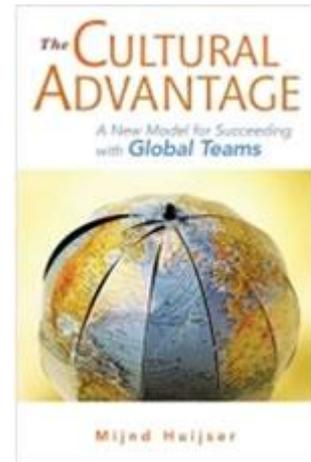


## Book reviews

Reviewer [George Simons](#), SIETAR member  
Review May 2006  
Author Mijnd Huijser  
Title *The Cultural Advantage: A New Model for Succeeding with Global Teams*  
Publisher [Nicholas Brealey/Intercultural Press](#)  
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In *The Cultural Advantage*, the well-traveled management consultant Mijnd Huijser provides a glimpse into “The Model of Freedom” (MoF), the tool he has designed for intercultural understanding and managing conflict in diverse teams.

Huijser’s model is “new” in the sense that it attempts to provide a tidier constellation of intercultural insights in a more elegant way (in the technical sense of “explaining more with less”). Willy-nilly, we all stand on each other’s shoulders. The author acknowledges roots in the work of Hofstede and Trompenaars who have provided the boilerplate for the lion’s share of intercultural research and work. Having worked with both, he also points out both conflicts in their viewpoints and inconsistencies in some of their conclusions while respecting them as gurus in the field. He also provides a quick overview of their theories in a short appendix.

Additionally, Huijser draws on half a dozen or so US management theorists some of whose models provide instructive overlays and additional functions for the MoF such as team role and organizational analysis. Most interestingly he has engaged in extensive [Appreciative Inquiry](#) (AI) sessions for a significant part of his research to both verify and improve the MoF. AI provides a living and ongoing laboratory for the improvement of the model that overcomes some of the restrictions of quantitative research via surveys and instruments. There is an attraction in the Western mind to a model of quadrants, perhaps rooted in the four elements, the four humors. I was also reminded of [Walt Hopkins](#)’ analysis of corporate cultures as *Role, Soul, Goal and Control* orientations.

Somehow, in reading *The Cultural Advantage*, the metaphor of a computer operating system keeps imposing itself on me, and not simply because Geert Hofstede popularized the term “software of the mind” in the title of one of his books, but because our Western intercultural models are really user interfaces. They help us take advantage of complex systems—the miles of code—that would paralyze us if we had to deal with them directly. So as we often wait impatiently for a new version of software that fixes the bugs of the last version and is easier to use. MoF appears to do this. At the same time we must remain aware that models of this sort increase the invisible distance between us and what is really going on in the black box—which most of us would rather not know about, as long as the interface helps us communicate and do what we want to do.

Models, today it seems, need to be branded and sold. If you are using *Hofstede 98* or *Trompenaars NT*, what is the cost of installing bright, shiny new *Huijser XP*? One must weigh elegance and simplicity against investment and entropy, the hardware and software one may have to discard and buy to adopt a new system. Interculturalists and those concerned with global management training will of course be weighing cost against the opportunity and brand image that Huijser says he wishes to both promote and protect. The book is deliberately brief, “a demo,” as the author calls it, and ends with an invitation to the author’s [master classes](#) for those whose experience qualifies them and who wish to invest time and money in learning more about the model and its application to their work. See Appendix 4 if you are interested.

If the menu is not the meal and the map is not the territory, what are we to make of cultural models? MoF, it seems to me, is a part of the trend of globalization, that has a culture of management practice driven by US management theory, occasionally with adaptations. Here English is the hieratic language and diversity is valued as economic opportunity. It is a world which welcomes and tests new models. It is about change, taking advantage of synergy where possible, but is short on cultural preservation unless the cultural features being preserved add to the bottom line. Otherwise, we have places for the quaint and curious, but they tend to be tourist traps and museums. In a world driven by opportunity, fear and the accumulation of power and capital, there is a need to legitimize other bottom lines. This means alternative views of and approaches to culture, the need for balancing richness and sameness, past and present. So, despite the attractiveness and usefulness of a new model like the MoF we continue to need a plethora of other models and approaches to serve these alternative bottom lines.

As another reviewer remarked, *The Cultural Advantage* reads like a novel. The language is simple and accessible to a wide level of readers and the author has managed to re-express critical insights into culturally conflicting behavior with more clarity and punch than one normally sees in this field. In addition there is a fictional multicultural team saga that opens the first chapter and continues to illustrate in its protagonists thoughts and actions the cultural variety identified by the MoF. It helps us bridge the abstract and the real.

On the other hand, some things seem missing. Having read the book cover-to-cover twice and passim, I failed to find a clear justification for the model being called “The Model of Freedom.” Some chapter titles are good headlines while others seem just catchy but not integral to the content of the chapter. The title of Chapter 2, “Beyond Mars and Venus” still leaves me bewildered. At first I was expecting gender issues à la John Gray, and, not finding that, perhaps a metaphor to transport me to other less known parts of the cultural solar system.

The book is aimed at execs, managers and others working in international environments real and virtual and those involved in their formation. It is just about the right size for a flight from Chicago to Los Angeles, or Stockholm to Rome, with a pause for lunch. It is definitely worth the read. Even if one might not intend to apply it as part of the cultural discussion of a team or a formation event, there are sufficient aha’s that will either open our eyes to something new or confirm that something we observed is actually as we suspected.

Perhaps our search for intercultural competence through models and experience should ultimately bring us to where, man or woman, we can be eulogized as Antony did Brutus in the closing lines of Julius Caesar:

“His life was gentle, and the elements  
So mix'd in him that Nature might stand up  
And say to all the world, ‘This was a man!’”