

THE 5-QUESTION CONFLICT DECODER

A Field Guide for Cross-Cultural Disagreements

When a conflict erupts on a cross-cultural team, your instinct is to solve the problem. But in most cases, the problem you see is not the actual problem. The real issue is buried under cultural assumptions about hierarchy, directness, face, loyalty, and authority that neither side has named out loud.

Before you intervene, run the disagreement through these five questions. They will not solve the conflict, but they will show you what you are actually dealing with — which is the only way to solve it without making it worse.

QUESTION 1: IS THIS ABOUT THE ISSUE — OR ABOUT HOW THE ISSUE WAS RAISED?

In many Asian, Middle Eastern, and Latin cultures, how something is said matters as much as what is said. A direct challenge in a meeting — normal in Sweden or the US — can feel like a public humiliation in Thailand, India, or Indonesia. If someone shuts down or becomes passive after a disagreement, the problem may not be the content. It may be that the content was delivered in a way that violated a cultural norm about face, respect, or hierarchy.

Ask yourself: Would this person react differently if the same message had been delivered privately, or by someone higher in the hierarchy?

QUESTION 2: WHO IS "SUPPOSED" TO RAISE THIS?

In high-hierarchy cultures, junior employees raising issues directly to senior leaders can be seen as insubordination, not initiative. A quality concern flagged by a floor supervisor directly to the MD — praised in Scandinavian culture — might create deep discomfort for the supervisor's direct manager in a South Asian or Southeast Asian context. The disagreement is not about the quality concern. It is about who spoke out of turn.

Ask yourself: Has someone been bypassed in the chain? Is the real tension about the issue, or about the perceived breach of protocol?

QUESTION 3: WHAT DOES "YES" MEAN HERE?

In many cultures, "yes" means "I heard you" — not "I agree" and certainly not "I will do it." If you thought a conflict was resolved because everyone nodded and said yes in the meeting, and then nothing changed afterward, the conflict was never actually addressed. The agreement was performative. The real positions went underground.

Ask yourself: Did the meeting end in genuine alignment, or in polite compliance? What would a follow-up conversation one-on-one actually reveal?

QUESTION 4: IS SOMEONE PROTECTING A RELATIONSHIP I CANNOT SEE?

In family-owned businesses operating across cultures, loyalties are layered. An employee who refuses to report a problem may be protecting a colleague who is a relative, a village connection, or a long-tenured friend of the owner. What looks like resistance or dishonesty is often relationship preservation — and in many cultures, preserving relationships ranks above operational transparency.

Ask yourself: What relationship or loyalty might be at stake for this person that I am not seeing?

QUESTION 5: AM I THE PROBLEM?

The hardest question. You may be leading from your own cultural playbook without realising it. Your expectation of open debate, direct feedback, individual accountability, or written documentation may be your cultural preference, not a universal standard. If the same type of conflict keeps recurring with different people from the same cultural background, the common factor is you.

Ask yourself: Have I adapted my leadership to this cultural context — or am I waiting for everyone else to adapt to me?

These five questions will not eliminate cross-cultural conflict. But they will stop you from solving the wrong problem — which is what most Western-trained managers do when they walk into a cross-cultural disagreement with their usual playbook. The real skill is not conflict resolution. It is conflict diagnosis.

For the full framework, read *Leading with Character Across Cultures* — available at bjornvikard.com.
