Learning to collaborate creatively with people from other cultures is a vital skill in today’s business environment, says professor Roy Y.J. Chua, whose research focuses on a key measure psychologists have dubbed “cultural metacognition.”

Working on a $30 million historical epic about the Tang Dynasty to be set in China, Hollywood screenwriter David Franzoni struggled to make the story appeal to Western audiences. Then Franzoni hit upon an idea: tell the tale through the eyes of a foreign-born general who served as the right-hand man to emperor Xuanzong and his consort.

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The plan didn't make it past Chinese government censors. According to a recent article in the Wall Street Journal, the idea was nixed on grounds that the treatment was too sympathetic toward the general, An Lushan, portrayed in Chinese history as a villain who ultimately betrayed the emperor. The script was accepted after Franzoni rewrote it to portray the general as a “snake.”

The story illustrates a common challenge to Hollywood filmmakers as they attempt to break into China's more than $2 billion-a-year film market—and to businesspeople in all industries as foreign markets become increasingly important to their business strategies. Cultural misunderstandings and different ways of operating (government control over filmmaking, for instance) can lead to unforeseen setbacks and delays, threatening the success of creative business ventures.

Vital skill
Learning to work with people from other cultures in order to collaborate creatively is a vital skill in today’s business environment, says Roy Y.J. Chua, an assistant professor in the Organizational Behavior Unit at Harvard Business School who has focused his research on exploring how such collaboration can effectively take place. A graduate of Columbia Business School, where he studied social psychology along with management, Chua was born and raised in Singapore, itself a multicultural society.

"I've always been fascinated by how culture changes the way people interact and innovate, and how collaboration is affected by intercultural relationships and intercultural trust," he says.

There's no doubt that the confluence of diverse cultures can create opportunities for innovation—think of the Crusades and the Renaissance, or of Japan revolutionizing the auto industry. "To the extent that creativity is about the recombination of existing ideas," Chua says, "then combining ideas that haven't been connected before creates the potential to produce something new and useful."

The question is how to reap the benefits of that while minimizing the inevitable misunderstandings.

"Trying to make a movie about the Tang Dynasty for a Western audience is a very refreshing proposal, but at the same time, many of the ideas from Chinese culture might not translate easily into a Western context," he says. "You have to find a way to generate a common platform to appeal to both sides."

In a forthcoming article in the journal Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, Chua uses a combination of survey and experimental research to focus on a key measure psychologists have dubbed "cultural metacognition." The term refers to a person's reflective thinking about his or her cultural assumptions. It seems to have a strong effect on how effectively people collaborate across cultures, Chua says.

"I often compare it to the heightened awareness you have when driving in a foreign city, where you will pay more attention to the road signs and traffic signs. It's this kind of heightened awareness and reflection about what I think about other cultures and how other cultures think about me that helps cross-cultural creative collaboration."

Testing cultural metacognition
In the first of three studies, the researchers asked 43 middle-level managers enrolled in an executive MBA course to complete a questionnaire to rate their own degree of cultural metacognition. Statements to rate included "I am aware of how to use my cultural knowledge when interacting with people from other cultures," and "I adjust my cultural knowledge while interacting with people from a new or an unfamiliar culture."

The team then surveyed up to 10 former coworkers of each manager, whose cultural background was different from the manager's, asking how they rated the manager's effectiveness in creative collaborations. Managers with higher cultural metacognition scores on the questionnaires garnered higher ratings from their colleagues as well.

While such a result may seem expected, the bigger question is, how does cultural awareness lead to more effective innovation? Based on previous studies, the researchers focused on the role of trust in that equation, distinguishing between two kinds: "cognitive trust," an intellectual appreciation of another person's skills, abilities, and reliability; and "affective trust," an emotional belief that another person has one's best interests at heart.

"Affective trust is especially critical in creative collaboration because unlike collaboration that merely involves the sharing of labor, creative collaboration requires sharing of new ideas," Chua says.

"Given that new ideas are often undeveloped, they are risky to share," he continues. "Sharing a bad idea might cause one to be ridiculed. Conversely, a good idea might..."
be stolen. Only when there is high affective trust would two partners be willing to freely exchange new ideas."

In their second study, the researchers found that affective trust was much more likely to stem from having high cultural metacognition than cognitive trust.

This time, 60 managers attending another executive MBA course were asked to complete a network survey listing up to 24 of their primary professional contacts and asked the extent to which they were able to rely on them professionally (cognitive trust) and the extent to which they were able to share their personal hopes, dreams, and difficulties (affective trust). Next, they were asked to rate how willing they were to share new ideas with each person. When dealing with someone from their own culture, the managers' cultural metacognition had no effect on either types of trust. For contacts from another culture, however, those with higher cultural metacognition developed higher affective trust in their partners and were more willing to share new ideas with them; cognitive trust, meanwhile, had no correlation with cultural metacognition.

In order to put these findings to a further test, the team designed a third, more hands-on experiment involving 236 undergraduates. First, each participant was asked to come up with a new chicken recipe from a list of ingredients from different cultures. Each person was then paired with someone from another cultural background and asked to collaborate to produce a recipe different than those either had created individually. These recipes were then rated on creativity by two independent chefs.

Here's the catch: Half of the teams were allowed 10 minutes to talk and get to know one another before they were presented with the task—a simple way to develop affective trust—while the other half weren't. Once again, the researchers found links between cultural metacognition and creativity.

"When working with a stranger from a different culture on a task that rewards creative collaboration, high cultural metacognition in one of the two individuals gives the pair the potential for affective trust and creativity," Chua says. "This potential, however, is only realized if the partners have a personal conversation to build affective trust. Pairs that didn't have the chance to build trust did not become more creative as a result of their cultural metacognition."

Interestingly, in each of the pairs that had a personal conversation, it was the higher of the two cultural metacognition scores that seemed to drive the creativity effect.

"As long as one person is able to connect and adjust to the other party, then that is sufficient for them to collaborate," Chua says. In other words, if one person is able to grapple with his or her cultural assumptions, then that person can spur a fruitful collaboration without the other person necessarily even realizing it.

A learnable habit
The good news is that cultural metacognition is not fixed, but rather it is a mental habit that can be learned over time and through different circumstances. "People who have a culturally diverse social network tend to have higher cultural metacognition," Chua says. "The fact they have to deal with people from different cultures more causes them to question their own assumptions more."

For those who don't have a culturally diverse network already, he recommends consciously seeking out new cultural experiences. However, such activities need to be genuine to work.

"You want to deeply involve yourself in cross-cultural interactions"

"It's not just going to a foreign movie or eating culturally different food," he says. "You want to deeply involve yourself in cross-cultural interactions."

Chua stresses that it is important to always engage in active inquiry and observations, and be mindful that your assumptions or interpretation of a given culture might not be accurate or applicable in a given context.

One way to do this is by keeping a journal and writing down thoughts after each interaction with someone from another culture. This can help people see patterns in their interactions with culturally dissimilar colleagues, eventually leading to more mindful interactions. That, in turn, can lead to enhanced affective trust that makes cross-cultural creative collaboration more effective, whether the goal is to sell a product overseas or launch the next Chinese-American blockbuster.

Readers: What are your experiences when it comes to doing creative work with someone from another culture? What are the key challenges? Please share your thoughts in the comments section below. [WB]

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