



Beyond ITIL:

The Cultural Dynamics of IT Service Management



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INTRODUCTION

ITIL (the IT Infrastructure Library) is the most widely accepted approach to IT Service Management in the world. ITIL is a framework that outlines accepted best practices for IT Service Management. Its concepts support IT service providers as they plan consistent, documented, and repeatable processes that improve service delivery and support. It was first developed in the late 1980s by the UK Government's Central Communications and Telecom Agency as a way to gain control in a difficult-to-manage, technology-based environment.

ITIL has become quite popular in recent years, particularly in North America, a few years after it first gained traction in Europe. But as companies deploy ITIL globally, they find that "one size" doesn't necessarily "fit all." What works in some cultures may have to be modified to work well in others.

One of ITIL's biggest benefits is that it brings a common vocabulary across the organization. For the most part, even non-implementers are using the ITIL vocabulary.

As you will see, using a common vocabulary, *when coupled with an understanding of different cultural frameworks*, makes ITIL—and Service Level Management in particular—much more effective.

In fact, a closer look at these cultural frameworks helps explain why there are varying degrees of enthusiasm for a process-based framework like ITIL. Understanding these cultural frameworks will help you explain ITIL more clearly, and see which parts of it are likely to make sense for your organization.

ITIL describes ten Service Support and Service Delivery processes and functions, which include:

Service Support	Service Delivery
Incident Management	Service Level Management
Problem Management	Financial Management
Change Management	Capacity Management
Configuration Management	Availability Management
Release Management	Continuity Management

In this special report we will pay particular attention to the Service Level Management process of ITIL, specifically Service Level Agreements (SLAs) and Operating Level Agreements (OLAs), and the impact of culture on them.

One of ITIL's strengths is its flexibility. It allows you to craft agreements that make sense in the context of very different cultures.

Important: Like many other processes, ITIL can be very effective across continents—as long as you approach it with an open mind, and try to see it from the perspective of other cultures. In different places, the very perception of ITIL and what you agree on may vary considerably from what you *think* you agreed to!

Keep reading and you'll see what we mean.

CHAPTER 1

CULTURE

Let's start off by defining culture, and also get everyone on the same page regarding IT Infrastructure Library.

While the ITIL library has a number of processes defined, we will focus on the cultural implications of the Service Level Management process, since it is often one of the best known parts of ITIL. The implications are general to all process disciplines of ITIL.

Cultural anthropologists define culture as a *set of beliefs that govern behavior*. In other words, each of us has a set of cultural "lenses" that influence how we see and interpret certain behaviors. Other cultures interpret the same behaviors completely differently.

Example:

Let's look at something as simple as not making noises while eating. In many cultures, if you make a loud sound while eating, your elders would chide you and tell you that this is considered impolite. Contrast this with "polite" Japan, where slurping your noodles loudly is seen as a compliment. You are telling the chef that you really enjoy the meal! Same behavior—different perceptions.

ITIL can help you manage your IT department as a business through adoption of industry best practices. It's important to note that its approach is non-prescriptive. ITIL provides advice and guidance on the key process and people issues involved in delivering IT services. It does not demand or command.

It is this non-prescriptive aspect of ITIL that makes it so effective across many different cultures. ITIL can be adapted for many different settings. However, some organizations are drawn to the rules-based framework of ITIL, exactly because they *like* rules and processes. But as you will soon see, this approach can cause complications when adapted to different regions around the world.

CHAPTER 2

SLAs AND OLAs

One of the keys to delivering good service is managing customers' expectations. Simply put, if you do not set your customers' expectations about what you will provide for them, they will set the expectations for you. Unfortunately, their expectations are likely to be far higher than what you can efficiently and effectively provide.

Example:

If you spend a lot of money for a luxury car, you probably expect more than just a flawless car. You expect white glove treatment at every point in the interaction with the car dealership and the car manufacturer.

Conversely, if you're paying a rock-bottom price for a new economy car, you're probably willing to put up with fewer features, and you probably anticipate courteous but not fawning service from the dealer. All you reasonably expect is a safe car that reliably gets you from point A to point B in relative comfort.

In this example, your assumption about the quality of the car and the level of service you'll get from the dealership is implied by the price and perhaps the advertising.

In ITIL, expectations with customers are set at the Service Level Management process, specifically in the Service Level Agreement (SLA).

An SLA is a written agreement between a service provider and the customer. It defines service goals and essentially sets the expectations for exactly what service will be provided.

In terms of delivering good service, SLAs are necessary. But they're not enough.

To be complete, SLAs need Operating Level Agreements. OLAs also set expectations—not for what the service provider will deliver, but for what the service provider can expect to receive from other IT groups. The service provider depends on these other groups to be able to give the required levels of service to the customer with whom they signed the SLA.

Without an SLA, the customer assumes that *you* will be the one providing support on any topic, delivered in any manner, at any hour of the day or night exactly as the customer wants it.

This makes perfect sense from the customer's point of view. They expect to contact you only once in a while, whenever they have an issue that they need resolved—usually when they are under some kind of time pressure. So from their perspective, you don't seem busy. How can you be swamped with work, when they so rarely ask for help?

In addition, they expect you to be available the instant they contact you. And since you are the technology expert, they expect you to be knowledgeable about whatever they're calling about, no matter how obscure.

See what you're up against? These are typical expectations of someone calling a service provider. Without Operating Level Agreements with other IT groups, a service provider has no way of ensuring that they can actually meet the expectations they've set with the customer in their SLAs. This is particularly true if they depend on other internal departments to deliver on parts of the SLA.

Not surprisingly, SLAs and OLAs have been wildly popular. They let service providers set expectations that are jointly agreed upon with the customer, in terms of exactly what is expected from a service provider.

So far, so good. Unfortunately, as you will soon see, simply getting a signed agreement between people from two different cultures is not enough to establish a smooth relationship.

Why not? Blame it on those cultural lenses we discussed earlier. Different cultures give different people different interpretations of the same agreement.

CHAPTER 3

RULES AND RELATIONSHIPS

Societies can generally be divided into two types of cultures. One is a rules-based culture, and the other a relationship-based culture.¹

Rules-based Cultures: Rules are Rules

In a rules-based culture, individual behavior is governed, not surprisingly, by rules. Typically, this means that a rule is a rule and must always be obeyed. Rule #1 is "Follow the rules." Rule #2: "When in doubt, see rule number one."

Example:

You find yourself approaching a stop sign late at night on a deserted road. The temperature is 20°F below zero. If you find yourself braking to a complete halt, double-checking to make sure that no one else has the right of way, before proceeding on your way, then you are most likely from a rules-based society. You are following the rules, and this rule says you must stop at a stop sign. (Of course, there is no sign that says "Go," but that's another story.)

In a rules-based culture, most people follow the rules, and believe that everyone else follows the same sets of rules. This is what enables their society to function properly. It is perfectly possible for complete strangers—people who have never met—to sign an agreement and start doing business with each other the very next day.

There will usually be a contract, often an elaborate one, with language that specifies that any changes to the contract must be approved by both parties in writing. There will also be language on how to handle disputes, as well as professionals to represent both sides in signing the agreement as well as handling any disputes that might arise.

So negotiating an SLA between two rules-based cultures shouldn't cause too many problems. Both sides respect the law and trust the rules, and realize that everyone else is bound by the same rules.

¹For more, see *Working Across Cultures*, John Hooker, (Stanford University Press)

In a rules-based culture, trust can be created quickly because both parties agree to the same set of rules. However, things are quite different in a relationship-based culture.

Relationship-based Culture: Rules are Guidelines

In a relationship-based culture, on the other hand, individual behavior is governed by relationships, not rules. In these cultures, a rule is a guideline, something to be evaluated in the context of the particular situation at hand—not something rigid and unchanging.

Example:

Take the same situation as before. You're approaching a stop sign late at night when the temperature is 20°F below zero and the road is clearly deserted. If you find yourself merely slowing down, looking around to be sure it's clear, then driving past the stop sign without coming to a complete halt—you are most likely from a relationship-based society. You have evaluated the rule in the context of the situation and decided it can be modified in this case. You followed the spirit of the law, if not the letter.

In a relationship-based society, it is almost impossible for two strangers to meet for the first time and begin doing business the next day. The reason, in a word, is trust. In relationship-based societies, long-term relationships are the foundation for trust.

In relationship-based cultures, trust grows based on the relationship between people, not because of rules. You trust somebody because you know them, or you know their family, or because somebody you already trust said it's OK, you can trust that person.

Quite a difference! Now you're beginning to see how different cultures, different belief systems, can lead to very different perspectives between groups of people who have just signed the same agreement.

Once an agreement is signed, a person from a rules-based society is likely to assume that the agreement is concluded, everything is agreed to, and business can begin immediately. In the future, if any changes need to be made to the original agreement, both parties will sit down again, renegotiate and eventually modify the original agreement.

However, people from a relationship-based society see it very differently. They see the agreement as signifying general agreement, but believe the agreement can be modified based on the situation at any given moment. After all, from their point of view, an agreement is just a guideline rooted in theory that hasn't yet been tested in reality. It can and must be modified, based on the particular situation.

In the context of ITIL, and Service Level Management in particular, understanding the differences between these two cultures—and how they view business agreements—is very significant. **Getting a written SLA or OLA in a relationship-based society does not make it definitive or cast in stone.** Be prepared when changes to the agreement, or requests to change it, are made.

Here's good news. Even in relationship-based countries, IT and technology people generally like SLAs and OLAs. They realize these agreements can mean the difference between chaos and some semblance of sanity for a service provider.

Tip:

Suppose you have an agreement with customers in a relationship-based society, but there are still misunderstandings when you actually roll out the service. Probe to see if the end-users of the service actually agree with the terms of the SLA. It may be that the person who signed the SLA simply wishes they did.

Example:

In some cases, what management wants, and what senior IT executives want, can be as different as tea and coffee. Take, for example, a large academic institution in the southwestern US with a strong relationship-based culture.

As part of a multimillion-dollar rollout of an enterprise-wide system, they instituted a centralized support center. End-users and customers were encouraged and instructed to call the central helpdesk if they had any issues regarding the new system and its use. The helpdesk staff was well trained and well staffed. They were well qualified to take care of customer issues.

There was just one small glitch. A few months after the system was rolled out, a survey of end-users showed that a large percentage (over 40%) were bypassing the central helpdesk, and continuing to call the people they had always called for assistance. These were typically administrative assistants, who had been there for many years. Unfortunately, they were not part of the formal support system that was being rolled out.

This kind of support was both expensive and unproductive. The administrative assistants, while still very knowledgeable about the university's inner workings, did not have the same level of skills on the new systems to qualify them to give expert advice. Not only did they get distracted from their own work, they were often frustrated. After all, they were experts before, but not in the new system. Many passed on their frustration to the end-users. Not a good situation at all. Simply exhorting people to call the central helpdesk clearly had not worked.

The solution (or part of it) was to take into account the relationship-based culture at this university that nurtured personal relationships over impersonal (albeit excellent) support. The administrative assistants who were actually receiving the calls were given extra training and access to the call tracking system. This allowed them to either quickly log the fact they had received a call and resolved it, or escalate it appropriately to the central helpdesk. This particular solution worked within the culture of this organization, and enabled them to keep a balance between relationship- and rules-based processes.

In other words, while management may have good reasons for everyone to contact a central helpdesk, it may be hard to break deep cultural mores, not to mention years of "how things worked." In some cultures, people are simply far more comfortable asking people they know and trust for assistance.

The good news is that given the non-prescriptive nature of ITIL, this adaptation to include nontraditional support modes into the formal support process still makes sense.

Bottom line: When creating SLAs and OLAs between a rules-based and relationship-based society, you could have complications if you don't take into account cultural differences.

CHAPTER 4

CONTEXT

Some cultures are “low context,”² in which the information people need is explicitly spelled out. You can usually tell you’re in a low-context culture when you see a lot of signs and written directions on what to do next.

Most low-context cultures are Northern European-based.

Example:

Imagine you are trying to photocopy a document in an unfamiliar building. You find the photocopier, but as you walk up to it you see a sign that says “Out of Order.” If you are from a low-context culture, you are likely to notice and believe the sign. In fact, you actually look for signs like this one, because you feel they deliver important information, and guide you on what to do next. Furthermore, you trust that the information on the sign is correct, and are confident that the sign will be updated or removed if the information happens to be incorrect.

Now contrast this with a high-context culture.

High-context Culture

In a “high-context” culture, there is much less reliance on posted signs and written instructions to know what is going on and what you should do next. Even if you do find signs, they are likely to be outdated or incorrect.

Example:

Same situation. You’re trying to photocopy a document in an unfamiliar building. You locate the photocopier, and as you approach you see a sign that says “Out of Order.” But since you are from a high-context culture, you’re not likely to even notice the sign. This isn’t because you can’t read or understand the sign. It is simply because, in your culture, you don’t generally take your cues from signs. You pay more attention to the people and environment around you. In this case, for example, if someone is there and says the photocopier is not working, you are more likely to believe them.

²John Hooker, *Working Across Cultures*

Tip:

High- and low-context societies require different communications strategies. For example, sending a written memo or e-mail to explain a policy or procedure is less likely to be read—or perhaps even followed—in high-context and relationship-based cultures. In these societies, it's essential to supplement your written message with more personal methods of getting your point across, including phone calls, video conferences and (even better) personal visits.

Technology Implications for High- and Low-context Societies

Most knowledge bases and self-help tools used today are text-based. That means they are inherently low-context systems. These are fine for providing clear instructions in certain situations, particularly for task-oriented steps.

But to communicate complicated technical information, low-context text-based systems are probably not the most efficient. There are far too many subtleties you can only get by listening to or watching someone with experience in action.

This is something to think about and perhaps discuss with your vendor, particularly as you start deploying self-help systems around the world.

CHAPTER 5

CULTURAL CLASSIFICATIONS

Professor Geert Hofstede from the University of Maastricht³ in the Netherlands developed one of the best-known cultural classification schemes. According to his research, the cultures of the world are differentiated primarily along five axes.

They are:

- **Power Distance** – The extent to which less-powerful members of institutions and organizations expect and accept that power is distributed unequally
- **Individualism** – The extent to which people are oriented to look after themselves and their immediate families rather than larger social groups
- **Masculinity** – According to one interpretation, masculine cultures tend to be competitive, while feminine cultures encourage cooperation
- **Uncertainty Avoidance** – The extent to which the members of the culture feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations
- **Long-term Orientation** – Measures a society's long-term devotion to traditional, forward-thinking values

In the interest of conserving space, we will examine *Power Distance* and *Individualism*, since they are easier to explain in the context of Service Level Agreements, Operating Level Agreements and ITIL.

Power Distance and Service Level Management

In cultures where there is a high power distance—i.e., an acceptance of a major gulf between the people in charge and the people who are not in charge—you (as a person in authority) are less likely to be challenged or questioned. After all, you're the boss.

³www.geert-hofstede.com

Let's say you are an authority figure from a culture like the US, with a low power distance index. Suppose you visit a culture with a high power distance index like India and actively solicit input. What you hear may not mean what you think it does.

For example, suppose you ask people if they understand the requirements you've just laid out, and they say "yes." That "yes" may simply mean "Yes, I hear you" rather than "Yes, I agree."

Same words—but very different meanings and implications.

That also explains why, if you solicit input, you may not receive any. If you ask for candid input, you may only get feedback that does not embarrass the person in charge. Watch for this kind of behavior, particularly if you rely on surveys to gauge how effective your service is. You may have to interpret the results differently, or phrase the questions differently.

Conversely, let's consider a culture like China, which has a *high* power distance index. Suppose you go in and are asked by your boss for candid feedback in private. If you actually take him or her up on this offer, and you provide candid feedback, you're likely to find it's not well received. Huh? What just happened? Didn't he or she just ask for candid feedback? Why did they react so poorly when you just gave them what they asked for? Once again, different cultural lenses are at work.

Individualism and Service Level Management

In many Western⁴ countries today, forums and self-help-based support tools are becoming increasingly popular. In these settings, customers help other customers, answer questions and provide guidance.

Typically, an individual outside the company is eventually recognized for his or her contributions to a company-sponsored information resource, e.g., web group, wiki or the like.

⁴The concept of what is "Western" is arbitrary. After all, India is west of China. In this special report, I use the term European and Western interchangeably, to include Europe, US, Australia and New Zealand. As always, these are general terms.

This highly desirable situation can be a win-win for all involved. Individuals love to contribute, but only if their contribution is recognized and valued. And companies can certainly use the extra help! Rather than depending solely on their often-overworked front line support team, companies can encourage expert volunteers to provide additional support to other customers, with the understanding that this is not official support, but an alternative.

The volunteers are then feted in some form or another, often given “MVP – Most Valuable Professional” status, meetings with senior company executives, access to inside technical information, premium level support and more.

This model has proven to work very well in certain circumstances, usually where the base product can be modified and expanded.

However, once these forums start expanding to, say, countries in Asia or Africa, using individual recognition to motivate volunteers may not be as effective. Countries and cultures in these regions are typically more collective, rather than individualist. That is, people are far more likely to perceive themselves as *part of a group*, and thus any rewards should go to the group, not to an individual.

In some cultures, this attitude can even extend to the point where the person who stands out is perceived as a nail sticking out—one that needs to be hammered back down.

Over time, the tools that currently celebrate individuals and their contributions will need to adapt to more collectivist cultures.

CONCLUSION

As you can see, even a basic, high-level understanding of cultural frameworks allows you to dramatically increase your chances of a successful global service implementation.

One of the keys to success is flexibility. Remember that different cultures have different cultural lenses that interpret the same behaviors completely differently.

Be sure that you, your teams, your processes and technology are all flexible enough to accommodate a variety of cultural and societal differences, as you continue your quest to deliver outstanding service around the world.

