

CROSS CULTURAL understanding

By Deborah Mackin

Adapted from *Cultural Intelligence* by Brooks Peterson

The ability to work with people from other cultures is becoming increasingly necessary in our global work environment. Even if you never travel abroad, it's important to be ready to mix with other cultures as each year the number of immigrants is increasing. Likewise, the number of interpersonal exchanges at the global level via video and teleconferences is becoming more frequent. How can we handle these situations effectively? How do we avoid personalizing our differences into likes and dislikes? Is there a way to understand and respect our differences and use them to build something that is stronger and more flexible than before?

Most people with little cultural understanding struggle with the differences they experience relating to others from another culture. Deep inside many of us is a belief that relating to a person from another culture should be easy. When it isn't easy and the differences are pronounced, our reaction is often impatience and even hostility. However, belittling another culture or considering them difficult or ridiculous is like the turtle with its hard shell looking at the hummingbird with its long beak and tiny wings and calling the hummingbird ridiculous for how fast it moves. Both the turtle and the hummingbird exist for very specific reasons, and we would not be at all successful trying to force one to become like the other.

It's better to seek to understand the cultural differences at a deep level, improving our cultural intelligence and our ability to relate successfully with a wide variety of differences. The purpose of this article is to explore and expand our cultural understanding in an attempt to improve cross cultural relations.

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The United States culture grooms people from an early age to think independently and take risk and initiative. They are encouraged to be an individual and follow their own path, to show creativity in their classroom assignments, and they often see themselves as equal to authority. Outside the United States, the rules are very different. Countries

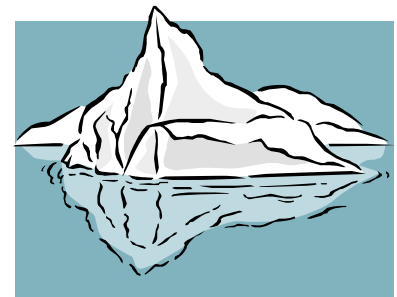
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like Japan and France contrast strongly to the North American model. For example, rather than promoting individual stardom as we do in the United States, the Japanese have an expression, “The goose that honks gets shot.” Their focus is not to call attention to oneself, but instead, promote harmony and group cohesiveness. Put two people representing these different cultures in the room together, with no cultural understanding, and there will be many misunderstandings resulting from their interaction.

Stereotype vs. Generalization

We have to be very careful as we explore cultures to understand the difference between stereotype and generalization. **Stereotype is usually a negative statement or description when we apply one negative perception to an entire group of people.** For example, if we describe Americans as pushy, aggressive, and demanding, that’s a stereotype because, obviously, there are many Americans that don’t fit this description. **A generalization, on the other hand, is a description of a cultural trait that comes after examining a large number of people and drawing certain conclusions based on what was observed.** There are exceptions to every rule, but generalizations that come from research and insights from cultural experts, allow us to capture a fairly accurate picture of how people, in a given country, are likely to behave.

Brooks Peterson, in the book *Cultural Intelligence*, likens culture to an iceberg. There is the part you can see – the tip of the iceberg – which represents the behaviors and obvious characteristics such as language, food, population, music, clothing, pace of life, gestures, eye contact, and leisure activities. Then there is the part of the iceberg under water that we can’t see: opinions, attitudes, philosophies, values and convictions. These most frequently include notions of time, rules about relationships, importance of work, motivations for achievement, tolerance for change, communication styles, and preferences.

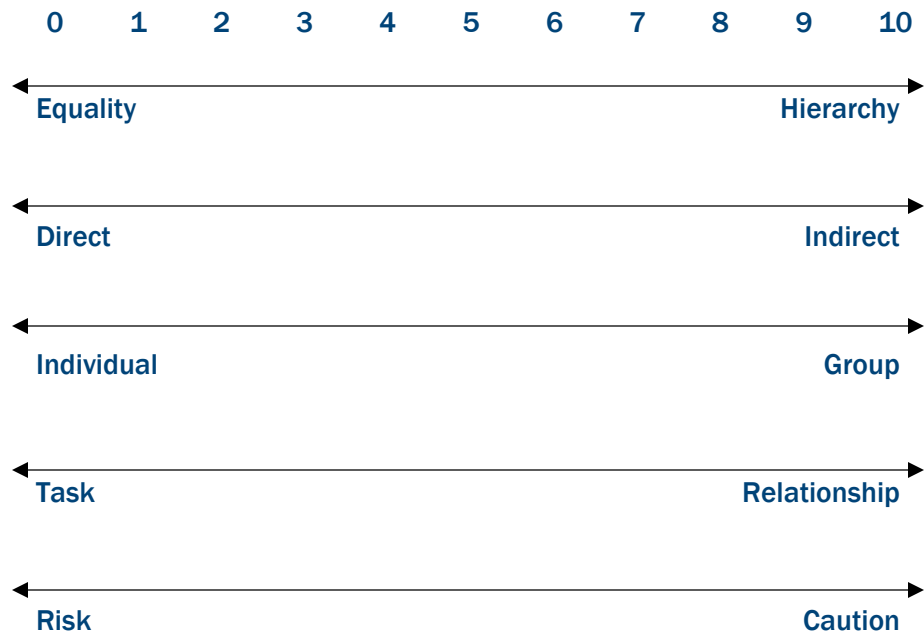


Five Culture Dimensions

Often it’s helpful to begin our cultural understanding by examining five dimensions of culture on a ten-point scale. Knowing the precise number where a country falls is not

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the goal here, but rather where to place the country on a continuum. The five dimensions are listed below:



Let's examine each of these dimensions before we place the countries on the continuum. As we do, keep in mind that each dimension has its advantages and disadvantages and neither is inherently superior to the other.



Equality vs. Hierarchy

When a culture essentially places people on equal footing with one another, the culture is defined as one of equality. People in an equality culture prefer to be self-directed, have flexibility in the roles they play, have freedom to challenge the opinion of those in power, and men and women are basically treated the same. In a hierarchical culture, on the other hand, more distinction exists in roles about who is in charge and who is responsible for what. People prefer to take direction from those above, have strong limitations about appropriate behavior for certain roles, do not challenge the opinions of those in power, enforce regulations and guidelines and expect men and women to behave differently and to be treated differently. The French culture, for example, expects a manager to provide direction and make decisions, whereas in a North American culture, managers are encouraged to hold back and let others share first.

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Direct vs. Indirect

The second cultural scale relates to the way people communicate in face-to-face and written communication. While personality differences affect communication style, it's important to recognize that a culture, as a whole, can be said to be more or less direct. A direct style prefers to speak assertively and be less concerned about how something is said, openly confront issues or difficulties, engage in conflict when necessary, express views or opinions in a frank manner, and say things clearly, not leaving much open to interpretation. The indirect style, on the other hand, prefers to focus on not just what is said, but on how it is said, to express concerns tactfully, avoid conflict when possible, be diplomatic and count on the listener to interpret the meaning. Cultures on the higher end of the continuum place much more emphasis on nuance and reading between the lines. North Americans are notorious for missing what isn't being said.



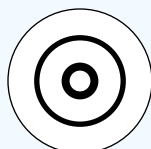
Individual vs. Group Orientation

The third cultural dimension deals with the degree of importance that people give to being part of a group. Some cultures place enormous importance on which groups they belong to and how strong their attachment is to those groups. They don't transition very easily in and out of these groups. It's important here when talking about individualism, that we clarify it with individuality. Individualism can be defined as "the promotion of one's own needs, putting oneself first." Individuality, on the other hand, suggests that "each person is unique and has some kind of different personal contribution to make." This difference emerges with the French, who certainly have a stronger group orientation than Americans (socialized medicine, nationally funded education, public mass transportation to name a few) and yet are passionate about expressing individual ideas and the uniqueness of each person. It's important for North Americans to understand this difference when dealing with the French.



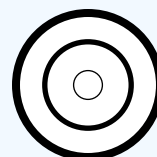
North Americans tend to be approachable and outgoing, with a rather thin "outer wall" surrounding them. They move easily between social groups and let new people past the thin wall without a problem.

This diagram represents the individually-focused culture.



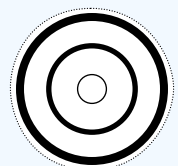
Some Europeans and South Americans have a thicker "outer wall" as they require more time to develop close relationships and accept someone into their group. But once someone is part of a group, he or she will tend to have a lifetime membership.

This diagram represents the group-focused culture.



Many Asians have a very thin "outer wall" just outside the thick, protective one. The thin outer wall represents the Asian emphasis on harmony, proper hosting, courtesy, and protocol.

This diagram also represents the group-focused culture.



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People from individually-oriented cultures can be frustrated at how slowly meaningful connections are built when they work with people from group-oriented cultures. And those from group-focused cultures sometimes perceive people from individualistic cultures as shallow and insincere because they seem to move too quickly to become familiar with others.

Therefore we see people with the individual orientation preferring to take individual initiative, focus on themselves, make decisions on their own, put individuals before the team, and move in and out of groups as needed. People with the group orientation prefer to act cooperatively and establish group goals, standardize guidelines, make loyalty to friends a high priority, determine their identity through group affiliation, put the team or group before the individual, conform to social norms, and keep group membership for life.

Task vs. Relationship

The common myth in cross-cultural understanding is that if we just act ourselves, then we'll get along just fine. Nothing could be further from the truth. This dimension focuses on the degree to which an individual places relationship building and trust as foremost in doing business versus the tasks of doing business. Americans are especially prone to ignoring the relationship side of the business equation because they often see these as "soft skills" that can be left up to intuition. Not surprisingly,

people from relationship-focused cultures often feel pushed or rushed by task-focused Americans.

Americans attend a meeting expecting to get their agenda accomplished, where their relationship counterparts are more interested in building some kind of business relationship to see if they can trust the American group.

“**The common myth in cross-cultural understanding is that if we just act ourselves, then we'll get along just fine.**”

Another way to look at this dimension is whether people focus on “what you do” or “who you are.” A task-oriented culture will begin discussion with a new person by asking “What do you do?” Many people in this type of culture form their identity based on what they do as a profession. Relationship cultures, on the other hand, focus on who they are. They might share their interest in art history, literature or music. They place more importance on leisure time than work time (work to live, not live to work). When Americans go out to dinner after a work day, they continue to talk about work; when the French go to dinner, they talk about everything but work.

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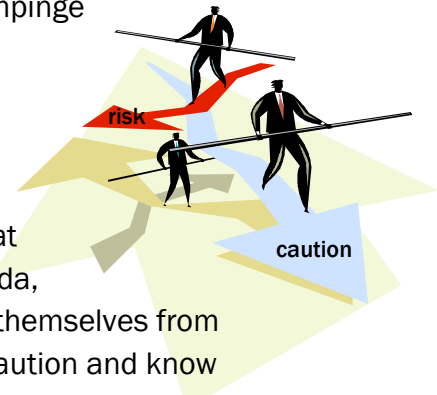
Task-oriented people prefer to define others based on what they do, move straight to business, keep most relationships with co-workers impersonal, sacrifice leisure time and time with family in favor of work, use largely impersonal selection criteria in hiring, and allow work to overlap with personal time. Relationship-oriented people prefer to define people based on who they are, like to establish comfortable relationships and a sense of trust before getting down to business, have personal relationships with co-workers, sacrifice work in favor of leisure time and time with family, get to know co-workers and colleagues slowly and in-depth, use largely personal selection criteria (such as family connections) when hiring, and do not allow work to impinge on personal life.

Risk vs. Caution

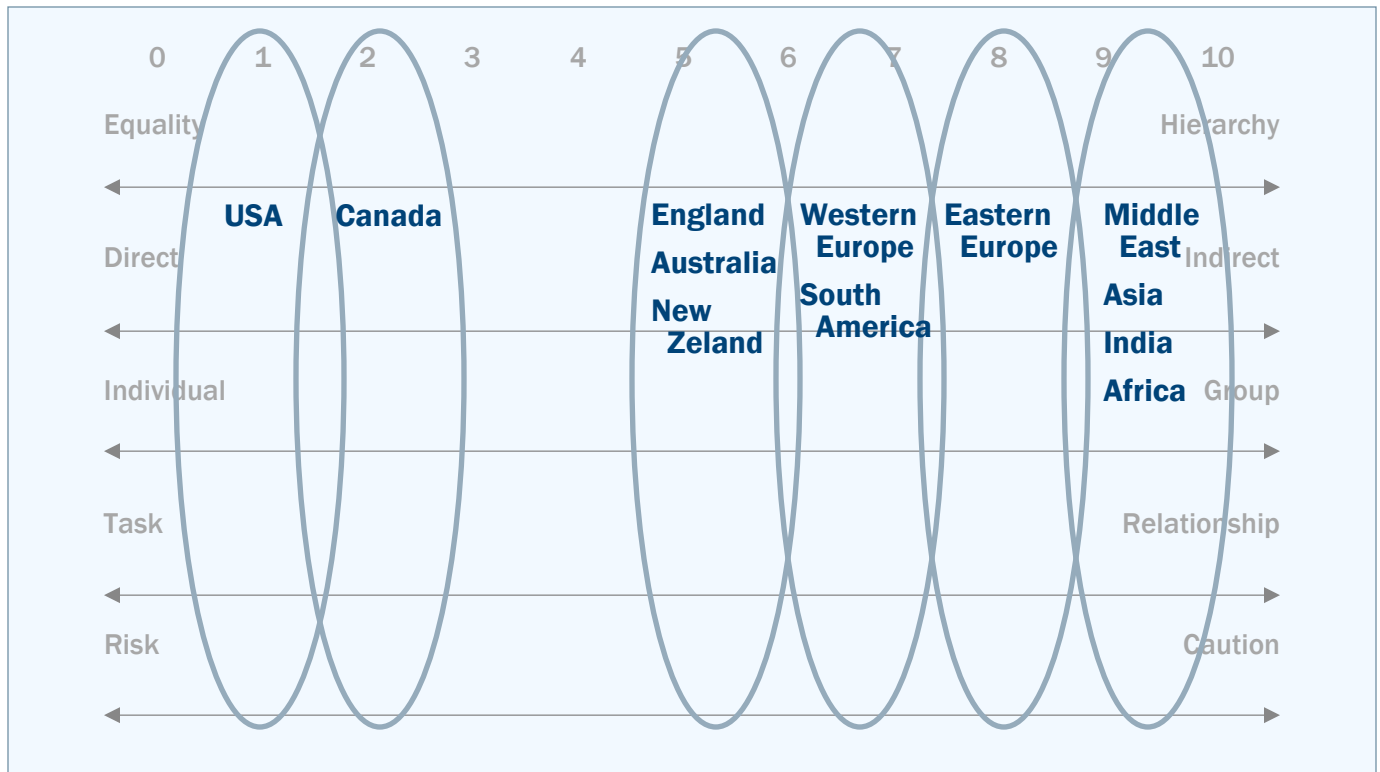
Some cultures thrive on change and welcome risk. New countries that have only been in existence for a few hundred years (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States) have had to take risks to build themselves from nothing. In contrast to this, older, more established cultures prefer caution and know they can afford to take their time. Cultures that are caution-oriented carefully plan and methodically and scientifically proceed in their ventures. Precision manufacturing and engineering are naturally done best by caution-oriented cultures such as Germany and Japan. Americans typically feel ready and confident to launch into new ventures where there is no precedent. Many others often want to proceed more slowly and cautiously.

Risk-oriented people prefer to make decisions quickly with little information, focus on the present and the future, are less cautious, change quickly without fear of risks, try new and innovative ways of doing things, use new methods for solving problems, have fewer rules, regulations, guidelines and directions, and are comfortable changing plans at the last minute. Caution-oriented cultures, on the other hand, prefer to collect considerable information before making a decision, focus on the past, are more cautious in a “ready, aim, aim, aim, fire” way, change slowly and avoid risks, want more rules, regulations, guidelines and directions, refer to past precedents of what works and what doesn’t, stick to proven methods for solving problems, and dislike changing plans at the last minute.

You have probably been considering where various cultural colleagues fall on the continuum based on the description of the five dimensions. Let’s place the countries along the continuum now to see if you guessed correctly.



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While this diagram is extremely simplistic, it is a useful generalization to help us understand the differences, even if it is not accurate for every single country or situation. The important point here is that the farther apart people are on the scale, the less likely they are to relate easily to each other. When we find it difficult to relate, we have a tendency to not like the other person and to avoid him or her altogether. The result is an even greater division between the cultures.

So what are the steps to increase our cultural intelligence and improve our ability to relate to others?

Step One: Become aware of your own cultural style.

There is a tendency to look only at the “good things” in our own cultures. When I ask people in training to write down what they hear people say about different cultures (Canada, America, and France, for example), they will list good things about their own culture, and bad things about the other cultures. So it’s important to identify various aspects based on the five dimensions discussed earlier. Many people are a combination of various cultures ranging from their mother tongue to the new cultures they have adopted as they’ve moved around the globe. There may be aspects of multiple cultures in how they think and respond. For example, a Chinese Canadian may have an interesting blend of cultural characteristics.

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Step Two: Know the facts about the cultures you most commonly relate to.

There is a difference between studying another culture and the generalizations that have been identified through research and listening to negative stereotypes that others suggest about a culture. Knowing the facts means doing your homework on the cultural characteristics. It helps to learn a bit of the language and study how closely to stand and other nonverbal behaviors. For example, the French like to stand very close to each other and touch, whereas North Americans keep a greater distance. It's also helpful to know how the culture responds on the five dimensions and to know how your own cultural style compares with others. For example, North Americans enjoy brainstorming ideas when confronted with problems.

The French, on the other hand, have very little experience brainstorming because that is not the way they were taught in school. So, when planning a meeting of the two groups, it would put the French at a disadvantage if brainstorming was an activity for the whole group. Instead, it would be better to hold general discussions — which is common to both — and build on the ideas coming forth.



Step Three: Identify ways to modify your behaviors appropriate to the other culture.

If you are typically task-oriented, begin an email with a bit of chitchat to build the relationship first. If you like a timed agenda, add in more flexibility around time in order to accommodate the different culture. Use a bit of the other culture's language in correspondence and be sensitive to the time it takes for another culture to translate what you are saying before they can even participate in the activity you are asking them to perform. It's also important to speak slowly and avoid using slang in your sentences.

Step Four: Respond to the other culture using your modified behavior.

Similar to emotional intelligence, cultural intelligence suggests that after you have a good understanding of your own self, you develop social awareness of the other culture and then begin to manage it more effectively. Usually this requires some proactive thinking about the situations you will encounter *before* you get there. For example, if your cross-cultural team is going to try to reach a decision about something, it will be important to make sure that all cultural approaches are represented. For example, the French often begin from a “Non” or “C'est impossible” position and then slowly move toward “yes” and “I guess that will be possible.” Americans often do the opposite; they start by thinking that anything is possible, make a quick decision, and then adjust it numerous times after the fact. Finding an accommodation that works for both will be

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much better than trying to push or pull either group. It's okay to highlight these differences, as it helps to improve understanding and communication.

The process of increasing your cultural awareness is just that, a process. As a result, it will often feel like two steps forward and one step back. However, with the right attitude, it can be fascinating to work to understand the different cultures you encounter and practice new ways to get along. This may be as simple as practicing how and what to write in an email or the more complex requirements of a difficult negotiation. This work will require personal characteristics of empathy, tolerance for ambiguity, flexibility, open-mindedness, and an outgoing personality.

Those who take the plunge and make the effort to talk with and explore other cultures will always be more successful — even with a few mistakes — than those who hold back to avoid feeling uncomfortable.



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