

Four Cultural Dimensions and Their Implications for Workplace Behavior

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THE INFLUENCE GURU

Indicators for estimating where a group sits on each of Hofstede's four dimensions — and what each one means for how you communicate, influence, and negotiate.

The following model is based on the research done by Geert Hofstede, Ph.D., as described in his 2001 book, *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions, and Organizations Across Nations* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Introduction

In this article you will find some indicators for estimating where a group — national, ethnic, or professional culture, organization, subgroup — lies on each of four dimensions and some implications of each for communicating with members of groups at the extremes. These are suggestions only and must be modified to fit the group with whom you are communicating. It is important to note that neither position is intended to be presented as “good” or “bad.” Any such implication is a result of the author's cultural limitations. I am grateful for the work done by Dr. Hofstede in identifying the four factors discussed in this article. There are many other cultural factors to consider, of course, including, but not limited to, attitudes toward time and the deep structure of a national or professional language that orients its speakers toward certain concepts and makes others difficult to grasp.

It is important to remember that we behave differently to those we consider members of our group and those we consider outsiders. All groups have norms about how “strangers” are to be treated; in some cases, this may be helpful to you in communicating, in others a hindrance. It is always useful to be aware of these norms.

Four dimensions of culture: the Hofstede model

Power Distance

The degree of fixed inequality of power between the more and less powerful members of a group

LOW  HIGH

Uncertainty Avoidance

The degree to which members of a group prefer to avoid uncertainty or ambiguity

LOW  HIGH

Individualism

The degree to which members of a group prefer to operate and make decisions independently as opposed to collectively

LOW  HIGH

Competitiveness

The degree to which members of a group are motivated by achievement and competition as opposed to service and cooperation

LOW  HIGH

HOW TO USE THIS WORKBOOK

On the following pages, compare your own preferences on Dr. Hofstede's dimensions with the preferences that characterize a specific organization, group, or individual — a party with whom you need to communicate in order to solve a problem or achieve a result. Add your own observations to the implications of each of those dimensions. Note any difference in preference between you and the party with whom you are communicating, influencing, negotiating, or resolving conflict. Then adjust your approach, taking those differences into account.

Power Distance

LOW

- Decisions are made after consultation.
- Inequality is seen as bad. Hierarchy exists for convenience.
- Those in lower-status roles may disagree with those in authority and express it.
- Trust among peers is high. Those in authority are often mistrusted.
- Personal power is emphasized. Expert power is accepted.
- Change occurs by redistributing power.

HIGH

- Decisions are made by authority.
- Everyone has a rightful place. Hierarchy represents reality.
- Those in lower-status roles are reluctant to disagree openly with those in authority.
- Trust among peers is low. Those in authority are often trusted.
- Positional power is emphasized. Referent power is important.
- Change occurs by dethroning those in power.

LOW

MEDIUM OR MIXED

HIGH

YOU

ORGANIZATION

IMPLICATIONS OF POWER DISTANCE FOR COMMUNICATION AND INFLUENCE

LOW

- Equalize power during meetings.
- Communicate with all key persons at the same time, when possible.
- Communicate with a representative group.
- Your ability to influence successfully will derive from your expertise and skills.

HIGH

- Defer to and protect existing power positions.
- Communicate important information to those in the leadership first.
- Communicate directly with those who hold legitimate authority in the group.
- Your ability to influence successfully will derive at least partly from your position or active support by leadership.

Implications of Power Distance for negotiation and conflict resolution

LOW

- Specify ground rules that equalize power during the negotiation.
- Proposals that involve redistribution of existing currencies may be considered.
- Expert power will be accepted; “pulling rank” may make agreements difficult.
- You are more likely to be able to make agreements without gaining approval from superiors.

HIGH

- Defer to and protect the positions of those in power. Use or borrow authority to press for a solution.
- Make proposals that protect existing control of currencies while bringing a better balance to the situation.
- Power in negotiation will be mainly based on authority; consider this in your Tactical Attitude.
- Provide formal methods for the redress of grievances.

NOTES

Uncertainty Avoidance

LOW

HIGH

■ Less resistance to change, more risk-taking.	■ More resistance to change, less risk-taking.
■ Preference for broad guidelines, few rules.	■ Preference for clear requirements, specific ground rules.
■ Appreciation for generalists, "common sense."	■ Appreciation for specialists, expertise.
■ Conflict is seen as natural, dissent is accepted.	■ Conflict is seen as undesirable, consensus is sought.
■ Willing to make decisions and take actions on less evidence.	■ Require more evidence before making a decision.
■ Innovation and informality prevail.	■ Ritual, tradition, and formality prevail.

LOW

MEDIUM OR MIXED

HIGH

YOU

ORGANIZATION

IMPLICATIONS OF UNCERTAINTY AVOIDANCE FOR COMMUNICATION AND INFLUENCE

LOW

HIGH

■ Use informal, less structured approaches to communication.	■ Use more structure and formality.
■ Act facilitatively; use both expressive and receptive influence behaviors.	■ Act more as an expert; emphasize expressive influence behaviors; persuade and answer questions clearly. Do your homework.
■ Disclosure of uncertainty will get others involved and may lead to commitment.	■ Disclosure of uncertainty may be unwise.
■ Stress innovation and future orientation.	■ Stress tradition and links with the past.
■ Present both sides of an issue.	■ Present a clear position on the issue.

Implications of Uncertainty Avoidance for negotiation and conflict resolution

LOW

HIGH

■ Emphasize your openness to a variety of ideas.	■ Use more structure and emphasize your expertise.
■ Make broader, more flexible agreements.	■ Make agreements specific and enforceable.
■ Develop creative ideas for exchange.	■ Stress past history of success with similar agreements.
■ Informal agreements may be acceptable.	■ Plan carefully; be prepared with back-up options to deal with every possible contingency.

NOTES

Individualism

LOW

HIGH

■ Dependence on and identification with the group is valued.	■ Self-reliance and independence is valued.
■ Group decisions are considered superior.	■ Individual decisions are considered superior.
■ Security, conformity, and duty are valued.	■ Autonomy, variety, and freedom are valued.
■ Emphasis is on belonging, “we” consciousness.	■ Emphasis is on individual initiative.
■ Opinions and values are considered to be predetermined by one’s reference group.	■ Opinions and values are considered to be personal and individual.

LOW

MEDIUM OR MIXED

HIGH

YOU

ORGANIZATION

IMPLICATIONS OF INDIVIDUALISM FOR COMMUNICATION AND INFLUENCE

LOW

HIGH

■ Stress group process for involvement.	■ Stress value of individual ideas; encourage initiative in communication.
■ Stress value to the group of your idea; emphasize group needs, duty, loyalty.	■ Stress value to individuals of your ideas; relate to individual needs and concerns.
■ Expect disagreements within the group to be resolved partly on the basis of seniority.	■ Expect disagreements to be resolved through debate or negotiation.
■ If you don’t succeed in selling your idea to the whole group, withdraw temporarily and try again later.	■ Expect to sell your ideas to different group members at different times in different ways.

Implications of Individualism for negotiation and conflict resolution

LOW

- Stress common interests between or among parties.
- Focus on the needs of the group.
- Emphasize organizational needs and traditional solutions.

HIGH

- A thorough exploration of differences will be acceptable.
- Identify and respond to individual needs.
- Encourage individual initiative in finding creative solutions.

NOTES

Competitiveness

LOW

- Relationships, service, social atmosphere are more valued.
- Preference for cooperation and interdependence.
- Intuition, feelings trusted.
- Sex roles more fluid and more equally valued by the group.
- Conflict may be avoided or win-win solutions sought.

HIGH

- Achievement, recognition, advancement are more valued.
- Preference for autonomy.
- Analysis, data trusted.
- Sex roles are defined; men dominate.
- Confrontation is common; win-lose situations are accepted.

LOW

MEDIUM OR MIXED

HIGH

YOU

ORGANIZATION

IMPLICATIONS OF COMPETITIVENESS FOR COMMUNICATION AND INFLUENCE

LOW

- Promote a harmonious atmosphere at meetings; allow ample time to socialize.
- Emphasize intrinsic rewards; be empathetic.
- Take a more intuitive approach.
- Depend more on personal relationships in influencing.

HIGH

- Structure meetings for task focus; be brief and keep time limits.
- Emphasize tangible rewards.
- Take a more rational approach; use “hard data” when possible.
- Depend more on control of resources to influence successfully.

Implications of Competitiveness for negotiation and conflict resolution

LOW

- There is a high need for harmony in relationships; reflect this in your Tactical Attitude.
- Attentive listening will be appreciated.
- Cooperation is valued.

HIGH

- Maintaining the opponent's "face" will be helpful in achieving agreement.
- Benefits should be tangible and clear.
- "Toughness" is respected as long as you are perceived as being fair.

NOTES

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Founder of **The Influence Guru**, Kim Barnes is a coach, facilitator, and author with more than forty years of experience in leadership, influence, and organization development. She was a founder and, for many years, CEO of Barnes & Conti Associates, and developed or co-developed programs including *Exercising Influence*, *Inspirational Leadership*, *Intelligent Risk-Taking*, *Consulting on the Inside*, and *Managing Innovation*. She is the author of six books, including *Exercising Influence* (Wiley) and *Building Better Ideas* (Berrett-Koehler). She works with enterprise companies, government agencies, small businesses, and individuals from the San Francisco Bay Area.

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