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Why great leaders can underperform when they switch countries

I attended a talk by [Lionel Laroche](#) yesterday at [AAGEF Ontario](#) about the cultural dimension of leadership, focused on French vs. Canadian work styles.

One idea really stood out:

- ➔ 80% of your job remains the same across countries.
- ➔ But the remaining 20%—how you interact with people—can make or break how your performance is perceived.

That 20% is deeply cultural, and often shaped early in life (even as far back as high school): how we debate, how we show respect, how we run meetings.

Two key differences were highlighted:

#### 1. Relationship to conflict:

In Canada, conflict is typically softened. Teams align quickly on what works, move forward, and resolve disagreements later through iteration and compromise.

In France, debate is more direct and openly encouraged. Escalating to a manager to resolve a disagreement is more common—and more accepted.

- 👉 In Canada, however, that escalation can be perceived as a lack of collaboration.

#### 2. Teamwork dynamics:

Canadian teams emphasize clear roles, accountability, and “need-to-know” information sharing.

French teams tend to operate with more fluid boundaries: information flows freely within the team, and people contribute beyond their formal scope.

- 👉 Same objective, very different operating models.

There was also a visual shared during the event to illustrate these two ways of working when things are not going according to plan—but I’m afraid you had to be there to fully appreciate it!

So what does this mean for leaders?

Awareness is the first step—and often the biggest unlock.

Cultural “translation” is a leadership skill, not a soft one.

Having a mentor from another culture can dramatically accelerate adaptation.

One practical (and unexpected) tip for French professionals in Canada: read the comic strip 'For Better or For Worse', a good window into Canadian cultural norms.

Leadership effectiveness isn’t just about what you deliver, it’s also about how well you navigate the invisible cultural rules around you.



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[Renowned thought-leader / expert in Nimble Change Leadership™, change agility, agile decision-making & culture change | Executing strategic transformations & building agile capabilities across sectors | ORCHANGO](#)  
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Last evening, I had the pleasure of attending [Lionel Laroche](#)'s speech 🎤 about [hashtag#crosscultural](#) dynamics (in the workplace & beyond). The event was organized by [AAGEF Ontario](#) – the association of alumni from France's "**Grande Écoles**" (the equivalent of the Ivy League).

I had seen Lionel speak a few years back... And, given the number of decades I worked in Canada + in/with other countries, cross-cultural environments are definitely not new to me... **BUT I didn't hesitate one second to register and see him present again! Here are the key reasons:**

✅ Lionel powers his speeches with a mix of *humour*, personal *stories*, deep *insights*, and solid *analysis*.

✅ He beautifully explains the direct link between culture / attitudes / ways-of-working and *history* – which is very enlightening (e.g. see pix ↓).

✅ Most importantly, when contrasting cultures – e.g. how teams of Canucks 🍁 vs. Frenchies 🍷 operate, and what happens when they start working all together ⚡ – Lionel comes across as **totally non-judgmental**. He simply explains what happens and why; and provides practical advice on how to handle the challenging dynamics.

Keep doing what you are doing [Lionel](#) i.e. helping cross-cultural teams gel & make magic together!!

PS - thanks [Bruno Lebeault](#) & the team of volunteers for inviting Lionel back + keeping our alumni community alive & strong with our monthly events!! 🙌💙🍁🍷😊



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Cultural diversity in the workplace is a strength and a competitive advantage, but only if we manage it intentionally.

Last night, I attended a fascinating lecture at the [Centre for Social Innovation \(CSI\)](#) on navigating cultural diversity at work, organized by [AAGEF Ontario](#), the Ontario-based association of alumni of France's elite graduate schools. The session was led by cross-cultural expert [Lionel Laroche](#) and offered deep insights into the realities of working in Canada's uniquely diverse organizations. In Canada, more than in most countries, people from all over the world work side by side. This creates both opportunities and inevitable misunderstandings.

Left unmanaged, cultural differences can lead to frustration, lost productivity, and unmet expectations. Handled well, they become a true source of creativity and innovation.

Two people approaching the same problem from different cultural perspectives can create solutions that neither of them would have thought of alone. But this doesn't happen by default. It requires awareness and effort.

Some takeaways on the specificities of the Canadian workplace:

- Change management: incremental change is preferred over radical transformation.
- Teamwork: individual accountability is emphasized over collective responsibility.
- People management: behaviours are attributed to individuals, not cultural groups.
- Networking: Canada is a country of specialists rather than generalists.
- Communication: conflict avoidance is deeply embedded in Canadian culture.

Grounded in historical, anthropological, and practical examples, Lionel did an outstanding job of naming implicit dynamics and showing how understanding them can help teams work more effectively across cultures. Awareness is already a big part of the solution!

For those interested, Lionel's video series "Developing Cultural Diversity in Your Organization," funded by the [Government of Alberta](#), is available here: <https://lnkd.in/dM52bjrN>

A big thank you to [Bruno Lebeault](#) for putting this excellent event together. Looking forward to the next one!