

# **Cultural awareness**

Dimitar Prisadnikov

## Contents

My own culture .....	3
How does it compare to other cultures? .....	3
How can one fit better among other cultures? .....	3
How can one build, maintain and improve cross-cultural relationships? .....	4

## My own culture

Originally, I come from Bulgaria the culture of which is not drastically different than the Dutch one but still there are some aspects that are unlike. According to Hofstede's insights, Bulgarian culture can be summarized as being strongly hierarchical, collectivistic, masculine and with a high level of uncertainty avoidance. The power distance is high which means that there is a strong emphasis on traditional roles and clear distinctions between those in power and those who are not. Furthermore, Bulgarians put the needs of the group over the needs of the individual and values assertiveness, achievement and strong work ethic. They tend to be uncomfortable with ambiguity and change, and focus more on the present and the past than on the future.

There are multiple reasons why the culture in Bulgaria is the way it is (many being related to history and politicise) but based on my own observations and experiences, I believe the culture is rapidly changing to be more like the one present in the Western societies.

## How does it compare to other cultures?

As an international student, I have had multiple encounters with people from other cultures where we have had to work together towards a common goal. In the beginning, some of the things that people from other cultures did seemed strange or unfamiliar to me (and I am sure this is how others felt about my own actions), but as time passed, we adapted to each other's cultures and perhaps even build stronger relationships. Those experiences helped me to experience and get used to different cultures as well as develop the skills needed to effectively communicate and collaborate with people from different backgrounds.

The most significant culture shock I have experience while studying and working in the Netherlands has always been the flat hierarchy. According to Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory, which I fully agree with and find accurate in this case, Bulgaria is a relatively hierarchical society, with a high score on power distance. This means that people value traditional roles and have clear distinctions between those in power and those who are not therefore a vertical hierarchy is more common in Bulgaria. I have faced the flat hierarchy both at school where you can have casual off-topic with lectures and address each other by first and at work where the people on higher position treat everyone equally and fairly. The first example is something that would never happen where I come and is viewed as rude and inappropriate. As for the workplace, based on my little experience working in Bulgaria, I believe that people the flat hierarchy is becoming more and more popular amongst companies but still there are many individuals who will be afraid to speak to their manages and bosses no matter what.

Another behavioural difference caused by contrasting cultural backgrounds is the conflict avoidance by people coming from many Asian countries. For me, this is something I usually experience in the workplace when there is a problem that needs to be solved. Some of my co-workers with Asian origin are hesitant to push forward their ideas and almost never disagree with others. All of this makes collaborating and communicating significantly harder since they prefer to say something they do not think/believe in order to avoid further conflicts.

## How can one fit better among other cultures?

Adapting to other cultures is not easy, especially when those cultures are far different than what we have been experiencing for most of our lives but is not impossible. One key strategy for fitting in is to actively engage in learning about the culture of the host country, including customs, traditions, values, beliefs, social norms, etc. This can include reading about the culture, participating in cultural

exchange activities and events, and seeking out opportunities to experience the culture in practice. Additionally, being open-minded and respectful of cultural differences, and also being able to effectively communicate one's own cultural perspective can help to foster greater understanding and cooperation. Another strategy is to build trust and strong personal connections, this can include being reliable and trustworthy, as well as being willing to offer help and support to others. Furthermore, being aware of and avoiding cultural taboos and manners and avoiding stereotypes can also be helpful in fitting in other cultures.

## How can one build, maintain and improve cross-cultural relationships?

Having that every one of us surrounded by numbers of cultures nowadays, learning how to build, maintain and improve such cross-cultural relationships is essential part of our lives. These relationships can greatly enhance our understanding of different cultures, as well as help us achieve better collaboration. There are multiple strategies we can use to try and improve those relationships.

One such strategy is actively learning about the cultures surrounding us. This can include reading about their history, customs and traditions, as well as seeking out opportunities to experience them. For example, participating in language classes and putting the effort to learn a foreign language can be a great way to start experiencing new cultures.

Secondly, it is important to be open-minded and respectful of cultural differences. This means being willing to learn and understand other people's perspectives of others even when may seems wrong from our point-of-view.

Finally, it is important to be aware of and avoid cultural taboos, stereotyping and manners to avoid offending people from other cultures. This can include being sensitive to issues such as religious beliefs and cultural stereotypes.