

2.3.7: Cultural Differences

7. How do you manage and do business with people from different cultures?

The final topic we will discuss in this chapter is the role of culture and cultural diversity in organizational behavior. Cultural diversity can be analyzed in many ways. For instance, we can compare cultural diversity *within* one country or company, or we can compare cultures *across* units. That is, we can look inside a particular North American firm and see employees who are Asian, black, Latino, American Indian, white, and so forth. Clearly, these individuals have different cultural backgrounds, frames of reference, traditions, and so forth. Or we can look more globally and compare a typical American firm with a typical Mexican, Italian, or Chinese firm and again see significant differences in culture.

We can also analyze cultural diversity by looking at different patterns of behavior. For instance, Americans often wonder why Japanese or Korean businesspeople always bow when they meet; this seems strange to some. Likewise, many Asians wonder why Americans always shake hands, a similarly strange behavior. Americans often complain that Japanese executives say “yes” when they actually mean something else, while Japanese executives claim many Americans promise things they know they cannot deliver. Many of these differences result from a lack of understanding concerning the various cultures and how they affect behavior both inside and outside the workplace. As the marketplace and economies of the world merge ever closer, it is increasingly important that we come to understand more about cultural variations as they affect our world.

What Is Culture?

Simply put, **culture** may be defined as “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another; the interactive aggregate of common characteristics that influences a human group’s response to its environment.”²⁸ More to the point, culture is the “collective mental programming of a people.”²⁹ It is the unique characteristics of a people. As such, culture is:

- Something that is shared by all or most of the members of a society
- Something that older members of a society attempt to pass along to younger members
- Something that shapes our view of the world

The concept of culture represents an easy way to understand a people, albeit on a superficial level. Thus, we refer to the Chinese culture or the American culture. This is not to say that every member within a culture behaves in exactly the same way. On the contrary, every culture has diversity, but members of a certain culture tend to exhibit similar behavioral patterns that reflect where and how they grew up. A knowledge of a culture’s patterns should help us deal with its members.

Culture affects the workplace because it affects what we do and how we behave. As shown in **Exhibit 2.4**, cultural variations influence our values, which in turn affect attitudes and, ultimately, behaviors. For instance, a culture that is characterized by hard work (e.g., the Korean culture discussed above) would exhibit a value or ethic of hard work. This work ethic would be reflected in positive attitudes toward work and the workplace; people would feel that hard work is satisfying and beneficial—they might feel committed to their employer and they might feel shame if they do not work long hours. This, in turn, would lead to actual high levels of work. This behavior, then, would serve to reinforce the culture and its value, and so on.



Exhibit 2.4 Relationship of Culture to Values, Attitudes, and Behavior

To see how this works, consider the results of a survey of managerial behavior by French researcher Andre Laurent.³⁰ He asked managers how important it was for managers to have precise answers when asked a question by subordinates. The results, shown in **Exhibit 2.5**, clearly show how culture can influence very specific managerial behavior. In some countries, it is imperative for the

manager to “know” the answer (even when she really doesn’t), whereas in other countries it made little difference. Thus, if we want to understand why someone does something in the workplace, at least part of the behavior may be influenced by her cultural background.

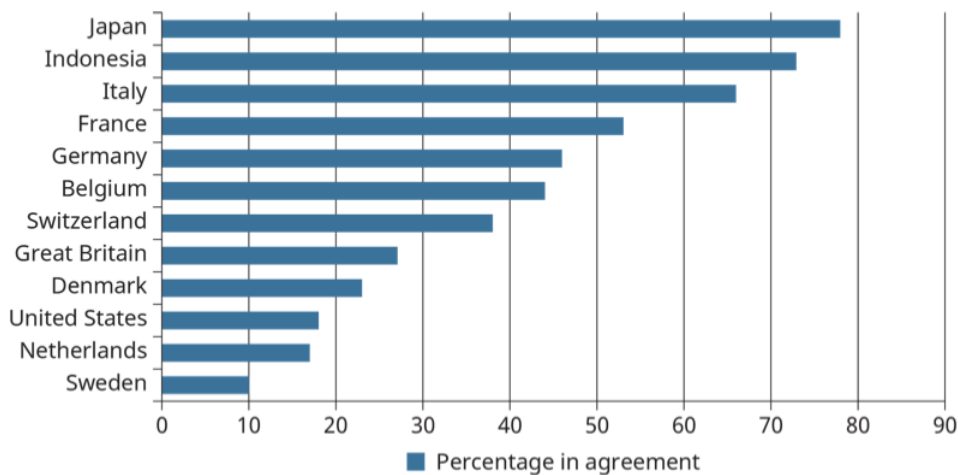


Exhibit 2.5 Appropriate Managerial Behavior in Different Countries

Dimensions of Culture

There are several ways to distinguish different cultures from one another. Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck have identified six dimensions that are helpful in understanding such differences.³¹ These are as follows:

1. *How people view humanity.* Are people basically good, or are they evil? Can most people be trusted or not? Are most people honest? What is the true nature of humankind?
2. *How people see nature.* What is the proper relationship between people and the environment? Should people be in harmony with nature, or should they attempt to control or harness nature?
3. *How people approach interpersonal relationships.* Should one stress individualism or membership in a group? Is the person more or less important than the group? What is the “pecking order” in a society? Is it based on seniority or on wealth and power?
4. *How people view activity and achievement.* Which is a more worthy goal: activity (getting somewhere) or simply being (staying where one is)?
5. *How people view time.* Should one focus on the past, the present, or the future? Some cultures are said to be living in the past, whereas others are looking to the future.
6. *How people view space.* How should physical space be used in our lives? Should we live communally or separately? Should important people be physically separated from others? Should important meetings be held privately or in public?

To see how this works, examine **Exhibit 2.7**, which differentiates four countries (Mexico, Germany, Japan, and the United States) along these six dimensions. Although the actual place of each country on these scales may be argued, the exhibit does serve to highlight several trends that managers should be aware of as they approach their work. For example, although managers in all four countries may share similar views on the nature of people (good versus bad), significant differences are noted on such dimensions as people’s relation to nature and interpersonal relations. This, in turn, can affect how managers in these countries approach contract negotiations, the acquisition of new technologies, and the management of employees.



Exhibit 2.6 Japanese train station

Dimensions such as these help us frame any discussion about how people differ. We can say, for example, that most Americans are individualistic, activity-oriented, and present/future-oriented. We can further say that they value privacy and want to control their environment. In another culture, perhaps the mode is past-oriented, reflective, group-oriented, and unconcerned with achievement. In Japan we hear that “the nail that sticks out gets hammered down”—a comment reflecting a belief in homogeneity within the culture and the importance of the group. In the United States, by contrast, we hear “Look out for Number One” and “A man’s home is his castle”—comments reflecting a belief in the supremacy of the individual over the group. Neither culture is “right” or “better.” Instead, each culture must be recognized as a force within individuals that motivates their behaviors within the workplace. However, even within the U.S. workforce, we must keep in mind that there are subcultures that can influence behavior. For example, recent work has shown that the Hispanic culture within the United States places a high value on groups compared to individuals and as a consequence takes a more collective approach to decision-making.³² As we progress through this discussion, we shall continually build upon these differences as we attempt to understand behavior in the workplace.

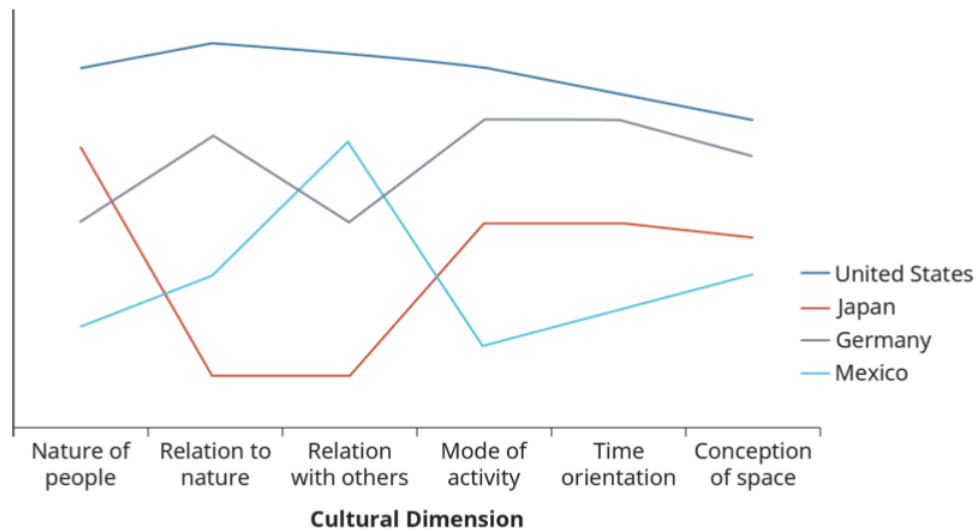


Exhibit 2.7 Cultural Differences among Managers in Four Countries

concept check

1. What role do managers play to ensure that the culture of individuals are valued and appreciated and contribute to a successful work environment?

28. G. Hofstede, *Culture's Consequence*, (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1980), p. 25.

29. Ibid.

30. A. Laurent, "The Cultural Diversity of Western Conceptions of Management," *International Studies of Management and Organization*, XII, 1–2, Spring-Summer 1983, pp. 75–96.

31. F. Kluckhohn and F. Strodtbeck, *Variations in Value Orientations* (Evanston, III.: Row, Peterson, 1961).

32. T. Cox, et al., "Effects of Ethnic Group Cultural Differences on Cooperative and Competitive Behavior on a Group Task," *Academy of Management J.*, 34, pp. 827–847; and S. Gruman, cited in N. Adler, *International Dimensions of Organizational Behavior* (Boston: PWS/Kent, 1986), pp. 13–14.

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Exhibit 2.5 (Attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license)

Exhibit 2.6 Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck identified six dimensions that are helpful in understanding such differences. Japan is a populous country that requires workers to take public transportation to and from work. *How does the Japanese geography affect Japanese culture?* (Credit: elminium/ flickr/ Attribution 2.0 Generic (CC BY 2.0))

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