For this last chapter of the book, we turn to a subject that has an important impact on the conduct of negotiations, and leads on to a broader theme: differences in negotiation behaviour resulting from different cultural mores.

The subject has come up in several case studies in the preceding chapters, and now we shall complement these multiple examples with a general summary of the subject. A systematic analysis of cultural factors would however be beyond the scope of the present volume.

Culture and negotiations

If we want to negotiate, we above all need to understand the interface between the different cultures. We are naturally familiar with our own cultural background, and even if we are not always conscious of it, we function without any difficulty in our usual environment. Things start to get much more problematic when we leave this familiar environment and negotiate in distant countries or with people from other cultures. Much of what we simply take for granted is then suddenly quite different and strange. Suddenly we are on shaky ground. Even if we have fully mastered the techniques of negotiation and are extremely successful in our own country or in countries with a similar cultural makeup, we can find ourselves failing miserably when we leave them. In the past two decades the professionalism of European business people and diplomats has improved considerably – specifically in respect of the countries and markets of the Far East. Awareness of the problem has increased as more and more excellent books have come onto the market. With this chapter
we wish to make a modest contribution to this welcome development, by laying additional stress on the often absolutely decisive importance of cultural factors for the advanced negotiator. As in the previous chapter we recommend further reading and if possible active engagement in the subject is recommended. Before we turn to the problems that arise when different cultures come face to face, it would be well to have a first look at what we actually understand by the term *culture*.

**What is culture?**

It is of course not possible to provide a comprehensive answer to this vast question. Whole libraries of excellent books have been written on the subject over the centuries. At best perhaps, we should try to provide a usable working definition. According to Hofstede (1981), *culture is a collective programme of the human mind*: something like country-specific software for the human. In this manner each culture has produced its own software so to speak. The analogy with the world of the computer, which is just a soulless machine, may seem rather coarse at first sight, inappropriate even. But whatever the objections, a comparison between culture and software is a useful one, if we do not take it too literally.

Let us take a simple example: the average English-speaking user would be greatly out of his depth if he tried to use the Japanese, Chinese or even the Greek version of his favourite word processing program – even if all he wanted to do with it was to write an English text. Misunderstandings, errors, even complete failure of the attempt, depending on the degree of patience invested in this hardy enterprise, are so to speak pre-programmed in. But after learning a few fundamentals of the language version he is using, he could handle the software with almost as much facility as his usual one.

This short chapter is intended above all to bring the reader’s awareness to the difficulties awaiting him in unfamiliar cultural territory, but at the same time to encourage him to overcome these obstacles.

So let us come back to our question: what is culture? To take a somewhat more human-oriented definition, it is the *ability to convey large messages with small gestures*. That doesn’t sound so technical, but in fact it means exactly the same thing: a social code that serves the members of a