

## Working with different cultures – the Singapore experience

Having made Singapore my home for the last eleven years and working in many other countries during this period I am fascinated by the ways that different people from different countries communicate and work together. Singapore is one of the most multi cultural countries I have experienced. I ran a management development workshop recently for a large global MNC and of the twenty one participants eleven nationalities and cultures were represented. While I enjoy and welcome cultural diversity it is important to understand how the different cultures may see each other and to be aware of the “cultural minefield” that may exist within a large organization.

The research of Geert Hofstede in the international management area has led to greater insights into how different cultures see and understand each other. Hofstede discusses four dimensions in understanding organizational management practices: 1. individualism-collectivism, 2. power distance, 3. uncertainty avoidance, and 4. masculinity versus femininity.

**Individualism-collectivism.** This dimension centres on organizational practices in individualistic cultures such as Canada, US, Australia, and Great Britain contrasted with collectivistic cultures in East Asia (Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Singapore). Power distance. Low power distance (Canada, US) subscribes to equal power distribution versus high power distance (Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, etc.) in hierarchical structures. Uncertainty avoidance. Hofstede found that Canada and the US are low in uncertainty avoidance, i.e., they like to take risks, take individual initiative, and enjoy conflict. Whereas cultures like Japan, Hong Kong, and South Korea are high in uncertainty avoidance, i.e., do not like conflict, but pursue group harmony; people within these organizations need clear rules, procedures, and clearly defined job responsibilities. Masculinity versus femininity. Hofstede discovered that Japan rated high on masculine dimensions (males expect an “in-charge” role). In contrast, countries like Norway and Sweden have a stronger feminine dimension, which means that roles are more fluid between males and females.

Professor Ting-Toomey and her colleagues, Michael Bond, Harry Triandis, and Geert Hofstede consistently found that the individualistic and collectivistic dimension teaches the most about differences between cultures, particularly between East Asian and western cultures. Individualism and collectivism is connected with the concept of identity, i.e., How do we see our sense of self? Individualistic cultures emphasize the “I” identity and collectivistic cultures emphasize the “we” identity, which is a fundamental difference between western and eastern cultures. In individualistic cultures, people tend to be verbally direct: they value communication openness, learn to self disclose, like to be clear, straightforward, and contribute to a positive management climate. Whereas in collectivistic group-oriented cultures, indirect communication is preferred because the image of group harmony is essential. In western cultures, talking is very therapeutic; in Asian cultures, there is an emphasis on observing and reflecting about the process. Research indicates that several patterns of cultural differences exist

**Different Communication Styles.** The way people communicate varies widely between, and even within, cultures. One aspect of communication style is language usage. Across cultures, some words and phrases are used in different ways. For example, even in countries that share the English language, the meaning of “yes” varies from “maybe, I’ll consider it” to “definitely so,” with many shades in between.

**Different Attitudes Toward Conflict.** Some cultures view conflict as a positive thing, while others view it as something to be avoided. In the U.S., conflict is not usually desirable; but people often are encouraged to deal directly with conflicts that do arise. In contrast, in many Eastern countries, open conflict is experienced as embarrassing or demeaning; as a rule, differences are best worked out quietly.

**Different Approaches to Completing Tasks.** From culture to culture, there are different ways that people move toward completing tasks.

Asian and Hispanic cultures tend to attach more value to developing relationships at the beginning of a shared project and more emphasis on task completion toward the end as compared with European-Americans. European-Americans tend to focus immediately on the task at hand, and let relationships develop as they work on the task.

***Different Decision-Making Styles.*** The roles individuals play in decision-making vary widely from culture to culture. For example, in the U.S., decisions are frequently delegated -- that is, an official assigns responsibility for a particular matter to a subordinate. In many Southern European and Latin American countries, there is a strong value placed on holding decision-making responsibilities oneself.

***Different Attitudes Toward Disclosure.*** In some cultures, it is not appropriate to be frank about emotions, about the reasons behind a conflict or a misunderstanding, or about personal information. Keep this in mind when you are working with others.

Though cultural differences and boundaries do exist, it is my experience that the tie of our common humanity binds us together far greater than the divide of our cultural backgrounds.

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