



# Book Riding the Waves of Culture

## Understanding Diversity in Global Business

Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner  
Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 1997  
First Edition:1994

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### Recommendation

The results are in: All of those stereotypes that we’ve been told to forget are, in fact, true. At least, that’s what a survey of 30,000 people from 31 nations suggests. The data paints some familiar pictures: the inflexible German, the vacillating Frenchman and the pushy American. The statistics from the survey support the conclusions reached by authors Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner in the earlier, first edition of this book: Don’t base business decisions on the rhetoric that people are the same regardless of race, color or creed. They aren’t! Academically organized, dense with anecdotes and, this time, thoroughly documented, *Riding the Waves of Culture* is entertaining at least, and possibly essential in this global age. *BooksInShort* recommends this book to any professional approaching an international management task, or overseeing a business that stretches across regional boundaries.

### Take-Aways

- Culture is the accumulation of traditions that a group of people employs to solve problems and reconcile dilemmas.
- Culture comes in onion-like layers, from the most obvious to the deeply seated.
- Previously solved problems disappear from consciousness and become basic assumptions, like breathing.
- An individual who participates in his or her parent culture can never thoroughly understand other cultures.
- Therefore, the assertion that there is one best way to manage a business is untrue.
- Every culture experiences the concepts of authority, bureaucracy, creativity, good fellowship, verification and accountability in radically different ways.
- Different products mean different things to people in different cultures.
- McDonalds is junk food in Boise and ostentatious gourmet fare in Minsk.
- Business organizations that seem alike in two cultures are actually perceived differently.
- We can become transcultural by learning to both understand and appreciate the business culture of others.

# Summary

## Cultural Predispositions

Culture is the method through which human beings – and the nations and organizations they create – organize meaning. It can be seen in the way the members of the culture behave in response to family, strangers, nature, gestures, signals and tribulations.

There are several generally accepted cultural orientations that emerge when individuals interact, some of which are complementary, while others are in direct opposition to one another.

The universalist, for example, thinks that good can be accurately delineated and followed as a rule. The particularist, on the other hand, argues that rules are made to be broken. A person who believes that the will of the people is more important than the ideas of one man might be called a communitarian, as opposed to an individualist.

“Culture is like gravity – you do not experience it until you jump six feet into the air.”

The significance of these cultural orientations becomes clear when they are put into practice. For example: You are riding with a business associate who strikes a pedestrian while traveling at a speed faster than the posted limit. Your associate wants you to tell the judge he was not speeding. What right does your associate have to expect you to lie on his behalf? And what do you think you should do?

## Universalists v. Particularists

An international survey of 30,000 people found that North Americans and most northern Europeans come down squarely in the universalist camp on this one. The law was broken and the associate has no right to expect you to lie. The proportion falls to less than 75% for the French and Japanese.

“In some cultures it seems more important to universalize good taste than legal procedure.”

In Venezuela, two thirds of the respondents took the particularist line and recommended a lie. Joining the particularists of Venezuela were the Nepalese, South Koreans and the Russians, all at over 60 % in favor of lying. At the other extreme, well over 90% of Dutch, Romanians, British, Australians, Irish, Canadians, Americans and, at 97%, the Swiss, voted in favor of the rule of law.

The consequences become more important as we dig deeper. A French airline employee adds that the seriousness of the pedestrian injury would effect his decision. The elderly British housewife agrees. The Frenchman explains that if the pedestrian had been killed, he would surely feel compelled to lie to protect his friend. The British woman is appalled. She might make an exception and lie for a friend if the pedestrian is not harmed, but can’t imagine lying to protect her friend if the victim died.

“Achievement-oriented corporations in Western countries often send young, promising managers on challenging assignments to faraway countries without realizing the local culture will not accept their youthfulness and/or gender, however well they achieve.”

Along the same lines, consider an examiner who is checking out a friend for insurance purposes. Let’s say the examiner is a doctor or a risk analyst. What right does the friend have to expect the doctor to tone down his concerns so that the insurance will be less expensive? What would you do? This is a universalist-versus-particularist conundrum with a different spin. The examiner works for a company that expects him to perform honestly. We must assume that any lack of candor would put his job and his reputation at risk.

“I try to avoid asking a Dutch audience for criticism after one of my workshops; the experience is much the same as being machine-gunned.”

The most flexible groups in their response to this scenario are the Serbians, Russians, Czechs, Egyptians and our friends the Venezuelans. The Japanese and Indonesians join the northern European block, with more than 60% in favor of speaking the truth and

warning of the risk.

In a business setting, the differences are usually more subtle, but no less important. For example, many people from universalist cultures who attempt to conduct business with people of a particularist bent fail to realize the importance of personal relationships in negotiations. Particularists will want to take time to forge a relationship where one does not exist. The universalists on the other hand, often want to get the deal done and move on.

## **Individualism and Communitarianism**

Like the prior tests weighing universalists versus particularists, exercises can be conducted to make an assessment of the consequences of individualism and communitarianism in the business setting.

Consider the following scenario: There is a minor accident at a nuclear power plant that goes undetected at the time it occurs, but is uncovered later. Does management attempt to identify the individual whose dial was ignored, or does it deal with the entire shift on duty at the time? And how does the work force feel about the management strategy?

“Those who are married know that it is impossible ever completely to understand even people of our own culture.”

The survey showed little certainty on issues of fault. The Cubans were the most certain that fault should be assigned to the individual, but only at a 69% rate, a virtual tie with the Russians. At the other extreme, 84% of the Indonesians felt that the group must share the fault. The Americans, British and Danes were split down the middle.

## **Cultural Sub-Divisions**

There are wonderful subtleties to each of these orientations that further complicate human interactions. In a communitarian culture, you are considered a nobody if you travel alone and have no one to carry your bags, answer your calls or follow your orders.

“In an achievement culture, the first question is likely to be ‘What did you study?’ while in a more ascriptive culture the question will more likely be ‘Where did you study?’”

Nigerians, Singaporeans and the French always come in groups and will probably phone the home office a dozen times to iron out details while negotiating with a single, cocky American who is empowered to make the deal and be done with it. The American, who prizes his rugged individuality, does not realize that his individualism is seen as a lack of status by his rival negotiators.

Neutral cultures are not necessarily cold, but cultures that prize affectivity show their feelings plainly by laughing, smiling, scowling, gesturing and crying, without any effort to conceal, analyze or postpone gratification. Our workshops find the Ethiopians and Japanese the most neutral, close to 80% of the time. The Austrians hold down the middle ground and the Spanish, French and Italians are the least neutral.

“Members of cultures which are affectively neutral do not telegraph their feelings but keep them carefully controlled and subdued.”

Translated to the work environment, when asked whether they would express strong feelings at work, the Kuwaitis were the most likely to speak up and the Ethiopians the least likely. Right behind the Kuwaitis were the Egyptians, Omnis, Spanish, Cubans and Saudis. Most of the world straddled the middle ground. The subtleties amaze.

“People who do more than one thing at a time can, without meaning to, insult those who are used to doing only one thing. Likewise, people who do only one thing at a time can, without meaning to, insult those who are used to doing several things.”

For example, you probably do not want to tell a joke to an Ethiopian. Even if she got the joke, she would find it embarrassing to laugh and awkward not to laugh. For the Japanese, exaggerated deference is a method of rebuke. When the Japanese manager says: “I would be in your debt if you would take care of a matter so minor, on my behalf,” he actually means: “Do it, or else.”

# Mixing Business and Pleasure

Relationships can be either diffuse or specific. In a diffuse relationship, an employee who met his manager in a bar would expect the superior to be better at pool, darts and deciphering the wine list. The authority of that manager diffuses beyond the office. In a specific relationship, a manager might take the office out for an evening of bowling and become just one of the gang once past the office portal.

These relationships can be defined in terms of life spaces. The German doctor is a doctor at home, at the butcher shop and at the opera. His wife is the doctor's wife wherever she goes, too. In France and Germany, when you are invited to dinner, you only go into the rooms clearly defined for this particular event and never intrude deeper into the house. A major problem for business people who are diffuse is the inclination to make public something the specific personality considers private, causing that person to lose face.

“As markets globalize, the need for standardization in organizational design, systems and procedures increases.”

The specific person does not enjoy mixing pleasure and business. The orientation can have far-reaching consequences. If one business partner is diffuse and another is specific, the relationship can be short-lived. The specific partner makes a decision he thinks is right and moves on with the next. The diffuse partner disagrees with the decision and is forever troubled that his partner could make such a bad choice. He allows the incident to influence all subsequent interactions and finally decides he cannot do business with someone who could make such a bad decision.

## Status

Status and how it is achieved is a potent component to the world's cultures. Since we can't choose our parents, the status that comes from being “to the manor born” is ascribed. All other forms of status are achieved, one way or the other.

Age, education and experience are characteristics that make sense as predictors of business behavior, except in Catholic, Hindu and Buddhist countries. In those countries, passiveness, practical achievements and detachment from earthly concerns are all forms of ascribed status.

In the Protestant countries, one earns heaven through good deeds, a belief that spills across the altar to the office and a religiously sanctioned capitalism. Ask the Kuwaitis if respect depends on family background and half of them will agree. They represent the highest percentage group. Ninety-four percent of the Swedes and Irish surveyed said family has nothing to do with the respect you achieve.

When dealing with an ascription-oriented culture, make sure your team has senior, distinguished members with impressive titles. Do not underestimate the need of your counterparts to make their ascriptions come true. They are self-fulfilling prophets.

## Time

Managers need a shared expectation about time and its meaning that exceeds the need to make a meeting or a deadline, and flows into an understanding of how a different culture views the past, present and future. Time may wait for no man, but sequentially oriented cultures sure do.

You stand in line in the butcher shop and wait your turn, whether it makes sense to do so, or not. So, if you want sliced beef and the butcher has the beef up on the slicer, you cannot have him cut you a pound before he puts it back, not in England or Northern Europe, and certainly not in New York. That would be synchronic-thinking. It is rare among the world's cultures, and requires people to track several parallel activities. A butcher might ask for all the salami customers at once, rather than wrapping and unwrapping each lump of meat. But that would breed chaos in a culture where the number you take is the order in which you are served.

## Nature

Different cultures regard the natural environment in different ways. The inner-directed cultures believe nature is like a machine with an owners' manual that ought to do what its owners want it to do. The outer-directed cultures see nature as the author of their organization and worth protecting to assure the good health of the culture.

That said, the nations were surveyed to see what percentage believed it was worth trying to control nature. Nine percent of the Bahrainis said it was. At the other end of the scale, 68% of the Romanians and 56% of Cubans thought it would be worth reining in Mother Nature.

If you can control nature, you can surely control your own fate. If you cannot control nature, then, no matter how good a job you do and no matter how hard you work, you still can get hit by lightning or swept away by a flood. In the survey, only 33% of Venezuelan managers felt they were in control of their own fate, slightly less than the Chinese, Nepalese and Russians. At the other extreme, 88% of the Israelis felt self-sufficient, a tie with the Uruguayans and just ahead of the Norwegians and the Americans.

## About the Authors

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