

Thunderbird School of Global Management is using TMC's Cultural Orientations Indicator® to help more than 1,200 students each year become global leaders.

Founded in 1946, Thunderbird School of Global Management is the first and oldest graduate management school offering MBA degrees focused exclusively on global business.



HELPING PREPARE LEADERS FOR THE GLOBAL BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT

Background

Founded in 1946, Thunderbird is the first and oldest graduate management school offering MBA degrees focused exclusively on global business. Thunderbird is considered the world's leading institution in the education of global managers with operations in the United States, Switzerland, the Czech Republic, Russia, Central and South America, Singapore and China. In 2007, the *Financial Times*, *U.S. News & World Report*, and *The Wall Street Journal/Harris Interactive Survey of Corporate Recruiters* ranked it No. 1 in international business education.

Thunderbird is dedicated to educating leaders who create sustainable prosperity worldwide by facilitating the development of a global mindset. More than 38,000 students have graduated from

Thunderbird and its alumni live and work in more than 140 countries.

Thunderbird is known for attracting students who have a cosmopolitan attitude about the world. Students all have global life experiences. For example, many American students have lived outside the United States for large portions of their lives.

Technology and communications advances, including the Internet, are causing the world to shrink, creating greater opportunities to work with others in wider geographic areas and in virtual teams scattered across the globe.

One of Thunderbird's main concerns was how to teach students to fully appreciate and overcome cultural differences among the people with whom they would be working.

Thunderbird was looking for an assessment tool to help its students understand these differences and overcome "cultural dissonance".

Approximately five years ago Thunderbird formed an alliance with TMC.



In This Case Study

Through the voices of two Thunderbird professors, Karen Walch, Ph.D. and Denis Leclerc, Ph.D., we get a sense of the critical importance of understanding cultural differences and leveraging similarities to achieve success in international business.

The professors also explain how Thunderbird's alliance with TMC plays a major role in this process.

"We researched every cross-cultural assessment tool available," says Professor Karen Walch, Associate Professor at Thunderbird School of Global Management. Thunderbird selected the Cultural Orientations Indicator® (COI) from TMC, a statistically validated online cultural assessment that measures a person's work style preferences against 10 dimensions of culture to identify potential conflicts users may encounter when working with team members and colleagues around the world, and offers recommendations to manage them.

The COI is used in two required classes (cross-cultural communications and global negotiations). More than 1,200 students a year complete TMC's COI assessment as part of their class experience.

"The COI is easy to use and meets the demands of our particular type of sophisticated student," says Walch. More than just a basic program, TMC's COI is a scientific, analytical tool which our diverse student population can use on demand online."

"Before we had TMC's COI it was "like using a typewriter" adds Denis Leclerc, a Ph.D. in intercultural communication. "Now students can go beyond theory to evaluate their own communication styles."

The COI "is a compass to navigate around cross-cultural preferences," says Alessandro Nobili, a recent Thunderbird MBA graduate from Italy.

Challenges

Why is it important for business professionals to understand their cultural differences and know how to leverage their similarities?

Professor Walch tells a story from her own life.

Early in her career Walch worked as an investment consultant in Puerto Rico. One of her clients was a U.S. millionaire planning to relocate his business there. He didn't understand the cultural differences between mainland U.S. and Puerto Rico and quickly became disappointed with the progress he was making. This disappointment rapidly grew into frustration, judgment, paranoia and finally aggression. Walch understands now that the Cultural Orientations Indicator (COI), a tool that she uses in her cross-cultural communication and negotiation classes, could have prevented these problems and resulted in a more favorable outcome.

"If we can manage our disappointments before they get to aggression, we can actually get business done," Walch says. "And we can actually be successful, create value and have really good relationships."



“Soft skills are very hard to teach,” she explains. Cultural learning affects what we do in marketing and in general management and impacts negotiation.”

As part of their program, students must negotiate a complex issue playing the role of buyer or seller. Cultural communications is a key component in those negotiations. Students are profiled using the COI before negotiations begin to identify cultural gaps and understand cultural differences to build working trust among each other.

Professor Leclerc enjoys watching students in his cross-cultural communications classes overcome challenges and discover how to thrive in a global business environment.

“We get a great reaction from the students,” says Leclerc “Having a tool that all our students use from the time they enter to the time they leave reinforces that Thunderbird is a global school providing very different experiences for students.”

“The students realize that sometimes the issues they have in class teams are miscommunication,” he says. Students come to understand that it is not about personality differences or accents, but about cultural gaps, which can be overcome.

Those who fail to make these discoveries rarely succeed in complex global environments.

Cross-cultural communication class “is the DNA of what the school is all about,” Leclerc says. Thunderbird uses TMC’s COI to help its students and corporate clients make these key discoveries.

Results

Student experiences with COI have shown promising results in developing global business leaders. By understanding cultural differences students can learn how to “style shift” to negotiate business deals, build trust and get along better with global colleagues.

The COI from TMC gives Thunderbird an open platform for discussion, an advantage that allows students to look at their own communications styles from a graphic perspective.

“You can almost see the light bulb go off,” Leclerc says. “Students from different countries see they are not using the same communication framework.”

One African student, a member of a diplomatic family living in Europe was able to better understand conflicts arising from basic cultural differences and preferences.

“She had that ‘aha’ experience,” Walch says.

“Some of our Jordanian students thought all American women were like those on the TV show Desperate Housewives,” Walch continued. “They were surprised to meet Americans who did not fit their pre-conceived ‘profile’ and who shared their own values, such as caring for their families.”

A U.S. male student with a military background was having difficulty making progress in his job negotiating with colleagues in Mexico. Using TMC’s COI, he was able to overcome these cultural differences and build successful relationships.



“What it comes down to is the perceptions we have of each other,” Walch says. “TMC helps our students deal with the cross-cultural issues that are critical to global management, which is what T-Birds are all about. The COI has become a part of our brand.”

Hear Thunderbird students tell their stories at www.tmcorp.com/111

Students Tell Their Stories

Alessandro Nobili, Student

“Anybody can open a book and learn about finance and marketing,” says Alessandro, a recent MBA graduate student from Italy. But studying cross-cultural communication at Thunderbird has taught him to value “soft skills”.

Nobili, who has lived and worked in three European countries, says one key for success in cross-cultural communication is learning to focus on similarities instead of differences. “What makes a difference is how you deal with people,” he said.

The Cultural Orientations Indicator (COI) from TMC has helped Alessandro learn to thrive in diverse cultural environments.

The COI, a tangible and actionable tool that provides rankings and scales, has helped Alessandro develop critical leadership tools which, he says, he uses every day. Through his experience at Thunderbird and with COI he has learned European-centric thinking is not always a winning way to think. Alessandro says it was a “painful process” to be open to different cultural encounters.

“The COI is the backbone and what every leader needs to have in his wallet to develop his career,” Nobili says.

Alessandro says he will likely “leverage the European passport,” but is open to working everywhere because the COI allows him to be “flexible” wherever he goes.

Suguna Nagarajan, Student

Suguna Nagarajan experienced many cross-cultural misunderstandings when she worked as a software engineer for a U.S. company in her native India. She learned not to take cultural differences personally and to understand the culture and the people she works with. The COI also helped Suguna to communicate more effectively on a recent internship in Austria where styles were much more formal. The COI and being a Thunderbird student has also encouraged her to develop a wider group of international friends, she says.

Ajay Gundu, Student

Ajay, an investment banker from Bangalore, India is about to graduate from Thunderbird. Before using the COI, he said team meetings were “too long and never came to ‘proper’ conclusions.” Using the COI he learned that different people have various preferences for time management, and that there is a personal strategy one must use in every meeting, which includes understanding and adjusting.

How did the COI help Ajay personally?



Before, Ajay said he would never have considered working outside India. Now, he is looking for international adventure and says he wants to “go to about every other place.”

Shilpa Desawale, Student

Shilpa was working at an Indian Information Technology firm where she interacted with many people from western cultures. She thought they were more formal and direct. The COI helped her understand that Asians are indirect and high context, that they speak a lot but are not direct. Westerners are the opposite and more to the point.

Shilpa was concerned how she would adapt when she came to the United States for an internship.

“In India where I am from,” she says, “the corporate culture is very hierarchical and people don’t interact very openly with the boss.” There is an expected distance.

But her American boss would often call her into his office and ask her opinions.

At first she thought, “are there problems with my work...Why did he call me in?”

The COI helped her to understand “flat structures” of Western business and to adapt and respect others. After two years in the United States, Shilpa has become so comfortable she hopes to stay for another five to ten years.

Aayush Mahajan, Student

Aayush was working as an engineer for Mahajan, an automobile company in India. He got a crash course in cross-cultural communication when the Indian auto maker announced a joint venture with the French company Renault.

Using COI helped him put into perspective his dealings with his French colleagues.

Indians working on process improvement and engineering projects were open to handling projects other than those for which they were responsible. The French focused more on their specific responsibilities. Neither are wrong; just different.

COI helped him understand how to negotiate with his French colleagues using sympathy instead of empathy.

Aayush said that the COI and the Thunderbird experience has made him very relaxed in cross-cultural teams. He has confidence he lacked before.

