



INTERVIEW

# The science and art of learning about cultures: Descriptions, explanations, and reflections In conversation with Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, Founder, Art of Living

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**Abstract** National cultural differences pose major obstacles to global business expansion. Managers, therefore, seek to learn more about cultures. Conventional managerial learning mostly draws from descriptive scientific models which have potential drawbacks such as unidimensionality, decontextualisation, and culture-level information. Explanatory models of cultural psychology can help overcome these limitations. Further, insights from a cross-culturally fluent provide reflective learnings. Toward this end, I engage in a conversation with Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, the founder of the Art of Living organization, on issues related to cultural identity in the global workplace in the Indian context.

## Introduction

Cultural intelligence, cultural competences, and cultural adaptability are the buzzwords in contemporary business literature (e.g., Molinsky, Daveport, Iyer, & Davidson, 2012). Academic researchers and business managers cannot brush these aside as jargon. Contrary to the popular assumption that the “world is flat” (Friedman, 2005),

empirical data suggests that a failure to bridge the cultural distance is one of the major reasons why intercultural connectedness is sub-optimal at the individual and the organisational level (Ghemawat, 2007; Ghemawat & Altman, 2012). Why are cultural differences posing such a challenge to business managers?

One possible reason could be that there is a dearth of reliable information on cross-cultural difference—managers must depend on mainstream media, rules-of-thumb, and anecdotal stories in their cross-national ventures, and learn about cultures through trial-and-error. However, the availability of scientific literature on cross-cultural differences, often re-written for the lay audience (e.g., Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010; Markus & Conner, 2013; Nisbett, 2003), contradicts this idea.

Moreover, most global organisations have instituted formal practices of cultural learning. For example,

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Goldman Sachs, in 2009, launched cross-cultural training programmes, aptly called “cultural dojo” in Japan (Nakamoto, 2012) and “cultural yoga” in India. HSBC’s “World’s Local Bank” ad campaign is well known. The “cross cultural knowledge industry” (Segalla, Fischer, & Sander, 2000, p. 42), comprising professional trainers (Littrell & Salas, 2005) and consultants, is proliferating. Therefore, there is less reason to believe in the lack of learning resources.

The other possible reason for limited appreciation and sensitivity to cross-cultural differences—the one that I discuss in detail in this paper—is that the learning content for managers mostly draws from descriptive scientific models. The explanatory models, offered by cultural psychology, are an underutilised resource that can help the manager analyse and appreciate the cultural differences better. I substantiate my point by taking the example of cultural differences in personal choice and external control.

In addition, the experiential process of cross-cultural research and managerial learning is informed by the art of reflection (related concepts that emphasise curiosity and a creative flair for understanding one’s cultural experiences include “cultural metacognition,” Earley & Ang, 2003; “cultural mindfulness,” Thomas, 2006). Along with personal insights and observations, reflection includes conversations with cultural experts who have first-hand experience living and interacting with people of diverse cultures. Toward this end, I engage in a conversation with Sri Sri Ravi Shankar for his insights on cultural identity in the global workplace, especially in the context of India.

## Descriptions of culture

### Cross-cultural management

The subject matter of managerial learning is commonly derived from the academic discipline of cross-cultural management. The scope of the discipline is: “Cross-cultural management *describes* organisational behaviour within countries and cultures; *compares* organisational behaviour across countries and cultures; and, perhaps, most important, seeks to understand and improve the *interaction* of co-workers, managers, clients, suppliers, and alliance partners from countries and cultures around the world.” (Adler, 2002, p.11, emphasis in original). The subject matter of this discipline draws mainly from the scholarly works of anthropologist Edward T. Hall (1959, 1976), cross-cultural management researchers Geert Hofstede (1980), F. Trompenaars (1993), and the more recent GLOBE (Global Leadership and Organisational Behaviour Effectiveness, House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004, Javidan, Dorfman, Sully, & House, 2006). Two defining features of the subject matter are:

#### Bipolar dimensions

In the conceptual culture-as-iceberg model (Hofstede, 1980), the tip of the iceberg comprises observable and tangible differences in cultures, say, in dress, language, and food habits. The hidden or the underlying intangible dimensions—identified through ethnography and/or survey research—comprise the core of culture. Conceptually,

these dimensions are bipolar scales or continua along which the cultures can be rank-ordered as “high” or “low”. Osland and Bird (2000) identified 22 dimensions commonly found in the literature. For example, Hofstede’s (1980; Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010) well-known dimensions comprise individualism/collectivism, power distance (high/low), masculinity/femininity, uncertainty avoidance (high/low), and long-/short-term orientation. Most countries around the world are rank-ordered on these dimensions (Hofstede, 1980).

#### Observable behaviours and cultural practices

The dimensions are conceptual and systematic abstractions of the real world. These map on to observable cultural practices and individual behaviours. For example, Hofstede’s individualism/collectivism dimension is associated with the following behaviours: the word “I” is encouraged in individualistic cultures and avoided in collectivistic cultures; media is the primary source of information in individualistic cultures whereas social network is the primary source of information in collectivistic cultures (Hofstede et al., 2010). The literature is laden with descriptions of the characteristic features associated with a particular dimension. These descriptions, mainly, draw from ethnographic study, participant observations and survey research.

#### Critique of the dimensional approach

Whereas the dimensional approach is comprehensive, in that it allows for comparisons of many countries simultaneously along a common set of dimensions, it has the following limitations:

##### Unidimensionality

Because cultures are marked high or low on one-dimensional constructs, cultures tend to get typecast one way versus the other. There is little help to make sense of the instances that do not fit the generalisation. Osland and Bird (2000) call the dimensional approach as “sophisticated stereotyping” (p.74) and warn that “Sophisticated stereotyping should be the beginning of cultural learning, not the end, as is so often the case when teaching or learning about culture” (Osland & Bird, 2000, p.74). For example, in a 1991 survey, many Costa Rican customers—members of a collectivistic culture—preferred automatic tellers over human tellers because “at least the machines are programmed to say ‘good morning’ and ‘thank you’” (cited in Osland & Bird, 2000). Dimensional models do not account for such anomalies.

##### Decontextualised

Cultural dimensions do not account for the influence of situational contexts (Sinha & Tripathi, 2003; Søderberg & Holden, 2002). Might an individual behave in culturally atypical ways given the situation and circumstances? For example, Sinha and Tripathi (2003) note that India occupies a curious position in the individualism—collectivism dimension: Hofstede (1980) originally predicted that India would occupy a very low point on his Individualism scale. In fact, India scored 48, compared with 91 for the United States and 12 for Venezuela. Indian social psychologists argue that

individualism and collectivism is defined by the contingencies of situations and inter-personal and social contexts. Sinha and Tripathi point out, "In the Indian society, I/C (*individualism–collectivism*) act like figure and ground. Depending on the situation, one rises to form the figure while the other recedes into the back-ground" (p.324).

### Culture-level variables

The dimensions are theoretical constructions at the cultural level. The person-level characteristics, unless empirically derived from nested models, cannot be conclusively drawn from the culture-level variables (e.g., [Chao & Moon, 2005](#); [Hofstede, 1995](#); [Matsumoto & Yoo, 2006](#)). [Hofstede \(1995\)](#) draws an interesting analogy: culture-level variables provide a "garden view" to the cultural observer—an overall, aggregate impression. The description of the garden, both syntactically and statistically, may not relate to the characteristics of flowers in the garden. Person-level variables—the flower in Hofstede's analogy—are defined by a different set of variables, which are not captured in dimensional models.

These problems in the dimensional models not only concern the academic scholars, but they also baffle the uninitiated cross-cultural manager. The problems associated with the dimensional models for a working manager can be illustrated with a workplace phenomenon: many European-American managers have observed, that in contrast to independent, self-driven employees in their home-culture, Indian employees seek directions and instructions, even when the employees know how to do the task (e.g., [Storti, 2007](#)). In cross-cultural dimensional models, this observation can be mapped on to [Hofstede et al.'s \(2010\)](#) description that in high power distance cultures, "subordinates expect to be consulted", versus in low power distance cultures, "subordinates expect to be told what to do" (p.76). This information still is at the descriptive level.

The foreign manager can potentially appreciate the situation better, and develop a more empathic, context-specific response by analysing the phenomenon from an explanatory framework discussed in the next section. Research suggests that an informal analysis, or active attention and processing of cultural situation (e.g., [Thomas, 2006](#)) enhances cross-cultural effectiveness (e.g., [Leong & Ward, 2000](#)). However, in today's fast-paced business world, managers cannot rely on personal armchair theorising. Explanatory scientific models and conclusions based on empirical data provide useful insights to the cross-cultural manager.

### Explanations of cultural differences

Noted French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss (1908–2009) noted that explanation does not consist of reducing the complex to the simple, but of substituting a more intelligible complexity for one that is less ([Geertz, 1973](#)). The cross-cultural problem described above can become more intelligible if it is teased apart in the following manner: The phenomenon that "subordinates expect to be told what to do" comprises person-level psychological constructs, such as: self-concept—what are the salient

assumptions and beliefs in employees' minds regarding independence and interdependence in the workplace; intrinsic motivation—what drives employees' willingness to do the work; do the two processes interact—does employee's salient self-concept—triggered by the demands of the situation—make him or her, more or less motivated? Do the behavioural outcomes vary cross-culturally?

### The cultural psychology approach

The cultural psychology approach championed by [Markus and Kitayama \(1991, 2003; Kitayama & Markus, 1999\)](#) throws light on the rootedness of the person-level psychological constructs within cultural contexts. The phenomenon under discussion can be scrutinised in the following manner: The agentic nature of the self, prevalent in European-American contexts is different from that in India. The Western model of personal agency is *disjoint* in nature, that is, it prescribes that "actions are freely chosen, contingent on one's own preferences, goals, intentions, motives" ([Markus & Kitayama, 2003](#), p. 7); the model of agency in Indian cultural contexts is *conjoint*, according to which, "actions are responsive to obligations and expectations of others, roles, and situations; preferences, goals, and intentions are interpersonally anchored" ([Markus & Kitayama, 2003](#), p. 7).

With this theoretical premise, the researchers follow rigorous experimental studies to demonstrate the causal link between an antecedent event and behavioural outcomes to explain the person-level processes and mechanisms of thinking, feeling, and behaving, and also to empirically demonstrate how far the theoretical description of culture maps on the person-level characteristics. The following empirical studies shed light on the workplace phenomenon under discussion.

### Personal choice and intrinsic motivation

In a landmark study, [Sheena Iyengar and Mark Lepper \(1999\)](#) demonstrated how 7–9 year old children, reacted differently to a task, either chosen by themselves or by their mother. The intrinsic motivation was higher for Asian-American children when task-choices were made for them by their mother, and for European-American children when they personally made their own choices. Asian-American children persisted in the task far longer and performed best, and spent 50% more time in the free play in the task when the mother had chosen than Americans. The subjective experience of the task was different for the two cultural groups. [Iyengar \(2010\)](#) reports:

Indeed, a number of the Anglo American children expressed visible embarrassment at the thought that their mothers had been consulted in the experiment. Mary had an especially memorable reaction. After being read her instructions, she reacted with horror that only seven-year-olds freely express: "You asked my *mother*?" Contrast this with the reaction of Natsumi, a young Japanese American girl who thought that her mother had chosen for her. As Ms. Smith was leaving the room, Natsumi approached her, tugged on her skirt, and asked, "Could you please tell my mommy that I did it just like she said?" (p. 49).

### Autonomy and motivation

Tripathi, Savani, & Cervone (2013) conceptually replicated the Iyengar and Lepper (1999) results with working adults. Indian and American corporate professionals engaged in an open-ended voluntary online task. Each group, on average, spent 25 min in the activity; however, they did so in a contrasting set of conditions. Indians spent more time on task under autonomy-suppressive conditions—instructions that restrained personal discretion; Americans spent far greater time on task in autonomy-supportive conditions—instructions that encouraged personal discretion and choice. The researchers concluded that autonomy is less consequential to the motivation of Indians than to Americans.

### Preference versus choice

In a series of experimental studies, Krishna Savani and colleagues (2008, 2010) have demonstrated cultural variations in the conception of personal choice. Indian participants, compared to Americans, are slower to make choices, less likely to choose according to their personal preferences, and less motivated to express their intrinsic preferences in their choices (Savani, Markus, & Conner, 2008). For example, in one study (Savani et al., 2008, study 6), the experimenter “usurped” the object the participant had chosen and replaced it with another. When asked to evaluate the replaced object, American participants evaluated the replaced object less favourably than the freely chosen one. Indians found the replaced object just as good. Moreover, Americans rated an object much less attractive when they were told by the experimenter, “Here, I choose this for you,” versus when they were told, “Please choose for yourself.” (Savani et al., study 7).

In sum, the three empirical studies demonstrate that: 1) The choice of significant others is critical to the motivation of Asian-American children, 2) In adulthood, Indians experience autonomy as being detrimental to their motivation, 3) Choice-based actions are less consequential to Indians’ conception of the self. Taken together, there is empirical evidence to support the proposition that the conjoint model of agency is more true of Indians than European-Americans. Indians are more motivated in situations that emphasise interpersonal relationships rather than personal choice. It is, therefore, likely that Indian employees construe task-instructions and external directives as relationship-building mechanisms in the workplace. With an enriched explanation and supporting empirical evidence of the phenomenon, the Western manager is better informed, and potentially more empathetic toward the cross-cultural difference.

### Reflections: conversation with a cultural expert

An important source of information that cross-cultural researchers rely on is “cultural experts”. A cultural expert is a cross-culturally fluent authority who has travelled and interacted with people of multiple cultures, and one who has an intrinsic understanding of the home culture vis-à-vis the foreign ones. I, therefore, turn to the founder of the Art of Living organisation, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar to get his insights

on the broad topic of cultural identity in the global workplace. The Art of Living is a humanitarian organisation with operations in 152 countries around the world. Founder Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, has been honoured with highest civilian awards of many countries for his mission of world peace and for what he calls “one world family and cultural plurality” (for a complete list of awards and honours see <http://www.artofliving.org/sri-sri-ravi-shankar-awards-honors>).

I organise my questions around three themes: 1) Authenticity and adaptability in the global workplace, 2) Universal and culture-specific work values: the role of Indian cultural identity, and 3) Management of diversity and differences.

### Authenticity and adaptability in the global workplace

**Ritu Tripathi (RT):** Thank you Guruji<sup>1</sup>, for giving me the opportunity to speak to you on behalf of IIMB Management Review.

I teach and do research in cross cultural management. Thus, I seek your insights on cross cultural issues. I look at the day-to-day work behaviour in different countries and cultures to understand the global workspace. At times, one’s organisational culture clashes with one’s national culture. What path do employees take when their organisational culture is inconsistent with their home culture? For example, Indians are used to having the boss take the lead in meetings and social gatherings. As Indians we are told to address our seniors as “sir” and be deferential towards them. The West perceives this as being excessively deferential and hierarchical, and expects Indian employees to be more forthcoming. Indians adapt but are not very comfortable with the idea. In such cases what would your advice be?

**Sri Sri Ravi Shankar (SSRS):** We need to adapt ourselves. It is just like driving. In Europe you drive on the right side; when you come to India or go to England, you have to switch to the left. In the same way, we need to have adaptability. Different countries have different ways of greeting people. In India, for example, the way of greeting is different from that in France or the US. These differences make the world a more interesting and beautiful place. Instead of trying to demolish the differences, we should just enjoy them. The human personality has so much flexibility in it. We are born with such flexibility but, along the way and somewhere, we condition ourselves such that we lose our flexibility. That is when all the trouble comes. So we have to reorient ourselves to be more flexible like we used to be when we were young.

**RT:** I agree with you. In your books such as *Management Mantras*, you emphasise authenticity or being true to one’s own self as one of the important human qualities. When Indians adapt themselves to Western practices, say to forms of greeting, that change may or may not be

<sup>1</sup> Sri Sri Ravi Shankar is commonly addressed by this Sanskrit word for ‘teacher’ or ‘a learned person’

real. Is there a dilemma between authenticity and adapting?

**SSRS:** Authenticity is totally different from mannerism. Authenticity comes from within. True feelings come from within but the language in which you express yourself could be different. It's like this – our etiquette, our mannerisms, the ways in which we greet and relate to people can be different but within each one of those ways there is a core of our selves, a core behaviour that needs to be authentic. It can be attended to easily - paying attention in this direction can keep us more authentic.

### Universal and culture-specific work values: the role of Indian cultural identity

**RT:** Guruji, are there some universal sets of work values? Or are work values defined by the cultural boundaries? What is ethical or not is at times culturally defined. For example, tipping is absolutely fine in some cultures, in others it is considered a bribe.

**SSRS:** Yes. Universal work values are very simple. What you don't want others to do to you, you should not do to others. You don't want anybody to cheat you, you should not cheat someone else. This is the basic principle. The laws are different in different countries, and we need to build on those laws. The punishment for violation of those laws is also very different in different countries. We need to adapt to the laws. But I would say ethics is universal.

**RT:** You have mentioned in your book that adherence to human values is a key requirement of the workplace. Can you please elaborate on this – an intangible concept? Are there any markers to say *these* are human values...

**SSRS:** Human values are not something concrete that you observe. Human values include integrity, honesty, straightforwardness, adaptability, compassion, forgiveness, the spirit of forget and forgive, moving forward with vision, taking people along with you, and so on. Human relationships are essential. You cannot deal with people like a machine. In your office, if your clerk says his mother is sick and he has to go and you insist he has to work, no work gets done, nor are people happy. Creating a sense of happiness in the workplace, creating a sense of lightness, a lighter working atmosphere is all part of human values. Does it make sense?

**RT:** It does Guruji, a lot of sense ... Guruji, there are Indians working across the world and you have travelled worldwide. What are some of the strengths, the unique work values that Indians can bring to the table that can potentially benefit Westerners?

**SSRS:** In India people are very friendly, flexible, and adaptable. They are not too imposing either. Indians are quick to learn and know how to manage chaos much better than others. Given our chaotic lives, we don't have nervous breakdowns, which often happen in Western society. Indians have shock absorbers in them; they are able to adapt themselves to challenging situations and they boldly take up the challenges. Traditional Indians are also

more intuitive. With people who practice some sort of meditation and breathing exercises, for example, their brilliance comes along with some sort of intuitive power and ability. If people are not introduced to the spiritual culture of India then that's a different story. People who are traditionally brought up in this country, who have some sort of spiritual background, their intuition is very high. That is why they are appreciated world over and in the West in particular. Whatever the profession, traditional people with some of these spiritual practices have excelled in their professions.

**RT:** The Western literature of late is talking about the Indian way of leading. What according to you are the hallmarks of a leader? Is there anything unique about leadership in India?

**SSRS:** As I said, the Indian leadership is unique as we are born with diversity. We inherit a huge lore of values. Many times we are not aware of the wealth of cultural and philosophical values that we have. We have enormous patience also, and we have the ability to make everyone feel the essence of belongingness. So, Indian leadership first feels confident about its culture. Many times we do not feel good about our own culture, our own tradition. We think anything Western is much better. If we do not honour our own cultural roots, our own tradition, our own religion, our own philosophy, then we will be very weak. We cannot be good leaders in any field. So we need to have very strong roots and broad vision about the world culture.

India is one country which always said, let knowledge come to us first and we have always said the world is one family – *Vasudaiva Kutumbakam*. These roots are the strength of Indian leadership and even as we appreciate inputs from other cultures, if we do not strengthen our roots, then the leadership will be only cosmetic. Along with Aristotle and Shakespeare, we have to think of what we have with us – Kalidasa, Adi Shankaracharya, and other philosophers. If not, it is not really coming from conviction. So for conviction to arise from a leader from within he needs to feel very strongly rooted in his own heritage. You know this plays very big on the leader's psychology.

Indians have to learn a lot of things from other people as well. For example, we need to learn teamwork; being too individualistic is not good. Everyone comes up with brilliant ideas but implementation is problematic because everyone thinks his or her idea is the best. In this sense we have to learn from the Japanese. In Japan once they choose a leader, they go with the vision of the leader. Similarly we should learn timing and precision from the Germans. Keeping to time is something that Indians have to learn. We are very casual and laid back about it. Probably warmer countries everywhere in the world have this attitude of postponing things, like the Latin American "manana" attitude. I would say, rather, it is a tropical syndrome. It is not just in India but in many other parts of the world.

**RT:** I come now to a specific question related to the Indian philosophical precept of *Nishkam Karma*—doing

action but not being attached to the fruits of action. How can we reconcile this contradiction to the current workplace, especially the global workplace that is designed around goal-setting, performance reviews, rewards, and compensation?

**SSRS:** This idea of *Nishkam Karma* has been wrongly understood. Here it is said, *Karmaney vadikaraste maa faleshu kadachana* – which means you have the right or authority over the domain of acting, and when you have that right over the domain of acting, the fruit of action is spontaneous, it is automatic, you have no control over it. You have no control over the end but you have all control over the means. If you are too anxious about the ends, you are not able to attend to the means to achieve that. In the Gita it is said, you do your work, put your hundred percent, because the result depends not just on your effort but also other factors. You have no control over other factors. But you have all control over what you want to do. *Nishkam Karma* simply means doing action with hundred percent attention, not being anxious about the result of the action. Because if you are anxious about the result, you are unable to perform, your mind is unable to think and you don't have the strength to act on what you want to do because anxiety takes over.

## Diversity and differences

**RT:** Guruji, in the contemporary management literature, diversity management and diversity strategy are the latest buzzwords. Again, the Indian cultural ideal has been unity in diversity. What, according to you, is unity in diversity? What relevance does it have to management?

**SSRS:** Diversity is an issue more in the West, where there is more much more unison. In India we have been living in a diversified society; every few kilometres you go, the language changes, tradition changes. People of different religions live in this country. So we are born with diversity. In schools and colleges we have diverse groups studying together. Our colleges, institutions, workplace, and government have plenty of examples of diversity.

This is not the case everywhere, more so in the West, where for various reasons people are comfortable with people only of their particular race, culture, language, or religion and there has not been much opportunity for them to interact with people of different cultures. I think diversity should be a must, it not only helps an individual to grow and expand his vision, it is a big learning process; it brings a lot of patience and working with different cultures enables individuals to see things from a different viewpoint. I'm glad it is being taken up.

**RT:** Let us take up a more practical question. On the surface, things seem quite peaceful. At times, however, there is cultural stereotyping and prejudice in the workplace. Can you give any advice on how to handle stereotyping, racism, and prejudice in the workplace?

**SSRS:** Prejudice is the problem everywhere in the world today. There is prejudice against religious, cultural, or racial groups. Though we say we are a planet free from

racism, racism still dominates today. So this is an issue that needs to be handled with much care and strength – inner strength. Some spiritual practices come in handy. They help you to strengthen yourself if you are discriminated against. At the same time they help those who are discriminating against others to see things in a different light.

We have to come out of both the victim consciousness and holding-others-as-culprit consciousness. In the workplace, an undercurrent of victim consciousness can harm the whole atmosphere; it affects the creativity and the teamwork. As with victim consciousness, so also with guilt consciousness of being a culprit, and of holding others as the culprit. To avoid this, the best way is to live more in the present. One must increase one's energy level, and this is what I call spirituality. Spirituality is something that would build your energy, heal your scars, uplift your spirits, create more intuitive ability, and sharpen your intelligence.

Thank you very much!

**RT:** Thank you Guruji, for your time and valuable insights.

## Conclusion

Cross-cultural differences pose a major threat to global business expansion. Therefore, a sound knowledge of cultural differences is imperative in today's globalising economy. In order to gain a well-rounded perspective on foreign cultures, managers are urged to complement the conventional descriptive frameworks of cultural differences with explanations and reflections. Explanatory frameworks borrowed from cultural psychology throw light on the person-level processes and mechanisms that, otherwise, are glossed over in the managerial learning. A fuller understanding of person-level cultural differences and the attendant empirical evidence is likely to enhance the manager's effectiveness as a global manager—in diverse business domains such as communication, negotiations, marketing, teamwork, and leadership.

The experiential process of cultural learning, as anecdotally recorded by cross-cultural researchers (e.g. [Markus & Conner, 2013](#)), benefits from discussing—and demystifying—the personal experiences and observations with a cross-culturally fluent authority. I engaged in a reflective conversation with Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. The following directions emerged for practice and research from the conversation:

## Directions for practice

Sri Sri Ravi Shankar offered various insights to business managers. With regard to adaptability and authenticity, Sri Sri emphasised the importance of both. The appreciation of differences, and the ensuing flexibility and adaptability—the hallmarks of Indian managers abroad—he suggests, must be encouraged. Sri Sri emphasised that while being adaptable, a “core of ourselves” keeps us authentic. One core human value, he offered as an example, was to do unto others, as you

would have them do unto you. Although, this advice is not new, yet in cross-cultural business contexts, it provides a firm and concrete anchor to the manager to hold on to.

His advice to Indian business leaders included a suggestion to draw intellectually from the indigenous cultural sources such as Kalidasa, Shankaracharya, and other philosophers. He emphasised the importance of meditative practices and observed that the sharp intuition of many Indian managers could be a result of the spiritual and meditative mindset. He underscored that spirituality is living in the present. In sum, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar provided a broad overview of global work practices and specific insights on working across cultures, especially to Indian business managers.

### Directions for future research

Researchers also can draw several insights from the interview. One, for instance, is that the construct of “authenticity” although well-researched in positive psychology (e.g., Medlock, 2012) and leadership (e.g., Luthans, Norman, & Hughes, 2006) has not gained ground in cross-cultural research in terms of measurement and operationalisation (cf. Vogelgesang, Clapp-Smith, & Palmer, 2009). Sri Sri made a comment that authenticity is retaining the “core of one’s self”. Researchers might want to empirically explore the attributes of the core and managerial outcomes it predicts in cross-cultural assignments.

Sri Sri suggested that the “core” includes universal human values, such as integrity and honesty. Taking this as a cue, researchers can empirically investigate if individual’s subjective understanding of personal strengths and values confounds the definition of the “core” variably across cultures. Using self-report survey measures, researchers can also try to identify the components of the “core self.” Experimental social scientists can also design studies to vary the experienced level of the “core self” and measure the effect of this variability on behavioural outcomes across cultures. This is but one example of prospective research. It is left to the ingenuity of the researcher to use the reflective insights for empirical research. Much cross-cultural research has advanced in this fashion.

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