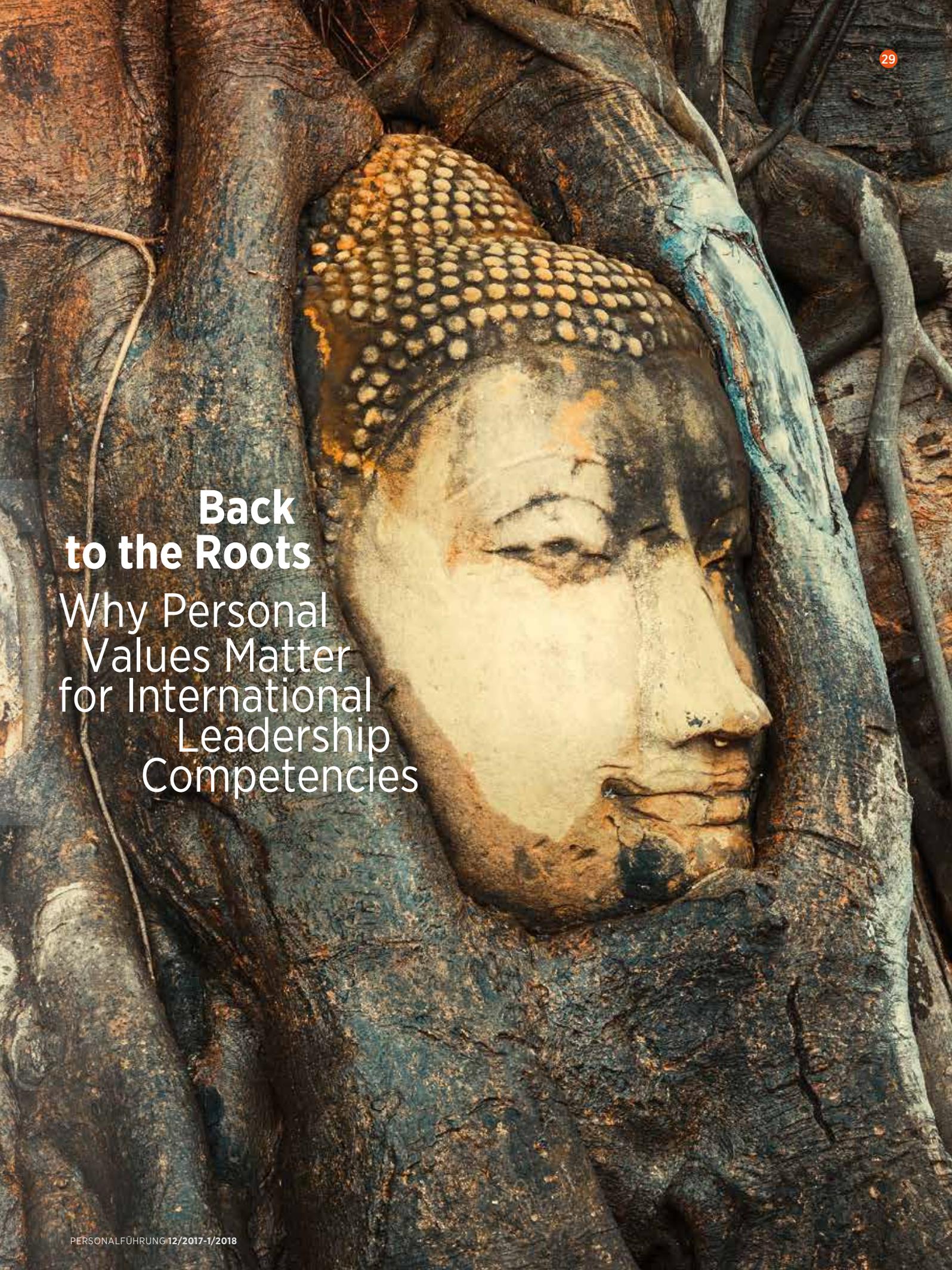


Today it is easy to travel around the world, to move from one place to another and to visit foreign cultures. When on vacation we are fascinated by the differences between our “normal” world and the often totally different life style of other countries. This fascination, as well as other career reasons and desire for adventure, trigger managers and leaders to move abroad for their next job assignment. But what might seem so easy when on holiday can turn into a “culture clash” when managers and leaders face their daily business life in a foreign country. Their first excitement can rapidly turn upside down into great disappointment, when expectations are not met and arrangements and agreements seem to be interpreted in totally diverse ways.



**Back  
to the Roots**  
Why Personal  
Values Matter  
for International  
Leadership  
Competencies

Despite all previously checked facts and figures, irritation and emotions well up and the new expats find themselves asking: Was it really worth trying? Underlying this reaction could be a “culture clash”, an inner conflict arising between the manager’s own cultural values and assumptions and his perception and experience of other, different cultural values at his new working place. A strong emotional reaction to unforeseen situations or not adequately assessed challenges that arise in the interaction with the new culture. Being usually fact oriented and rather reserved, it is often

difficult for them to realize that their new job assignment also stirs emotions such as uncomfortableness, doubts, even fear. It might be easy for them to travel to other parts of the world – but what managers and leaders always, and still, carry within themselves are their own cultural values, perspectives on life, behavior patterns, attitudes, personal purpose, and meaning.

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### EXECUTIVE CAREER COACHING AND INTERCULTURAL TRAINING

Managers and leaders should therefore, in preparation for a global job, international assignment or project work, go back “to their roots” and invest some time in reflecting on their own personal values and cultural attitudes that might have profound influence on their ability to cope with another culture. A preliminary or parallel executive career coaching will not only support an additional intercultural or international skills training, but also provide managers and leaders with personal insights about their own emotional triggers, prejudices, and pitfalls, that could turn a positive start into a personal nightmare.

The exclusive and face-to-face dialogue within an executive coaching opens the door to personal values and beliefs that often remain hidden (mostly for good reasons) in their daily work life. “Going back to the roots” can therefore be a major factor in developing and implementing international leadership competencies.

### THE GLOBAL CULTURE PROJECT

The following theoretical models and dimensions of personal and cultural values will be supported by a practical example of a consulting and coaching process that the author conducted for an international manufacturing company. The “Global Culture Project” consisted of a series of three workshops in Europe to support the start of a newly built plant in

Thailand, Asia. Focusing on new production lines with state-of-the-art technology that were already in place in Hungary, two young Hungarian managers were asked, and subsequently decided, to transfer to Thailand for two years. The new plant was managed by an experienced Austrian CEO, together with an Indian and a Thai manager. Therefore, four cultures were represented at these workshops, two of them took



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place before the transfer of the Hungarian expats to Thailand, and one after six months during their vacation back in Europe.

The goal of these workshops was to create a mutual understanding about the different expectations, functions, roles, and responsibilities within the team, and to set up information and communication rules and processes for all. To sum up, it became very clear that the personal values and cultural beliefs of the two Hungarian expats played a significant role in their personal and professional success and wellbe-

ing at their new assignment at the Thai factory.

### THREE LEVELS OF CULTURAL INFLUENCE

When managers and leaders start their new job assignment abroad, they suddenly face a multitude of new impressions at the foreign organization and in their business life. They

ods, and tools, e.g. goal setting and delegation, time management, communication and information processes, contracts and performance criteria, etc.

#### Espoused Values (2<sup>nd</sup> level)

Underlying these artifacts are espoused values, which encompass values such as leadership principles, strategic guidelines, and even philosophies, etc. Often repre-

exploit and discharge. On a more personal level, basic human values and life concepts are, for example, self-worth, personal identity, dealing with emotions, importance of family, traditions, spirituality and religion, sympathy and antipathy towards other cultures, etc. Reflecting and making those conscious through an executive coaching can be a major key to excellent intercultural leadership competencies.



Especially in an international job assignment, managers and leaders will be confronted with life experiences very different to their normal routine. Unfamiliar situations can be as simple as food preferences, getting introduced, being welcomed and integrated into the daily business life, rituals of politeness (how to say “yes” or “no”) to “normal” business processes (e. g. definition of “punctual”, “excellent performance”, meeting routines, etc.).

might have had a look-see visit before, but on D-day (their official starting day) real life kicks in and all cultural impacts happen simultaneously. Best described by the model of organizational culture by Ed Schein (2004), professor at the MIT Sloan School of Management, three levels of cultural values must be taken into consideration. And managers and leaders need to confirm, adapt to, debate or even reject them.

#### Artifacts (1<sup>st</sup> level)

Cultures are visible through artifacts. On a personal level, they show themselves in one’s appearance (clothing, status symbols, language, etc.), as well as in typical management and leadership processes, meth-

presented on a personal level by the leading stakeholders of a culture, they show themselves through the applied leadership style (authoritative – participative, transactional – transformational – holistic), role behavior, and expectations towards staff.

#### Basic Assumptions and Values (3<sup>rd</sup> level)

The core or essence of a culture lies in its “roots”, their basic assumptions and values. As they encompass taken-for-granted beliefs, perceptions, thoughts, and feelings, mostly on an unconscious level, they are difficult to discern. Core organizational assumptions can be, for example, beliefs about the importance of employees as human resources, either to value and develop or to

### PRACTICAL EXAMPLE “GLOBAL CULTURE PROJECT”

In the review workshop in the “Global Culture Project” one typical experience of the Hungarian expats showed the risks that lie hidden in tabooed cultural values. One of the major problems at the Thai factory were cultural differences in goal setting and delegation between the Asian and European managers. The European managers believed that a “yes” to a task meant “it will be done”, whereas for the Asian employees a “yes” was often just a polite answer with no clue what was really to do and therefore nothing at all was actually done.

These misinterpretations nearly caused the break-up of the project because the Europeans thought these non-actions of their Asian co-workers were signals of resistance to their leadership role. Personal executive coaching revealed those roots of misunderstanding and an open dialogue supported the overcoming of those pitfalls by consciously reflecting on the unfamiliar cultural and personal values with an open mindset.

ing”, his work shows that the purpose of life lies in giving meaning to every encounter or life situation. Although reflecting on these personal values is mostly not in the focus of attention of managers and leaders, their personal values are nevertheless always subconsciously active as powerful career drivers.

The first value category was described by Viktor Frankl (1946) as “creative values”, values that are realized in creative action. In addition to these, there are values which are realized in personal experience, “experiential values”. And the third category refers to “attitudinal values”, values that reflect man’s attitude toward the



Typical attitudinal values – “personal core values” can be found in: religion, ethics and spiritual beliefs, historical and political orientation, business and growth concepts, family and community values, performance and success beliefs, law and order, justice and regulations, environment and sustainability.

### THREE PERSONAL VALUE CATEGORIES

A “culture clash” often strikes a chord at the very core of people’s identity. To reveal and describe those basic assumptions, “roots”, and values (Schein), the worldwide known model of three personal value categories by Viktor Frankl (Austrian doctor and psychotherapist 1905–1997, 39 books, 29 honorary doctoral degrees) gives additional insight. Best known for his international bestseller, “Man’s Search for Mean-

ing”, his work shows that the purpose of life lies in giving meaning to every encounter or life situation. Acting as an internal sensor for personal meaning and self-fulfillment, all of these values influence the development of intercultural skills and competencies of managers and leaders. They can reinforce or hinder the success of an international job assignment.

### CREATIVE VALUES – PERSONAL CAREER VALUES

In a professional business context, creative values can be described as the underlying force of career ambitions, expectations, and dreams of managers and leaders. As innate and / or acquired beliefs, they fuel their intrinsic motivation to establish an international career. The roots of these so called “personal career values”

are deeply embedded in childhood experiences and observations. Often international expats have an intercultural background in their families. Or it can be the reverse: an upbringing in a more rural and isolated environment leads to breaking those limits. Typical creative values – “personal career values” can find meaning in: international and professional excellence in an area of expertise, impact and power as general manager and leader in an expanding area

To discover the personal “creative values and career values” of managers and leaders, it is helpful to reflect in a career coaching on their personal and professional career history and status by asking: What career purpose and meaning do I want to fulfill with my next career step? What hopes and motivation drive me, what concerns hinder me? What are my expectations with regards to myself, my new role and performance?

Especially in an international job assignment, managers and leaders will be confronted with life experiences very different to their normal routine. Unfamiliar situations can be as simple as food preferences, getting introduced, being welcomed and integrated into the daily business life, rituals of politeness (how to say “yes” or “no”) to “normal” business processes (e.g. definition of “punctual”, “excellent performance”, meeting routines, etc.). To avoid a professional “culture clash”, intercultural skills trainings and coaching are an excellent prevention action. Based on scientific studies of value differences of diverse cultures (Hofstede 2001) and hands-on knowledge, managers and leaders benefit in reflecting and adapting their own behavior to the modes of another culture.

Typical experiential values – “professional and national culture values” encompass dimensions such as (Hofstede 2001): power distance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, uncertainty avoidance, long term orientation versus short term normative orientation, indulgence versus restraint.

In the example of the “Global Culture Project”, typical differences in professional and national culture values between the Hungarian expats and the Thai staff could be observed in:

- ▶ defining management processes: “structured and strict” versus “flexible and adaptive” (masculinity versus femininity),
- ▶ attitudes toward task fulfillment: “focused and on time” versus “observing, compliant” (uncertainty avoidance),
- ▶ focus on new challenges: a more “pessimistic” versus a more “optimistic perspective” (indulgence versus restraint).

In an intercultural skills training or executive career coaching for managers and leaders, their experiential values can be detected and their behavior shaped by asking:



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of responsibility, new challenges and cultural adventures, financial growth and prosperity, working in multicultural teams, building new relationships, challenging one’s own limits and beliefs about life. In the example of the “Global Culture Project” some of the career values of the Hungarian managers were described as: getting to know, and living in, a foreign culture, deepening one’s own professional expert knowledge on an international basis, working together with people from diverse cultures.

### EXPERIENTIAL VALUES – PROFESSIONAL AND NATIONAL CULTURE VALUES

Experiential values can be described as purposeful reactions to what life offers, the response to the various and multifaceted situations which life presents every minute of the day. Daily duties, leisure time as well as business life can, and should, have “meaning”, an underlying purpose. If meaning gets lost and “nothing makes sense”, the anchor that connects us to our world dissolves.

What will be the key differences between my current management routines and leadership behavior and the upcoming, other national and business culture? How will I detect cultural signs of typical misunderstandings, irritation, or even conflicts? What will be my contribution to mutual understanding, commitment, and engagement?

### ATTITUDINAL VALUES – PERSONAL CORE VALUES

The third group of values, according to Viktor Frankl, encompasses those values and meaning that are realized in facing situations or constraints that cannot be prevented or changed. As a doctor and psychotherapist who survived the holocaust, he explored the depths of human existence and showed that even a deadly danger can be challenged by one's own attitude towards them. And although the challenges of managers and leaders in foreign countries will be far from this dramatic, there will be several restrictions and inevitable facts touching their personal core values that might result in a "culture clash".

Typical attitudinal values – "personal core values" can be found in: religion, ethics and spiritual beliefs, historical and political orientation, business and growth concepts, family and community values, performance and success beliefs, law and order, justice and regulations, environment and sustainability.

In the example of the "Global Culture Project" the following personal core values of the Hungarian expats were challenged:

- ▶ being separated for lengthy periods of time from their home country and family (with whom they used to interact daily),
- ▶ being confronted with a totally different political system (Hungarian republic versus the Thai dynasty and its deep worship for the king),
- ▶ adapting to a different juridical system and government laws.

To avoid a possible "culture clash" of managers and leaders, it is advisable to reveal and reflect on their attitudinal values in an executive career coaching by asking: How will I manage difficult, even unchangeable situations (my partner's job opportunities, my children's schooling, financial obligations, contact with home country, etc.)? How will I deal with cultural differences that touch

my core values and beliefs: religious beliefs, law and order (e.g. death penalty), diversity (e.g. caste systems, veiling of women, children's work)? What will I do if I fail and need to come back?

To summarize, a key factor for the development of excellent international leadership competencies lies in going "back to the roots" for managers and leaders by consciously reflecting on their personal cultural values. An executive career coaching can provide them with a secure and confiden-



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tial atmosphere and professional support to review their personal career and core values against the expected challenges of an international assignment. Intercultural skills trainings as well as team building workshops at their new working place will add to the development of their individual leadership competencies. ●

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