

CHAPTER TWO

Comparing Cultures

A: Main Teaching Points (by textbook section)

In general, this chapter examines models for comparing different national cultures.

A manager often depends on comparative models of culture because these help him/her learn about the new culture by comparing it to cultures with which he/she has experience – including his/her own.

The material in this chapter is complex and may prove difficult with students who do not have experience in manipulating social-science models. Allow plenty of time for discussion. When time is limited, the instructor might decide to leapfrog sections 2.2.1–2.2.2, 2.3, and 2.4 and go straight into the discussion of Hofstede’s model in section 2.5. Hofstede’s model is most often applied in the literature and in subsequent chapters.

Warnings: It is essential that students learn to handle the basic concepts with ease and accuracy. They must understand that:

1. The concept of a culture applies to the group, not the individual. Describing an individual as, for example, “a high-context person” is meaningless. Individual behavior is described in terms of psychology.
2. The models are comparative. A culture is only “low-power distance” relative to some other culture(s).
3. The models apply most accurately in routine situations. In non-routine situations, behavior is much harder to predict.
4. Students sometimes try to mix parameters from different models. For instance, “Culture X is a high-context culture when compared with the individualist Culture Y.” This is confusing. Students must realize that each of the models gives different types of insight.
5. Students may complain that they cannot see the relevance of this “theory” to management issues in the real world. Refer them to the Exercise, and to subsequent chapters where these models (in particular, Hofstede’s) are applied widely.

2.1 Introduction

Cultural differences can lead to serious disputes. Different spatial orientations are distinguished in the Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck model.

2.2 Comparative models

The Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck model is described. The model has the value of making comparisons and gives opportunities for wide class discussion. But it was *not* designed specifically for managers and some of the orientations have limited application.

2.3 Comparing the influences of context

Hall's distinction between high- and low-context cultures (see transparency 2.2) is useful for explaining different communication styles and different attitudes towards written agreements and towards change. In these respects it has implications for management. But the point must be made that it is based on qualitative and not quantitative data. Hall does not provide a statistically based ranking, and no culture exists exclusively at one end of the scale.

2.4 Comparing status and function

Work by Laurent and colleagues is most useful in explaining the status that a manager has within society at large, the extent to which the communication within the organization is restricted to the hierarchical line, and the role of the manager as technical expert or facilitator. Industry and organizational-culture factors may also be significant; an entrepreneurial project-based organization is far more likely to tolerate by-passing than a bank, say, in which routine is important and the communicators need to know the precise status of a message.

2.5 Comparing values in the workplace

Hofstede has made the most important contribution to cross-cultural management studies. The strengths are more significant than the weaknesses in his work.

Start the discussion by drawing attention to the four points on p. 39 of the textbook. His work shows that:

- work-related values are not universal;
- national cultural values are likely to persist, even when a multinational tries to impose the same organizational norms on all its branches;
- local values determine how headquarters regulations are interpreted;

- a multinational that insists on imposing the same organizational norms is in danger of causing morale problems and inefficiencies.

Then follow this up by explaining the size of the study. The scale is unlikely to be duplicated in the future.

Problems arise in dealing with exceptional cases that appear to disprove Hofstede's general principles, and the class is in danger of grinding to a halt if you try to tackle every objection as it arises. Some examples of common objections are embodied in the following questions. Are needs to avoid uncertainty in Singapore really as low as the model suggests? Haven't cultures such as Japan become more feminine since the model was produced? Doesn't the case of Yugoslavia disprove the notion of cultural unity?

The first two of these are answered by reminding students that Hofstede is essentially concerned with comparing cultures, not with making specific statements about any one culture, and that perhaps all cultures have moved in the same direction since the original research – perhaps maintaining their distances to other cultures. Notions of cultural unity and whether Hofstede is out of date are dealt with in the next chapter of the textbook, where questions of cultural shift are discussed.

B: Implications for the Management Student

(This section modifies the material on pp. 52–3 of the textbook.)

1. Review Hall's explanations of high- and low-context cultures (section 2.3) and apply it to your business school. How do you characterize:
 - a. teacher–student communications?
 - b. relations between peers (teacher/teacher; student/student)?

How far do these aspects of the business school culture reflect the national culture?
2. In the business school, which of these is rewarded by high student participation and which is punished by low student participation?
 - a. The teacher follows the syllabus to the letter, whatever the interests of students.
 - b. The teacher departs from the syllabus whenever it seems appropriate.
 - c. The student has to follow a homework assignment to the letter.
 - d. The student is encouraged to negotiate his/her individual homework assignment with the teacher.

How far do these aspects of the business school culture reflect the national culture?

C: Class Discussion Questions

1. In groups, use the Kluckhohn-Strodtbeck model to design a profile of your culture, and of any other cultures that you know well. Then think of counter-examples that illustrate “subordinate variations.” Discuss your answer with other groups.

2. In terms of high-context or low-context, where do you rate your own culture compared with, say, Japanese or American cultures?
3. In a typical organization within your culture, when can the individual be outside the hierarchical line? How might this communication be rewarded or punished?
4. Find examples that illustrate Hofstede's profile of your own culture. Find examples that seem to contradict the profile. How far can these contradictions be explained by:
 - features in an ethnic sub-culture?
 - individual psychology?
 - organizational culture?
 - industry factors?
 - other factors in the environment?

D: Answers to the Exercise

1. This behavior is UNTYPICAL in the United Kingdom. A person without technical qualifications might be promoted if he/she has management skills as a facilitator. But her weak communication skills suggest that she may not be a good manager. Most important, employees in a relatively low power-distance culture (Hofstede) such as the United Kingdom are unlikely to welcome a political appointment. Her father's political status has little positive influence on her status in her workplace (Laurent).
2. The lack of productivity is TYPICAL. Swedish culture is found at the feminine extreme of Hofstede's masculine-feminine dimension, and Japanese culture at the masculine extreme. The Swedish women accept a female chairman, whereas the Japanese men may not happily welcome women at the same level, let alone in a superior position (Hofstede).
3. This disinclination to communicate outside hierarchical lines in Turkey is TYPICAL (Laurent). Power distances and needs to avoid uncertainty are relatively high (Hofstede).
4. This readiness to take lower salaries in return for life-time employment in Australia is UNTYPICAL. But in Japan, where needs to avoid uncertainty are higher, long-term security is typically preferred to immediate profit (Hofstede).
5. The Nepalese employee associates authority within the workplace and authority within the community. It illustrates a patronage relationship. This is TYPICAL (Laurent; Trompenaars).
6. This low emotional commitment to the past is TYPICAL of how low needs to avoid uncertainty are expressed in Sweden. When adequate reasons have been presented, the union is likely to accept.

E: Additional Exercise Material

Read this case and answer the questions below.

HONG KONG SALES

Amy, Belle, and Ming are experienced assistant sales staff working for a traditional Taiwanese trading company in which all staff are Chinese. They are aged between 27 and 29, and have at least five years' experience with the company. They are responsible for deciding how to promote the range of products to their different customers. Each product and each customer needs different treatment. As Belle says, "There are no rules to follow in all cases. That is the problem . . . that makes the job challenging."

They are supervised by a mid-level manager, Mr Wong. He allocates their work, although they often have a more detailed understanding of the needs of each customer than he does. Nevertheless, he feels it important to keep control of every move they make. He usually stays in his private office, but four times a day he comes into the general office where the three women work and checks on their progress.

Perhaps ten times a day, Amy goes to Mr Wong's office and asks for his help in making a decision. She always accepts his advice.

Belle stays at her desk. When Mr Wong comes to the general office, she explains everything that she has done. He says something like: "Yes, yes, very good. But not that, not that, please change that." Belle replies: "Thank you, yes of course." She sometimes makes the changes that he wants.

Ming also stays at her desk. She resents Mr Wong's close supervision, and argues with him when he criticizes her work. Her arguments are usually well thought-out and sensible. Mr Wong has little patience with her.

QUESTIONS

1. How does each of the three women try to manage their boss?
2. How far is the behavior of each of the four people typical of their context?

DECISION

3. The company is acquired by an American multinational. Top management is American, and expects to see American values expressed in the workplace. Mr Wong is promoted to manage a new department and you replace him.
 - a. Of the three women, whose behavior does not need to be changed? Why not?
 - b. Whose behavior does need to be changed? Why?
 - c. What changes do you hope to see?
 - d. How do you cause these changes to be made?

F: Test Bank

1. A major strength of the Kluckhohn-Strodtbeck model is that it:
 - a. Illustrates how cultures can be compared along distinct dimensions
 - b. Was designed for use by managers
 - c. Has precisely defined orientations
 - d. Provides objective criteria for making comparisons.

(Answer, a: pp. 28–9)

2. Mainstream American culture perceives the nature of people to be:
 - a. Dominated by natural forces
 - b. In balance with natural forces
 - c. Essentially evil
 - d. A mix of good and evil.

(Answer, d: p. 30)

3. In past-oriented cultures:
 - a. Career planning and training is valued
 - b. Immediate realities are prioritized
 - c. The past is used as a model when planning for the future
 - d. Past behavior is replicated.

(Answer, c: p. 32)

4. In high-context cultures:
 - a. Meaning is communicated by explicit signals
 - b. Meaning is communicated by implicit signals
 - c. A direct “blunt” communicative style is favored
 - d. Ambiguity is discouraged by top management.

(Answer, b: p. 33)

5. In low-context cultures:
 - a. Insiders and outsiders are tightly distinguished
 - b. People in authority are considered irresponsible
 - c. Cultural patterns are slower to change
 - d. Business agreements are usually written.

(Answer, d: p. 35)

6. Hall’s model:
 - a. Explains why different cultures communicate differently
 - b. Cannot explain communicative styles
 - c. Explains why some people join Rotary and some join the Masons
 - d. Is supported by statistical data.

(Answer, d: pp. 35–6)

7. Of the countries listed below, Laurent found most agreement with the statement “through their professional activity, managers play an important role in society” in:

- a. Denmark
- b. United Kingdom
- c. Netherlands
- d. France.

(Answer, d: p. 36)

8. When applied to the foreign branch of a multinational company, Hofstede's research shows that:
 - a. National cultural values are unlikely to persist when a headquarters tries to impose the same organizational norms on all its branches
 - b. National cultural values persist, even when headquarters tries to impose the same organizational norms on all its branches
 - c. Headquarters regulations determine how local values are expressed
 - d. Headquarters regulations determine how local values are described to headquarters staff.

(Answer, b: p. 39)

9. Where power distances are low:
 - a. Subordinates prefer a participative superior
 - b. Students value conformity rather than independence
 - c. Managers dislike admitting a need for support
 - d. Technical education is primarily valued as a means of signaling social status.

(Answer, a: p. 42)

10. Managers are more likely to be of lower average age in higher level jobs:
 - a. In East European countries
 - b. Where needs to avoid uncertainty are low
 - c. Where long-term personal relationships are important
 - d. Where specialist careers are preferred over management careers.

(Answer, b: p. 43)

11. There is more universalistic concern with the needs of society where:
 - a. Values are more individualist
 - b. Values are more collectivist
 - c. The manager is morally and emotionally committed to the organization
 - d. Employees are relatively uninterested in long-term job security.

(Answer, a: p. 44)

12. One strength of Hofstede's work is that:
 - a. The informant population (IBM) is relatively controlled across countries
 - b. National culture groups can be precisely distinguished
 - c. He has republished his data many times since making the research
 - d. It distinguishes between entirely individualist and entirely collectivist cultures.

(Answer, a: p. 51).