The Influence of
CULTURE

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Culture has been my passion before I even knew it existed! Ever since I was a kid, I loved seeing things out of the ordinary during holidays with my family. Everybody called me nosy, and often, I got told off, "Curiosity killed the cat!". When I camped with my mum, dad, and sisters in France, Austria, or Italy, I was mesmerized by how the locals talked, ate, and dressed. It made me wonder.

After college, I immediately moved and started traveling, working, and living abroad. Slowly but surely, I began to notice (and, honestly, experience painstakingly) that there were challenges in doing business and organizing events more than just the fun of working internationally.

My career has been a continuous journey of discovery, particularly in understanding the pivotal role of culture. Over the past decade, I've dedicated myself to hone my skills as an event designer, immersing myself in literature, attending courses, and self-training to better navigate the influence of culture on events. This learning process has been both challenging and inspiring.

To give you an example. The first conference I attended in the US was eye-opening. A cheering, shouting, and clapping crowd welcomed an inspirational speaker on stage. Now, that was new, and it made me feel a little awkward, as I had no clue why everybody went wild. Did I miss something? My first experience felt insecure, as I felt I was not part of the group. Luckily, more Europeans had the same experience, so I understood: it's not me; this is how they do it, so culture.

Think of culture as an onion. There are different layers around a heart, where the values of a person, a group, or an organization are at the core.

Many aspects must be considered when you design or organize events, including diversity–diversity of nationalities or organizations with a stake in your event. All can have different goals, wishes, demands, and–not to be missed out–cultures. What do you do with that fact? How well do you know your stakeholders? And is that knowledge based on facts or assumptions? Reflect on this for a minute, please.

As an event designer, I have experienced that culture–however crucial–is often ignored. Making cultural "mistakes" could mean distinguishing between good and great events. Here are a few basics that might help you avoid making them. Understanding and respecting cultural differences is not just a skill; it's a necessity.

Collective Programming of the Mind

First, a definition of culture: Culture can be described as a collective mindset that distinguishes different groups of people. We often think of it as "differences between countries." However, culture comprises much more, such as the ideas and customs of organizations, professions, or people.

Culture is about all habits and traditions you have learned, often unconsciously. How you were raised, the neighborhood you grew up in, the education you received, the organizations you worked for, and the friends you have met: They all contribute to what you see as "the standard" and make you what you are today.

These "standards" define how you think, feel, and act in your daily activities. They influence your decisions and how you react to unexpected situations. They differentiate you from others.

Think of culture as an onion. There are different layers around a heart, where the values of a person, a group, or an organization are at the core:

- Around the core values, we find the rituals and traditions of a family, organization, or country. Like the cheering at an inspirational speaker or not;

- Role models, such as the chairperson of your association, surround the rituals. You may also think of your president or, in my case, the king;

- And the most visible to all are the symbols; think of a country's flag or your association's logo,

You can see the symbols and role models, yet the difficulty in parsing a person's culture starts with the central area of the onion–the part you cannot see- with unwritten "rules" and rituals. When working in an organization, you slowly but surely grow into whatever habits are inherent to that workplace. You may be unaware that workplace

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habits might be different elsewhere. These coded rituals might be challenging to recognize if you are an outsider.

Some examples are communication preferences (phone, email, or simply walking up to someone's desk), hierarchy or the absence of it, and what kind of conflict expression or resolution is appropriate. Understanding these "office politics" is essential to fitting in and succeeding in the organization. On a personal level, these rituals and values are things you must uncover and navigate to create lasting business relationships or friendships.

Sampling another culture can be enriching if you are open to it because it opens your eyes and gives you a different perspective. Hence, my love for travel. It introduces me to other views on life within a cultural context. It often humbles me and enhances my respect for other living beings. Sometimes, it also makes me smile and wonder.

I learn by talking to and observing others, and as a result, I grow as a person and professional. Cultures inspire me: other habits, colors, smells, tastes, and art. As an event designer, making the design team with whom you work conscious of what might be influential or essential in other minds is crucial. Empathy mapping helps us in more ways than you can imagine.

Culture in Events

Discussions about "culture" in conferences and events are meaningful because you may not share the same culture as the key stakeholders you work with or the participants for whom you design and program the event. Cultural considerations to help you understand what's important to them might influence everything from which day of the week you start the conference and what communication style to use to what types and amounts of food you serve. Also, a great reason to work with a diverse team when you begin event design.

Culture may be challenging to grasp and handle because of the variety of viewpoints and the potential for misunderstanding when context is missing. For example, I am Dutch. We value working efficiently and ensuring we are all clearly aiming for the same targets. We achieve that by being creative, bold, and direct in communication. However, this method, which we find highly effective, is sometimes perceived by other cultures as "rude." Yet that is never our intention. Knowing and understanding this would help the collaborative process.

Being aware of our differences will allow us to work in closer harmony. A deep dive or an interest in another person's culture will develop empathy and provide context. It enables us to stand back, observe, and react more understandingly. It will also make it easier to resolve potential conflicts. All these aspects make working together a lot easier and more fun.

That is why, as professionals, you should think about how to prepare and educate your team. Whenever they encounter different cultures, whether organizational, interpersonal, or related to traveling to a host destination, this will help them more easily access the unknown ahead.

Start Prepared!

First, you need to be aware of the cultures involved. Start with your management, participants, and other stakeholders. You need to be curious and ask many questions. The answers you get won't be ones you can find on a website or in your event guidelines. However, they will help you understand the crowd, and knowing about them will influence decision-making.

Please take a deep dive and know where it differs from your stakeholders. Listen and observe when talking to them. What are they telling you verbally and nonverbally? Do you notice a change in attitude or behavior when they talk about a specific subject? What does this mean? Then, figure out what, why, and how to overcome these cultural obstacles as you design and execute your event.

I would love it when people open up to cultural differences. Traveling the world taught me many exciting perspectives that helped me be a better consultant, facilitator, and event designer. There are always more ways than one!

To learn more about culture in event planning or The Event Design Collective, contact Ingrid at info@rrem.nl.

Meet Ingrid

INGRID RIP is a passionate and versatile meeting professional with a track record of over 30 years in the industry, including over 20 years as an entrepreneur. As Event Designer, Ingrid is passionate about human development, behavioral design, and the dynamic events industry. As director of her consultancy firm and director for the Netherlands of the Event Design Collective, she knows that events are a powerful tool. However, they need a more strategic approach if you want them to add value for all stakeholders involved.