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Meet Your Colleague

# Generational diversity from an intercultural point of view

Germany  
Assist GmbH

Hierarchy



## Partners



Centrum Wspierania  
Edukacji  
i Przedsiębiorczości



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# Hierarchy

## Introduction

When conflicts arise at work that are not only triggered by different generations but are also shaped by cultural background, hierarchy and power differences can play an important role.

**Hierarchy and power differences** are important for understanding generations and cultures because they strongly influence how people perceive authority, decision-making and social roles. These perceptions may differ not only between cultures but also between generations within the same culture.

## What is hierarchy?

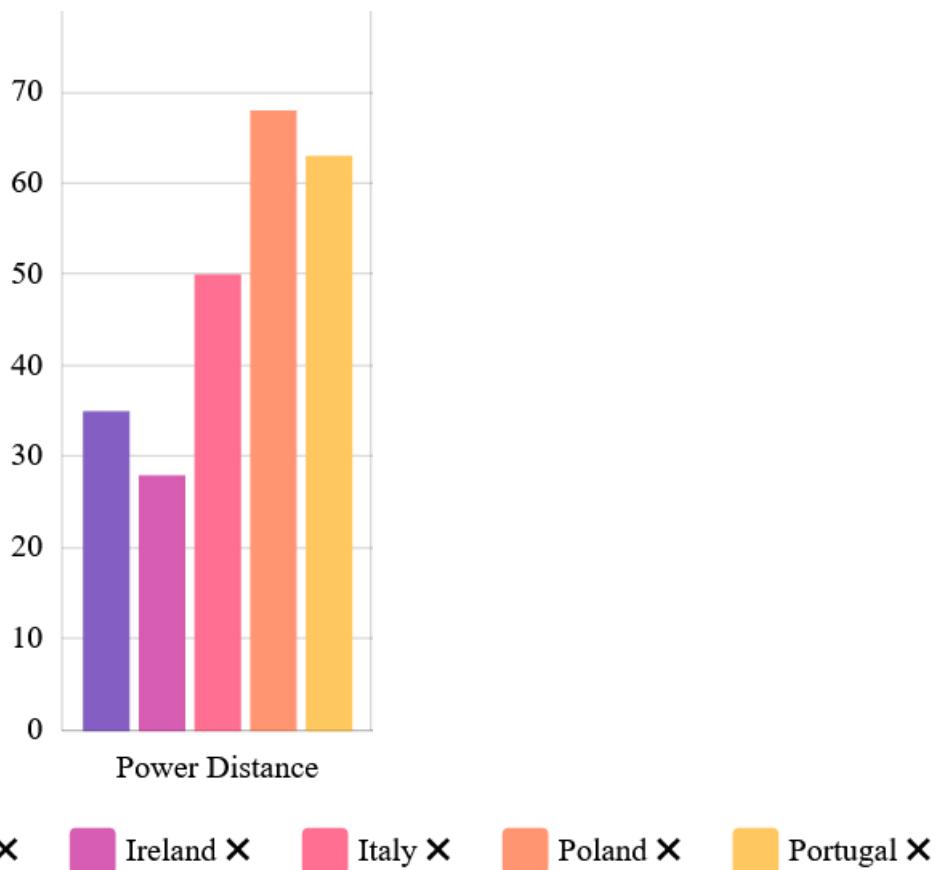
What we refer to as hierarchy and power differences is defined by Geert Hofstede as *power distance*. Hofstede understands *power distance* (according to Geert Hofstede) as "the extent to which the less powerful members of organisations and institutions (such as the family) accept and expect that power is distributed unequally." <https://geerthofstede.com/culture-geert-hofstede-gert-jan-hofstede/6d-model-of-national-culture/>

It is therefore a matter of the extent to which societies regard hierarchies and power differences as **normal and expected**. Power distance may be expressed, for instance, through verbal and non-verbal communication habits, such as the use of polite forms and titles or gestures of respect like bowing and curtsying. It can also be observed in the way societies organise their social structures and processes, with top-down decision-making more common in those with higher power distance.

Cultures with **high power distance** (for example, many Asian, Arab or Latin American countries) accept clear hierarchies, expect top-down decisions and regard explicit rules of rank and respect for authority as self-evident. In these cultures, high power distance is viewed as natural and stabilising.

By contrast, cultures with **low power distance** (for example, Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands and Australia) favour flat hierarchies and prefer decision-making by consensus. Leaders are defined more by their role than by their hierarchical status, resulting in flatter structures and more equal treatment.

The graphic below illustrates the power distance factor as defined by Hofstede, comparing how the partner countries involved in the MYCo project are positioned in relation to one another.



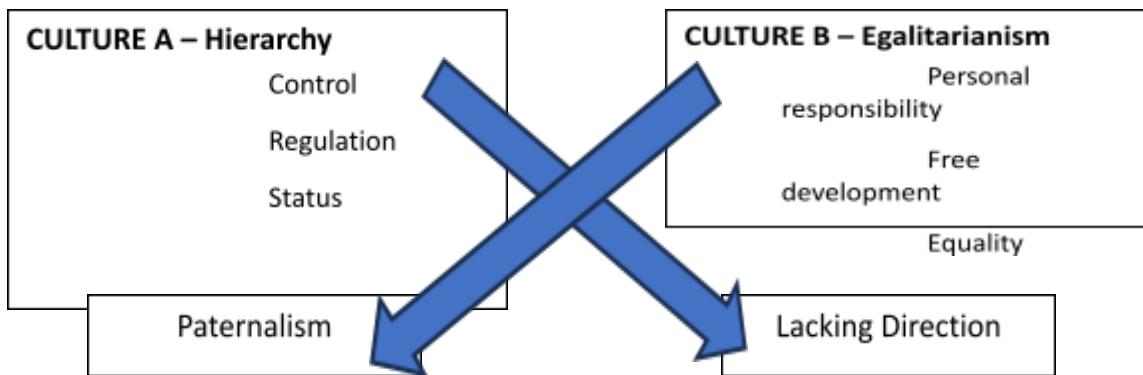
<https://geerthofstede.com/country-comparison-bar-charts/>

The survey conducted by the partnership in the participating countries indicates that hierarchy plays a role in intergenerational conflicts across all contexts. The German country report shows that participants were well aware of the differences between Germany and countries such as Italy and Portugal, even among younger generations: '*In some interactions with people from Mediterranean regions, hierarchical structures and attitudes are more pronounced. Younger people show more verbal respect towards older people when they come from these regions.*'

A cross-country comparison further reveals that, in all participating countries, younger generations are generally less supportive of hierarchical structures and favour flatter hierarchies and more egalitarian interactions. Older generations, by contrast, continue to expect authority, duty and hierarchical structures both of themselves and of others.



How do intergenerational conflicts manifest themselves in the workplace when those involved come from cultures with different views on hierarchy?



In a conflict of values concerning hierarchy, members of Culture A, who place importance on hierarchy, may accuse representatives of Culture B, who favour egalitarian structures, of being disoriented (*'You don't know how to do that! Do it the way I tell you!'*). Conversely, members of Culture B may accuse representatives of Culture A, with their preference for hierarchical structures, of paternalism (*'Let me try it and see if it works!'*).

When such situations arise at work, it is important for those involved to recognise that neither the values of Culture A nor those of Culture B are inherently better or worse. What matters is developing an understanding of one another's values.

### Results from the survey

Reports from Germany and Poland indicate that younger generations are less comfortable with authoritarian leadership styles and top-down decision-making than their older counterparts. In these countries, conflicts often centre on adherence to hierarchical structures, respect and seniority – particularly when young people come from strongly egalitarian cultures. One example from Germany noted: *'We had a young intern from a different cultural background who struggled with the hierarchical structures of a professional kitchen. Some older team members were frustrated, but we eventually managed to resolve the issue.'*

In Italy and Portugal, which score more highly on the power distance index, the research examples appear to confirm that older people tend to favour controlling hierarchies and loyalty, while younger people seek greater autonomy and a stronger voice in decision-making. Even here, however, a trend towards change is evident. It could also be argued that, despite this trend, tensions are heightened when older employees from Portugal and Italy work alongside younger employees from Germany or Poland, who prefer more egalitarian workplace structures.



Nevertheless, the research suggests that misunderstandings and conflicts in the workplace, where cultural differences are a decisive factor, occur only occasionally. In most cases, participants expressed considerable openness towards other cultures.

### Summary

In summary, conflicts tend to arise when older employees in particular – regardless of their country specific cultural background – demand hierarchy, status and respect for experience. Such demands may give rise to interpersonal tensions of varying intensity, depending on how closely or distantly colleagues from other cultures relate to these principles.



## Generational Cards



### Generational diversity from an intercultural point of view **Hierarchy** Generation: Gen Z

#### **Disrespectful**

Generation Z does not pay attention to hierarchies in professional life, uses few titles and forms of verbal politeness to show respect, and is considered demanding when it comes to protecting their own interests, such as maintaining a work-life balance.

#### **Research Findings**

Generation Z is considered egalitarian, less hierarchical and sensitive to important social issues such as climate change.

#### **Strategies and Practical Advice**

Try using appreciative words to increase commitment and motivation.

Offer constructive feedback.

Allow flexibility in terms of place of work and working hours.





## Generational diversity from an intercultural point of view

### Hierarchy

#### Generation: Millennials

#### Self-centred

Millennials are considered demanding and self-centred. Yet they belong to a generation that consciously chooses their workplace based on cultural and value considerations.

#### Research Findings

Millennials belong to a generation that is already familiar with new technologies and that prefers flat hierarchies. Millennials are culturally sensitive and able to adapt.

#### Strategies and Practical Advice

Try to create opportunities within the company to foster a sense of community, for example through joint leisure activities. This will meet the needs of millennials, who tend to reject hierarchical structures.

Support opportunities to embrace diversity within the company. This will please millennials, who tend to prefer egalitarian structures.

Open up your corporate culture to new technologies and the associated informal forms of communication, even if they seem less appropriate at first.





## Generational diversity from an intercultural point of view

### Hierarchy

#### Generation: Gen X

#### Formal

Generation X is considered 'formal' in terms of hierarchy because they tolerate relatively pronounced hierarchical structures and power inequalities.

#### Research Findings

Generation X values formal structures and hierarchy more than younger generations. They are more committed to formal workflows and top-down processes, as well as experience-based authority. They are sensitive to cultural differences, while still adhering to conservative values in some areas.

#### Strategies and Practical Advice

Give Generation X employees clear guidelines with room for individual initiative, as Generation X still values independent work.

Maintain polite manners and respectful behaviour.

Do not be overly formal. Your Generation X employees may perceive this as 'too complicated'. Generation X is a fundamentally pragmatic generation.





## Generational diversity from an intercultural point of view **Hierarchy**

Generation: **Babyboomers**

### **Authoritarian**

The baby boomer generation is considered “authoritarian” in terms of hierarchical structures because it insists on discipline and gestures of respect.

### **Research Findings**

Baby boomers are the generation that still lives and accepts the strongest hierarchical structures in all compared cultures. They value structured processes, adherence to rules and hold a high sense of duty.

### **Strategies and Practical Advice**

Express appreciation for the experience that baby boomer employees bring to the table.

Use verbal and non-verbal forms of politeness, such as greetings and titles, to meet this generation's need for respect.

Take advantage of opportunities to increase cultural sensitivity and diversity among all employees in the company, for example through training or focus days.





## Key Takeaways

- Misunderstandings – and sometimes conflicts – between generations are often rooted in differences of values.
- When addressing intergenerational misunderstandings and conflicts, it is important to take into account not only the values of different generations but also those of different cultures.
- Each generation brings its own cultural values, which may vary from one country to another.
- Younger generations (Generation Z, Millennials) across cultures tend to favour flatter hierarchies, greater pragmatism and more direct communication, while older generations (Generation X, Baby Boomers) are generally more conscious of hierarchy, place greater value on security, and adopt a more formal style.
- A respectful exchange of values is beneficial in overcoming intergenerational and intercultural misunderstandings and conflicts.

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