

# Cultural Agility in the Age of Disruption

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**Abstract.** *The aim of this paper is to propose a holistic conceptual framework focusing on cultural agility, intercultural competence and how they activate within the complex dynamics of disruptive business environments in order to enhance companies' ability to operate in international markets and to respond to the challenges posed by a rapidly changing landscape impacted by fast technological advancements, Artificial Intelligence, global trends or major geopolitical shifts. Our research methods included a critical screening of relevant literature, journals, books, articles, reports, statistics, internet researches, that represented the theoretical part of this study. Based on this theoretical foundation, interpreting our findings, a holistic conceptual framework is proposed. This framework illustrates a process constituted by 4 stages strongly connected with the concepts of organizational culture and strategy. It highlights the vital importance of cultural knowledge, behaviour, feedback & assessment, improvement & learning within organizations facing disruptive challenges. This paper is part of a larger project on the importance of intercultural competences in multinationals and offers future research opportunities.*

**Keywords:** cultural agility, intercultural competence, disruption, talent management, leadership, cross-cultural trainings, organizational culture.

## Introduction

In the last 20 years, due to fast-growing economies, accelerated internationalization, organizations' strategic decisions to become world leaders in their industries, not only local players (Guillen&Garcia, 2015) and to identify more business opportunities in the global market than in their domestic environment (Mathews, 2006), companies have expanded internationally, making acquisitions, carrying out manufacturing and distribution activities, developing global value chains (GVCs) where the different phases of production process are performed in several countries ("Global Value Chains", n.d.).

According to OECD reports, about 70% of international trade sector nowadays requires GVCs in terms of both products and services with complex interactions between domestic and foreign suppliers or workforce services ("Trade policy implications", n.d.) and a worldwide consumer base (MSCI, 2021).

Companies have expanded from domestic to international markets also motivated by the percentage of the international revenue generated (Caligiuri, 2012), with 41% of international revenue exposure for US companies (Butters, 2023) and around 60% for European companies (MSCI, 2013).

To succeed globally in today's complex international and multicultural environment, organizations need to build a corporate culture that fosters cultural agility by developing

interculturally competent professionals and by encouraging best HR and leadership practices in creating a culturally agile workforce (Caligiuri, 2012).

Having screened relevant literature, we explored key concepts for understanding what cultural agility is and its role for companies exposed to international environments impacted by disruptive factors, such as technology, AI, global trends or geopolitical changes. This theoretical background constituted the basis of a holistic conceptual framework focusing on 4 stages centered around the concepts of organizational culture and strategy and developed to support companies to operate in the fast changing global business landscape.

## Literature review

As businesses navigate global challenges, a new paradigm is required, driven by adaptability, openness, innovation, collaboration, cultural agility with a special focus on examining the role of intercultural competence in organizational resilience and growth.

In a global ecosystem characterized by the interconnectedness of cultures, markets and talent pools, cultural agility is not only about surviving disruption, but also about succeeding in a landscape where the ability to understand, respect and effectively collaborate with culturally diverse partners has become a vital aspect.

This study shall provide an insight into three key concepts that support the conceptual framework proposed: cultural agility, organizational culture, disruption.

### *Cultural agility*

Operating in a VUCA world, dominated by multiculturalism, mainly due to globalization, and a constant loop of changes and crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, wars or AI technologies, demands a “great reset” in terms of being agile both organizationally and culturally (Bruhn, 2022) and developing new workplace competencies (Sager, 2019) with a focus on cultural agility that has become a priority to be acquired and fostered (PwC, 2011). Therefore, we need to fully understand the concept and how it is attained.

The term “cultural agility” has basically been defined as “the ability to quickly, comfortably and effectively work in different cultures and with people from different cultures” (Caligiuri, 2013), being considered a mega-competency with three levels based on cross-cultural competencies (Caligiuri, 2012), a meta-competency enabling professionals to adapt and work in unfamiliar cultural situations (Sanchez&Sanchez, 2016), “an ability...to use your cross-cultural learning effectively” (Drăghici, 2015) or an important part of a meta-skillset mechanism developed to manage cultural diversity (Gibbs & Boyarz, 2015). It has sometimes been used interchangeably with concepts like cultural intelligence (CQ), global mindset (Gibbs & Boyarz, 2015), global dexterity (Molinsky, 2013) or cross-cultural competency (C3) (Brenneman et al., 2016) or related to cultural humility (Caligiuri et al., 2016), cross-cultural learning (Drăghici, 2015), cultural inclusion and development (Caligiuri, 2012). Multinationals often translate “cultural agility” into “flexibility” of employees to adapt culturally to local norms and situations, while being responsive in a global business environment (Sager, 2019) and interacting successfully with external partners.

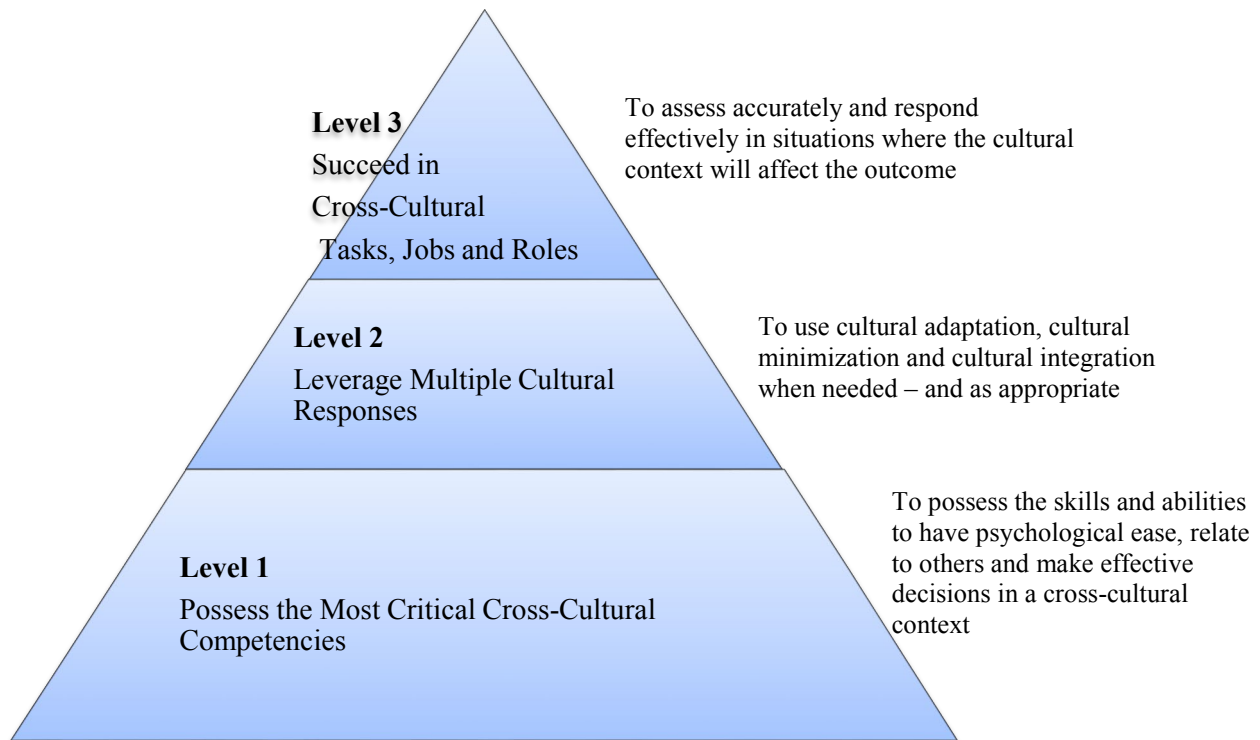
Designing a comprehensive Cultural Agility Competency Framework for professionals and organisations, based on understanding cultural agility as a mega-competency comprised of four categories (behavioural response, psychological ease cross-culturally, cross-cultural interactions, making decisions in a cross-cultural context), Caligiuri (2012) enumerates and explains in detail twelve critical cross-cultural competencies contributing to success in international contexts and cross-cultural business relationships and roles.

**Table 1. Cultural Agility Competency Framework**

<b>Competencies Affecting Behavioural Responses</b>
1. Cultural Minimization 2. Cultural Adaptation 3. Cultural Integration
<b>Competencies Affecting Individuals' Psychological Ease Cross-Culturally</b>
4. Tolerance of Ambiguity 5. Appropriate Self-Efficacy 6. Cultural Curiosity and Desire to Learn
<b>Competencies Affecting Individuals' Cross-Cultural Interactions</b>
7. Valuing Diversity 8. Ability to form Relationships 9. Perspective-Taking
<b>Competencies Affecting Decisions in a Cross-Cultural Context</b>
10. Knowledge and Integration of Cross-National/Cultural Issues 11. Receptivity to Adopting Diverse Ideas 12. Divergent Thinking and Creativity

Source: adapted from Caligiuri (2012, p. 46).

The author perceives cultural agility as a process not as a one-time achievement, therefore involving several layers of competencies that need to be acquired and developed, especially cross-cultural competencies that constitute the basis of the Cultural Agility Pyramid.



**Figure 1. The Levels of Cultural Agility**

Source: adapted from Caligiuri (2012, p. 25).

At individual level, cultural agility can be attained through a combination of learning, practice and experience, while at the organizational level, multinationals should foster a cultural agility climate encouraging a culturally intelligent workforce (Lundby&Caligiuri, 2013).

*Culturally agile organizational culture*

Organizational culture is largely referred to as being a set of shared values, norms, behaviours and practices that distinguishes an organization from others (Higgings, 1991), consisting of key characteristics that an organization values and needs to understand and apply (DK, 2022) and integrating different elements that ensure a solid, well-functioning culture, such as artifacts (myths and sagas; language systems and metaphors; symbols, ceremonies and rituals; value systems and behavioural norms) (Higgings, 1991) or operative cultural forces on three levels of culture (artifacts, espoused values, tacit assumptions) (Stanford, 2022).

**Table 2. Three levels of culture**

<b>Artifacts</b>	Visible structures and processes, observed behavior (difficult to decipher)
<b>Espoused values</b>	Ideals, goals, aspirations, ideologies and rationalisations
<b>Tacit (underlying) assumptions</b>	Taken-for-granted, unconscious beliefs, values (highly determinative of behaviour, perception, feeling)

Source: adapted from Stanford based on Schein’s model (2022, p. 303).

Given that organizational culture is about the past, the present and the future of an organization system, the concept has been defined as “the multifaceted learned structure and practice of the people who lead and people who follow, people who work together and build a history that shapes the future.” (Schein & Schein, 2019, p23). Focusing on the relationship between organizational culture and business strategy, it is concluded that companies want their people to adopt their corporate culture by pursuing organizational goals and objectives. Moreover, Higgings (1991) highlights the strong connection between organizational culture and strategy as it shapes the company cultural type based on strategic performance and risk level taken in strategic decisions.

Due to the continuously changing and multi-faceted context with a constant flux of unforeseen events, organizational leaders need to make quick decisions about the operation of their company, sometimes designing or redesigning their business models, totally or partially, to respond or to anticipate crises, economic shifts or multiple other disruptive factors (Stanford, 2022). Inevitably, organizational culture is also subject to change as future-oriented mindset leaders prepare their organisations for the future needs and multicultural operating environments that require cross-culturally competent and culturally agile professionals supported by intercultural training programs, company policies and procedures designed to increase cultural agility within their workforce (Caligiuri, 2012).

Fostering cultural agility implies encouraging culturally agile leadership and shaping culturally agile workforce by attracting, selecting, recruiting and developing culturally agile leaders, while creating a climate of cultural agility among all people equipped with the right tools and resources required to work across cultures (Lundby & Caligiuri, 2013), such as corporate programs to develop multicultural managers, senior leaders (Tudoran & Deaconu, 2023) able to

discuss about globalization, global issues and to emphasize the importance of operating in international markets for the long-term success of the organization (Lundby & Caligiuri, 2013) or other instruments, including language courses, cross-cultural trainings, global team training, international opportunities (global conferences, international assignments), global rotational programs, investment in technology to facilitate information exchange electronically worldwide. Building a corporate culture that integrates cultural agility is supported by both leadership and Human Resources segment, the latter being in charge of attracting and assessing culturally agile employees through its talent management and global mobility programs and responsible for developing a learning system to build cultural agility in the workforce (Caligiuri, 2012).

*Disruption*

The term “disruption” has widely entered the business lexicon in 1997, being introduced by Harvard business professor Clayton Christensen in his book “The Innovator’s Dilemma” (1997) (Oroszi, 2020), where he developed the theory of disruptive innovation, firstly examined in the disk-drive industry (Christensen, 1997) and, subsequently, extended to other industries and topics, including response strategy, performance and innovation metrics (Christensen et al., 2018). Initially, the term focused on product development and illustrated a mere correlation between outperforming in a sustaining innovation context (incremental improvements to existing products aimed at satisfying the demands of existing customers) and underperforming in a disruptive innovation context (creation of new products designed for underserved or non-existing markets, that eventually prove to displace established competitors) (Christensen et al., 2015) and later it evolved to a synonym of any disruption in technology field or start-ups (Nisen, 2013) that can reshape and shake industries by innovation (Newman, 2016). Nowadays, due to a rapidly changing world dominated by globalization, crises, wars, geopolitical shifts, technological advances, AI development, unforeseen events (Stanford, 2022), megatrends (Marr, 2022) or megathreats (Roubini, 2023), the term “disruption” has been associated to sudden and fast transformation, change, disturbance that interrupts and alters business models and the way we work, requiring “the ability to pivot rather than panic” (Schwartz & Riss, 2021, p3), the need to partially or totally design or redesign organizations (Stanford, 2022), the capability to creatively respond to change forces shaping extremely complex, interdependent external and internal environments (Higgings, 1991).



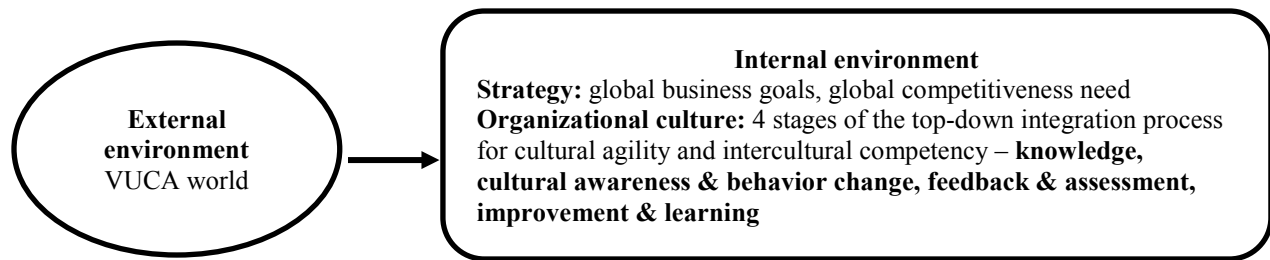
**Figure 2. The Managerial Environments**

Source: adapted from Higgings (1991, p.19).

We have entered an Age of Disruption, a period of accelerated change, unpredictability and massive technological growth worldwide. The world has become volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA), making it difficult to approach a challenging situation (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014) and to operate in a multi-faceted context where threats can come from anywhere, not only from a competitor (Friedman, 2020), but also from other transformative global forces, such as climate changes, economic and political pressures, dichotomic landscape alternating between globalization and fragmentation, shifting demographics, changing social, cultural and workplace trends (Marr, 2022) or digitization that requires creativity, continuous innovation, agility to respond rapidly to changing business conditions, to make fast decisions and to change course quickly when necessary (Friedman, 2020). To succeed in this VUCA world, organizations need to leave behind leadership styles that were efficient during the previous industrial revolution and implement leadership agility development strategies to succeed in the 4<sup>th</sup> Industrial Revolution (internet & AI) (Friedman, 2020) while building a disruption-ready workforce, equipped with the mindset and skills to embrace disruption as the norm, such as managing uncertainty, ability to take risks, bringing clarity and direction in dynamic contexts, cultivating a continuous-learning attitude (Hebbar, 2023) and fostering cultural agility as part of building a global leadership mindset vital to operate in a multicultural global environment (Lundby&Caligiuri, 2013) demanding the skills to communicate, work and build trust with people from different cultures (Verstandig, 2019).

*Conceptual framework for culturally agile organizations*

Based on this theoretical foundation, we propose a guiding conceptual framework on how to support integration of cultural agility and intercultural competency within agile organizations facing globalization and current global disruptions in a VUCA world. The framework describes a top-down process made up of four stages tightly connected with the interdependent concepts of organizational culture and strategy. Strategically, the cultural agility integration process is impacted by company global goals of operating internationally and by its global competitiveness necessity. Part of the company internal environment, organizational culture plays a central role in building a culturally agile organization by encouraging cultural knowledge acquisition and behavior change both at the individual and company level via specific policies and procedures on diversity and inclusion, HR strategies to recruit and develop culturally agile professionals, cross-cultural trainings, workshops and coaching, international assignment management, global team collaboration programs and leadership practices to foster cultural agility and intercultural competency. The top-down process consists of four consecutive stages that focus on cultural input, practice, evaluation and continuous learning: cultural knowledge (to inform), cultural awareness and behaviour change (to implement), feedback & assessment (to assess), improvement & learning (to improve & learn) within organizations facing disruptive challenges and it is illustrated below.



**Figure 3. Conceptual framework for building a culturally agile organization**

## Methodology

We focused our research on secondary bibliographic sources, without ignoring the tertiary bibliographic sources.

In the first phase of the research, we established the terms and concepts on which there is a common understanding, following their evolution over time and the related or convergent elements of the chosen theme.

In the second phase, we selected the relevant data from the sources chosen to identify several organizational patterns on the topic, regardless of the research method used by the sources. Through the use of secondary and tertiary sources, we established that, in general, organizations that propose to act agile on a global level, do not have a formal framework for training, implementation and assessment of intercultural agility or they implement it for certain management or top management positions. The study of the materials revealed the need to fill the existing gap through the research proposed by the article.

In the third phase, we developed a concept that can be formalized in organizations, described with specific actions and that can be used as a benchmark by managers of multinationals or by those who have employees from other cultures under their command.

Regarding the materials studied, our concern was that they should be from well-known sources with an impeccable reputation.

## Results and discussions

Based on the methodology used in this paper, we discovered that the relevant business literature on cultural agility refers to various definitions of the term and often uses it interchangeably with other concepts embedding similar traits, which might lead to confusions in understanding, using and applying the notion. Other findings highlight the importance of cultural agility and intercultural competency in today's global and disruptive business environment, the necessity to integrate them within organizational culture and strategy due to company global objectives, partnerships, activity and global competitive advantage. As far as the company internal environment is concerned, there are several directions on how to build a culturally agile organization, including strategic HR practices in recruiting, assessing and developing culturally agile professionals, talent management, global leadership skills, continuous learning attitude and investments in intercultural trainings, global mobility programs, cross-cultural programs for team collaboration or company international events in order to facilitate intercultural experiences and experimentations. As some studies show, organizational cultural agility is impacted by the company readiness to embrace cultural agility practices (talent management aligned to global company goals and the pressing need for global competitiveness) (Caligiuri, 2012) and by slower adaptability to the rapidly changing environment (Friedman, 2020).

The conceptual framework proposed in this paper illustrates the top-down process of integrating cultural agility and intercultural competency within a culturally agile organization and takes into consideration both the internal and external environment where the organizations operate in, highlighting the factors influencing them, mainly in relation with company strategy and organizational culture. This framework has been elaborated as a guide to be practically implemented by multinationals and it contributes to a better understanding of the term cultural agility, of how cultural agility integration process functions, while mapping a clear process for the managers to carry out each stage in order to communicate (inform), to implement, to assess and to improve this integration process for better management adapted to the current context.

Other frameworks describe cultural agility subcomponents that impact different categories (behavior, cross-cultural interactions, psychological comfort and making-decision process) or levels based on acquiring the skills and abilities needed for being effective in a multicultural context (Caligiuri, 2012) and relate mostly to individuals than organizations.

## Conclusion

The aim of this article is to illustrate that agile organizations are also culturally agile companies as they face globalization, cross-cultural business environments and disruptions and to propose a conceptual framework for the integration process of cultural agility within culturally agile organizations.

We have briefly presented the main concepts supporting our objective, namely cultural agility, culturally agile organizational culture and disruption, highlighting that cultural agility might be a confusing term due to its relative synonyms. It is a clear need to clarify the term and establish it as such.

Subsequently, we have designed a conceptual framework for building a culturally agile organization with four practical stages that might be used as a tool for leaders, managers, HR managers to better understand the concept, the cultural agility integration process, to elaborate specific practices and procedures, to take clear actions and make financial decisions regarding investments in developing culturally agile professionals by intercultural trainings, global education programs and others.

This study has some limitations. The explanations of the key terms should be understood as providing only a starting point for further explorations and, although valuable, they could benefit from more detailed elaboration. We have proposed only a conceptual framework illustrating a practical process to integrate cultural agility within agile organizations, not a model or a method.

Further research could lead to a larger study on this topic, investigating how it is applied in the corporate segment and how companies elaborate procedures and policies to encourage building a culturally agile organization.

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