The Seven Dimensions of Culture
Understanding and Managing Cultural Differences

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What distinguishes one culture from another?

Many of us work routinely with people from other cultures and backgrounds.

Often this goes well, and the cultural differences are interesting and enriching. However, sometimes things go wrong, for reasons that we may not understand.

This is where it's important to understand the differences between cultures, so that we can work with people more effectively, and prevent misunderstandings.

Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner's Seven Dimensions of Culture help us do this. We'll look at the seven dimensions in this article, and we'll explore how you can apply the model in your own situation.

About the Model

The Seven Dimensions of Culture were identified by management consultants Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner, and the model was published in their 1997 book, "**Riding the Waves of Culture**."
Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner developed the model after spending 10 years researching the preferences and values of people in dozens of cultures

around the world. As part of this, they sent questionnaires to more than 46,000 managers in 40 countries.

They found that people from different cultures aren't just randomly different from one another; they differ in very specific, even predictable, ways. This is because each culture has its own way of thinking, its own values and beliefs, and different preferences placed on a variety of different factors.

Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner concluded that what distinguishes people from one culture compared with another is where these preferences fall in one of the following seven dimensions:

1. Universalism versus particularism.

2. Individualism versus communitarianism.

3. Specific versus diffuse.

4. Neutral versus emotional.

5. Achievement versus ascription.

6. Sequential time versus synchronous time.

7. Internal direction versus outer direction.

We'll look at each dimension in detail below.

You can use the model to understand people from different cultural backgrounds better, so that you can prevent misunderstandings and enjoy a better working relationship with them. This is especially useful if you do business with people from around the world, or if you manage a diverse group of people.

The model also highlights that one culture is not necessarily better or worse than another; people from different cultural backgrounds simply make different choices.

However, the model doesn't tell you how to measure people's preferences on each dimension. Therefore, it's best to use it as a general guide when dealing with people from different cultures.

Applying the Model

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Let's look at each of the dimensions in detail, and explore some of the strategies that you can use with people who fit the characteristics highlighted in each dimension.

Note 1:

For each dimension, we've included some of the national cultures that Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner identified as having a preference at each extreme of that particular dimension. You can use this as a general guide, but remember to treat people as individuals, and to avoid stereotyping.

Note 2:

The cultural dimensions don't take into account people's personal experiences or differences between sub-cultures within the country, so bear this in mind when you're applying the model. This is especially relevant in today's global environment, where people can be influenced by many different cultures.

Note 3:

Be sensible in how you apply these strategies. In practice, there will be many other factors that will have a bearing on how you manage people and communicate with them.

1. Universalism Versus Particularism (Rules Versus Relationships)

Dimension	Characteristics	Strategies
Universalism	People place a high importance on laws, rules, values, and obligations. They try to deal fairly with people based on these rules, but rules come	• Help people understand how their work ties into their values and beliefs. • Provide clear instructions, processes, and procedures.

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Dimension	Characteristics	Strategies
	before relationships.	• Keep promises and be consistent. • Give people time to make decisions. • Use an objective process to make decisions yourself, and explain your decisions if others are involved.
Particularism	People believe that each circumstance, and each relationship, dictates the rules that they live by. Their response to a situation may change, based on what's happening in the moment, and who's involved.	• Give people autonomy to make their own decisions. • Respect others' needs when you make decisions. • Be flexible in how you make decisions. • Take time to build relationships and get to know people so that you can better understand their needs. • Highlight important rules and policies that need to be followed.

Typical universalist cultures include the U.S., Canada, the U.K, the Netherlands, Germany, Scandinavia, New Zealand, Australia, and Switzerland.

Typical particularistic cultures include Russia, Latin-America, and China.

2. Individualism Versus Communitarianism (The Individual Versus The Group)

Dimension	Characteristics	Strategies

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Dimension	Characteristics	Strategies
Individualism	People believe in personal freedom and achievement. They believe that you make your own decisions, and that you must take care of yourself.	• Praise and reward individual performance. • Give people autonomy to make their own decisions and to use their initiative. • Link people's needs with those of the group or organization. • Allow people to be **creative** and to learn from their mistakes.
Communitarianism	People believe that the group is more important than the individual. The group provides help and safety, in exchange for loyalty. The group always comes before the individual.	• Praise and reward group performance. • Don't praise individuals publically. • Allow people to involve others in decision making. • Avoid showing favoritism.

Typical individualist cultures include the U.S., Canada, the U.K, Scandinavia, New Zealand, Australia, and Switzerland.

Typical communitarian cultures include countries in Latin-America, Africa, and Japan.

3. Specific Versus Diffuse (How Far People Get Involved)

Dimension	Characteristics	Strategies

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Dimension	Characteristics	Strategies
Specific	People keep work and personal lives separate. As a result, they believe that relationships don't have much of an impact on work objectives, and, although good relationships are important, they believe that people can work together without having a good relationship.	- Be direct and to the point. - Focus on people's objectives before you focus on strengthening relationships. - Provide clear instructions, processes, and procedures. - Allow people to keep their work and home lives separate.
Diffuse	People see an overlap between their work and personal life. They believe that good relationships are vital to meeting business objectives, and that their relationships with others will be the same, whether they are at work or meeting socially. People spend time outside work hours with colleagues and clients.	- Focus on **building a good relationship**before you focus on business objectives. - Find out as much as you can about the people that you work with and the organizations that you do business with. - Be prepared to discuss business on social occasions, and to have personal discussions at work. - Try to avoid turning down invitations to social functions.

Typical specific cultures include the U.S., the U.K., Switzerland, Germany, Scandinavia, and the Netherlands.

Typical diffuse cultures include Argentina, Spain, Russia, India, and China.

4. Neutral Versus Emotional (How People Express Emotions)

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Dimension	Characteristics	Strategies
Neutral	People make a great effort to control their emotions. Reason influences their actions far more than their feelings. People don't reveal what they're thinking or how they're feeling.	• **Manage your emotions** effectively. • Watch that your **body language** doesn't convey negative emotions. • "Stick to the point" in meetings and interactions. • Watch people's reactions carefully, as they may be reluctant to show their true emotions.
Emotional	People want to find ways to express their emotions, even spontaneously, at work. In these cultures, it's welcome and accepted to show emotion.	• Open up to people to build **trust** and **rapport**. • Use emotion to communicate your objectives. • Learn to **manage conflict** effectively, before it becomes personal. • Use positive **body language**. • Have a **positive attitude**.

Typical neutral cultures include the U.K., Sweden, the Netherlands, Finland, and Germany.

Typical emotional cultures include Italy, France, Spain, and countries in Latin-America.

5. Achievement Versus Ascription (How People View Status)

Dimension	Characteristics	Strategies
Achievement	People believe that you are what you do,	• Reward and recognize good performance appropriately.

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Dimension	Characteristics	Strategies
	and they base your worth accordingly. These cultures value performance, no matter who you are.	• Use titles only when relevant. • Be a **good role model**.
Ascription	People believe that you should be valued for who you are. Power, title, and position matter in these cultures, and these roles define behavior.	• Use titles, especially when these clarify people's status in an organization. • Show respect to people in authority, especially when challenging decisions. • Don't "show up" people in authority. • Don't let your authority prevent you from performing well in your role.

Typical achievement cultures include the U.S., Canada, Australia, and Scandinavia.

Typical ascription cultures include France, Italy, Japan, and Saudi Arabia.

6. Sequential Time Versus Synchronous Time (How People Manage Time)

Dimension	Characteristics	Strategies
Sequential Time	People like events to happen in order. They place a high value on punctuality, planning (and sticking to your plans), and staying on	• Focus on one activity or project at a time. • Be punctual. • Keep to deadlines.

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	schedule. In this culture, "time is money," and people don't appreciate it when their schedule is thrown off.	• Set clear deadlines.
Synchronous Time	People see the past, present, and future as interwoven periods. They often work on several projects at once, and view plans and commitments as flexible.	• Be flexible in how you approach work. • Allow people to be flexible on tasks and projects, where possible. • Highlight the importance of punctuality and deadlines if these are key to meeting objectives.

Typical sequential-time cultures include Germany, the U.K., and the U.S.

Typical synchronous-time cultures include Japan, Argentina, and Mexico.

7. Internal Direction Versus Outer Direction (How People Relate to Their Environment)

Dimension	Characteristics	Strategies
Internal Direction (This also known as having an internal**locus of control**.)	People believe that they can control nature or their environment to achieve goals. This includes how they work with teams and within organizations.	• Allow people to develop their skills and take control of their learning. • Set clear objectives that people agree with. • Be open about conflict and disagreement, and allow

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Dimension	Characteristics	Strategies
		people to engage in constructive conflict.
Outer Direction (This also known as having an external**locus of control** .)	People believe that nature, or their environment, controls them; they must work with their environment to achieve goals. At work or in relationships, they focus their actions on others, and they avoid conflict where possible. People often need reassurance that they're doing a good job.	• Provide people with the **right resources** to do their jobs effectively. • Give people direction and **regular feedback**, so that they know how their actions are affecting their environment. • Reassure people that they're doing a good job. • **Manage conflict** quickly and quietly. • Do whatever you can to **boost people's confidence**. • Balance negative and **positive feedback**. • Encourage people to **take responsibility** for their work.

Typical internal-direction cultures include Israel, the U.S., Australia, New Zealand, and the U.K.

Typical outer-direction cultures include China, Russia, and Saudi Arabia.

Tip 1:

Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions is another model that can help you to understand different cultures. The advantage of Hofstede's model is that his research included only employees from one organization – IBM – so his findings are unlikely to be affected by differences in company culture.

The disadvantage is that the culture of this company may skew more general results.

Tip 2:

To learn more about managing and working with people from specific countries and cultures, see the Managing Around the World articles in our **Team Management**section, and listen to our Expert Interviews with **Terri Morrison** and **Michael Schell**.

Key Points

The Seven Dimensions of Culture model was created by Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner, and was published in their book, "Riding the Waves of Culture."

The model says that what distinguishes people from one culture compared with another is where their preferences fall on each of the following seven dimensions:

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Be sensible in how you apply the model. Treat people as individuals, and remember that there are many factors that will have a bearing on how you communicate and interact with other people.