Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Mindset change in a cross-cultural context

Martin Loeve*

Delta Change Management, Renesse, The Netherlands

Imagine you are Thai and a member of a management team from a European company that acts in an Asian emerging market. Imagine you are a European expat with the assignment to double the turnover from that Asian company in a few years. Imagine you are a Change Maker and they ask you to facilitate the (multinational) management team of that Asian company to develop a market strategy and translate it into a business plan, and you have to deal with cultural differences. How do you manage a small-scale change process based on the principles of action learning in that specific multinational context? That's the essence of this account of practice.

Keywords: *Small-scale change processes; Action learning; Mindset change; Cross-cultural context*

Introduction

The company involved in this account of practice is a Dutch multinational operating in Thailand. Since 1991 the company has been active in the field of managing document solutions. They have around 130 employees. The Management Team (MT) consists of Thai professionals managed by a European Managing Director (MD). Seventy percent of the MT members are female and the MD is male. Typical for Thai culture is the emphasis on hierarchy and internal social relationships.

The MD has an academic background in business administration and experience in an international business environment. The desire of the MD is to work with the MT to become more results driven and more proactive in developing existing and new markets for document solutions.

*Delta Change Management, P.O. Box 60, 4325 ZH Renesse, The Netherlands. Email: martin@
deltachangemanagement.nl

My assignment was to facilitate the MT to develop a market strategy and a business plan as well as to change attitudes and behavior to act in a more results-driven way and be more proactive to develop markets.

Method

Generally, when I have a group of people that needs to work out an assignment as a team, I work according to my own change method: small-scale change processes (see Figure 3).

The small-scale change process philosophy I have developed is based on the experience with action learning principles I have had in more than 25 years as a trainer, coach and manager in sport and business, and on my MBA study at the Action Learning Business School BSN Nederland. I have also developed basic instruments to program and implement small-scale change processes: the navigational map as a learning and experience process and the atspAr® formula as a navigational instrument, as shown in Figures 1 and 2. The 'a' stands for analysis, the 't' for target, the 's' for strategy, the 'p' for plan, the 'A' for action and the 'r' for reflecting. I use the navigational map and the atspAr® formula for personal, team and business development. The principles of action learning used in my change method are:

- working with groups or (multidisciplinary and/or multinational) teams, consisting of approximately six to eight individuals;
- working together to tackle a problem or a challenge, a concrete reason for change, to innovate or to develop;
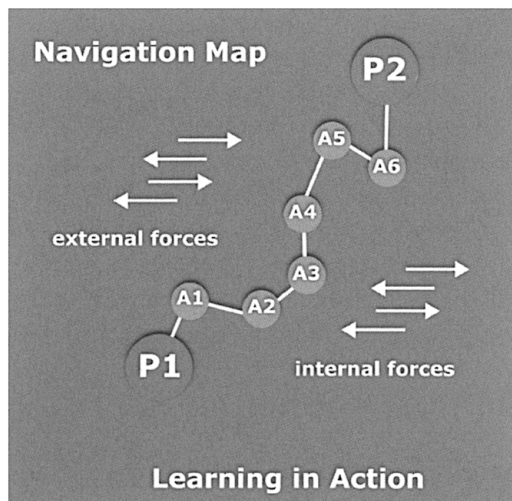- a clear desire and motivation to get into action and enough space and freedom to learn;

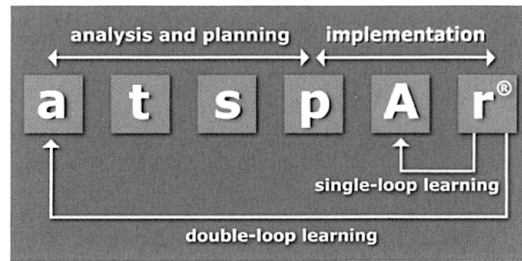**Figure 1.** The navigational map as a learning and experience process

Figure 2. The atspAr® formula as a navigational instrument

- acting and reflecting on the experience gained: single and double loop learning;
- the process is guided by a facilitator (Change Maker).

Need for mindset change

On the first day I realized that the situation was more complicated than anticipated. The MD asked me to start the first meeting with an introduction of myself and my book *The Change Maker*®. So I did. The team members were listening with a lot of attention, but did not ask any questions and when I asked them a question they looked first to the MD and after that they smiled at me in a very friendly way. But, the non-verbal language they showed was very clear: we do not understand you. Based on these first experiences I made up my mind and came to the conclusion that because of the strong hierarchy present, there was little (verbal) interaction. Interaction is key to successfully facilitating small-scale change processes based on the principles of action learning. And therefore three mindsets needed to be changed in order to make this project work (see Table 1).

Table 1. My assessment of the mindsets (the current position, P1, on the navigational map)

Mindset 1	The Thai managers	Emphasis on hierarchy.
		Self-talk: 'It is not done to express your personal opinion, especially when it differs from that of the MD'.
Mindset 2	The MD	Emphasis on result.
		Self-talk: 'Every member can contribute, so it is important that they speak out and speak freely. I am used to employees that challenge my opinion and points of view'.
Mindset 3	The Change Maker	Emphasis on small-scale change processes.
		Self-talk: 'I know how to facilitate small change processes in a cross-cultural context. I know that every group needs a flexible approach, but in 99% of the cases I can follow a more or less standard program. I am used to groups consisting of individuals with mindsets that are more or less similar'.

The solution

After I came to the conclusion that all three mindsets needed to be changed in order to make this project work, I had to change my work method. I thought about all kinds of motivators, hygiene and success factors I had learned and used in the past. I also thought about cross-cultural differences and work methods in general. I came to the conclusion that if I wanted to facilitate the MT successfully, and I did, then not only did I have to be flexible in my work, but I would also have to deal with the cross-cultural aspects. I adapted my program and organized specific interventions:

1. Interviews and discussions with the individual MT members to get more insight in their mindset and ideas. I chose a small room with one round table to break the hierarchy, no one was sitting at the head of the table. I talked with each individual team member and asked him or her if they felt comfortable in these one-to-one sessions. I asked them mainly open questions about their background in an organizational context and about their ideas on developing a market strategy and business plan. I took all the time we needed. I paraphrased their answers and checked that I understood them properly, both verbal and non-verbal. At the end of each session we made agreements about a maximum of three (matrix) actions.
2. Interview and discussion with the MD to talk about mindsets and his point of view and expectations. What bothered me most was his natural and organizational hierarchical position in relation to the expectations of the group. How could we break that and motivate the MT members to express their personal opinions and give feedback on his thoughts? Because he has a lot of international experience and he is change minded, it was quite easy to make him understand that it was necessary to 'play' with his hierarchic position, especially during the planned workshop sessions. That's the reason why I chose round tables again during the workshops. We also decided that at the beginning of the workshops he would give a short introduction on the importance of formulating a market strategy and on how he was going to participate in the workshops.
3. Interactive workshops at a team level, to develop a common market strategy and business plan. In another environment, a comfortable hotel in the neighborhood, I formed small groups (including the MD), also at round tables, and asked them to work out parts of the business plan. I walked around and motivated them to contribute ideas and to give opinions. They wrote their ideas on post-it notes and put those on the wall. We walked around and looked at the results and had a few discussions. In this manner everybody kept on moving through the room and round the tables and started to feel more and more relaxed. It took some time but step by step an explanation or a clarification was given for the ideas. We made jokes and, partly due to the humor used, in a few hours the ice was broken. I judged that everybody felt comfortable. Later on each MT member was made responsible for a specific part of the process and had to present the results to the whole

Table 2. My assessments of mindsets after new experiences (new position, P2, on the navigational map)

Mindset 1	The Thai managers	Emphasis still on hierarchy. Self-talk: 'However, I know a bit more of the mindset of this European MD and I know that he views hierarchy differently. It is possible to express your personal opinion, even when it differs from that of the MD'.
Mindset 2	The MD	Emphasis on result. Self-talk: 'I have learned that in Thai culture hierarchy is very important. So I put less stress on expressing personal opinions. I have made it clear that I appreciate every MT member's opinion. Every member can contribute, but it is not so important how they do that. If they choose so they can speak out and speak freely, or do that implicitly or indirectly, individually or in team settings. I have learned that my Thai colleagues discuss issues with me more easily when I create a comfortable environment. I know now that I cannot treat them in the same way as I would Dutch MT members'.
Mindset 3	The Change Maker	Emphasis on small-scale change processes. Self-talk: 'I know now that I have to analyze the group and its members before I start a small-scale change process in order to find out what mindsets they have. When I find that there are individuals with a mindset that hinders them in the change process I have to work on that with them. If I want to facilitate small-scale change processes in a cross-cultural context in an effective way, then I have to be even more flexible in my work methods to overcome problems with different mindsets'.

group. After each presentation the outcome was discussed by the whole team sitting around a big round table. In this way and step by step the MT got more and more involved in the process to develop a common market strategy and business plan. This was a huge step for the MT, because they were used to the MD deciding on the strategic direction. Instead the MD was participating on an equal footing and he enjoyed the process. Sometimes he asked questions and initiated discussions and dialogues.

The results

By using the step-by-step solution I described above, I believe we achieved results on mindset change in a cross-cultural context, see Table 2. And this is not the only result. With the new market strategy and business plan the subsidiary of the multinational is on course to double its turnover in a few years.

Table 3. Things that I have learned from this small-scale change process

Position on the navigational map	atspAr® component	Things that I have learned as a Change Maker
P1	analysis	Analyze not only the internal and external change forces, but also the mindsets of the individual participants from different positions: on personal, team and business levels.
P1–P2	target	Design a flexible change program on headlines and work out the details step by step with the participants during the small-scale change process, concerning their mindset, competencies and cultural differences in that specific context.
P1–P2	strategy	A development change strategy based on action learning works also in a cross-cultural context, but it is necessary to work with the participants in a flexible way. They have to feel comfortable with this approach.
P1–P2	plan	Normally I work with teams which consist of 6–8 people. Because of the natural hierarchy it is necessary that I split up the team from time to time to create interaction and to keep them involved in the change process in order to attain common targets and a common course.
P1–P2	Action	I have to limit the ambition of the client and myself and work with the participants on a commitment to execute 1–3 concrete actions.
P1–P2	reflection	To overcome the hierarchy it is important that I create a comfortable, non-threatening environment for the participants. I have to help them to learn how to reflect on the level of the activities (single-loop learning) and on the program itself (double-loop learning). I also have to reflect on my own mindset: how effective is my mindset (attitude and behaviour) concerning the change program, work methods and cultural differences?

Conclusions

Mindset change is a complex issue. It does not only cover the rational (facts and figures) and emotional (thoughts and feelings) parts but also the specific context and personal background and level of competencies that makes mindset change so difficult and at the same time so interesting. To change mindsets in a cross-cultural context calls for flexibility in your work method. It also requires a change in rational and emotional aspects from you as a Change Maker. I connected the things that I learned from this small-scale change process, based on the principles of action learning, in this specific cross-cultural context to the different stages of the navigational map and atspAr® formula in a navigational table, see Table 3.

For those of you who have never sailed, it works like the navigation in the car. You start in a current position P1 and indicate your future desired position P2. Then plan your route, set off and reflect en route. The navigational map is based on the principles of action learning: Action and Reflection are the pillars of this experimental science. Reflecting on the level of activities: single-loop learning, and reflecting on the change process itself: double-loop learning.

With the atspAr formula as a compass you can change your outcome at any point on the navigational map. The course is likely to be zig-zag. And that is very important; most change plans are blueprint models. They go directly from P1 to P2. There is not enough room to learn and change direction on the way. That's the reason that I combined blueprint thinking with greenprint doing: action learning in practice.

The analyzing and planning (program) phase

Step 1: Analyze the Professional Environment
The first step to take on the navigational map is to determine whether a change process is required, based on your present position. The key question is: is there (really) a need for change? To answer this question we have to:

1. Scan the environment.
2. Map out the external and internal change forces.
3. Determine the influence of the change forces.
4. Weigh up the influence of the change forces.
5. Determine whether there is a need for change.

Step 2: Determine Targets
The second step to be taken on the navigational map is to determine your desired future position. The key question of this second step is: what do we want to achieve with this change, and when? Therefore we have to:

1. Determine the change targets and objectives.
2. Evaluate the targets and objectives (make them SMART).

Step 3: Develop an Effective Strategy
The third step to be taken on the navigational map is to set out an effective course towards your desired future position. The key question here is: how do I achieve my change target and objectives in the most effective and responsible way? Therefore we have to work out two detailed steps:

1. Generating strategic options.
2. Determining the strategic choice.

Step 4: Make a Plan: the navigational map itself
The last step in the analysis and planning stage is: working out the navigational map itself: the navigational plan. The key question is: what activities do we need to carry out to actually achieve our change targets and objectives? Therefore we have to:

1. Put together the change (business)-team.
2. Describe the change activities.
3. Plan the change activities.
4. Budget the expected cost and benefits.

Planning is all about describing the activities, organization and budget.

The implementation stage

Step 5: Commit to Action
The first step of the implementation stage is: the execution of the navigational plan. The key question of this first step is: what activities will we do today to take a step closer to our change target? For this stage we have to work out a detailed action plan and win commitment to act, from all levels.

Step 6: Reflecting on Results
The second and final step in the implementation stage is reflection. The key question of this final step is: how effective is the change activity itself and how effective is the change process as a whole? To answer this question we have to reflect (periodically) on two levels:

1. Reflecting at the level of the change activities.
2. Reflecting at the level of the change process.

Figure 3. Small-scale change philosophy and instruments

I have learned that generally theoretical information on cross-cultural aspects/differences is nice to know, but what you *need* to know is 'what are the culture aspects and differences (gaps) in that specific context with the people you have to work with?' Mindset change is a dynamic interactive process with a lot of (social)

interaction. To keep that dynamic and interaction manageable, in my opinion, you can use small-scale change processes, based on the principles of action learning. That is what this account of practice has illustrated.

Note on contributor

Martin Loeve, MBA, of Delta Change Management, facilitates, initiates and directs small-scale change processes. He advises entrepreneurs, managers and students in their personal and business developments. He is author of the management book *The Change Maker*®, a guide to how to manage small-scale change processes. He is also founder and director of the Action Learning School Delta-Academy and Delta Network for professionals. Information: www.deltachangemanagement.nl