Dr Fons Trompenaars is co-founder of the consultancy firm Trompenaars Hampden-Turner, and is the author of the book Riding the Waves of Culture. This book, now in its third edition, has sold over 120,000 copies and has been translated into 16 languages. Two central themes in the book are the definitions of cultural norms and values, and how they translate into seven cultural dimensions (please see the companion article on page 12 – 13). Swedish Press spoke to Dr Trompenaars and his Australian business partner Sean Williams, co-founder and Commercial Director of Mundus International. Sean is currently living in Sweden and advises foreign diplomats and business executives on how to interpret Swedish culture, traditions and institutions.

Swedish Press: Can you please summarize how Cross-Cultural Awareness in general, and understanding the 7 dimensions in particular, will benefit the readers of Swedish Press?

Fons Trompenaars: In a nutshell, we distinguish between four levels of cross-cultural competence: Recognition, Respect, Reconciliation, and Realization. The 7 cultural dimensions are particularly relevant for the recognition level. For example, an American may feel intuitively that Swedes are more reserved than his own compatriots. A Swede, on the other hand, may think of American culture as being rather superficial. We find that people often use the 7 dimensions as convenient labels merely to recognize why they don’t like people from different cultures, so we try to make them also respect those differences. Once people have learned to both recognize and respect, they are still left with a dilemma, namely how to make something useful out of the differences. This is what we call reconciliation – the art of integrating opposites. So what specific action should one take to make all this happen? That is the realization part of the equation, and it is facilitated by understanding that there are scientific cross-cultural models underlying the 7 dimensions. This is why I think the dimensions are helpful for people who travel across different cultures.

SP: Swedes who come to live in America sometimes observe that Americans are welcoming and extroverted, allowing the newcomer to build up a network of superficial acquaintances relatively quickly. On the other hand the Swedes often feel that they have very few real friends, and so they end up feeling lonely. Can this be explained through cultural differences between Swedes and Americans?

FT: I do recognize this phenomenon and like to illustrate it using the “peach versus coconut” analogy. It is a metaphor for the Neutral versus the Affective, in combination with the Specific versus the Diffuse (3rd and 4th dimensions, page 13). Americans tend to be Specific and Affective, which translates as enjoying other people, whereas Swedes are Diffuse and Neutral, which translates into esteem of other people. A specific culture is like a peach with lots of easily accessible flesh on the outside but a tough, almost impenetrable stone at the core. Culturally speaking, a typical American is a peach with a generous amount of flesh, or “public domain”. An American may say to a casual acquaintance: “Help yourself to a beer in my fridge”, or “feel free to borrow my car”, because these belongings exist in his or her public domain. Subjects like ill health, politics and religion reside in the private domain at the American’s core and are only shared with close friends.

SP: Conversely, North Americans in Sweden often find it difficult to establish contact with Swedes who are perceived as introverted and inaccessible, even in the absence of a language barrier since most Swedes speak good English. How can this sense of isolation be explained?

FT: This is because Swedes are more like the coconut, difficult to penetrate at first but all yours if and when you manage to drill your way through to their core. By the way, a little alcohol helps to lubricate the drill! The big problem arises if you try to overlay the peach and the coconut, which leads to the feelings of isolation on both sides that you describe in your questions. What is in an American’s public domain belongs to a Swede’s private domain, and vice versa – so don’t assume that you can just grab a beer from your host’s fridge or borrow his car when visiting Sweden, and don’t lecture Americans about politics or religion if you are a Swede. On the other hand, feel free to enjoy the hospitality of Americans, even if it seems superficial, and know that once you have penetrated that hard outer shell of a Swede, you have got a friend for life.

Sean Williams: The inaccessibility of Swedes is well documented in various international benchmark tests. In one such study involving 60 nationalities, Swedes obtained the lowest ranking when it came to establishing basic social relationships. During a typical fika pause at the office, people will eat pastries and exchange pleasantries. Afterwards, everybody goes their separate ways, and there is no expectation to engage in further social contact. By the same token, it is well established that Swedes make very loyal friends, even if it takes a foreigner months or years to reach that point in the relationship.

FT: Let me support what Sean just said by giving an example. Recently while I was giving a workshop in China, a very good Swedish friend of mine passed away. To my surprise, his friends and relatives were quite upset that I didn’t attend his funeral in Sweden. I had thought that they would show an understanding for my absence, given my situation at the time, but I was clearly mistaken. In Sweden, if a close friend dies, you drop everything and come to the funeral, because that is what true friendship is all about.

SW: How true. If Swedes are coconuts and Americans are peaches, then we Australians are mangoes – less flesh, bigger stone, and no hard shell!

FT: So far we have mostly talked about Dimensions 3 and 4, but let us not overlook the other ones, especially number 7 which has to do with dominating the environment versus subordinating oneself to the environment. By “environment” I don’t just mean Nature, but also the world around us. The Americans have a greater tendency to dominate the environment than the Swedes, for whom harmony with the environment is sacrosanct. You see this for example in the American build-up of the military, versus Sweden’s preference for conflict resolution through diplomacy in peacetime and neutrality in wartime.

Interviewed by Peter Berlin