


CONCEPTS OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCE

Edward T Hall, an American anthropologist, has suggested a number of ways of classifying differences between cultures. His concept of high context and low context cultures is particularly useful. Looked at together with Hofstede's work it provides us with a framework within which to prepare for international encounters.

According to Hall, Germany is an example of a low context culture. The assumption underlying a low context culture is that the expression of concepts and ideas in written and spoken form is extremely important. This type of communication is usually realised by means of literal language, explicit detail, written agreements, etc. Its style will tend to be direct and logical.

Japan is the classic example of a high context culture. The underlying assumption in this kind of culture is that a lot of meaning is carried by contextual factors such as hierarchy, setting and location. This type of communication is realised by means of implicit messages, unspoken topics, figurative language and hints. Its style will tend to be indirect and subtle.

Serious communication problems can occur in meetings between high context and low context cultures if there is no anticipation of a potential problem. Thus, the representatives of the low context culture may view the representatives of the high context culture as difficult to make out, evasive and vague. From the other side of the table the low context people may be viewed as aggressive, impatient, naive and patronising.



A FRAMEWORK FOR LOOKING AT CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Hofstede's Dimensions

In 1980, the Dutch sociologist Geert Hofstede collected data from employees of IBM in over forty different countries. His objective was to measure the influence of the various national cultures on the multinational IBM culture. From this data he was able to put together one of the most comprehensive analyses of cultural differences between nationalities. He summarised his findings in terms of four dimensions:

Individualism/Collectivism

In a collectivist culture people see things in terms of the group and tend to value the importance of commitment to/from organisations, friends and family. Much emphasis is placed on group harmony, and personal relationships tend to prevail over the task. In an individualist culture ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family. In an individualist society the task tends to prevail over any personal relationships. Both the UK and Germany are high on the Individualism index. Most Latin American and Oriental countries are much more collectivist.

Uncertainty Avoidance

A strong uncertainty avoidance culture is one in which people feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations, and have a need for written and unwritten rules. People in these cultures prefer to avoid ambiguous situations, and like structured situations with precise objectives, detailed assignments and strict timetables. In weak uncertainty avoidance cultures people dislike too much structure, or too many rules, and are happy with more open-ended situations that give the possibility of creative problem solving. Germany scores well above the UK on the uncertainty avoidance index. France, Belgium, Italy and Spain score high; Scandinavian and North American countries very low.

Power Distance

In an organisation this dimension measures the distribution of power and status between people at different 'levels' in the organisation. In a high power distance culture less powerful members of organisations expect and accept that power is distributed unequally. Germany and the UK have the same low position on the power distance index. France, Belgium and many Latin American and Oriental countries come high up on the power distance index.

Masculinity/Femininity

Hofstede defines a masculine culture as one in which ambition, drive for and recognition of achievement, concern for high earnings are important. He defines a feminine culture as one in which interpersonal relations, cooperation, a search for consensus and concern for the environment are more important. Masculine countries excel in manufacturing, especially where things need to be done efficiently, well and fast. Feminine countries are more successful at service industries like consulting and transport, and in making things to meet customer specifications. Germany, the UK and the USA are all masculine cultures. The Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands are very feminine.