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# DEFINING CULTURE

WHEN WE ARE LIVING AND WORKING IN ANOTHER CULTURE, WE ARE USUALLY VERY AWARE OF OBVIOUS DIFFERENCES IN DRESS, FOOD, AND BASIC BEHAVIOURS. MUCH MORE IMPORTANT FOR EFFECTIVE INTEGRATION ARE DIFFERENCES AT A DEEPER, IMPLICIT LEVEL, WHICH WE ARE LESS LIKELY TO BE AWARE OF.

## ANALYZING THE STRUCTURE OF CULTURE

The culture of any society around the world can be compared to an onion. It has layers, which can be peeled off. Three distinct layers can be distinguished:

- the outer layer
- the middle layer
- the inner layer.

The outer layer contains those elements that people primarily associate with culture: the visual reality of behaviour, clothes, food, language, architecture, and so on. Wherever they are, they will readily recognize differences from what they are familiar with at home. This is the level of explicit culture.

The middle layer refers to the norms and values that a community holds: what is considered right and wrong (norms), or good and bad (values). Norms are often external: each society superimposes them on its members, reinforced by measure of social control. Values tend to be more internal than norms, and most societies do not have many means of controlling their enforcement. Values and norms structure the way people in a particular culture behave. But they are not visible, despite their influence on what happens at the observable surface, in the outer layer of culture.

The inner layer is the deepest: the level of implicit culture. Understanding the core of the culture onion is the key to working successfully with other cultures. The core consists of basic assumptions, series of rules, and methods that a society has developed to deal with the regular problems that it faces. These methods of problem-solving have become so basic that, like breathing, people no longer think about how they do it. For an outsider, these basic assumptions can be very difficult to recognize.

## UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENT MEANINGS

On arrival in your foreign destination to begin your professional assignment, you will immediately be aware of differences arising from the outer and the middle layers of culture. The importance of the inner layer of culture is that different cultures may give a different meaning to the same thing.

You are likely to find differences in the following areas, among others:

- the status accorded to older people
- the relationship between men and women
- the respect given to the law (and even simple rules)
- the degree to which your working relationship is or becomes more personal.

It is very important that you do not make the mistake of assuming that cultural differences are just about such visible elements as clothes, food, and houses. You may embarrass yourself, or your host, because you give different meaning

to the same things. If you have some understanding of these differences, and learn how to cope with them, your whole experience of working in a different culture can be enhanced and made much more effective – and enjoyable.

### UNDERSTANDING THE BASIC ASSUMPTIONS

Every culture has developed its own set of basic assumptions, which can be categorized into different dimensions. In dealing with universal human problems, each cultural dimension can be seen as a continuum: at one end there is a basic value, which contrasts with the value at the other end. The continuum will cover every possible combination between the two contrasting basic values.

All cultures need to deal with the challenge of these extreme choices. They face a continuous series of dilemmas, because by itself each alternative is either unsatisfactory or insufficient. In business, for example, do we go only for the short term or the long term? For stability or change? For market-led or technology-led products? For rewarding individuals or teams? Transnational organizations respond to these dilemmas in different ways, according to how they stand on each separate dimension derived from their cultural heritage.

Seven cultural dimensions can be distinguished, as follows.

### UNIVERSALISTIC VERSUS PARTICULARISTIC

People in universalistic cultures share the belief that general rules, codes, values, and standards take precedence over particular needs and claims of friends and relations. In such a society, the rules apply equally to

the whole “universe” of members. Any exception weakens the rule.

For example, the rule that you should bear truthful witness in a court of law, or give an honest account of an accident to an insurance company before it pays out, is more important here than particular ties of friendship or family obligations. This does not mean that, in universalistic cultures, particular ties are completely unimportant. But the universal truth – that is, the law – is considered logically more significant than these relationships.

The United States is a notable example of a universalistic culture, which explains the high number of lawyers per head of population.

Conversely, particularistic cultures see the ideal culture in terms of human friendship, extraordinary achievements and situations, and in a network of intimate relationships. The “spirit of the law” is deemed more important than the “letter of the law”. Obviously there are

### IDENTIFYING DIFFERENT CULTURAL VALUES

A single incident can have different meanings in different cultures, depending on the prevailing values of the society concerned. You need to learn to distinguish these.

As an example, imagine that you are a passenger in a car driven by your friend in an area of the city where there is a speed limit. Your friend drives too fast and hits a pedestrian, causing serious injuries. Your friend has to go to court, and you are the only witness. Do you tell the truth, or adapt what you will say to help your friend?

That is, do you choose for the law (impelled by universalism – everyone should be treated the same) or for friendship (where your particular relationship with your friend is more important)?

rules and laws in particularistic cultures, but these merely codify how people relate to each other. Rules are needed, if only so that people can make exceptions to them for particular cases, but generally individuals need to be able to count on the support of their friends.

South America and parts of Africa are examples of cultures where, typically, relationships between friends and family members are deemed more important than the letter of the law.

### **INDIVIDUALISTIC VERSUS COMMUNITARIAN**

In predominantly individualistic cultures, people place the individual before the community. The pace is set by individual happiness, welfare, and fulfilment. People are expected to decide matters largely on their own, and to take care primarily of themselves and their immediate family. The quality of life for all members of society is seen as directly dependent on opportunities for individual freedom and development. The community is judged by the extent to which it serves the interest of individual members.

The United Kingdom and, to a greater extent, the United States, are examples of cultures that encourage the individual. Pay and performance systems in organizations are often based on this.

At the other end of the continuum, a predominantly communitarian culture places the community before the individual. It is the responsibility of the individual to act in ways that serve society. By doing so, individual needs will be taken care of naturally. The quality of life for the individual is seen as directly dependent on the degree to which he or she takes care of fellow members, even at

the cost of individual freedom. People are judged by the extent to which they serve the interest of the community.

For example, in both China and Japan, working in a team and contributing to the group or society have a higher priority than individual performance.

### **SPECIFIC VERSUS DIFFUSE**

People from specific cultures start with the elements, the specifics. First they analyze them separately, and then they put them back together again. In specific cultures, the whole is the sum of its parts. Each person's life is divided into many components: as a newcomer, you can enter only one component at a time. Interactions between people are highly purposeful and well defined.

The public part of specific individuals' make-up is much larger than their private space. People are easily accepted into the public area, but it is very difficult to get into the private space, since each area in which two people encounter each other is considered separate from the other, a specific case.

Individuals within a culture that is specifically oriented tend to concentrate on hard facts, standards, measures, contracts. In specific cultures (such as the United States or Australia) business can be done without individuals having to form a relationship first.

People from cultures that are diffusely oriented start with the whole and see each element in perspective to the total. All elements are related to each other. These relationships are more important than each separate element; so the whole is more than just the sum of its elements.

Diffuse individuals have a large private space and a small public one.

Newcomers are not easily accepted into either. But once they have been accepted, they are admitted into all layers of the individual's life. A friend is a friend in all respects: at work, in sports, in domestic life, and so on. The various roles that someone might play in your life are not separated. Diffuse cultures cherish such qualities as style, demeanour, empathy, trust, and understanding.

In diffuse cultures such as in the Gulf countries, you have to develop a relationship first before you can do business. A high level of involvement is required as a precursor.

**AFFECTIVE VERSUS NEUTRAL**

In an affective culture, people do not object to a display of emotions. It is not considered necessary to hide moods and feelings and to keep them bottled up. Affective cultures may interpret the less explicit signals of a neutral culture as less important. They may be ignored or even go unnoticed. For example, Italian and French cultures display their emotions –

expressed, some would say, particularly in flamboyant driving! But this cultural bias is also revealed in their beautiful car designs and haute couture.

In a neutral culture, people are taught that it is incorrect to show one's feelings overtly. This does not mean they do not have feelings; it just means that the degree to which feelings may show is limited. They accept and are aware of feelings, but are in control of them. Neutral cultures may think the louder signals of an affective culture too excited, and over-emotional. In neutral cultures, showing too much emotion may erode your power to interest people.

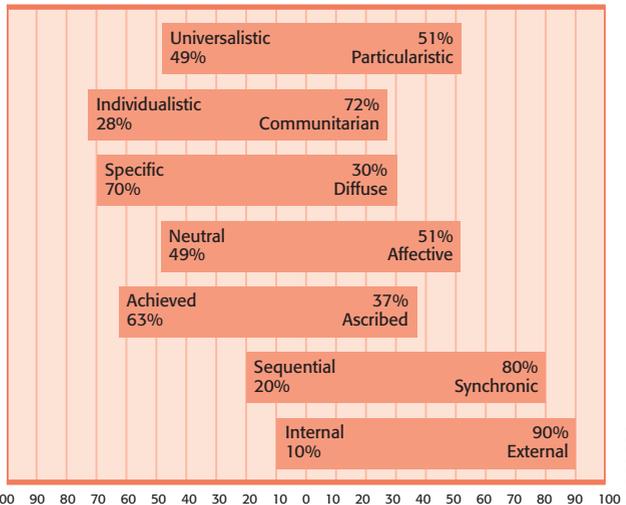
For example, it may be difficult to tell what business partners in Japan are thinking, as they are likely to exhibit little body language.

**ACHIEVED VERSUS ASCRIBED**

Achieved status is a reflection of what an individual does and has accomplished. In cultures that are achievement-oriented, individuals derive their status from what

**Profiling cultures**

*This example shows how a culture may be characterized along the seven dimensions. The measuring bar shows how it scores on each opposing value. Here, it scores strongly for an external and synchronic focus, rather less for an individualistic and specific focus, and so on. You could try profiling your own personal cultural response along these lines, an exercise that would familiarize you with applying the concepts.*



## MATCHING CULTURAL NORMS TO BUSINESS ACTION

The way that people in different societies interact with each other has important repercussions for business practice. To take an everyday example, consider buying food at a delicatessen. If you are in, for example, the United States, the United Kingdom or the Netherlands, you might collect a numbered ticket that shows your place in the queue. You patiently wait your turn, in the orderly, sequential queue. The sales assistant serves you with everything you need before the next customer, and this is an efficient system.

But if you are in, say, Italy, and you ask the assistant for salami, he or she will serve you and then shout, "Who else wants salami?" Other customers will then be served accordingly, before the assistant again asks you what else you want. This is also an efficient system. The salami is unwrapped just once, and the knife does not have to be washed again. This process also promotes social interaction between the cluster of customers who have a common bond (in this case, a need for salami).

Now imagine that you are running the computer services for a global hotel chain. You commission a computerized database system for the check-out system, which has been written by a US-based software house employing programmers with an Indian ethnic/cultural background. The desk clerk asks guests for their room number and retrieves their accounts from the database. This is a sequential system that works well in the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, and other countries.

But this system is not customer-friendly in the synchronic cultures of South America, Spain, or Italy. Here, the desk clerk and one guest expect to examine the account for extras (telephone, mini bar, and so on) while the guest in front is paying and the guest behind is shouting their room number. Sequential culture is actually built into the internal architecture of database software that originates in sequential cultures. It is difficult to make such a database work in synchronic contexts.

they have accomplished. An individual with achieved status has to prove what he or she is worth over and over again: status is accorded and maintained on the basis of his or her actions.

The Dutch culture is a good example of one that encourages people to achieve results, while family background is less important. It is what the individual does that is significant.

Ascribed status is a reflection of what an individual is and how others relate to his or her position in the community, in society as a whole, or in an organization. In an ascriptive culture, people derive their status from birth, age, gender, or wealth. People with ascribed status do not have to achieve results to retain status: it is accorded to them on the basis of their being.

In the Middle East and Far East, for example, who you are has to be taken very much into consideration.

### SEQUENTIAL VERSUS SYNCHRONIC

Every culture has developed its own response to time. The time-orientation dimension has two aspects: a culture's approach to structuring time, and the relative importance it gives to the past, present, and future.

Time can be structured in two ways. In the sequentialist approach, time moves forward, second by second, minute by minute, hour by hour, in a straight line. In the synchronistic approach, time moves round in cycles: of minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, and years.

People structuring time sequentially tend to do one thing at a time. They view

time as a narrow line of distinct, consecutive segments. Sequential people view time as tangible and divisible. They strongly prefer planning and keeping to plans once they have been made, rather than extemporizing and adapting. Time commitments are taken seriously, and staying on schedule is a must.

Sequential cultures include Canada, Australia, and Switzerland.

Conversely, people structuring time synchronically usually do several things at a time. To them, time is a wide ribbon, allowing many things to take place simultaneously. Time is intangible and flexible. Time commitments are desirable rather than absolute. Plans are easily changed. Synchronic people especially value the satisfactory completion of interactions with others. Promptness depends on the type of relationship.

The whole philosophy of 'Just in Time' management derived from the highly synchronic Japanese.

#### **Past-oriented cultures**

If a culture is predominantly oriented towards the past, the future is seen as a repetition of past experiences. Respect for ancestors and collective historical experiences are characteristic of a past-oriented culture.

#### **Present-oriented cultures**

A culture that is predominantly oriented towards the present will not attach much value to common past experiences, nor to future prospects. Rather, day-by-day experiences tend to direct people's thinking and action.

#### **Future-oriented cultures**

In a future-oriented culture, most human activities are directed towards future prospects. Generally, the past is not considered to be vitally significant to a

future state of affairs. Detailed planning constitutes a major activity in future-oriented cultures.

### **INTERNALLY OR EXTERNALLY CONTROLLED**

This dimension is concerned with relationships to nature. Every culture has developed an attitude towards the natural environment. Survival has meant acting with or against it. The way people relate to their environment – internalistically or externalistically – is linked to the way they seek to have control over their own lives and over their destiny.

Internalistic people tend to have a mechanistic view of nature. They see nature as a complex machine, and machines can be controlled if you have the right expertise. Internalistic people do not believe in luck or predestination. They are "inner-directed": one's personal resolution is the starting point for every action. You can live the life you want to live if you take advantage of the opportunities. People can dominate nature, if they makes the effort. Many Israeli people, for example, are highly internally controlled.

Externalistic people have a more organic view of nature. Mankind is one of nature's forces, so should operate in harmony with the environment. Man should subjugate himself to nature and go along with its forces. Externalistic people do not believe that they can shape their own destiny. "Nature moves in mysterious ways", and therefore you never know what will happen to you. The actions of externalistic people are "outer-directed": adapted to external circumstances. Russians and Singaporeans are notably externally controlled.

# MANAGING THE CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

DEALING WITH DIFFERENT CULTURES IS NOT ABOUT TRYING TO EMULATE OR DENIGRATE WHAT YOU FIND DIFFERENT. DOING BUSINESS AND MANAGING ACROSS CULTURES IS VERY MUCH ABOUT INTEGRATING THE STRENGTH OF ONE CULTURE WITH THAT OF ANOTHER.

## DEALING WITH DILEMMAS

Major business and management problems can be expressed as a dilemma: on the one hand, this, but on the other hand, that. For example, we need to work more in teams, but our reward system recognizes individuals. In working across cultures, dilemmas arise from each of the seven dimensions of culture.

## DEVELOPING TRANS-CULTURAL COMPETENCE

To work effectively in a multi-cultural environment, the key is reconciliation. You will need to be able to reconcile seemingly opposing values of dilemmas, which arise on a continuing basis.

As a manager, you have to inspire your workforce, and you have also to listen. You need to follow the orders of HQ to fulfil the global strategy, and you have to have local success by adapting to regional circumstances. You have to decide when to act yourself, but also when and where to delegate. You need to input your own day-to-day contribution, and at the same time be passionate about the mission as a whole. And you need to simultaneously use your powers of analysis while enabling the contribution of others.

## RECONCILING STANDARD AND ADAPTATION

This dilemma can be found in many forms. Should you globalize or rather localize your approach? Is it better for your organization to mass-produce or to focus on specialized products? Good leaders in transnational organizations are effective in finding resolutions whereby locally learned best practices are

## THE IMPLICATIONS OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

When you are in a foreign country, and encounter something familiar, it is all too easy to assume that your host culture gives it the same meaning as you do. As an example, consider a “global” product: the MP3 player.

The technical specification of the “portable RX MP3 player” is the same everywhere it is sold throughout the world: it is the same size, it has the same performance, memory, and so on. You transfer MP3 files from your personal computer to the player, and the music comes out of the headphones.

A test group of consumers in the United States were asked if they liked it. “It’s great,” was the typical response, the reason being: “I can listen to my favourite music without being disturbed when I’m travelling.” In China, the test group typically said: “It’s great. I can listen to my favourite music without disturbing others when I’m travelling.”

It may be the same product technically, but it has a different purpose in different cultures. Therefore it has to be marketed to satisfy a different need in different cultures.

globalized. Thus activities might be decentralized but information about them is centralized. The universalistic approach promotes common systems, global brands, and human resources principles around the world. It fuels the search for the one best way of doing things and releases the synergy of a global corporation. Without this, it is easy to lose the benefits of operating globally.

At the same time, taken too far and not balanced with a healthy dose of particularism, it can lead to extremes with “one best way” being pursued at the cost of flexibility to the particular needs and circumstances of the local situation.

#### **RECONCILING INDIVIDUAL CREATIVITY AND TEAM SPIRIT**

The effective manager knows how to mould an effective team out of creative individuals. In turn, the team is made accountable to support the creative genius of individuals as they strive to contribute the best for the team. This has been described as “co-opetition”.

In many companies, there is no problem finding enough individuals to generate enough ideas. The challenge lies with the “business system” or community, which has to translate those ideas into the reality of viable products and services. While ideas originate with individuals, it is not enough to simply pass these down for implementation to subordinates, who may be inhibited in their criticism. It is far more effective for the originator to work with critics, implementers, and builders of working prototypes to help to debug the idea, where necessary. It is a question of reconciling idealization with realization, which is at least as important.

In this dilemma concerning individual versus community, the membership of teams must be diverse, consisting of people whose values and endowments are opposite, yet these teams must achieve a unity of purpose and shared solutions. The problem with highly diverse competing individuals is that they may behave like so many primadonnas.

The problem with unity and team spirit above all is that diverse and novel inputs get squeezed out. A way of reconciling these polarized opposites is to make the ultimate goal so exciting, and the process of creating new shared realities so enjoyable, that diverse members overcome their differences, to realize a unity of diversities, which makes the solution far more valuable.

#### **RECONCILING PASSION AND CONTROL**

Is a good manager an overtly passionate person, or rather a person who controls his or her display of emotions?

Two extreme types can be recognized. Passionate managers without reason are seen as neurotics. Overly controlled managers without emotions are seen as robots or control freaks. Both these types are unsuccessful in a multi-cultural environment. Effective managers check passion with reason; conversely, they give meaning to control by showing their passion at specific, well-chosen moments.

#### **RECONCILING ANALYSIS AND SYNTHESIS**

If a manager uses pure analysis to address a problem – chopping the larger whole into piecemeal chunks – this can lead to a kind of paralysis. Conversely, a synthesis, putting everything into a larger context,



can be overdone and lead to aimless holism and a resistance to action. An important ability of the modern manager is to transcend any problem by elevating thought to higher levels of abstraction, while retaining the ability and drive to zoom in on certain aspects of the problem.

### RECONCILING BEING AND DOING

Research shows that what leaders *are* is not different from what they *do*. They seem to be one with what they do. It is recognized that an important source of stress is when being and doing are not integrated. Successful leaders do things in harmony with who they feel they are, and vice versa. They have been able to reconcile private and professional life.

### RECONCILING SEQUENTIAL AND SYNCHRONIC

Effective leaders can plan sequentially, but they also have a strongly developed skill in stimulating parallel processes. “Just in Time” management is widely recognized as the process in which processes are synchronized to speed up the sequence. Furthermore, an effective international leader is able to integrate short and long term, and past, present, and future: tradition and potential.

### RECONCILING INNER AND OUTER FORCES

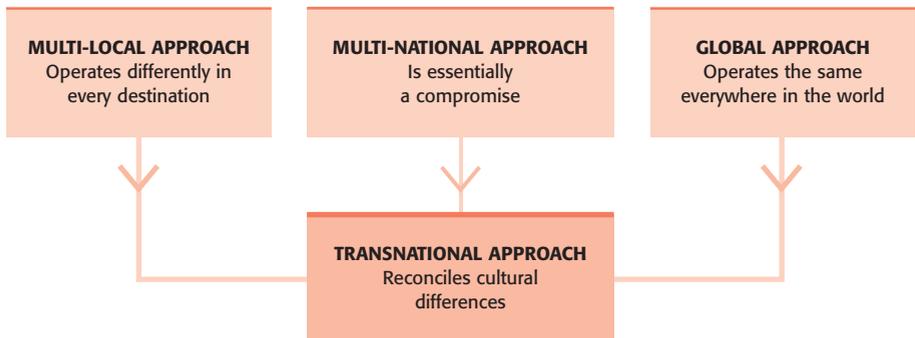
The final core quality of an effective manager is the ability to integrate the feedback from the market with the technology developed in the company.

Again, it is not a competition between technology push and market pull. A push of technology will eventually lead to the ultimate niche market: one without customers. A monolithic focus on the market will leave the business at the mercy of its clients. Values are not “added” by leaders or managers, since only simple values “add up”. Leaders combine values: a fast and a safe car; good food yet easy to prepare; a computer that makes complex calculations but is also customer friendly.

Combining values is not easy, but it is possible. The more extended systems of values is the context where international leadership will prove its excellence.

### Responding to different cultures

*The most productive response to other cultures is to reconcile yours with theirs. The global approach, where a company operates in the same way around the world, is the polar opposite of the multi-local approach, which tries to be different everywhere. The multi-national approach is only a compromise, and does not achieve the win-win position of the transnational approach.*



# WORKING WITH CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

BEING AWARE OF CULTURAL DIMENSIONS, AND THEIR IMPACT ON AN ORGANIZATION'S STRATEGY, YOU NEED TO CONSIDER HOW TO WORK AS A MANAGER ACROSS CULTURES. HOW CAN YOU BECOME MORE EFFECTIVE IN IDENTIFYING AND DEALING WITH DILEMMAS THAT ARISE FROM CULTURAL DIFFERENCES?

## RECOGNIZE THE DIFFERENCES

Your first task is to recognize the differences integral to particular cultures. Use the seven categories (dimensions) of dilemmas to help you understand and interpret what you see and observe.

## RESPECT THE DIFFERENCES

One culture is not better than another. There is no correct way or ideal position on each dimension. Cultures are just different. Learn to respect other cultures and accept they have the right to give the meaning they choose to their world.

## RESPOND TO THE DIFFERENCES

There are several options for you to respond. First, you can ignore cultural differences and “do your own thing”, like a tourist on a short vacation. You face the danger of being misunderstood and your hosts may not welcome you. Or you can abandon your own culture and try to behave as the destination culture: “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” However, this is simply putting on an act and it will be difficult to maintain. Your hosts may mistrust you and be suspicious. You can decide to compromise and try to adapt to some aspects of the differences.

However, what do you choose to compromise on? This is still a lose–lose option, satisfying neither party.

The most productive approach is to try to integrate your culture with the culture of your hosts. Try to get a win–win position: that is, reconciliation. It is about using the strengths of your culture and the strengths of theirs. For example, if you are basically an individualist and you are working in a team or group culture, why not join in with the group spirit in order to develop your own individual strengths? Then help them to see that high-performing individuals can contribute to their team.

## SUPPORT INTER-CULTURAL COMPETENCE

The ability to reconcile dilemmas is not just learned or innate. It needs a systemic approach. The whole organization should build a framework to support, stimulate, and facilitate people to reconcile.

Some individuals with high potential may not yet have been able to progress further than a (lose–lose) compromise, as their work environment does not appreciate creative solutions. Conversely, less effective people may have achieved significant reconciliation by a stimulating and supportive environment.

How can such an environment be created? It begins with leaders and managers who practise what they preach. And it is of the utmost importance that rewards are created that will motivate individuals and teams to do so.