

Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions

Understanding Workplace Values Around the World



We know that we are living in a global age. Technology has brought everyone much closer together. This means that people of different cultures find themselves working together and communicating more and more.

This is exciting, but it can also be frustrating and fraught with uncertainty. How do you relate to someone of another culture? What do you say, or not say, to start a conversation right? Are there cultural taboos that you need to be aware of?

Building connections with people from around the world is just one dimension of cultural diversity. You will also need to factor it into motivating people, structuring projects, and developing strategy.

How can we understand cultural differences? Are we relegated to learning from our mistakes, or are there generalized guidelines to follow?

Fortunately, psychologist Dr Geert Hofstede asked himself this question in the 1970s. What emerged after a decade of research and thousands of interviews is a model of cultural dimensions that has become an internationally recognized standard.

With access to people working for the same organization in over 40 countries of the world, Hofstede collected cultural data and analyzed his findings. He initially identified four distinct cultural dimensions that served to distinguish one culture from another. Later he added a fifth dimension, and that is how the model stands today.

He scored each country using a scale of roughly 0 to 100 for each dimension. The higher the score, the more that dimension is exhibited in society.

The Five Dimensions of Culture

Armed with a large database of cultural statistics, Hofstede analyzed the results and found clear patterns of similarity and difference amid the responses along these five dimensions. Interestingly, his research was done on employees of IBM only, which allowed him to attribute the patterns to national differences in culture, largely eliminating the problem of differences in company culture.

The five dimensions are:

1. Power/Distance (PD)

This refers to the degree of inequality that exists – and is accepted – among people with and without power. A high PD score indicates that society accepts an unequal distribution of power, and that people understand "their place" in the system. Low PD means that power is shared and well dispersed. It also means that society members view themselves as equals.

Application: According to Hofstede's model, in a high PD country such as Malaysia (104), you would probably send reports only to top management and have closed-door meetings where only select powerful leaders were in attendance.

	Characteristics	Tips
High PD	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Centralized companies. Strong hierarchies. Large gaps in compensation, authority, and respect. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acknowledge a leader's power. Be aware that you may need to go to the top for answers
Low PD	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Flatter organizations. Supervisors and employees are considered almost as equals. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use teamwork. Involve as many people as possible in decision making.

2. Individualism (IDV)

This refers to the strength of the ties people have to others within the community. A high IDV score indicates loose connections. In countries with a high IDV score there is a lack of interpersonal connection, and little sharing of responsibility beyond family and perhaps a few close friends. A society with a low IDV score would have strong group cohesion, and there would be a large amount of loyalty and respect for members of the group. The group itself is also larger and people take more responsibility for each other's well being.

Application: Hofstede's analysis suggests that in the Central American countries of Panama and Guatemala where the IDV scores are very low (11 and 6, respectively), a marketing campaign that emphasized benefits to the community or that tied into a popular political movement would likely be understood and well received.

	Characteristics	Tips
High IDV	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High valuation on people's time and their need for freedom. An enjoyment of challenges, and an expectation of rewards for hard work. Respect for privacy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acknowledge accomplishments. Don't ask for too much personal information. Encourage debate and expression of own ideas.
Low IDV	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emphasis on building skills and becoming masters of something. Work for intrinsic rewards. Harmony more important than honesty. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Show respect for age and wisdom. Suppress feelings and emotions to work in harmony. Respect traditions and introduce change slowly.

3. Masculinity (MAS)

This refers to how much a society sticks with, and values, traditional male and female roles. High MAS scores are found in countries where men are expected to be "tough," to be the provider, and to be assertive. If women work

outside the home, they tend to have separate professions from men. Low MAS scores do not reverse the gender roles. In a low MAS society, the roles are simply blurred. You see women and men working together equally across many professions. Men are allowed to be sensitive, and women can work hard for professional success.

Application: Japan is highly masculine with a score of 95, whereas Sweden has the lowest measured value (5). According to Hofstede's analysis, if you were to open an office in Japan, you might have greater success if you appointed a male employee to lead the team and had a strong male contingent on the team. In Sweden, on the other hand, you would aim for a team that was balanced in terms of skill rather than gender.

	Characteristics	Tips
High MAS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Men are masculine and women are feminine. There is a well defined distinction between men's work and women's work. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Be aware that people may expect male and female roles to be distinct. Advise men to avoid discussing emotions or making emotionally based decisions or arguments.
Low MAS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A woman can do anything a man can do. Powerful and successful women are admired and respected. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Avoid an "old boys' club" mentality. Ensure job design and practices are not discriminatory to either gender. Treat men and women equally.

4. Uncertainty/Avoidance Index (UAI)

This relates to the degree of anxiety that society members feel when in uncertain or unknown situations. High UAI-scoring nations try to avoid ambiguous situations whenever possible. They are governed by rules and order and they seek a collective "truth." Low UAI scores indicate that the society enjoys novel events and values differences. There are very few rules, and people are encouraged to discover their own truth.

Application: Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions imply that when discussing a project with people in Belgium, whose country scored a 94 on the UAI scale, you should investigate the various options and then present a limited number of choices, but have very detailed information available on your contingency and risk plans. (Note that there will be cultural differences between French and Dutch speakers in Belgium.)

	Characteristics	Tips
High UAI	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Very formal business conduct with lots of rules and policies. Need and expect structure. Sense of nervousness spurns high levels of emotion and expression. Differences are avoided. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Be clear and concise about your expectations and parameters. Plan and prepare, communicate often and early, provide detailed plans, and focus on the tactical aspects of a job or project. Express your emotions through hand gestures

		and raised voices.
Low UAI	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informal business attitude. • More concern with long term strategy than what is happening on a daily basis. • Accepting of change and risk. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not impose rules or structure unnecessarily. • Minimize your emotional response by being calm and contemplating situations before speaking. • Express curiosity when you discover differences.

5. Long Term Orientation (LTO)

This refers to how much society values long-standing – as opposed to short-term – traditions and values. This is the fifth dimension that Hofstede added in the 1990s, after finding that Asian countries with a strong link to Confucian philosophy acted differently from Western cultures. In countries with a high LTO score, delivering on social obligations and avoiding "loss of face" are considered very important.

Application: According to Hofstede's analysis, people in the United States and United Kingdom have low LTO scores. This suggests that you can pretty much expect anything in this culture in terms of creative expression and novel ideas. The model implies that people in the U.S. and U.K. don't value tradition as much as many others, and are therefore likely to be willing to help you execute the most innovative plans as long as they get to participate fully. (This may be surprising to people in the U.K., with its associations of tradition.)

	Characteristics	Tips
High LTO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family is the basis of society. • Parents and men have more authority than young people and women. • Strong work ethic. • High value placed on education and training. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Show respect for traditions. • Do not display extravagance or act frivolously. • Reward perseverance, loyalty, and commitment. • Avoid doing anything that would cause another to "lose face."
Low LTO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promotion of equality. • High creativity, individualism. • Treat others as you would like to be treated. • Self-actualization is sought. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expect to live by the same standards and rules you create. • Be respectful of others. • Do not hesitate to introduce necessary changes.

For a list of scores by dimension per country and more detailed information about Hofstede's research, visit his [website](#).

Note:

Hofstede's analysis is done by country. While this is valid for many countries, it does not hold in the countries where there are strong subcultures that are based on ethnicity of origin or geography. In Canada, for instance, there is a distinct French Canadian culture that has quite a different set of norms from those of English-speaking Canada. And in Italy, masculinity scores would differ between north and south.

Key Points

Cultural norms play a large part in the mechanics and interpersonal relationships of the workplace. When you grow up in a culture, you take your norms of behavior for granted. You don't have to think about your reactions, preferences, and feelings.

When you step into a foreign culture, suddenly things seem different. You don't know what to do or say. Using Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions as a starting point, you can evaluate your approach, your decisions, and actions based on a general sense of how the society might think and react to you.

Of course, no society is homogenous, and there will be deviations from the norms Hofstede found. However, with this as your guide you won't be going in blind. The unknown will be a little less intimidating and you'll get a much-needed boost of confidence and security from studying this cultural model.

Apply This to Your Life

- Take some time to review the [scores by country](#) for the various cultural dimensions that Hofstede identified. Pay particular attention to the countries that the people you deal daily come from.
- In light of these scores, think about some interactions you've had with people in other countries. Does your conversation or association make more sense given this newly found insight?
- Challenge yourself to learn more about one culture in particular. If your work brings you in contact with people from another country, use that country as your point of reference. Apply Hofstede's scores to what you discover, and determine the accuracy and relevance for you.
- The next time that you are required to work with a person from a different culture, use Hofstede's scores and make notes about your approach, what you should be prepared to discuss, and why you feel the way you do. Afterward, evaluate your performance and do further research for the next time.
- Above all, make cultural sensitivity a daily part of your life. Learn to value the differences between people and vow to respect the things that make people unique.