

## DIMENSIONS OF CULTURE



Exploring the dimensions of culture helps to define what a culture believes and what guides its people—including the cultural norms that affect day-to-day interactions. While there are dozens of dimensions to culture, the following 11 dimensions are key to the foundations of culture, and understanding them will help you navigate conversations and influence how you respond to difficult questions.

Each dimension is defined by two opposing poles and each culture, as well as each individual in that culture, falls at some point along the spectrum between those two poles. If you're able to map the culture you are entering into across a number of dimensions, you can obtain a more complete picture of that culture and communicate more effectively.

**INDIVIDUALISM****COLLECTIVISM**

People in individualistic cultures have a strong “I” orientation, and they are more self-focused and self-directed. They tend to make decisions alone and enjoy competition.

**Countries with strong Individualism:**

United States of America, Australia, Netherlands

**How does this play out?**

- People enjoy creating a unique identity.
- Nuclear families are the main social unit.
- Independence and self-reliance are valued.
- People often prefer to work alone or have autonomy in their actions.
- Help or advice is sought from professionals outside the group.

People in collectivistic cultures have a strong “we” orientation. They seek and value group identity and attachment. They make decisions as a group and enjoy collaboration.

**Countries with strong Collectivism:**

Japan, South Korea, Brazil

**How does this play out?**

- People desire affiliation with a group.
- Extended families are the main social unit.
- Interdependence creates strong social ties.
- Cooperation and harmony guide team work.
- Help or advice is sought from others within the group.

**EGALITARIANISM****HIERARCHY**

Egalitarian cultures believe all people are equal and have equal rights and responsibilities. There is an expectation of equal treatment under the law and for equal opportunities to participate.

**Countries with strong Egalitarianism:**

United States of America, Denmark, Finland

**How does this play out?**

- Employees are self-directed and are encouraged to take initiative.
- Information tends to flow up and down.
- Discussion and debate lead to decision making.
- First names are used early in interactions.
- Protocols are more informal and relaxed.

In hierarchical cultures there is an acceptance and expectation that different people have different levels of power and deserve different treatment. This leads to preferential treatment for certain people.

**Countries with strong Hierarchy:**

China, India, Nigeria

**How does this play out?**

- Employees await direction from their superiors and stay within behavioral norms.
- Information tends to flow from the top down.
- Managers make decisions and expect them to be carried out without too much discussion.
- Titles and last names are used until the relationship has progressed.
- Protocols are more formal and deferential.

## DIRECT COMMUNICATION

## INDIRECT COMMUNICATION

Direct communication cultures convey information explicitly through descriptions and facts. Language is a tool to share information and accomplish tasks. Feedback and debate are encouraged.

### Countries with strong Direct Communication:

United States of America, Germany, Russia

#### How does this play out?

- People feel free to express their opinion and to disagree.
- Both honest and direct feedback is given.
- There is less effort on “saving face” and more on accomplishing the task.
- More emphasis is placed on concrete data.

Indirect communication cultures convey information implicitly through inferences and connections. Language is a means to create meaning and strengthen relationships. Feedback is softened and conflict is avoided.

### Countries with strong Indirect Communication:

Japan, Pakistan

#### How does this play out?

- People express their opinion and disagree only with those whom they trust.
- Constructive feedback is given indirectly and sparingly.
- There is great concern for “saving face” and maintaining harmony.
- Context and circumstances greatly influence the conversation.

## INFORMAL COMMUNICATION

## FORMAL COMMUNICATION

Informal communication is characterized by casual interactions with little protocol, few titles, and relatively egalitarian treatment.

### Countries with strong Informal Communication:

United States of America, New Zealand

#### How does this play out?

- There is moderate differentiation between speech for family members and esteemed superiors.
- Language is often instrumental, or used as a tool to convey information and accomplish tasks.
- Speakers use many common expressions and slang.
- Informal communication can be spontaneous and freeform.

Formal communication is executed with adherence to protocols, the use of titles, and deferential treatment for superiors.

### Countries with strong Formal Communication:

Japan, Arabic-speaking countries, India

#### How does this play out?

- There is careful differentiation between speech for intimates and outsiders or superiors.
- Language is often expressive, or used to create a mood or tell a story.
- Speakers use ritualized language to address and discuss various topics with superiors.
- Official correspondence is often carefully planned in advance.

**MONOCHRONIC****POLYCHRONIC**

In monochronic cultures, time is precise, fixed, and scarce. People prefer to work in a linear and sequential fashion. "Time is money."

**Countries with strong Monochronic orientation:**

United States of America, Germany, Japan

**How does this play out?**

- Punctuality and timeliness are valued and being late is disrespectful.
- Others adhere to schedules and appointments regardless of the people involved.
- Tasks and deadlines often take precedence over relationships.
- People prefer to do one thing at a time.

In polychronic cultures, time is estimated, fluid, and abundant. Time and tasks may flow in multiple directions simultaneously.

**Countries with strong Polychronic orientation:**

Italy, Saudi Arabia, Ghana

**How does this play out?**

- Punctuality is a goal to be attained. Being late may be excused.
- People adhere to schedules and appointments depending on who is involved.
- Attention to a relationship may divert focus from a task.
- People move easily among many tasks.

## TASK

## RELATIONSHIP

Task oriented cultures focus on “doing.” People approach the job at hand and focus on goals, roles, structure, and outcomes. Building relationships occurs through the execution of work.

### Countries with strong Task orientation:

United States of America, United Kingdom, Netherlands

### How does this play out?

- Tasks, procedures, plans, and agendas are explicitly written and followed.
- Trust will build over the course of the work.
- Roles and responsibilities may change over time.
- Work and personal lives are separate.

Relationship oriented cultures focus on “being.” People are concerned with developing relationships and positive communication. Tasks get accomplished through relationships.

### Countries with strong Relationship orientation:

China, Mexico, Nigeria

### How does this play out?

- Socialization is the means to get to know people before the work begins.
- Trust is essential for initial collaboration.
- Roles and responsibilities are often clearly defined and fixed.
- Work and personal lives will overlap.

## LINEAR THINKING

## SYSTEMIC THINKING

Linear thinking follows a logical sequence consisting of discrete details. There is often a beginning, middle, and end to the flow.

### Countries with strong Linear Thinking:

United States of America, Austria, Switzerland

### How does this play out?

- Plans, procedures, schedules, and agendas are conceived and written in a linear format.
- There is a strong preference for conducting discussions and executing tasks in a step-by-step fashion.
- There is little tolerance for deviating from pre-determined and agreed-upon processes.

Systemic or holistic thinking uses interconnecting or collected elements to create the “big picture.” Thinking patterns can flow in many directions with many tangents.

### Countries with strong Systemic Thinking:

Brazil, Egypt, Italy

### How does this play out?

- Initial plans, procedures, schedules, and agendas are often changed mid-course as circumstances change.
- Resistance to following step-by-step procedures allows for flexibility and creativity.
- There is general acceptance that deviations occur normally in the course of discussions and business.



## UNIVERSALISTIC DECISION MAKING

## PARTICULARISTIC DECISION MAKING

In universalistic cultures, the same rules and standards apply to everyone regardless of hierarchy or personal relationships. There is a strong tradition of egalitarianism and fair play.

### Countries with strong Universalistic Decision Making:

United States of America, United Kingdom, Ireland

#### How does this play out?

- Decisions are made with an objective, fact-based attitude.
- Rules are established as standards and generally obeyed.
- Discussions and decisions are rather impersonal.
- Efficiency and uniformity are desirable goals.

In particularistic cultures, special considerations are given to certain people regardless of the rules. There is a tradition of favoritism and nepotism.

### Countries with strong Particularistic Decision Making:

Colombia, Nigeria, Russia

#### How does this play out?

- Decisions are made with subjective factors such as relationships, individual needs, and specific circumstances.
- Rules are viewed as guidelines when making decisions.
- Discussions and decisions are often personal.
- Personalization is highly valued.

## PAST

## PRESENT

## FUTURE

Past-oriented cultures demonstrate great respect for tradition and heritage.

**Countries and cultures with a strong Past orientation:**

Native American cultures,  
China, India

**How does this play out?**

- The past acts as a reference for planning and decision making.
- There is often resistance to change without careful deliberation.
- The historical context and learning from mistakes color future plans.

Present-oriented cultures focus on the here and now and actual situations.

**Cultures with a strong Present orientation:**

African tribal cultures

**How does this play out?**

- Plans and decisions are made considering current resources and circumstances.
- There is little focus on future benefits or problems.

Future-oriented cultures are concerned with planning and saving for the years to come.

**Countries with a strong Future orientation:**

United States of America,  
Singapore, Hong Kong

**How does this play out?**

- There is a focus on attempting to predict and plan for the future.
- People are flexible, open to change, and willing to experiment.
- Innovation and speed are more important than total accuracy.

## PRIVATE SPACE

## PUBLIC SPACE

Private space cultures prefer to allow greater distance between people. There is guarded interaction with fewer people, and others need permission to cross boundaries and approach closer.

### Countries with strong Private Space orientation:

United States of America, United Kingdom,  
Norway

#### How does this play out?

- Intimate and personal space is reserved for family and close friends.
- Arm's length interactions are common for professional associates of any gender.
- In public venues, such as standing in an elevator or sitting on a bus, people prefer to maintain as much space as possible.
- People of different genders can interact fairly easily.

Public space cultures are comfortable with close interactions with a diverse range of people. There is easy crossing of boundaries.

### Countries with strong Public Space orientation:

India, Brazil, Spain

#### How does this play out?

- Intimate and personal space is for extended family and one's community.
- Arm's length interactions are preferred for strangers.
- In public areas, people are comfortable standing and sitting in close proximity with others.
- In some cultures, people of the same gender can stand or sit close together, but people of the opposite gender must maintain a certain distance.

**CONTROL****HARMONY****CONSTRAINT**

Control-oriented cultures hold the belief that people can control nature and determine their own outcomes.

**Countries with a strong Control orientation:**

United States of America, Canada, Australia

**How does this play out?**

- People believe that they can change their environment to meet their specific needs.
- People know that if they study and work hard they can have a successful life.
- Little is attributed to "luck," "fate," or "providence."

Harmony-oriented cultures believe that people should live in harmony with nature.

**Cultures with a strong Harmony orientation:**

Traditional tribal cultures

**How does this play out?**

- People try to create a balanced lifestyle.
- There is a concerted effort to respect and take care of people, animals, and nature.

Constraint-oriented cultures believe that God or nature impose limits on man's options or ability to change things.

**Cultures with a strong Constraint orientation:**

Muslim cultures

**How does this play out?**

- People assert that fate influences the course of their lives.
- There is an acceptance that things happen for a reason.