



## The Nature of Cultural Difference

*“Poverty is everyone’s problem. It cuts across any line you can name: age, race, social, geographic or religious. Whether you are black or white; rich, middle-class or poor, we are ALL touched by poverty.” Kathleen Blanco*

People from different cultures do not think, behave and react to events in the same way: there are clear historical and geographical reasons for this. They are explored in a fascinating book ‘Organisations & Culture’ by Dutch management consultant Geert Hofstede (Harper Collins Business, 1991).<sup>1</sup>

Hofstede’s analysis is compelling: it helps us understand such issues as stereotyping, ethnocentrism and culture shock, and differences in the use of language and humour. We have found it helpful in explaining some of the things that have happened to us over the years.

Hofstede original observations were based on a major study of national cultural differences in subsidiaries of computer giant IBM, carried out in the 1980s, but his analysis has been refined since and informed by a host of later studies.

Hofstede identifies five independent dimensions of national culture which he refers to as:

- *power distance* — the extent to which the less powerful members of organisations (places where people work) and institutions (like the family, school or community) accept and expect that power is distributed unequally (all societies are unequal, but some are more unequal than others);
- *individualism* versus *collectivism* -- the degree to which individuals are ‘free agents’ or are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups. (Individualist societies like the US not only practice individualism but also consider it superior to other forms of mental software. Collectivist societies, for example, Japanese society, see things differently!)
- *masculinity* versus *femininity* -- this refers to the distribution of roles between the genders. Masculine culture countries (like the UK) strive for a performance society; feminine countries (like Sweden) for a welfare society. The women in feminine countries have the same modest, caring values as the men; in the masculine countries they are more assertive and competitive, but not as much as the men, so that these countries show a bigger gap between men’s and women’s values.
- *uncertainty avoidance* deals with a society’s tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity. Uncertainty accepting cultures are more tolerant of opinions different from those they are used to; they try to have as few rules as possible; people are more phlegmatic and contemplative, and not expected to openly express emotions. The more anxious cultures tend to be the more expressive cultures; they are the places where people talk with their hands, where it is socially acceptable to raise one’s voice or show one’s emotions.
- *long-term* versus *short-term* orientation: this fifth dimension was found in a study which used a questionnaire designed by Chinese scholars. The values associated

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with short term orientation are respect for tradition, fulfilling social obligations, and protecting one's 'face'.

It is worth noting here how Hofstede defines culture. In most Western languages, he says, 'culture' is commonly taken to mean 'civilization' or 'refinement of the mind'. Hofstede sees this as culture in its narrowest sense and calls it 'Culture One'. But culture, he says, is also about more fundamental human processes, "the ordinary and menial things in life — how we greet others, how we eat or show or conceal our feelings, how we keep a certain physical distance from others, how we make love, or maintain bodily hygiene." This Hofstede calls 'Culture Two' — Culture Two deals with the "things that hurt".

Working in development you become very aware of Culture Two, and the often subtle but critically-important differences between peoples.<sup>2</sup>

## Vision & Values

*Conflicts of value go with being human. The reason is not that human beings have rival beliefs about a good life. Nor is it — through this comes closer to the nub of the matter — that the right action sometimes has wrong as its shadow. It is that human needs make conflicting demands. We do not need common values in order to live together in peace (but we do) need common institutions in which many forms of life can coexist... (where) conflicts of interests and values can be negotiated."*

John Gray in 'The Moral Universe' [Demos, London, 2001]

In October 2002 *Powerful Information* ran a workshop on 'Vision & Values', which discussed cultural difference in some depth with partners from 10 countries [Belarus, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Netherlands, Romania, Russia, Sierra Leone, Sweden and the UK].

Some of the delegates are seen here discussing their views on one of the propositions we put to them.



The workshop was held in the *City Discovery Centre* in Milton Keynes. You can find a copy of our report in [Resources](#).

<sup>1</sup> See also Richard D Lewis [2010]: 'When Cultures Collide: Leading Across Cultures', *Nicholas Brealey Publishing* (first published 1996). In this book Lewis provides a "truly global and practical guide to working and communicating across cultures, explaining how our own culture and language affect the ways in which we organise our world, think, feel and respond, before going on to suggest both general and specific ways of making our influence felt across the cultural divide. There are penetrating insights into how different business cultures accord status, structure their organisations and view the role of leader, alongside invaluable advice on global negotiation, sales and marketing. The book ranges from differences in etiquette and body language to new thinking in the areas of international management and team-building in Europe and the USA, as well as covering challenging new geographical ground in Russia, China and the Far East."

<sup>2</sup> It is important that development professions leave their preconceptions and prejudices at home when working abroad in different cultures, and this includes the perception that the Western way of doing things is the best. The world is changing fast — someone described it as 'like history speeded up' — and our 'Culture One' is likely soon to be eclipsed by other culture's 'Culture One'. Some in the west have yet to wake up to the significance of the change that's taking place. It's profound. According to Richard Lewis, the Chinese see the European nations (like Britain) and also the USA in decline, decay and spiritual disintegration. They have a sense of cultural superiority. I'm quoting here from Lewis' *magnus opus* ('When Cultures Collide' p485/6). The Chinese approach is collectivist and highly pragmatic; it doesn't include western notions like being idealistic and individualistic, or western values like freedom of expression...