**Culture in Negotiation: Preparing for International Negotiation**

**We tend to give too much weight to culture in negotiation, research suggests. Several guidelines can help international business negotiators put culture in perspective.**

**By** [**Katie Shonk**](https://www.pon.harvard.edu/author/katies5/) **— on September 14th, 2020 /** [**International Negotiation**](https://www.pon.harvard.edu/category/daily/international-negotiation-daily/)

In his book *How to Negotiate Anything with Anyone Anywhere Around the World,* Frank L. Acuff advises readers to expect Germans to be reserved, hard bargainers who may be offended by personal questions and tardiness. Those negotiating with Chinese counterparts are cautioned to avoid direct questions and to prepare to make numerous concessions. And negotiators doing business with Mexicans are told to expect an expressive communication style and a lengthy rapport-building process.

Books are just one form of information about culture in negotiation, along with films, television shows, hearsay, and personal experience. Such *intercultural negotiating schemas* provide a quick, easy way of reading counterparts in [cross-cultural negotiations](https://www.pon.harvard.edu/daily/leadership-skills-daily/how-to-negotiate-in-cross-cultural-situations/), helping us avoid blunders and understand puzzling behavior.

Yet negotiators often give too much weight to intercultural negotiating schemas—and their [international business negotiations](https://www.pon.harvard.edu/daily/international-negotiation-daily/top-negotiation-case-studies-in-international-negotiations-from-business-and-global-politics/) may suffer as a result, write professors Wendi L. Adair (University of Waterloo, Canada), Masako S. Taylor (Osaka Gakuin University in Japan), and Catherine H. Tinsley (Georgetown University) in the journal *Negotiation and Conflict Management Research*.

**Over-adjusting to Culture in Negotiation**

The research team surveyed American professionals who had conducted business negotiations with Japanese counterparts, as well as Japanese professionals who had negotiated with Americans. The negotiators reflected on how they prepared for talks with people from their own culture and how they prepared for talks with people from the other culture, as well as how such negotiations unfolded.

The results showed that study participants typically adjusted their negotiating style *too far* toward the other side’s culture. Specifically, they expected a counterpart to negotiate as she would at home, not understanding that the counterpart would attempt to adjust her strategy to the foreign context as well. Both sides tried too hard to adapt to their stereotypes about the other side’s negotiating style*.* Ironically, this type of cultural sensitivity often led to culture clashes on a number of dimensions, including the degree to which counterparts said they would directly or indirectly share information. Rather than meeting in the middle, the negotiators found themselves at cross-purposes.

**How to Balance Cultural Concerns**

When preparing for an [international negotiation](https://www.pon.harvard.edu/tag/international-business-negotiation/), how much emphasis should you place on culture? You don’t want to offend your counterpart with insensitive behavior, but focusing too much on culture in negotiation can backfire. These three guidelines should help you strike the right balance in [cross-cultural communication](https://www.pon.harvard.edu/daily/international-negotiation-daily/cross-cultural-communication-business-negotiations/) and negotiation:

1. **Consider the individual.** Background research on counterparts’ cultures is important, but it’s probably even more critical to get to know them as individuals, including their profession, work experience, education, areas of expertise, personality, and negotiating experience. Of course, it’s just as important for your counterpart to treat you as an individual rather than a stereotype.You might suggest an introductory phone call before you begin to negotiate. In addition to getting to know each other, you could discuss your plans and expectations for your first meeting and the negotiation in general. You may find that your counterpart’s profession or aspects of her personality turn out to be a better indication of her negotiating style than her nationality.
2. **Broaden your scope.** While coteaching a course on corporate diplomacy to executives, Harvard Business School professor Max H. Bazerman was impressed by the ability of some diplomats in attendance to incorporate a broad array of concerns into their negotiation planning. When analyzing a negotiation in a foreign country, the diplomats raised issues pertaining to changing politics and laws in the region, the interests of community groups, and business norms. The interpersonal challenges of negotiating with someone from another culture make it all too easy to overlook the broader context of your talks. But by adopting a more inclusive mindset and thinking like a diplomat, you’ll improve your odds of reaching a successful, lasting agreement.
3. **Reduce stress.** In his research on culture in negotiation, Columbia University professor Michael W. Morris has found that negotiators are more likely to behave according to cultural stereotypes when facing extreme demands on their attention. In one study, participants were asked to judge an employee whose behavior had led to a negative result. When facing time pressure, American participants were more likely than Hong Kong participants to blame the individual rather than the situation for the problem—an American negotiating bias.

Emotional stress, deadlines, and accountability to others from your own culture can cause you to act in lockstep with cultural expectations rather than carefully analyzing the situation, according to Morris. For this reason, do what you can to reduce stress at the bargaining table, whether by taking breaks, extending deadlines, or asking a neutral third party to help you resolve any differences that arise during your talks.