

New variables to increase cross-cultural knowledge transfer in strategic alliances

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1. Introduction

In today's international world the challenges for many companies to survive or to grow is to enter into any kind of strategic alliance (SA). Of paramount importance is the efficiency of processes to create, store and disseminate knowledge and to create and maintain an intelligence pool. The challenge is the successful design of these processes and the knowledge pool across the SA. This task becomes even more challenging when SA transcend international borders and the knowledge transfer process is impacted upon by national cultures. This paper describes research that is being undertaken to evaluate the impact that national cultures have on the transfer of knowledge between Central/Eastern Europe and Western European SA partners.

To understand and cope with different cultures many scholars have devoted substantial amounts of time conducting cross-cultural studies. Cultural dimensions having resulted from these studies can be grouped into the political/economic, social/cultural environmental components or into organizational cultural variables with each of them providing an understanding of general behaviour. However, they are lacking a specific focus on cross-cultural learning, knowledge transfer methodologies and cross-cultural knowledge creation attitudes. These are issues of pivotal importance for cross-cultural SA co-operation. In this context, Gupta and Govindarajan (2002), Apfelthaler (1998) and Schoenberg (1999, in Holden, 2002) emphasise that both, conceptual work and empirical evidence are in their embryonic stage. More specifically, Bradley and Darrel (2001) and Jaeger (in Bolton, 1999) stress the importance of a synergistic technique being beyond present cultural distinctions explicitly synthesizing cultural dimension into future models of trans-national management education, a subject, which is regarded by Apfelthaler (1998) to having been researched only in its very early stages in the German speaking countries.

2. Literature gap

Many writers confirm that academia, so far, could not provide satisfactory solutions for inaccurate and inefficient transferability of knowledge management transfer (KMT) (Szulansky in Odell (1998); Davenport & Prusak & Bresmann in Holden (2002); Clark & Geppert, 2002; Holden, (2002), Woodrow's & Tamulionyte-Lentz, 2000; Cyr & Schneider, 1996; Gill & Butler, 1996; Lang & Steger, 2002; Shaw, 2001; Cornuel and Kletz, 2001).

Referring to the KMT literature gap, Holden (2002) and Easterby-Smith (1997) confirm that organisational learning with an international and cross-cultural perspective is an under researched area. Ford and Chan (2003) argue that research has been carried out in knowledge management and separately in cross-cultural issues but not literature is available related the intersection of both. Confirming this statement, Zhu (2004, p.75) underlines the need for empirical research focusing on “ comparative panoramas on the root, internal logic, functioning, effect and problematic in and cross diverse cultural-institutional settings”. Focussing on CEE countries, Lang & Steger (2002) identified serious shortcomings in social scientific research on KMT and economic policy recommending a new approach. Moreover, Apfelthaler (1998) complains that literature as to inter-cultural training offers myriads of related concepts but with in-transparent content and methods reflecting very little progress over the years and lacking knowledge on factors of inter-cultural efficiency. Expanding on content, Ratten and Suseno (2006) shed light on the lack of research as to the impact of different types of knowledge on the cross-cultural strategic learning process.

This implies that management models must not simply be transferred from continent to continent or from the West to the East due to the influence of cultural values. This statement is supported by Mironshnik (2002) and by two consultants from Vilnius (Lithuania), Woodrow and Tamulionyte-Lentz (2000, p.1), stressing that “ we heard repeatedly that what Western consultancies offered was often rejected outright because there are too few antecedents on the Central and Eastern European experience for people to find Western management techniques credible or culturally congruent”. Questioning if current western models are valid Shaw (2001, p.5) wonders “firstly whether we had been supplying them with the right training to deal with this environment and secondly whether the western models of management were relevant to an Eastern European context”.

Different management arose from a culturally idiosyncratic environment, and this behaviour often causes distress on the other cultures, confirmed by Hofstede`s (1980) theory stressing that organizational culture is not independent from national culture. Consequently, Geppert and Clark (2003, p.3) suggest that “knowledge transfer and institution building are therefore moderated and mediated by local ideas, rather than unidirectionally copied”. Therefore, in order to avoid flawed KMT, managers and the different actors have no other alternative than understanding the core concept of culture and its implications on SA management.

3. General gaps in strategic alliances

In order to successfully compete in the international arena, companies are discovering the need to ally with strategic partners (Kotler, 2006). According to Wild, Wild and Han (2006, p.391) a strategic alliance is a “ relationship whereby two or more entities co-operate (but do not form a separate company) to achieve the strategic goals of each”. Many motives exist to enter into a strategic alliance, e.g. Kotler, (ibid., p.57) highlights four categories related to marketing alliances: Product or service alliance, promotional, logistic or pricing collaboration alliances. Wild, Wild and Han (ibid., p.391) suggest strategic alliances to tap into competitors` specific strengths. Similarly, Vince and Liu (1999) refer to another advantage in this co-operative learning as to a way of supplementing strengths and covering weaknesses.

Ghosh (2004, p.2), Doz and Hamel (1998), as well as Cohen & Levinthal, Van Wijk & Van Den Bosch, Volderba (quoted in Canestrino 2004, p.2) recommend strategic alliances as a way to facilitate mutual organizational learning and the creation of new knowledge and values to achieve both, individual and collective objectives.

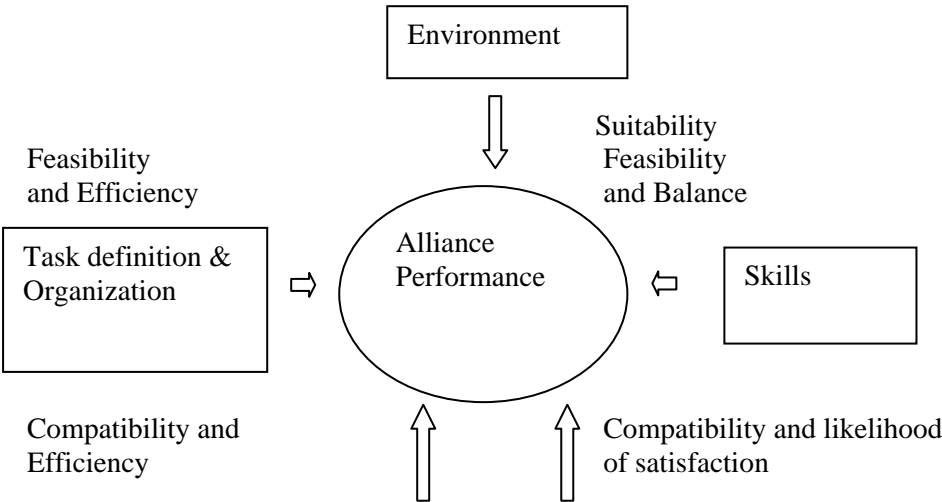
Moreover, Lane and Beamish (1990) confirm that learning through strategic alliances is a very popular way of entering in a new market. Assuming a good will on both parts of the SA, each company should try to design and plan in a way to maximize co-operation and minimize conflicts or tensions. Unfortunately, reality shows that “fledgling partners find themselves unable to move from planning to implementation” as stressed by Doz and Hamel (ibid., p.141): These two scholars identified several gaps in the strategic and organizational context as the main reasons for strategic alliance failure. The gaps refer to:

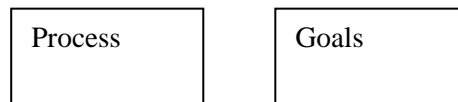
-The context of co-operation	The frame gap The expectations gap The organizational context gap The confidence gap
-The content of co-operation	The skills understanding gap The task definition gap
-The process of co-operation	The information gap The time gap

Additionally to these gaps, one of overriding importance is missing, which is the cultural gap. This statement is supported by Deresky (2000, p.117) stressing that “ culture is one variable which is often overlooked when deciding on entry strategies or alliances, particularly when we perceive the target country to be familiar with us and similar to our own. However, cultural differences can have a subtle and often negative effect”.

To maintain a successful strategic alliance co-operation Doz and Hamel (opcit) suggest to pay special attention to the following framework:

Figure 1: Learning issues at the heart of the alliance





Source: Doz and Hamel (opcit., p.181)

Very often the suggested steps for a successful strategic alliance are ignored or poorly implemented resulting on a costly strategic alliance failure. Some of the identified problems are explained and expanded on in the next section.

4. Specific gaps related to cross-cultural KMT in SA

The following interrelated gaps have been chosen mainly because of the influence of culture. Obviously, some other barriers exist influencing the success or failure of the SA, but due to the nature of this research, culture plays a vital role. If culture is unconsciously or consciously ignored it can be regarded as a source of conflict (Hofstede, 2006).

4.1 The Cultural Awareness Gap

Referring to a lack of cultural awareness and customized education Matlay (2001, p.3) points to the proliferation of franchise Western private education taking advantage of the gold rush of the early 1990s. He states that “these were staffed mainly by –know all- experts and – missionaries- of market economy, who often charged exorbitant fees in return for –prestigious- qualifications of dubious value to their trainees”. This reflects that the learning process has been dominated by the rational Western style of achieving company effectiveness but lacking attention to the cultural differences as well as to its receiver’s relevance and effectiveness. If the source of knowledge uses an ethnographic transmission and ignores or even depreciates the possibility to learn from others the danger of an “arduous relationship” (Szulanski in Holden, 2002, p. 82) exists.

4.1.1 A Discussion of The Structuralist Approach

To explain the knowledge management transfer process the sociological theory of structuralism, as experienced in CEE countries, can be used (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Mendoca and Kanungo, 1996; Lang and Steger, 2002; Clark and Geppert, 2002; Tsang, 2004) can be used . The basic idea behind structuralism is that the process of knowledge transfer flows from the Western part to the Eastern part occurring on a linear or one-way direction. Hutchings and Michailova (2004) criticize the lack of research about reciprocal learning and reciprocal exchange of knowledge arguing that also knowledge can also flow from Eastern partner to Western partners.

The structuralist approach may lead to role model learning and imitative management learning resulting in an inconsistency problem of managerial behaviour displaying two different modes of operation, one for efficiency and one for legitimacy (Lang and Steger, 2002). However, if the learning process is one by imitation, this will imply only the adoption of new practice (behavioural change). Without any reflection, criticism or appreciation of new knowledge no real cognitive change can take place. In the case of post communist and post socialist societies this imitative behaviour resulted in positive attitudes towards learning new routines, the reason for that was mainly because they were well rewarded for it, which again implies a short term behavioural change leaving gaps as to questioning real understanding as well as a real acceptance of the rational part. Szulansky in Odell (1998) refer in this context to problems arising from ignorance,

a lack of absorptive capacity or a lack of pre-existing relationships. Relying on cognitive models, however, does not suffice as they define knowledge as an analytical entity (Newel, 1999) that every individual has and that can be captured, possessed and transferred but ignoring the influence of culture or social interaction. Supporting this statement, Shaw (2001, p.1) experienced that “IT has tremendous potential for helping management in Eastern Europe but that it will not work if the context and culture are ignored”. Taking into account that the knowledge is produced or codified by the person who has the knowledge learning can be only possible when both share the same mental meaning of the words and have a common mental space. Bedward, Jankowicz and Rexworthy (2003) as well as Liu and Vince (1999) ask for mutual collaboration in the examination, construction or changes of the knowledge and material to be transferred to increase the likelihood of success. Concordantly, Holsapple (2003, p.201) suggests “that the learning processes are intrinsically social and collective and occur not only through the imitation and emulation of individuals, as with teacher-student or master and apprentice, but also because of joint contributions to the understanding of complex problems”. According to Child and Markoczy (1993) Western managers tended to be too critical and impatient with the behaviour of their local (i.e. Hungarian) counterparts. Furthermore, these authors recommend that a change in the learning process should include some elements of continuity to guarantee the process and in doing so, the members of both organizations maintain somehow their identity and enhance the commitment for the learning process.

4.2. The Knowledge Sharing Gap- an HR Issue

Scholars like Gupta and Govindarajan (2000), Elsass/Veiga (1994), and Krug/Hegaty (1997 in Westphal and Shaw, 2005) shed light on human resource issues as potential transfer inhibitors, e.g. reduced ability or willingness to share knowledge with members from the other company due to perceived differences in power, status and resources leading to in-group/out group biases, discrimination and conflict. According to Garvin (2000, p. 205) "knowledge is power, and shared knowledge usually means less power". This finding also resulted from Michailova's and Husted's (2003, in Hutchings and Michailova, 2004, p.3) research on knowledge sharing between Russian and Chinese subsidiaries and Western headquarters stating “that knowledge sharing is often defeated by what they term as knowledge sharing hostility”. In line with these statements, Odell (1998) identified in both Eastern or Western executives the attitude of not giving up the perception that knowledge accumulation and retention is a source of power. This represents a mayor blockage in communication with detrimental consequences in terms of a lack of trust, the conviction that status and rewards go to knowledge owners, the belief that knowledge is prerogative of a particular group, - not invented- here syndrome and the intolerance for mistakes or the need for help (Davenport & Prusak & Bresmann in Holden, 2002).

Vice versa, Odell (1998) regards those as powerful individuals who are able to inspire and lead by sharing instead of commanding and controlling.

Summarizing, as a consequence of cultural misunderstanding and un-reflected transfer approaches the authors suggest the reasons for this hostility to be:

1. The attitudes and behaviour of the knowledge transmitters
2. The attitudes and behaviour of knowledge receivers
3. A lack of the shared understanding of the content by transmitter and receiver.

4.3. Gaps Referring to the Acquisition style

Marks and Mirvis (1998, in Westphal and Shaw, 2005) and Bedward, Jankowicz and Rexworthy, (2003) referred to the influence of company acquisition styles. According to these authors the acquirer, consciously or not, doesn't apply a partnership spirit but rather behaves like a colonial conqueror alienating target country staff and creating a hostile attitude. All these barriers originate an ambience of resistance, friction and misunderstanding, which undermine the efficiency of reciprocal learning.

4.3.1 The Caretaker Role gap

Kim and Mauborgne (1998) and Krogh (1998, in Westphal and Shaw, 2005) identified that concepts referring to fair processes and care from the acquirer side has a very positive bearing on the formation of trust and commitment on behalf of the acquired employees representing an essential prerequisite for knowledge sharing.

4.4. The Political Past Consideration Gap

Central and Eastern European countries were governed by a system of state socialism, which has been marked by the economic and political dependency on the state. This political system is characterised by high authoritarianism and essentially paternalistic patterns. When researching Western and Eastern strategic alliances an in-depth understanding of past influences on managerial behaviour is vital to the long-term success in transferring, understanding and accepting new knowledge. This assumption is supported by Winston Churchill's statement (Holden, 2002 p.98): "if you wish to see far into the future, you must look deep into the past". This reflection process is suggested to refer to the idiosyncrasies of both parts in order to avoid the repetition of managerial and behavioural failures.

4.5 The Motivation Gap

Local managers show a more passive attitude related to the need for change. They did not express hostility towards adaptation because they didn't perceive the need to it (Child and Markoczy, 1993; Sulanzki in Odell, 1998). Furthermore, Campbell, Good and Alexander (1995, in Westphal and Shaw, 2005) observed that this passive attitude towards change and new knowledge development is not necessarily a defence mechanism, but probably resulting from the perception that it is unsuitable for, or inapplicable to their work. This motivation gap might also be triggered by 'forced learning' introduced by joint venture partners which is characterised by extensive re-socialization via training programmes and new systems. The term 'forced' implies that this method ignores the efficiency of the receiver's perception and his or her reaction (Child and Markoczy, 1993). This might lead local managers to turn back to the defensive behaviour patterns learned under the previous system. At best the result could be a temporary change on behaviour but in no way a real cognitive change or personal acceptance.

4.6 The Language Gap

The mastery of foreign languages is regarded by literature as a still existing problem. Cornuel & Kletz (2001) report on situations where former philology students were hired to be trained to become managers just because they speak foreign languages.

4.7 The Learning Method Gap

The dichotomy between deductive and inductive ways of thinking will also affect the way and the efficiency of the knowledge transfer. According to Walker (2003) countries like Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Ukraine, Slovenia and the Baltic States will find logical arguments more persuasive than anecdotal experiences pointing to more deductive approaches. In contrast, Russia's, Belarus', Slovakia's and Romania's educational system is based more on learning by analysing concrete data and actual experiences which seems to be related more to an inductive approach. Additionally to the learning method, attention has to be paid to the knowledge content according to the surrounding. This view is supported by Raich (2000) stressing that knowledge has meaning only in a defined context; if this context is changed the transfer of this knowledge can be perturbed, misunderstood, wrongly interpreted or even resisted.

Additionally, Kedia and Bhagat (1988, in Bolten, 1999) stress the difference between abstract versus associative thinking among developed and developing countries. In associative cultures, people utilize associations among events that may not have much logical basis but the context plays an important role in determining an individual's perceptions, attributions and behaviours. Contrarily, abstractive cultures, cause-effect relationships are prevalent.

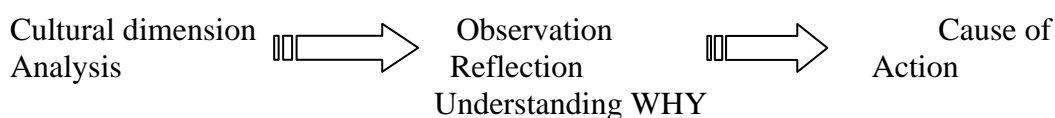
5. Cultural theories

The invisible influences of national cultures become visible as soon as geographic borders are crossed. Similar to Trompenaars' analogy, (1993, p.21) of a fish that "only find out the need of water when he is out of it", many people are not aware of these influences until they start to interact with people from other cultures.

Confucius said that "all people are the same. It's only their habits that are so different". In order to understand and cope with these differences, a practical step to undertake for international actors is to have a set of conceptual scheme to look at. Many aspects have to be taken into account in international business in order to be able to appreciate how values, beliefs and cherished philosophies contribute to organize a society.

Probably culture is one of those terms having been defined most widely and complex. Starting already with the definition of the word 'culture', Kroeber and Kluckhohn, fifty-five years ago, wrote an article where more than 164 definitions of culture were subject of study. However, this did not impede them to create a new one. The following culture definition has been selected due to its integrative contribution in the international business arena. According to Sherman et al. (1995, in (Miroshnik, 2002, p.2) culture is "an integrated phenomenon and by recognizing and accommodating taboos, rituals, attitudes toward time, social stratification, kinship systems and many other components, modern managers will pave the way toward greater harmony and achievement on the country in which a multinational business operates". In order to understand and manage cultural differences the following chain for cultural understanding is explained.

Figure 2: Chain of cultural understanding



Source: developed by the authors

An adequate understanding of cultural dimensions (shown below) would provide the actors with the capability of diagnosing the new culture. The second link will provide an understanding of why people behave differently in different cultures reserving judgement at this moment of time. Then, by having this understanding reflecting upon actions can occur with the result of experiencing some changes in behaviour, reciprocal learning or adaptation. Other positive consequences will be derived e.g. harmonious working atmosphere, reduction of friction among employees, improved communication or efficient meetings.

6.1 Summary of cultural dimensions

Expanding on the above chain of cultural understanding, the following different set of partially overlapping dimensions identified by relevant scholars are presented:

Figure 3: Summary of Cultural Dimensions

<p>Schein</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relationship with nature Human activity Human nature Relationships with people Time Truth and reality 	<p>Hofstede</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Uncertainty avoidance Power distance Individualism/collectivism Masculinity/femininity Long/short term 	<p>Trompenaars</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relationship with nature Relationship with people Universalis/particularism Individualism/collectivism Affectivity Diffuse/specific Achievement/ascription Relationship with time
<p>Adler</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Human nature Relationship with nature Individualist/collectivist Human activity (being/doing) Space (private/public) Time (past/present/future) 	<p>Hall</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Space:physical/person Time:monochronic/polychronic Language:high/low context Friendship 	<p>Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relationship with nature Human Activity Human Nature Relationship with people Time
<p>Herskovits</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Material culture Social institutions Men and universe Aesthetics Time orientation 	<p>Phatak</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individualism Formality Materialism Change Language 	<p>Schneider&Barsoux</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Human nature Space,time,language Relationship with nature Nature of reality and truth
<p>Moran & Harris</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sense of self and space Communication and language Dress/appearance Food and habits TimeValues/attitudes Relationships 		

As mentioned in the first paragraph – literature gap – the lack of conceptual and empirical work on cross-cultural KMT is still in its infancy. Therefore, cultural frameworks as above mentioned by Hofstede (1980, 1991, 1997), Hall (1976), Schein, (1993), Trompenaars,(1997), Schneider and Barsoux (2003), Moran and Harris, (2004) might have a significant bearing on the current situation, but are developed on very broad cultural terms. A lack of a specific focus on organizational functions or real problems, does not take required intercultural management competences into account and do not encourage the process of construction based on cultural commonalities. Although, some indications for learning implications are signposted, a deeper research on these implications is crucial.

7. Methodology

The suggested factors found in literature call for a naturalist mode of inquiry, which are lacking in quantitative methods. Therefore, a phenomenological approach is followed because it tries to understand social realities which are based on people's experiences. Qualitative research embraces interpretative techniques which try to describe, decode and translate to focus on understanding of organisational processes rather than on frequency and prediction Gilmore and Carson (1996); Lee (1999), Denzin & Lincoln (2000), Clark and Geppert (2002) and Lyst (2005). Finally, qualitative research is seen to be suited better for theory creation compared to quantitative research methods focusing more on theory testing. As a research method the case study approach was chosen. According to Yin (2002) and Tellis (1997; 2002) the case study fulfils the three parts of a qualitative method: describing, understanding and explaining.

The exploratory Russian Case Study has been conducted between the end of February and the beginning of March 2007 in St. Petersburg. 7 In-depth interviews were conducted at that time, as well as, indirect observation activities were undertaken and field trips notes have been used. For the data analysis the content analysis technique has been applied. The sample were 5 academics and 2 practitioners. A majority of academics was chosen for this research stage due to their perceived ability to provide conceptual insights.

8. Research findings

All the respondents reflected a clear understanding of what transferring knowledge across cultures entails. Mainly unanimous agreements have been elicited but also some differences in focus identified. After the first empirical part the following categories crystallized:

8.1 Knowledge related versus Alienation of Knowledge

Most of the respondents put a very high emphasis on using the right content to be transferred. During the interviews repeatedly the sentence “relate knowledge to Russian reality” was expressed. The respondents stressed that just getting Western examples was not very motivating for them because they don't fit with the Russian reality. In the following some statements pointing to the mismatch between taught material and Russian reality are provided:

“Related to knowledge, if they think this concept is over sophisticated and it doesn't fit for Russians, you immediately loose them. So it is very important when you are introducing concepts you should make knowledge manageable, give them an example of why does it work here” (Respondent 2).

Also, this respondent criticized Western presentation styles as being overwhelming in design but lacking content: *“very often you can look at chat forums on the internet, about what Russian do for Western companies and they joke with each other about power point*

presentations with very extreme sophisticated models, and they say that there are not worth the paper where they are printed on, they might work in Austria or in Finland but here they just don't work". Consequently the Russians loose their learning motivation because *"then the Russians immediately ask why do we have to learn, why are we loosing here our time, but saying that very often they are not correct. There is a need to articulate the information for the Russian team and they will think carefully and say is true this model should work in Russia"* (Respondent 2).

In line with this statement (respondent 3) added *"to know the material, in Russia we say to live the material, to make it workeable (meaning manageable) for us"*.

Some actions have already been started and some concrete examples to fit Russian reality can be seen on the bookshelves of Russian libraries. Mr. Kolchanov, vice-rector of IMISP (International Management Institute in St. Petersburg) in his personal interview to the St. Petersburg time (27 February 2007, p.3) explains the lack of Russian literature and how they are solving this problem. *"In contrast to Western literature, our books are mostly theoretical and descriptive character. This is the result of a lack of practical experience"*. He mentioned the marketing book from Williams Rudelius having experienced a transformation: *"it was a special project coordinated with the author. The book was published in Russian and adapted to Russian business and business-education"*. This statement is confirmed by Kaufmann (1997) who suggests to adapt marketing education to the respective identity level of the transition country. The cultural dimensions of uncertainty avoidance (nature of transition situations), collectivism (criticism) and individualism (shifting responsibilities) appear to be relevant.

8.2 Security and Support versus Destructive Criticism

The right learning atmosphere will contribute tremendously to the effectiveness of the learning outcome. Christensen, a cross-cultural educator quoted in Garvin (2000, p.202), highlighted that *„Challenge alone, however, is not enough to guarantee learning. Individuals also need a sense of security if they are to throw off old ways of thinking and acting. Learning means leaving the known for the un-known, an exhilarating, but scary venture. Therefore, when providing feedback or criticism sensitivity should be predominant, otherwise fear for making mistakes will impede the learning process. Respondent 1 supports this statement adding that "you have to be supportive, criticism is very much rejected. This could be done by joint discussion from both parts, even discussions of mistakes"*. Furthermore, respondent 2 encourages support as a way for the people to take more personal responsibilities: *"They want to shift responsibilities to the upper level all the way until the number one. I think a good way is to introduce them with the concept that there is nothing wrong in making mistakes if you have a degree of autonomy to make decisions, taking your responsibility is perfectly Ok to make mistakes provided that later when they occur you can give a logical explanation, what misfortune changed even led to this mistake, they will understand"*.

Showing the advantages of this integrative and supportive learning process will contribute to enhance commitment and desire to work for. In other words, activating the drive defined by Kotler (2006, p.187) as *"a strong internal stimulus impelling action"*. Also referring to this learning attitude, Baets, (2005 p.65) emphasizes that *"learning remains a free act of individuals"*. Not only showing the advantages, but also creating the right learning environment between different cultures comes to the fore. Emotions and power relations have to be considered an integral aspect of both, the individual and organisational learning. Again, the cultural dimension of power distance seems to be appropriate to be taken into account.

8.3 Reciprocal Learning versus Structuralism

This methodology was the most discussed and criticised one. Negative reactions as well as negative facial expression were shown during the interviews, as Russians respondents felt depreciated by Western partners: *“you see middle aged western managers coming here with their superiority showing all the background they have saying I’m a graduate of such and such School of Management, very self-centered sure they bring the light of wisdom. No member of the Russian team will feel happy in the presence of this people. Who likes to listen that you are still living in the stone age, which is not true”* (Respondent 2) and he continues referring to a statement of a lecturer underpinning his previous criticism: *“we come from the country which gave Nokia to the world”*.

He continues that sensitivity should be present at any time because *“Russians are very nationalistic and they get immediately insulted”*. If the Russian pride is hurt they will react immediately saying *“ we are a country who a man put his feet on the space”*. Here, the cultural dimension of ‘a sense of self ‘ comes to mind.

Alternatively, to this structuralist behaviour Russian interviewees would wish a more reciprocal relationship where both parts are involved and each of them can benefit from the relationship. It was suggested to find the time for discussion and to develop a common understanding.

Respondent 1 sheds light on the numerous differences existing between Russian and Western partners, *“here a very important point is having mutual discussions. In these discussions, for example, a large amount of time spent, openness and willingness to share knowledge are necessary. If Westerners are ready to spend time and are ready to share, then it can work”*.

8.4 Understanding the generation gap versus Standard methods

All respondents agreed and highlighted that Russians have to be treated differently depending if they belong to the old or to the new generation. The young generation, especially university students are far advanced in their mentality being very much Western orientated. Contrarily to the findings of the literature review, they speak and write fluently two or three languages and read Kotler or Hofstede without having any thought in mind if there is a Western or an Eastern scholar, as the respondent 6 stressed: *“It doesn’t matter for me. I have never even thought about this before, so where is the problem? I look inside, that’s it”*. Additionally, the role of technology as a learning tool was addressed by respondent 7: *“For example, web side they will not tell you which people they are, web sides don’t show nationalities”*.

Obviously, in contrast to this open-minded mentality, Russians are still struggling to provide the old generation with a bridge to deal with the continuous changes in the Russian society. Two statements are given by respondent 4: *“These old people, they are totally, totally, in the Tsar time. Sometimes it is hard to explain over time payment, how we pay salary, for example, night shift, day shift they don’t understand, how and why. 20-30 years ago people got 150 rubles per month and it is a guarantee that nobody cares why is today 117 and tonight is 140 every month is a security for them, this will be hard to explain. Indicating a culture or even identity gap (Kaufmann, 1997) he continues that the “Russian young generation has grown in the time of these 15 years between 1990-2005 without any kind of religion, too much freedom was at this time, and I think we need to come back to our Russia culture. We have a big generation gap, may be I am too old fashioned. If you ask our young people now who was Lenin, who was Stalin and what a communist country is, they answer*

mmm...I don't know". Concluding, cultural models applied in transition countries are suggested to differentiate as to generations.

8.5 Knowledge sharing versus hoarding knowledge

The interviewees stressed the difficulty in changing this behavior as this kind of activities was not fostered in Soviet times. Apparently, however, this weakness was also identified by Russians relating to Western partners, as respondent 1 suggested: *"Another barrier I have experienced by talking to my students is the company culture. I have students working for Western companies here in St. Petersburg and they told me that the Western companies weren't ready to share knowledge and were fearful to share knowledge. So..... the willingness to share or not is an important barrier"*.

Related to problems with mutual learning and the will to share knowledge on the Russian part, respondent 2 commented: *"mutual learning, no, this has not been in the name of the game. Instead, here it is about withholding knowledge, yes very often this is the case here, that any Russian company's department doesn't co-operate with each other, they compete with each other, so they don't communicate with each other because for what they compete, is to get the attention of the number one, and proving every day to be number one that the heart of this company is above the morals from finance, this is the marketing department who is the heart of our success and the finance department they run the same strategy"*.

8.6 Cultural awareness versus cultural blindness

Strategic alliance failures show that still many companies and their managers seem to underestimate the influence of culture when 'going global'.

According to Miroshnik (2002) there are two types of cultural blindness, the perceptual and the conceptual ones. She argues that managers neither see nor want to see cultural differences, and if this is the case, they will limit their ability to manage the SA and to get the benefits derived from diversity. This lack of cultural awareness and sensitivity was addressed by the interviewees. They stated that Westerners go to Russia without any cultural preparation. This relates, for example, to knowing something about Russian history, Russian reality: *"They don't do their homework"* as respondents 1 and 2 stressed, referring to do the homework as a preparation in their own country before traveling to Russia. This preparation does not only relate to macroeconomic figures but also getting to know their partner's achievements and knowledge background: *"We have here experiences with different approaches when interacting with Finnish and Netherlands business people. We have differences in planning, scheduling, discussion of main points, having different priorities, having different backgrounds"*.

Another example regarding the lack of cultural awareness, however on behalf of both parts, is provided referring to the lecture's content as respondent 5 mentioned: *"for example, a lecturer from Canada will explain to you, discuss with you a lot about Canada and may be he is not aware what is in our country, in Russia, so for us it is like this man from Canada doesn't know anything about us, it is like, he knows a lot about his own country but for us is just useless"*.

8.7 Open emotions versus Constrained emotions

According to Bagshaw (2002, p.2) emotions have a huge effect on people's behaviour and performance. He suggests that "low emotional intelligence brings a plethora of negative

emotions, like fear, anger and hostility. These use up a lot of energy, lower morale, absenteeism, apathy, and are an effective block to collaborative effort". Additionally emotions play an important role when developing new knowledge as underlined by Bagshaw (ibid. p.3) "we can not expand knowledge purely with knowledge that already exists. There has to be an input of hunches, guesses and intuition. These come more readily when we open the doors to emotional reactions".

Emotions play a very important role in Russians' life. This has been unanimously confirmed by the respondents. Also emotions in learning are vital as respondent 1 highlighted: *"Well, emotions are connected with interest and enthusiasm. To pay more attention it depends on interest and how you build interest is connected with emotions. I would like to tell an example that happened to my daughter. She is studying German but she just learned the book because the teacher had no emotions. If we could share emotions with our partners then we could learn more; attitudes to work, how the work is interesting for Russians. It is not only from the money point of view but to develop creativity and stimulate own development, when it is interesting for us what we learn. In this case we will be more enthusiastic. Emotions helped us to solve a lot of problems in the past. Emotions bring impulse to real life and then can change something"*.

Another respondent confirmed that people's warmth plays an important role in the knowledge management transfer process: *"For this it is very important to have personal contacts, Internet and emails... they are good but they aren't sufficient. For Russians is important to commit more. Relationships and trust are very important, this is our Eastern approach"*. Furthermore, he highlighted some Russian features and recommended how to break the ice with the Russians: *"I recall an interview some years ago, that the South Korean ambassador in Russia has given to the papers, it was the first time he came to the Soviet Union and he said that we were empty stores and very frosty people, not smiling at all and said that we were made out of stone, and that it was impossible to make contacts with us, but after some private invitations and drinking together some vodka he addressed the open minded and friendliness of the people"*. (Respondent 6). The cultural dimensions of high context and friendship become apparent.

8.8. Appropriate vs. Inappropriate Methodologies

Unanimously, this was a question that every interviewee was happy to listen in order to give a contribution to the improvement of the knowledge transfer process. Recommendations were addressed twofold: One refers to the content and the other to the methodology and tools. As to the content some statements have been already elicited referring to relating the knowledge to Russian reality. In the following, some statements related to methodology and tools for learning are suggested: *"Russians are totally objective for a general concept and then they see what does it mean in practical terms. For historical reasons they like to identify what is first, second, third. They need to have everything as clear and precise as possible and very often, especially Finns or Swedes, they are just the opposite. They like to give the general idea of what should be done"* (Respondent 2). Consequently, *"if you want to introduce a model, concepts like marketing, management the main idea is to show why this is worth doing it in the Russian context. Number two, divide this into easy steps to understand with concrete steps of how this looks in reality, then you make sure that again, and you make sure that basically you do what is expected and then you introduce them to the general concept so far"*(Respondent 2). In the same vein, Respondent 3 emphasised the importance of structure when teaching or training Russians: *"we have different programmes, especially Master programs with Germany, France and Italy, so now we have other experiences with other countries. So, the deepest problem at the beginning was how to explain the students how to learn, how to study, how to organise their time because in Russia it is very different"*. She explained that French supervisors were training their Russian lecturers and Professors how and what to teach but the big problem was *"how to explain the French or Italian approach, because for example for the French is very easy to make structure for us is not easy at all."*

Make a structure, create a text according to plan is difficult. For Germans during the contacts with Russians teachers and German teachers the problem was related to give exactly the same content, in the same programme and in the same matter so to follow the program, the plan of the course”.

Some Russian institutions involved in learning alliances with Western partners are struggling as to how to understand Western methods as well as Western material. They are using French or German trainers to help them understanding their material, and later the Russian lectures will act as a knowledge interpreter for Russian students to understand the content.

Another difficulty international knowledge provider faced was that Russian lecturers developed their own curriculum and material as well, so matching Western with Russian curriculum was a very difficult task to be accomplished as respondent 3 addressed: *“because in Russia some teachers, I think it is good, some teachers create their own program of the course, their own curriculum. For German teachers sometimes it was a problem because they are not sure if our students know something or not, so the problem was the details. Yes, because for the French it was is important structure, for the German teachers the problem was the content details”.* Again, the cultural dimension of ‘power distance’ seems to be very relevant to be taken into account.

Referring to learning tools the Russians don’t understand games as a learning tool. The bridge between play and real application is missing. *“I’m afraid, for the moment our students don’t feel very serious in using games. Games doesn’t give very deep experience, it is something like a game, it is just a game they do not live the experience for the enterprise, they just live the experience of the game but not the real feeling for the enterprise” (Respondent 3).*

In terms of common research it is advisable to check the level of understanding, perhaps developing a common sense making approach in order to avoid problems. Respondent 7 identified that “ in terms of the research side probably differences on the level of analysis in terms of the techniques, analysis on research methods and research techniques might vary”.

Methodologies related to active and mutual learning were welcomed by the respondents, for example, respondent 5, supported by respondent 6, said that *“Knowledge, knowledge without practice, theory without practice, knowledge without common work can not be so useful, common work with other people from other countries”.* Confirming this respondent 4. suggested *“collective training, and encouraging knowledge sharing. We did last year some collective learning related to organisational issues with some British and it was quite effective. They were sharing experiences and this was useful. Learning by doing, more practical orientated activities”.* Respondent 5 suggested *“ I like teachers, lecturers who are lively, that they bring action into the class, yes, yes, people must be. They have to give us feedback right now and no the day after tomorrow; they have to understand and to know what we know so it must be dialogue no monologue”.*

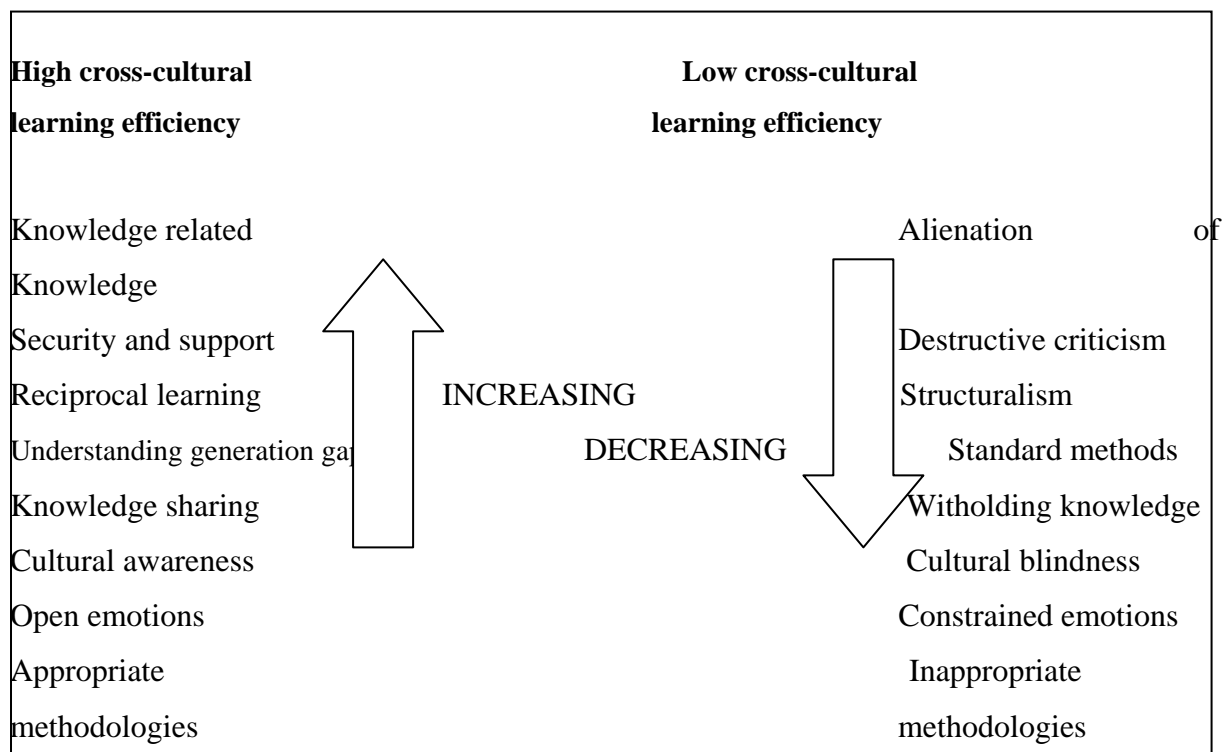
9. Conclusion

For cross cultural partners learning and really getting to know about the alliance partner’s environment, culture and past political development is of crucial importance in order to avoid misunderstanding or drawing flawed conclusions leading to inappropriate statements, predictions or even hurting behaviour. A comprehensive reciprocal learning period on their common corporate culture, technology and competitiveness among the partners will contribute to develop trust and understanding of the position of each partner. This learning

process will also contribute to the understanding of the task completion as well as for the process of mutual collaboration.

Understanding the influences of national culture on learning behaviour among the SA partners will avoid or smooth existing roughness blocking the sharing of knowledge. The learning action depends on the individual's will and motivation to learn, therefore, stimulation provided by the suggested attitudes and methodologies will trigger positive action. It will be a challenging process where the partners should synthesize their strengths and weaknesses and will have the opportunity to tailor or to redefine some behaviour, work processes or even attitudes to achieve the great aim of successfully growing together. The following model, which will be subject to validation by consecutive research stages, summarizes the categories arisen by this research:

Figure 4: Cross-cultural features and methodologies for learning



Source: developed by the authors based on primary research

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