

7 Culture

Text

Cultural diversity

Managers headed for a foreign country need to do their homework on the following cultural variables to avoid awkwardness and problems. There are no rights or wrongs here, only cross-cultural differences.

Individualism versus collectivism

People in **individualistic cultures** focus primarily on individual rights, roles and achievements. The United States and Canada are highly individualistic cultures. People in **collectivist cultures** – such as Egypt, Mexico, India and Japan – rank duty and loyalty to family, friends, organization and country above self-interests. Group goals and shared achievements are paramount to collectivists; personal goals and desires are suppressed. This helps explain why a top-notch engineer born in China would be reluctant to attend an American-style recognition dinner where individual award recipients are asked to stand up for a round of applause. It is important to remember, however, that individualism and collectivism are extreme ends of a continuum, along which people and cultures are variously distributed and mixed. For example, in the United States, one can find pockets of collectivism among Native Americans and recent immigrants from Latin America and Asia.

Time

Hall referred to time as a silent language of culture. He distinguished between monochronic and polychronic time. **Monochronic time** is based on the perception that time is a one-dimensional straight line divided into standard units, such as seconds, minutes, hours and days. In monochronic cultures, including North America and Northern Europe, everyone is assumed to be on the same clock, and time is treated as money. The general rule is to use time efficiently, to be on time and (above all) not to waste time. Toy maker Hasbro has gone so far as to help time-starved Americans speed up their play time. The company is introducing three 'Express' versions of classic board games this year: Monopoly Express, Scrabble Express and Sorry Express.

In contrast, **polychronic time** involves the perception of time as flexible, elastic and multidimensional. Latin America, Mediterranean and Arab cultures are polychronic. Managers in polychronic cultures tend to view schedules and deadlines in relative rather than absolute terms. Different perceptions of time have caused many cultural collisions. For example, as the deadline for the completion of the 2004 Olympic facilities in Athens approached, monochronic Americans fretted about the Greeks moving too slowly and missing the August deadline. But Brett Heyl, a US kayaker who trained in Greece and became familiar with the local work habits, was not worried.

'You'll never see them working hard, but things seem to get done,' Heyl says. 'Don't ask me how.' In April, Heyl took note of a seemingly idle crew of road workers, near the Athens airport.

'You come back in a month, and you're driving on a new highway,' Heyl says. 'It's just astounding how quickly they can get things done. When I was here in April, I saw a city that could not possibly be ready for the Olympics. Now I see one that will be ready on Friday.'

Sure enough, the Greeks pulled it off to rave reviews.

It is important to reset your mental clocks (and expectations) when living and working in a culture with a different time orientation or when working globally on a virtual team.

Interpersonal space

People in a number of cultures prefer to stand close when conversing. Many Arabs, Asians and Pacific Islanders fall into this group. An interpersonal distance of only six inches is very disturbing to a Northern European or an American, who is accustomed to conversing at arm's length. Cross-cultural gatherings in the Middle East often involve an awkward dance as Arab hosts strive to get closer, while their American and European guests shuffle backwards around the room to maintain what they consider a proper social distance.

Language

Foreign-language skills are the gateway to true cross-cultural understanding. Translations are not an accurate substitute for conversational ability in the local language.

Consider, for example, the complexity of the Japanese language. Japanese is a situational language, and the way something is said differs with the relationship between the speaker, listener or the person about whom they are speaking: their respective families, ages, professional statuses and companies all affect the way they express themselves.

In this respect, Japanese isn't one language, but a group of them, changing with a dizzying array of social conventions with which Americans have no experience. Japanese people are raised dealing with the shifting concepts of an in-group/out-group, male and female speech patterns, appropriate politeness levels, and humble and honorific forms of speech. An unwary student, armed only with a few years of classroom Japanese, can pile up mistakes in this regard very quickly.

Language instructors who prepare Americans for foreign assignments say it takes from 150 to 350 hours of classroom work, depending on the difficulty of the language, to reach minimum proficiency (e.g. exchanging greetings, shopping and ordering meals and asking for directions). The American Society for Testing and Materials has ranked the difficulty of learning foreign languages for native English speakers. The easiest to learn are the Romance and Germanic languages, such as Spanish, German and Swedish. Next are African and Eastern European languages, such as Russian. Finally, the hardest languages are Middle Eastern and Asian languages, such as Arabic, Chinese and Japanese.

Historically, foreign languages have not been a strong suit for Americans. Indeed, almost 81 per cent speak only English, and although 200 million Chinese are studying English, a paltry 24,000 American children are trying to master Chinese.

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