Eight-scale Tool for Mapping Cultural Differences

by Erin Meyer

Identifying typical behaviour in a group is sometimes necessary in business rather than focusing on the personal traits of an individual

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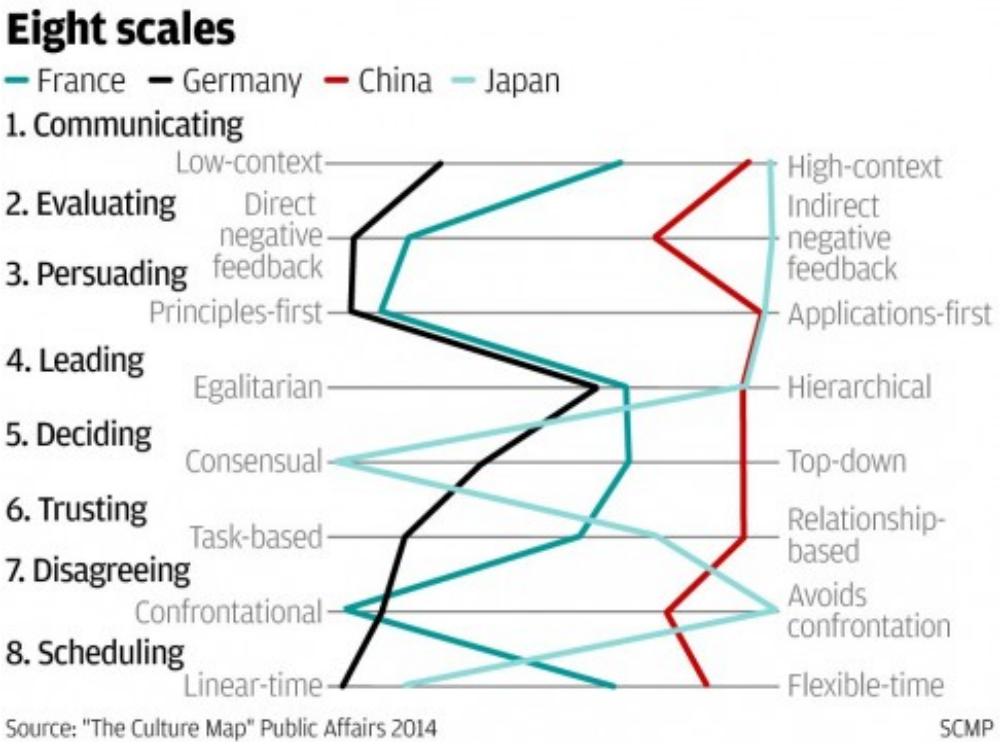
Yet, it is quite possible, even common, to work across cultures for decades and travel frequently for business while remaining unaware and uninformed about how culture impacts you. Millions work in global settings while viewing everything from their own cultural perspectives and assuming that all differences, controversy and misunderstanding are rooted in personality.



This is not out of laziness. Many well-intentioned people do not educate themselves about cultural differences because they believe if they focus on individual differences, that will be enough.

Often it is argued that speaking of cultural differences leads us to stereotype and therefore put individuals in boxes with "general traits". Instead of talking about culture, it is important to judge people as individuals, not just products of their environment, it is said.

At first, this argument sounds valid, even enlightened. Of course, individuals, whatever their cultural origins, have varied personality traits. So why not just approach all people with an interest in getting to know them personally, and proceed from there? Unfortunately, this view has kept thousands of people from learning what they need to know to meet their objectives.

If you go into every interaction assuming that culture does not matter, your default mechanism will be to view others through your own cultural lens and to judge or misjudge accordingly.

Yes, every individual is different. And yes, when you work with people from other cultures, you should not make assumptions about individual traits based on where a person comes from. But this does not mean learning about cultural contexts is unnecessary.

If your business success relies on your ability to work successfully with people from around the world, you need to have an appreciation for cultural differences as well as respect for individual differences.

Both are essential. As if this complexity weren't enough, cultural and individual differences are often wrapped up with differences among organisations, industries, professions and other groups. But even in the most complex situations, understanding how cultural differences affect the mix may help you discover a new approach. Cultural patterns of behaviour and belief frequently impact our perceptions (what we see), cognitions (what we think) and actions (what we do).

To help people improve their ability to decode these three facets of culture and to enhance your effectiveness in dealing with them, I have built on the work of many in my field to develop a tool called the Culture Map. It is made up of eight scales representing the management behaviour where cultural gaps are most common. By comparing the position of one nationality relative to another on each scale, the user can decode how culture influences day-to-day collaboration.

The eight scales are based on decades of academic research into culture from multiple perspectives. To this foundation I have added my own work, which has been validated by extensive interviews with thousands of executives who have confirmed or corrected my findings. The scales and their metrics are:

Communicating: When we say that someone is a good communicator, what do we actually mean? The responses differ wildly from society to society. I compare cultures along the Communicating scale by measuring the degree to which they are high- or low-context, a metric developed by the American anthropologist Edward Hall.

In low-context cultures, good communication is precise, simple, explicit and clear. Messages are understood at face value. Repetition is for clarification, as is putting messages in writing. In high-context cultures, communication is sophisticated, nuanced and layered. Messages are often implied but not plainly stated. Less is put in writing, more is left to interpretation, and understanding may depend on reading between the lines.

Evaluating: All cultures believe that criticism should be given constructively, but the definition of "constructive" varies greatly. This scale measures a preference for frank versus diplomatic negative feedback. Evaluating is often confused with Communicating, but many countries have different positions on the two scales. The French, for example, are high-context (implicit) communicators relative to Americans, yet they are more direct in their criticism. Spaniards and Mexicans are at the same context level, but the Spanish are more frank when providing negative feedback.

Persuading: The ways in which you persuade others and the kinds of arguments you find convincing are deeply rooted in your culture's philosophical, religious and educational assumptions and attitudes. The traditional way to compare countries along this scale is to assess how they balance holistic and specific thought patterns.

Typically, a Western executive will break down an argument into a sequence of distinct components (specific thinking), while Asian managers tend to show how the components all fit together (holistic thinking). Beyond that, people from southern European and Germanic cultures tend to find deductive arguments (what I refer to as principles-first arguments) most persuasive, whereas American and British managers are more likely to be influenced by inductive logic (applications-first logic).

Leading: This scale measures the degree of respect and deference shown to authority figures, placing countries on a spectrum from egalitarian to hierarchical. The Leading scale is based partly on the concept of power distance, first researched by Geert Hofstede, who conducted about 100,000 management surveys at IBM in the 1970s. It also draws on the work of Robert House and his colleagues in their Globe (global leadership and organisational behaviour effectiveness) study of 62 societies.

Deciding: This scale measures the degree to which a culture is consensus-minded. We often assume that the most egalitarian cultures will also be the most democratic, while the most hierarchical ones will allow the boss to make unilateral decisions. This isn't always the case. Germans are more hierarchical than Americans, but more likely than their US colleagues to build group agreement before making decisions. The Japanese are both strongly hierarchical and strongly consensus-minded.

Trusting: Cognitive trust (from the head) can be contrasted with affective trust (from the heart). In task-based cultures, trust is built cognitively through work. If we collaborate well, prove ourselves reliable and respect one another's contributions, we come to feel mutual trust. In a relationship-based society, trust is a result of weaving a strong affective connection. If we laugh and relax together, get to know one another personally and feel a mutual liking, then we establish trust.

Disagreeing: Everyone believes that a little open disagreement is healthy, right? The recent American business literature certainly confirms this viewpoint. But different cultures have very different ideas about how productive confrontation is for a team or an organisation. This scale measures tolerance for open disagreement and inclination to see it as either helpful or harmful to relationships.

Scheduling: All businesses follow agendas and timetables, but in some cultures people strictly adhere to the schedule, whereas in others, they treat it as a suggestion. This scale assesses how much value is placed on operating in a structured, linear fashion versus being flexible and reactive. It is based on the "monochronic" and "polychronic" distinction formalised by Edward Hall.

At the heart of the tool is the realisation that culture is relative. To succeed in a global business world you need to understand not just how people from your own culture experience people from other cultures, but also how those cultures perceive one another.

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