

Understanding Cultural Differences to Communicate in a Global World

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In today's global world, learning about other cultures is no longer a luxury — it's an essential part of doing business. Further, to work more effectively with your global colleagues, you must understand what makes them different from you. How do they prefer to communicate? How do they prefer to do business? What are the norms in their culture? Not understanding these differences can lead to serious obstacles within an organization, but getting in front of these obstacles can keep teams aligned and operations running smoothly.

Here are some common ways in which cultures vary around the globe and how that impacts the way they do business. Strategies and tips are offered to help bridge any differences.

Direct Versus Indirect Communication

- **Direct cultures** prefer communication to be simple and precise. Yes means yes. Words are used explicitly to carry the exact meaning in order to avoid misunderstanding. Those from direct cultures believe it's the responsibility of the speaker to make sure their ideas come across clearly. For those from indirect cultures, this may appear rude, but that is not the intent. Countries that are typically direct in their communication style include Israel, Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands.
- **Indirect cultures** prefer a more nuanced communication style. Messages are implied. Yes may mean yes, no or maybe. Information is embedded into the style and context of their communication and not in the specific words. Those from indirect cultures believe it is the responsibility of the listener to understand what is being communicated. To someone from a direct culture, they may appear untrustworthy or inefficient ("Why don't you just get to the point already?!") Indirect countries include Japan, China, Peru and Saudi Arabia.

Tips

- When working with **direct cultures**...
 - Pay attention to the words spoken
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 - Don't be too detailed in your communications, verbal or written
- When working with **indirect cultures**...
 - Look at non-verbal cues, such as eye-contact and body language
 - Read between the lines

- Use open-ended questions; ask “When will you be able to get that report to me?” instead of “Will you have that report to me by 3 p.m. Thursday?”

Individual vs. Group

- **Individualistic cultures** tend to look out for themselves and emphasize “I” versus “We.” These cultures take responsibility for individual successes and failures and reward individual initiative and achievement. Countries that tend to be individualistic include the United States, Australia, Sweden and England.
- **Group-oriented cultures** are more consensus driven and emphasize “we” versus “I.” They put the needs of the group ahead of the individual and reward group work and team collaboration. Countries with a strong group orientation include Colombia, Oman, Kenya and Vietnam.

Tips

- When working with people from **individualistic cultures...**
 - Don’t be afraid to discuss individual goals and objectives
 - Be careful not to micromanage
 - Use individual competition as a motivator
- When working with people from **group cultures...**
 - Be patient; decisions may need input from many stakeholders, as consensus is the goal
 - Don’t be afraid to monitor group progress (micromanage)
 - Set collaborative goals

Hierarchical Versus Flat-Structure

- **Hierarchical cultures** value status and rank over competencies. Titles are important, as is respect for authority. Organizational structures are multi-layered, and people are more formal. Countries that adhere to hierarchical structures include India, Mexico, Thailand and Venezuela.
- **Flat-structured cultures** value competencies over status and rank. These cultures are less formal, so first names are often used. Organizational structures tend to be flat, and it’s acceptable to challenge higher-ups. Countries that exhibit egalitarian traits include Denmark, Iceland, Norway and New Zealand.

Tips

- When working with people from **hierarchical cultures...**
 - Be careful not to contradict or correct your supervisors, especially not openly
 - When delegating, expect your requests to go unquestioned
 - Don’t be afraid to negotiate for a win-lose outcome
- When working with people from **flat-structured cultures...**

- Don't be afraid to openly question or contradict those with higher positions
- When delegating, explain the reason for the request
- Negotiate for a win-win outcome

Task vs Relationship

- In **task-oriented cultures**, trust is often given from the start. Relationships don't need to be strong in order to complete projects successfully; the relationship will come later, once the task has begun or is completed. Decision-making can go quickly, even if you've just met. You will likely meet those with high task orientation in Canada, Norway, Sweden and the United States.
- In **relationship-oriented cultures**, trust needs to be earned. Relationships build up slowly over time and are required in order to successfully complete tasks. Decision-making will go more quickly if you put in the time upfront to get to know all parties. Countries who lean toward relationships include Brazil, Indonesia, Russia and the Philippines.

Tips

- When working with people from **task-oriented cultures**...
 - Don't spend too much time in pre-negotiations or meetings
 - Understand that flexibility may not come naturally; be patient
 - When giving feedback, be sure to define standards
- When working with people from **relationship-oriented cultures**...
 - Take time to get to know your colleagues
 - Remain flexible and willing to consider unanticipated events
 - When giving feedback, listen and show appreciation

Understanding how, and more importantly *why* cultures differ is an essential part of working globally. These differences can affect everything from leading and supporting teams, to negotiating and closing a deal. Learning how to improve communications with those from abroad is an essential part of creating a truly global organization.