

# Societal cultures

Cultures affect ways of living, including values, beliefs, linguistic expression, behavioural norms and styles of communication.

Culture determines how societal groups manage themselves and deal with change. Understanding societal culture is critical to successful international leadership.

## DEFINING CULTURE

Culture has been described as mental programming; this means that we learn our culture from a young age. Culture refers to how a society or group goes about solving problems in its own particular environment.

Culture comprises several layers. At its core are the basic assumptions which each society takes for granted. These are invisible but they drive societal values and what are considered as acceptable behaviours. Rituals and ceremonies, societal role models and heroes, and visible artefacts or symbols (such as style of dress, food and architecture) represent culture at a surface level.



## SOCIETAL VERSUS COUNTRY CULTURES

Culture is usually associated with a country but societal cultures can transcend country borders. Each country/region can have regional sub-cultures. Nonetheless, research has tended to focus at country level and attempted to measure cultural dimensions based around differences at the basic assumptions layer.

Societal cultural norms affect everyday life and flow across into the workplace. They influence leadership and communications styles, team functioning, performance management, time management, hours of work and work-life balance, and reward systems.

## MEASURING CULTURAL DIMENSIONS

Research has attempted to measure societal cultural differences, primarily by using survey instruments to attach scores to specific cultural dimensions, and thereby draw distinctions between different countries' cultural values. The work of Geert Hofstede, and Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner are particularly well known as cultural theorists.

Cultural dimensions address such differences as: the distribution and acceptance of power relationships; the emphasis placed on individualism versus a collective group/team approach; acceptance of ambiguity versus tolerance of uncertainty; an emphasis on long-term versus short-term time orientation; a preference for reliance on relationships rather than upon written rules and contracts; status being ascribed or achieved; the separation of work and personal lives versus these being closely inter-linked; and a preference for pursuit of quality of life rather than financial success.

## CULTURAL INFLUENCES IN THE WORKPLACE

Cultural theory predicts that different approaches will need to be adopted in leadership styles, negotiations and working practices. For example, in a society that values high power distance, leadership styles will work best if they are top-down, operate through a hierarchy and are authoritarian. In a low power distance society, a more participative and democratic approach will be effective. When emphasis is placed on relationships rather than written contracts, time must be spent to cultivate relationships if negotiations are to succeed.

In individualist societies, performance management and reward structures will be based around individual contributions. In a collective culture, team work and rewards linked to group efforts are likely to be effective. Where quality of life is valued over material success, work-life balance is likely to be sought ahead of monetary incentives.

With every country having different scores attached to each cultural dimension, and no two countries being exactly alike, using cultural dimensions to predict the best course of action is difficult. Cross-cultural training is critical to global leadership.

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