

With more than 450 pages (paperback edition) and more than 50 countries covered, Richard Lewis' book, first published in 1996, may quite literally be the heavyweight of global culture guides. Its British author runs an international institute of cross-cultural and language training with a client list that includes many heavy-hitting multinationals. He has lived and worked in several places around the world, his possibly most fascinating role being as a tutor to the Imperial Family in Japan for five years.

When Cultures Collide consists of three main parts. While addressing many aspects, its primary focus is on conducting business across cultures. It starts with interesting observations on language differences and the diversity of thought they reflect, including an analysis of powerful mental blocks. Part I also briefly addresses how humor works, or rather mostly won't work, across cultures, and then goes on to discuss cultural conditioning and the relative nature of concepts like "normal" and "abnormal".

Part II, labeled "Managing Across Cultures", finds the author at his best. Using compelling ways to categorize major cultural differences, he helps the reader understand how different concepts of time, the relevance of status and power in shaping organizational structure, communication methods, and ways to conduct meetings and social gatherings, all influence

how interactions with a specific culture can be made effective. A bit weaker is the section on manners, which mostly remains anecdotal and may make it hard to figure out what to do in real-life situations in a given country.

The final part of the book, almost two-thirds of it, summarizes aspects of cross-cultural relevance country-by-country. For several of the major ones, it contrasts appearances vs. reality, helping the reader understand stereotypes and misconceptions he or she may have. While quite useful overall, this part of the book is not without shortcomings. For starters, owing to the author's origin and primary focus, Europe's countries get more than their fair share of coverage, while the information about some of the Asian and most of the Latin American countries is a bit shallow or even outright poor. For places like Azerbaijan, that may be ok, but not giving a country like Brazil, South America's largest, any more room than, say, Austria, is hard to understand. Also, the format used to summarize the information is not very consistent, making it harder than necessary to compare between different countries. Moreover, the author lumps a large part of the Muslim world into one section, "Arab Countries", which won't do justice to the significant differences between places like Lebanon and Yemen, for instance.

In spite of these nitpicks, this is a mostly well-written and valuable reference for the global business leader. If you are looking for easy-to-locate, easy-to-follow advice on how to conduct business in most of U.S.' relevant trade partner countries, this book is for you.



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A seasoned former executive of a Fortune 500 company, he regularly interacted with employees, customers, outsourcing partners, and third parties in more than 25 countries around the world. These included many parts of Asia, e.g., China, India, and Japan. Originally from Germany, he has lived and worked both in the United States and in Europe.



