

# Decoding cultural “bugs”: lessons from my remote Europe - India team

Giulia Scalaberni

Do you remember what  
you were doing last  
February 19th ?



Last February 19th I got this talk approved by Pycon team and guess what...? I was in India for the first time!

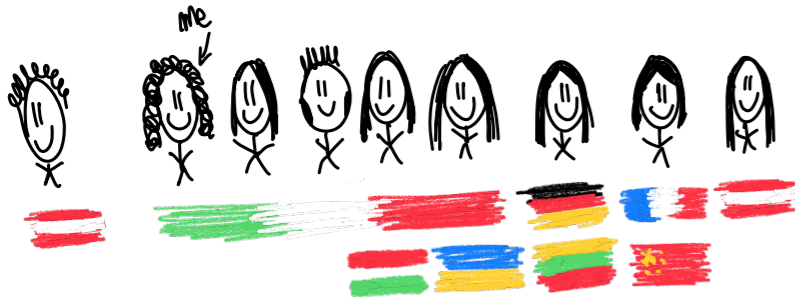
I was visiting the people of my team based there after a year of remote collaboration.

## What I do for a living



I work in an international medtech company as product manager and teamleader of a BI tool. We don't just have international teams but also international customers so I've experienced conversations from LATAM to Malaysia, from Portugal to Denmark.

## My product specialist team



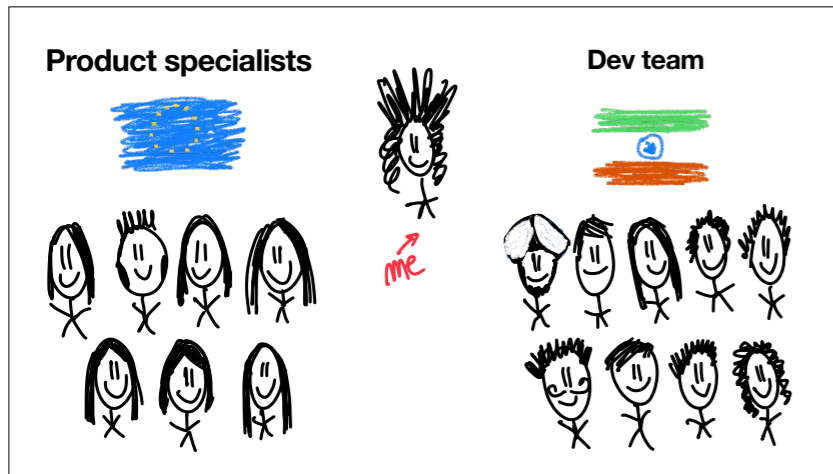
Let me introduce to you my product specialists team.

They manage configuration of reports for our users on our platform.

As you can see, many of us live in a country other than our country of origin.

This team started with me and another Italian colleague 7 years ago and then other people join during the years. So when I became the teamleader here I was pretty used to culture mix and differences manifested while working this internationally.

Then for strategy change we decided to insource the platform development with our Indian team, so we had to make a knowledge transfer from an Italian to an Indian development team.



So... that is the new design of the people around the product I manage.

I didn't know much about Indian culture, but I knew I would have to face new cultural challenges in the team.

## My initial fears

- Success of the project
- The accent
- New “normal”
- Team frustration

Of course the project accomplishment was the ultimate goal so pressure was in the room about the tight schedule.

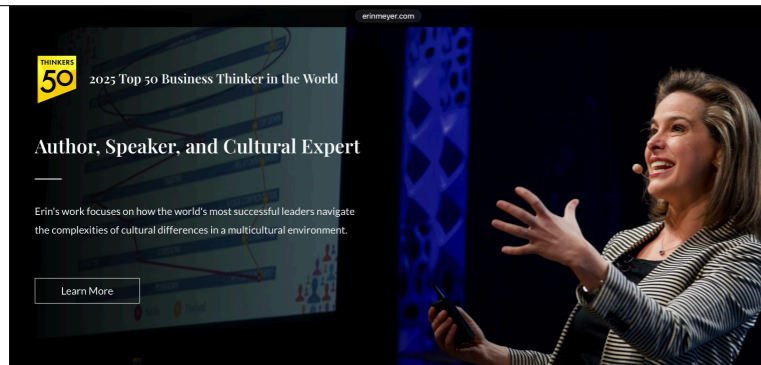
Then if you ever watched a movie or tv show or video online with Indian people, you know the accent is not immediate to get while speaking English.

Introducing something new to the team and our process would have required changes to our routine and “normal” way of proceeding with things.

And all of these, considering all the people involved who could had a different enthusiasm than me with all these challenges and new difficulties to navigate.

# CULTURE FATIGUE

So the elephant that would have join the the room with the team was cultural fatigue. That's always there when you work with people with different culture than you. Because the way of doing the same thing, handle the same situation and communicate the same thing might be at the opposite. Just due to a different cultural way of doing, handle and communicate. So since I was used to interact with different cultures since a while, I knew I could count on a lady.



Erin Meyer. Cultural expert who do teach and research about cultures. She created the culture map, it's also a book, to explain through dimensions like trust, communication how different cultures behave "normally".

L'ORÉAL Walmart \* VOLVO AIRBUS Google

# CULTURE RELATIVITY

To understand the culture map we need to get familiar with culture relativity.

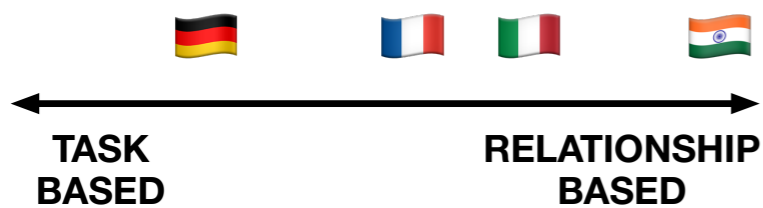
That's the different point of views we can have of the same culture.

An Italian working with Germans will feel rigidity, strictness compared to his/her roots culture way of managing the same thing. And on the opposite side, the German will tell that working with Italians is very messy and chaotic. But Indian people asked about hows to work with Italians will tell you about strictness and rigidity for deadlines.

So even if two cultures seems close, there are still gaps and different perceptions.

Let's see some cultural dimensions.

## TRUSTING



Let's keep a simplified version of my team.

Trusting scale is how we gain confidence, reliability and how be build trust at work, creating the safe space to talk about problems earlier without fear of judgement.

So, cultures oriented on task based trusting build this through closing tasks on time, getting work done and showing reliable at work.

But on the other side, relationship base cultures need a human connection first to then build trust.

True personal level conversation about personal life, go dinners together and know each other outside work.

So imagine the western countries approach of setting up meeting to start a project, 2 minutes round table of "introduce yourself" and the deep diving about execution. We started like this the first week of onboarding of my dev team and every call that week ended up with "are there any questions?" with always the same answer



Silence was the only answer. But actually it was a silence screaming about a cultural gap to fill. And thanks to the readings I did about culture map, I was able to detect what was needed to fix that. So even if for upper management might have seemed this as wasted time, I organized a 2 hours round table of chit-chatting. And that's the advice I always give to anyone asking me how to work efficiently with such cultures.



**What's your name**



**Where are you based,  
roles and years in the  
company**

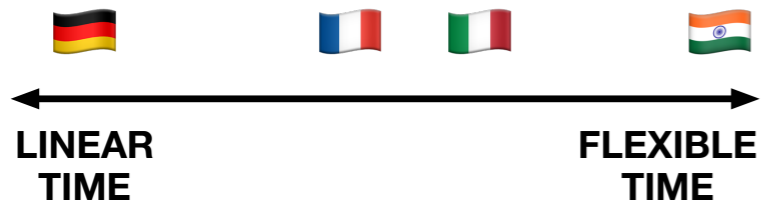


**3 things you like to  
do in your free time**

So that's the exact slide I shared during the "let's know each other meeting" to help a little the conversation.

Then person after person, even the more shy ones started telling about their life and (un)expectedly people started interacting as it could have happened while having lunch at the same table. "So you play tennis? I also do!" "Two children, me too!" Of course cricket was very popular for them as a sport :)

## SCHEDULING



Let's look at another dimension, everyone's obsessed with nowadays, time.

It's so important to understand that our perception of time is not standard all around the world and it has nothing to do with well behave, respect or education.

During my India days when we agreed to meet at the hotel lobby at 6pm, I was there at 5.50pm and I waited usually until 6.20pm in the best cases. Just reminding then "Indian times".

So at work it could be challenging but with cultural awareness you can trick it always considering the right contingency for your deadlines with stakeholders and differently with the team.

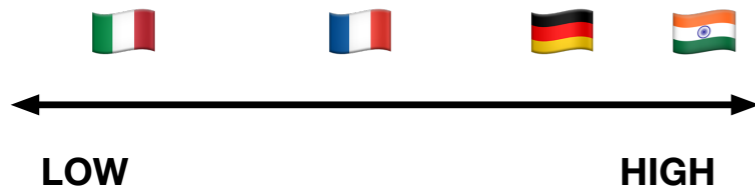
## NEGATIVE FEEDBACK



That's about how easy and direct we say something negative.

Even just a simple "no" can be hidden behind tons of world misleading you if you come from a direct culture.

## COMFORT WITH SILENCE



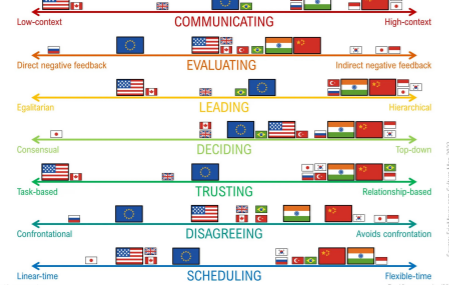
That's so relatable for Italians. Our communication is overlapping each other during conversations by default. Other cultures follow ping-pong kind of discussion. And then usually Eastern countries are more used to put silence in between conversations.

So sometimes it's not a "connection issue" during calls but it's the natural conversation pace.

That's important to know otherwise you will not give others enough time to react.

## "THE CULTURE MAP"

of top 10 economies according to Erin Meyer's "The Culture Map"



Here's a summary available online about more cultures represented through the scales that Erin Meyer studied.



Always remember that culture goes hand in hand with personality. Individuals from the same root culture may not always behave in ways that perfectly match their position on a cultural map. That is why each of us is unique, and why it is important to understand people as individuals as well as through the lens of their cultural norms.

## Lessons learned

- Culture&people awareness
- Give yourself time
- Team manifesto
- Rely on frameworks and standards
- Reframe office rituals when remote
- Summarize don't assume
- Change your mind

Always consider both cultural differences and individual personalities.

Building effective cross-cultural and remote working relationships takes time. We are not trained for patience anymore since we live in a world of notifications and any food can be delivered in 15 minutes at your house. Measure progress and be proud of it. Be obsessed with effectiveness growth.

Like the Agile Manifesto, we designed it in a great team-building activity. It's our list of principles and our identity. Things like having virtual coffees and being ready to bring sunshine into other people's rainy days. Not being ashamed of asking questions, setting our standards and creating shared expectations. This is very helpful when cultures do not match perfectly and for new joiners.

Adopting frameworks like Scrum provides a baseline to follow, reducing ambiguity and setting the same workflow for everyone.

Map and recreate what works naturally in an office, such as virtual coffee breaks and daily meetings with webcams on by default, so we can see people's reactions and overall mood. Also plan fun moments, such as photo contests or bingo-themed games, to create rankings and encourage friendly competition among teammates, even when working remotely. Sharing builds confidence.

Regularly recap decisions, expectations and next steps at the end of meetings. Most of the time, we are using English as a tool, not as our mother tongue. Be aware that this might feel offensive in some cultures, so explicitly explain that you are doing it to avoid misalignment, not because of a lack of trust.

What used to work may not work anymore when different cultures are in the room. Stay open to new perspectives and challenge your assumptions. Adaptability and continuous improvement are your superpowers. Always seek effectiveness.

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And remember...

**What looks like shyness or  
“strange” behavior may simply  
be cultural difference**

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