CHAPTER 8

Culture: A Group Habit Driven by Values and Needs

"Strength lies in differences, not in similarities."

— Stephen R. Covey

I believe there may be more than five thousand definitions of the word *culture,* which can mean slightly different things to different people. Some of them are practical, some are inspiring, and some—such as the one quoted above—make us think. What is the right proportion of differences and similarities where strength lies? Is culture the existence of similarities or the glue that binds the differences together?

The following list contains various examples that highlight the concept's main characteristics. One is not necessarily better than another: they are just different ways of framing the same concept.

- Culture refers to the cumulative deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by a

group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving.

- Culture is the system of knowledge shared by a relatively large group of people.
- Culture is communication; communication is culture.
- Culture, in its broadest sense, is cultivated behaviour. It is the totality of a person's learned and accumulated experience, which is socially transmitted. More briefly, it is behaviour influenced by social learning.
- Culture is a way of life for a group of people—the behaviours, beliefs, values, and symbols that they accept, generally without thinking about them, and that are passed along by communication and imitation from one generation to the next.
- Culture is symbolic communication. Some of its symbols include a group's skills, knowledge, attitudes, values, and motives. The meanings of the symbols are learned and deliberately perpetuated in a society through its institutions.
- Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behaviour that are acquired and transmitted by symbols, which constitute the distinctive achievement of human groups. This includes their embodiment in artefacts. The essential core of culture consists of traditional ideas and, especially, their attached values. Culture systems may, on one hand, be considered as products of action; on the other hand, they may be considered to be conditioning influences upon further action.
- Culture is the sum total of the learned behaviour of a group of people. The group's learned behaviour is generally considered to be the tradition of that people and is transmitted from generation to generation.

Geert Hofstede, the widely known Dutch researcher discussed in the next section, defines culture as “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another.”

My favourite definition is the one I’ve used as the title of this chapter: **Culture is a group habit driven by values and needs.**

Based on these definitions and descriptions, we can infer the people around us and the environment shape us. According to this concept, challenges similar to those faced by our parents and peers condition us and trigger the same reaction in us, the types of reactions that work.

How is it possible, then, the same challenge can trigger different reactions? Shouldn’t the same problem require the same solution in every culture? The answer is no, because event and reaction are related and depend on heritage and circumstances. One event can have multiple reactions as well. Have you ever been caught in the rain? I have. When I lived in Hungary, it was an interesting experience that I loved, especially in summer. When I came to live in the UK, it became a normal, everyday nuisance. In Thailand, it was shocking to get drenched in a monsoon. When we grow up in a place, what happens there is normal, and we learn how to deal with it in the best possible way by copying what others do successfully.

This chapter focuses on the main cross-cultural models that are the basis of any intercultural work. There are hundreds of books about this topic, so I am going to limit this discussion to four major frameworks that I believe complement one another.

Frameworks for studying cultural (national) differences

Hofstede's 6-D model

Geert Hofstede (b. 1928) is a Dutch cultural anthropologist and the founder of comparative intercultural research. Because of his numerous academic and cultural activities in different countries, Hofstede is regarded as one of the leading representatives of intercultural research. His theories and findings are used worldwide in both psychology and management studies. His most popular book, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind,* was first published in 1991 and has been translated into approximately twenty languages. According to *The Wall Street Journal*, Hofstede is one of the twenty most influential business thinkers in the world.

Between 1967 and 1973, professor Hofstede surveyed employees from multiple international IBM offices and found he could map national culture along five dimensions (later he added a sixth one). He rated forty countries for each dimension on a scale of 1–100. His concepts are still the most widely used in the field of comparative interculturalism.

Power Distance Index (PDI) is the degree of inequality between people, for example, physical and intellectual capabilities. This dimension expresses the degree to which the less-powerful members of a society accept and expect power is distributed unequally. The fundamental issue of this dimension is how a society handles inequalities among people. People in societies exhibiting a large degree of power distance accept a hierarchical order in which everybody has a place, and which needs no further justification. In societies with low power distance, people strive to equalise the distribution of power and demand justification for inequalities of power.

Individualism vs. Collectivism Index (IDV) identifies whether a culture holds individuals or the group responsible for the welfare of each member. The high side of this dimension, called individualism, can be

defined as a preference for a loosely knit social framework in which individuals are expected to take care of only themselves and their immediate families. Its opposite, collectivism, represents a preference for a tightly knit framework in society in which individuals can expect their relatives or members of a particular in-group to look after them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty. A society's position on this dimension is reflected in whether people's self-image is defined in terms of 'me' or 'us'.

Masculinity vs. Femininity index (MAS) examines the relationship between gender and work roles. The masculinity side of this dimension represents a preference in society for achievement, heroism, assertiveness, and material rewards for success. Society at large is more competitive. Its opposite, femininity, stands for a preference for cooperation, modesty, caring for the weak, and quality of life. Society at large is more consensus oriented. In the business context, Masculinity vs. femininity is sometimes referred to as 'tough vs. gender' culture.

Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI) is the extent to which cultures socialise their members into accepting ambiguity and uncertainty. The Uncertainty Avoidance dimension expresses the degree to which the members of a society feel uncomfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity. The fundamental issue in this dimension is how a society deals with the fact the future can never be known: should we try to control the future or just let it happen? Countries exhibiting a strong UAI maintain rigid codes of belief and behaviour and are intolerant of unorthodox behaviours and ideas. Societies with a weak UAI maintain a more relaxed attitude—in other words, practice counts more than do principles.

Long-term/Short-term Orientation (LTO) was added as a dimension later. Every society has to maintain some links with its own past while dealing with the challenges of the present and the future. Societies prioritise these two existential goals differently. The ones that score low

on this dimension, for example, prefer to maintain time-honoured traditions and norms while viewing societal change with suspicion. Those with a culture that scores high, on the other hand, take a more pragmatic approach: they encourage thrift and efforts in modern education to prepare for the future. In the business context, this dimension is referred to as ‘normative (short term) vs. pragmatic (long term)’ (PRA). In the academic environment, the phrase ‘monumentalism vs. flexhumility’ is sometimes used.

Kluckhohn-Strodtbeck framework

In 1961, the American anthropologist and social theorist, Clyde Kluckhohn, together with Fred Strodtbeck, Professor Emeritus of Sociology and Psychology, University of Chicago, developed the Values Orientation Theory, a model for analysing culture based on three principal assumptions:

1. There are a limited number of common human problems for which all people must find some solutions.
2. Despite the variability, there is a range of possible solutions.
3. All alternatives of all solutions are present in all societies at all times but are differentially preferred.

In line with this view, Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck suggested a society’s solutions for its problems reflect its culture. Consequently, they created a framework for cultural assessment that includes six major orientations and asks:

1. Do people believe their environment controls them, they control the environment, or they are part of nature?

2. Do people focus on past events, on the present, or on the future implications of their actions?
3. Are people easily controlled and not to be trusted, or can they be trusted to act freely and responsibly?
4. Do people desire accomplishments in life, carefree lives, or spiritual and contemplative lives?
5. Do people believe individuals or groups are responsible for each person's welfare?
5. Do people prefer to conduct most activities in private or in public?

These are interesting questions we usually don't ask, because we take them for granted unless the social norms go against our own values. How would each of us deal with them? Do we blame or try to change the outside world, or do we assume something is wrong with us as individuals? Whichever option we choose, intentionally or subconsciously, it can create some serious friction in us.

Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner framework

The Seven Dimensions of Culture were identified by Fons Trompenaars, a Dutch organisational theorist and management consultant, and Charles Hampden-Turner, a British management philosopher.

The model was published in their 1997 book, *Riding the Waves of Culture*. Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner developed the model after spending ten years researching the preferences and values of people in dozens of cultures around the world. As part of the study, they surveyed more than 46,000 managers in forty countries. They found people from different cultures are not randomly different from one another but instead differ in very specific, even predictable, ways. The model

concludes each culture has its own way of thinking, its own values and beliefs, and different preferences based on a variety of different factors.

The seven dimensions are:

1. **Universalism vs. particularism**: Cultures based on universalism place a high importance on laws, rules, values, and obligations. Rules come before relationships, though the intention is to deal fairly with individuals. Cultures based on particularism believe each circumstance and each relationship dictate the rules by which people live. The response to a situation may change based on what is happening in the moment and who is involved.
2. **Individualism vs. communitarianism**: People in individual cultures believe in personal freedom and achievement. They believe we each make our own decisions and must take care of ourselves. Communitarian cultures consider the group to be more important than the individual. The group provides help and safety in exchange for loyalty but always takes precedence.
3. **Specific vs. diffuse**: In specific cultures, work and personal lives are separate. As a result, personal relationships don't have much of an impact on work objectives. And, although good relationships are important, individuals can work together without having a good relationship. In diffuse societies, work and personal life overlaps. Good relationships are vital to meeting business objectives and work and social relationships are basically the same. People spend time outside work hours with both colleagues and clients.
4. **Neutral vs. emotional**: In neutral cultures, people make a great effort to control their emotions and tend not to reveal what they are thinking or feeling. Reason influences action far more than their feelings do. On the other hand, in emotional cultures people

find ways to express their emotions, even spontaneously, at work. Showing emotion is welcome and accepted.

5. **Achievement vs. ascription**: In achievement cultures, people are what they do and base their worth accordingly. These cultures value performance above social hierarchy. In ascription cultures, people value power, title, and position, and roles define behaviour.
6. **Sequential time vs. synchronous time**: In environments where sequential time is important, people prefer events to happen in order. They place a high value on punctuality, planning, sticking to plans, and staying on schedule. Time is money, and people do not appreciate it when their schedule is thrown off. People with synchronous perspectives see past, present, and future as interwoven. They often work on several projects at once and view plans and commitments as flexible.
7. **Internal direction vs. external direction**: People who live in internally directed cultures believe they can control nature or their environment to achieve their goals. This includes how individuals work with teams and within organisations. People from externally directed cultures believe nature or the environment controls them; they must work within their environment to achieve their goals. At work or in relationships, they focus their actions on others, avoiding conflict where possible. People often need reassurance that they're doing a good job.

These dimensions seem more practical to me. Should I grass up my friend, or should I just follow the rules heartlessly? Should I respect your title and position or value your achievement? Do I respect inheriting money, fame, or growth? Even these questions might make your blood boil if the answers are so obvious to you anything else would be just plain

wrong. That is completely normal. That is why people react so strongly when something goes against their values. Responding in an optimal way is nearly impossible unless we know why we are responding in a certain way and are aware of our own preferences. It does not mean we agree with someone else's preference; it means we can respect it and are able to see the situation from a different perspective. This is already a big step, and it's what we focus on during our workshops and coaching sessions when we do the Brain Fryer exercise. It is not the most politically correct title, but it sums up the difficulty of the task. I will show you an example later on in the chapter.

First, let's take a look at one of the most important models, created by Edward T. Hall.

Edward T. Hall's cultural factors

Anthropologist Edward T. Hall's theory of high- and low-context culture helps us to better understand the powerful effect culture has on communication. A key factor in his theory is **context,** which relates to the framework, background, and surrounding circumstances in which communication or an event takes place. The following widely-used example highlights the problems facing low-context North Americans when they interact with people from high-context cultures.

What follows is an icebreaker exercise we do at the beginning of ICQ Global workshops (I am not sure about the origins of the exercise, hence the lack of reference) First we ask participants to read the following dialogue:

Mark: Do you happen to know Suresh?

Ajay: Of course, I have worked closely with him on a number of projects over the past ten years. I know him very well.

Mark: I was thinking about meeting him and seeing if there might be a possibility for collaboration. What do you think?

Ajay: Yes, you should meet with him, and you should also meet with others.

Mark: Thanks. Who else should I meet with?

Ajay: You know, there are some girls who fall in love with a boy who is very popular, well dressed, and good looking. After they get married, they realise they made a mistake because the boy has no substance. Other girls will look for a guy with good character—checking out his family situation and talking with his friends about him. When she gets married, she is much happier than the girl who married the popular guy.

At this point, we check in with them to see if they understand the conversation. Usually the answer is yes, of course. Then we ask:

1. Should Mark meet with Suresh? Why or why not?
2. Why does Mark ask about other people to meet with?
3. Why does Ajay talk about a hypothetical marriage?

This is a prime example of two completely different communication styles: one that is direct and doesn't require reading between the lines; the other has the messages hidden in the context, not the words.

High-context cultures (including much of the Middle East, Asia, Africa, and South America) are relational, collectivist, intuitive, and

contemplative. This means people in these cultures emphasise interpersonal relationships. Developing trust is an important first step to any business transaction. According to Hall, these cultures are collectivist, preferring group harmony and consensus to individual achievement. And people in these cultures are less governed by reason than by intuition or feelings. Words are not as important as context, which might include the speaker's tone of voice, facial expression, gestures, posture, and even the person's family history and status.

Hall recounts a Japanese manager explaining his culture's communication style to an American in this way: "We are a homogeneous people and don't have to speak as much as you do here. When we say one word, we understand ten. But here, you have to say ten to understand one." High-context communication tends to be more indirect and more formal. Flowery language, humility, and elaborate apologies are typical.

Low-context cultures (including North America and much of Western Europe) are logical, linear, individualistic, and action-oriented. People from low-context cultures value logic, facts, and directness. Solving a problem means lining up the facts and evaluating them one after another. Decisions are based on fact rather than on intuition. Discussions end with actions. And communicators are expected to be straightforward, concise, and efficient in describing what action is expected. To be absolutely clear, they strive to use precise words and intend them to be taken literally. Explicit contracts conclude negotiations.

This is very different from communicators in high-context cultures who depend less on language precision and legal documents. High-context businesspeople may even distrust a contract and be offended by the lack of trust it suggests.

Hall made another important and practical distinction in terms of communication.

- **Monochronic cultures** like to do just one thing at a time. They value a certain orderliness and sense of there being an appropriate time and place for everything. They do not value interruptions. They like to concentrate on the job at hand and take time commitments very seriously.

  In addition, monochronic people tend to show a great deal of respect for private property and are reluctant to be either a lender or a borrower. This is part of a general tendency to follow rules of privacy and consideration as well as a religious adherence to plans.

- **Polychronic cultures** like to do multiple things at the same time. A manager's office in a polychronic culture typically has an open door, a ringing phone, and a meeting all occurring at the same time. Though they can easily be distracted, polychronic people also tend to manage interruptions well, with a willingness to change plans often and easily. People are their main concern, particularly those closely related to them or to their function. And, they tend to build lifetime relationships. Issues, such as promptness, are firmly based on the relationship rather than on the task. And objectives are more like desirable outcomes than must-dos.

If you live in the USA, Canada, or Northern Europe, you live in a monochronic culture. If you live in Latin America, the Arab part of the Middle East, or sub-Saharan Africa, you live in a polychronic culture. Interactions between the two types can be problematic. Monochronic businessmen cannot understand why the person with whom they are meeting is always interrupted by phone calls and people stopping by. Is it meant to be insulting? When do they get down to business? Polychronic

businessmen cannot understand why tasks are isolated from the organisation as a whole and measured by output in time instead of part of the overall organisational goal. How can you separate work time and personal time? Why would you let something as unimportant as a schedule negatively impact the quality of your relationships?

We can quickly see the problems. Recognising whether we are dealing with a polychronic or a monochronic culture and the attendant differences in how time and relationships are valued is crucial to being able to communicate effectively across cultures.

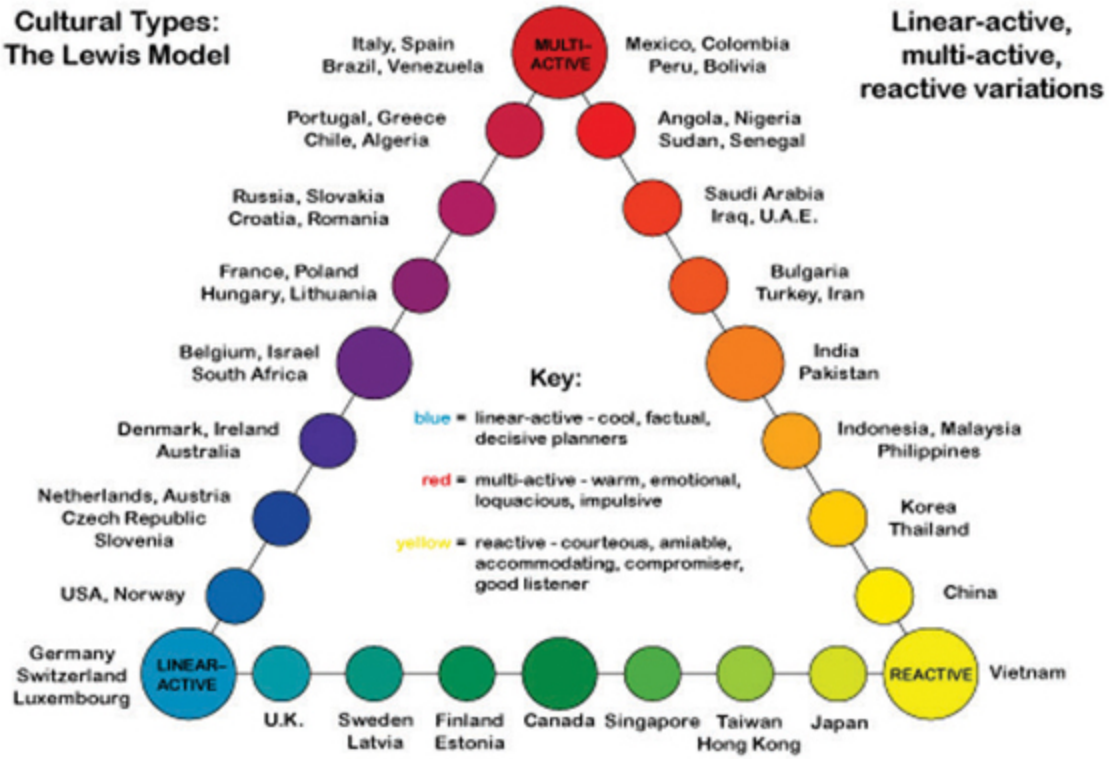
My question is, even if you live in a monochronic, organised culture, do you know people who are always late, and they have an obvious tendency for polychronic behaviour? Maybe even within your own family or circle of friends?

These dimensions drive individual behaviour as much as they drive group behaviour. The difference is the peer pressure within a group can be so strong it suppresses and modifies our behaviour; however, it does not change who we are, how we feel inside, or our preferences. What it does create is some serious frustration or disconnect in us, or between us and the group if we don't conform to the norms.

The Lewis Model

The Lewis model, pictured below, transcends these earlier works because the unit of analysis becomes the individual rather than a culture or a nation. Richard Lewis is a British linguist, cross-cultural communication consultant, and author. Perhaps his most famous book is *When Cultures Collide: Managing Successfully Across Cultures*. His more recent work, *The Cultural Imperative: Global Trends in the 21st Century*, incorporates his model of analysing cultures in terms of:

- **Linear-actives:** Cultures that plan, schedule, organise, and pursue one thing at a time (e.g., Germans and Swiss)
- **Multi-actives:** Cultures that are lively, loquacious, multitasking, and prioritise according to the importance or thrill of the event (e.g., Italians, Latin Americans, and Arabs)
- **Reactives:** Cultures that prioritise courtesy and respect, listen quietly, and react carefully to proposals (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, and Finns)



An experiential model, the Lewis framework is based on forty plus years of international consulting and some 32,000 interviews. Lewis spent much of his life learning languages and observing communication styles. His model has a practical validity to it.

Getting closer!