

National Cultures

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As opportunities for global expansion increase, so does the trend toward more diversity in the workplace. Successful companies are recruiting professionals with different backgrounds, cultures, styles and motivations. Yet this great resource presents increased possibilities for misunderstanding and cultural blunders.

It is obvious that organizations will need to expand the capacity for people to handle the challenges of working with other cultures if they are to participate successfully. Those companies that continue to struggle with domestic diversity will find themselves even more challenged.

Leaders must be flexible and be able to adapt to this diverse workforce and global consumers. This requires an understanding of the historical, political and economic references of people. Leaders must understand differences in worldviews, communication styles, ethics and etiquette of the people they deal with, both internally and externally.

When Cultures Collide

According to Richard D. Lewis (*When Cultures Collide: Managing Successfully Across Cultures*, 2000), the world's several hundred national and regional cultures can be put into three groups:

Linear-active: These are the task-oriented planners such as the Germans, Swedes, Swiss, American and the Dutch. In these cultures, people focus on a scheduled timeline and like to do one thing at a time.

Multi-active: These are people-oriented cultures that are more focused on interactions and dialogues, such as the Italians, French, Spanish, Mexican, Portuguese and Arabs. They don't care as much about schedules or timelines. Meetings may run long; the priorities are the relationships that come from them.

Reactive: These are the more introverted cultures. They are respect-oriented listeners such as the Japanese, Chinese, Finns and Southeast Asians. They like to concentrate on what a speaker is saying and rarely interrupt. They often speak in monologues and may express ideas using a passive voice.

This simple perspective can help one to begin to understand basic differences in ways of doing business in foreign countries. However, one must be cautious to avoid working with unverified assumptions.

Imagine the conflicts that can arise when these cultures with different priorities try to work together. They exist on a different timeline and often irritate each other. People from a data-oriented culture (Swedes, Germans, and Americans) like to get information by doing research before they act. By contrast, dialogue-oriented people (French, Spanish, Arabian), gain much of their information through a network of personal contacts.

Other major differences occur in the way that cultures view leadership, status, and time and the ways in which they communicate.

People must move beyond simply accepting cultural identities and differences to a place where they can be leveraged for competitive advantage, superior performance and creative growth. There is tremendous creative energy and innovation that can be harnessed when people from different perspectives work successfully together.

Global business is challenging in large part because cultural habits and attitudes blind people to other ways of doing things and make them unwilling or unable to change.