affects different learning styles (Yuen & Lee, 1994). This, in turn, predisposes individuals toward different modes of teaching. The challenge in an increasingly global and multicultural world is to make sense of these differing influences on how adults learn and to develop the flexibility to adapt teaching approaches accordingly.

Most CCTs based in U.S. and WE cultures believe that experience/activity-based learning is superior to lecture or rote memorization-based learning. These beliefs are based on a large body of theory and research (Dewey, 1933; Kolb, 1984; Lewin, 1951; Mezirow, 1991) and practical experience (cf. National Training Laboratories, n.d.). A related assumption is that a teacher will be more successful in developing in learners an understanding of complex ideas and issues by asking

participants questions to stimulate reflection than by providing the same information in a lecture. It is also assumed that this knowledge will be retained better through the active involvement of the learner.

Based on these assumptions, most interventions designed by many U.S. and WE CCTs rely heavily on short, informal lectures (a.k.a. lecturettes), a Socratic style of involving students through questions that encourage reflection, exercises to demonstrate and practice concepts, and individual and team projects to involve students in research and problem solving. Action learning (Marquardt, Leonard, Freedman, & Hill, 2009), team-building programs (Dyer, Dyer, & Dyer, 2007), and simulation-based training (Salas, Wildman, & Piccolo, 2009) are some examples of these strategies for maximizing learning.

The active-reflective approach to learning may be preferred by many U.S. and WE learners, but the reality is that this approach to learning is foreign to many, if not most, participants in many other cultures. In our experience, these individuals are used to, and are most comfortable in, learning environments in which they are told what they should know, what to do, and when they are expected to memorize information and procedure rather than figure things out for themselves or come up with original ideas. The passive role we observe in many students in Asian cultures can be partly attributed to Confucian deference and respect for age, experience, and authority.

Asking Questions to Promote Reflection, Engagement, and Understanding

One of us (HSL), now with considerable experience conducting training in Asia, was initially puzzled by the unwillingness of participants and students to engage in the Socratic-style questions that he had carefully developed to encourage his students to reflect on concepts and issues, to identify the dynamics and issues involved, and to develop personal creative solutions. His questions were frequently met with looks of puzzlement that he interpreted as an inability to think independently or an unwillingness to risk being wrong. Later, it was explained to him that his students were wondering why he would be exposing his ignorance and thereby losing "face" by asking such basic questions. After all, he was the authority on these matters and should be telling students the correct way to think about these concepts, not the other way around. By surfacing and correcting his assumptions about how his audience was responding to his questions, he dramatically improved his effectiveness with these audiences.

One of us (PC) notes that, in Taiwan, program participants are not used to answering questions in a public setting. The audience may be surprised that the CCT is asking questions rather than responding to audience queries. CCTs working in Taiwan who seek greater participant engagement by asking questions need to be aware of this expectation and preference. Chu recommends that CCTs use open-ended questions and easy-to-understand vocabulary (if delivering the program in English) to create a safe environment first when working with Taiwanese audiences.

There can also be a paradoxical aspect to the application of experiential learning in non-U.S. and non-WE cultures. Many countries recognize the limitations of a learning approach that relies so heavily on lecture and rote memorization. To correct this imbalance, they hire big-name management faculty and trainers from the best graduate schools and consulting firms to bring the latest and greatest ideas and development approaches to their countries and companies. The resulting mismatch between the educational philosophies, experiences, and expectations frequently leads to disappointing results, disillusionment on the part of the students and clients, and a rejection of the learning approach that they formerly admired and wanted to institute in their countries and organizations. We have learned that the transition from an educational philosophy emphasizing lecture, memorization, and passive student involvement to one that is based on experience, action, inquiry, and active learner engagement must be gradual and respectful of the cultural reverence for authority, clarity, and conformity (cf. Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999), and that CCTs must constantly ask clarifying questions to determine how their questions are being understood.

We are not suggesting, however, that CCTs eliminate their experientially based programs to accommodate the expectations of international learners. Stretching learners out of their

comfort zones is frequently a valuable experience for them. Rather, we are suggesting that CCTs test the validity of their assumptions about participants' prior learning experiences and expectations when designing their training programs.

Feedback Processes

Many, if not most, interventions that have the purpose of increasing individual, team, and organizational learning place a high priority on providing appropriate and valid feedback. For example, many popular leadership development strategies use 360-degree feedback as the cornerstone for accomplishing personal change and development. The belief in the value of personal feedback rests on a string of Western-based assumptions: (a) The focus of development is the enhanced performance of individuals (not groups), (b) leadership and management skills can be learned, (c) individual and personal advancement is desirable, (d) being open to feedback is desirable, (e) data and empirical measurement are good, (f) taking action is essential, and (g) objective feedback is good (Hoppe, 1998).

These assumptions are largely accepted in global corporations but are often unexamined and sometimes not accepted when used in multinational, transnational, or local companies. Moreover, the manner and degree of receptivity to feedback can differ vastly across cultures (Kowske & Anthony, 2007). Generally, in "low-context" cultures such as the U.S. (Hall & Hall, 1990), communication is direct and explicit. However, in "high-context" cultures (e.g., Japan and China), communication is more subtle and indirect (Hall & Hall, 1990); to be direct is considered disrespectful and rude. Therefore, employees of high-context culture organizations may need more time to reflect and explore development activities than employees of low-context culture organizations (Rowson, 1998).

For instance, in many Asian cultures, direct feedback is often perceived as being negative and having a detrimental effect on the recipient of feedback who would lose "face" in the process. Consequently, direct feedback is seldom given to employees. Many Asian countries regard group harmony more highly than conflicts and will often avoid that confrontation.

One of us (CSN) observed this dynamic when consulting in Singapore (his home), a high-context culture. A manager in a local bank complained that one of his employees with performance problems was given feedback regarding his behavior on multiple occasions over a period of 2 years with little positive impact. On closer inquiry, it became apparent that the feedback was quite indirect and amounted to a series of hints rather than requests for specific behavior changes. When questioned about the reason for using such indirect feedback, the manager responded that he "did not what to hurt his feelings" and thereby threaten their relationship going forward. Because the manager's assumptions about the dangers of direct feedback were broadly supported by the culture in Singapore, the manager was very reluctant to provide the sort of feedback favored in global organizations, particularly those based in the U.S.: specific rather than general, descriptive of behavior and impact, and focused on behavior that can be changed including next steps (adapted from MIT Human Resources, n.d.).

To a CCT who is used to working in low-context cultures such as the U.S. and U.S.-based global corporations, the lack of success of the indirect feedback given by the manager would be seen as evidence for the validity of the practical and direct feedback recommended in most U.S. and global corporations (e.g., MIT Human Resources, n.d.). However, without taking into account and understanding the supporting cultural norm concerning the possible destructive impact of direct feedback on harmony and "face," it is unlikely that a CCT will have much success coaching a manager to be more direct, behavioral, and assertive.

Even if managers succeed in conveying culturally sensitive feedback, how individuals receive and internalize developmental strengths and needs can differ greatly across cultures. Culture manifests itself within leadership development when an individual chooses to accept or reject performance feedback based on the culturally prescribed role of authority. For example, when delivering 360-degree feedback in individual coaching sessions to employees in a Mexican multinational organization, one of us (CH) noted that employees placed primary, if not sole, emphasis on the evaluative feedback of the manager. This is understandable if one

recognizes that the Mexican employment culture (a high power distance culture in the Hofstede et al., 2010, typology) places a high value on authority and hierarchy. Hill's experience of delivering the same type of 360-degree feedback in Sweden (lower power distance culture) was markedly different. In Sweden, the emphasis was more on integration of information across multiple organizational viewpoints (i.e., subordinates, peers, bosses, clients, etc.).

The French culture is also high on the Hofstede et al. (2010) power distance and uncertainty avoidance dimensions. One of us (HSL) experienced the impact of these cultural factors in recommending a 360-degree feedback process to a French-based global corporation. Senior management had no problem in having bosses give direct feedback to subordinates but was resistant to the idea of providing upward and lateral feedback from subordinates and peers.

Feedback that leads to insight that then becomes the basis of action is critical to any learning process. Without understanding the cultural norms surrounding the relationship between feedback and harmony (face), or taking into account the impact of power of the source of the feedback recipient, it is unlikely that a CCT will have much success in leveraging feedback as a basis for development actions in an international context.

The Importance of Participation and Engagement to Organizational Change

A fundamental assumption made by U.S. and WE CCT change agents is that employee participation in decisions that fundamentally impact and involve them is critical to their success (Cummings & Worley, 2008). Belief in the importance of employee participation and engagement in decision making goes back to Lewin and the vast movement of social/organizational theorists and practitioners who followed him (Lewin, 1947; Likert, 1967). These assumptions were supported by Lines (2004), who reported strong relationships between participation and five change outcomes: goal achievement, resistance to change, loyalty, effort, and identification.

Other cultures, however, have less confidence or interest in involving employees and internal organizational stakeholders in decision making. Differences in political governance and history are responsible for this reluctance to allow fuller participation in many circumstances (e.g., China, Russia, Saudi Arabia). People with little or no experience in democratic governance at the national level are not likely to understand or be interested in the sort of participative management strategies favored by many OD&C theorists and practitioners (cf. Likert, 1967). The ability of command economies, such as exist in China, to quickly and adroitly weather the "great recession" starting in 2008 have caused many countries and companies to question the wisdom of moving toward greater democratization of the workplace.

Free Market/Capitalism as Best Economic Model

In our experience, U.S. and WE CCTs often assume that free-market/capitalistic economies provide better results for companies, societies, and individuals than command economies, whether they be communist, socialist, or dictatorships. As noted earlier, many countries are now questioning the truth of this assumption based on the relative economic success of command economies such as China and, to a lesser degree, Singapore, Malaysia, and a host of other Asian countries. CCTs need to check their assumption that their clients accept the notion that democratic and free-market-inspired interventions (most of OD&C practices) will be most beneficial to their company or organization. Without an agreement on value and efficacy of these underlying economic/political values, it is not likely that many of their favorite interventions (which may have been great successes in the U.S.- and WE-based organizations) will be accepted or effective.

In other cases, clients may perceive that the barriers to transforming a command to a more participative management system are too great to make any efforts to change. One of us (AMF) encountered this sort of problem when consulting with the Russian Ministry of Defense at a time when that country was making a transition from communism to free-market capitalism. Many of his clients had great difficulty getting an audience with senior officers to get

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permission to experiment and develop innovative military equipment they thought was needed. His clients felt powerless because no one would listen to them.

When the concept of setting up a *skunkworks* was suggested by the CCT, the idea was rejected because it required a decision-making process that was too alien to the centralized command economy then characteristic of Russia.[6] In this system, unless a law explicitly stated that an action was legal, it was considered illegal (contrary to the legal system in the U.S. and other developed countries where activities are legal unless specifically indicated as illegal). Because there was no law stating that a skunkworks was legal, the military assumed it would be because illegal. In addition, the only example of a free market in Russia at that time was the Russian mafia, which was viewed as immoral and evil by the military and general society. With the confluence of these factors, the CCT's recommendations went nowhere. Fn6

Summary

This article has provided a multitude of assumptions that CCTs may consciously or unconsciously make that can determine the kind and form of interventions that they recommend and employ with clients. Based on these considerations, the situation facing CCTs can seem overwhelming and bewildering when they move into an unfamiliar culture. In the face of this complexity, many CCTs may ignore the cultural complications and offer to international clients interventions and analyses that they would recommend to clients in their native business cultures.

If they have a large enough international reputation, the status and authority of the CCT may result in initial acceptance and limited "push back." Clients will give them enough leeway to begin their work with minimal alterations or modifications. The failure to check assumptions and modify practice and procedures accordingly, however, usually results in mediocre or poor outcomes, and the consultant, no matter his or her "guru" status, is often invited to leave or the contract is not extended or renewed. CCTs with less international status and reputation will face resistance or rejection if they do not take into account the various factors identified in this article. This reality may make the situation appear to be a classic "catch-22" situation—inexperienced CCTs cannot sell their services because of their lack of experience concerning the culture, customs, and economic and political factors in play in foreign countries, and yet they cannot get that experience without prior work experience in those countries.

Fortunately, there is a relatively straightforward practice that will help CCTs gain credibility and acceptance in virtually every culture. In addition to the normal preparation for an international engagement, which includes a review of expected cultural expectations and customs, we recommend the following five-step model:

1. Beware of your hubris and swallow your pride. Acknowledge to yourself and the client your ignorance of their culture and economic and political environment.
2. Develop an interview protocol that includes questions designed to inform you about these factors. Share any additional assumptions about working in a particular country or with a particular client that may affect your work.
3. Invite clients to predict how your proposed interventions will fail in their particular country or organizational environment.
4. Make necessary adjustments.
5. Above all else, check your assumptions!

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[6] *Skunkworks* is a term originated in the U.S. military to describe small design groups tasked to develop highly innovative weapons. Skunkworks have a high degree of autonomy and maintain low organizational visibility to prevent the kind of resistance to any new or risky ideas that is typical of most bureaucracies.

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