

Diversity and Intercultural Communication



Courtesy: Andrea Laurita/Getty Images

Chapter Objectives

In this chapter, you will learn to do the following:

- Define culture.
- Value diversity and improve intercultural competence.
- Connect and communicate across cultures.

Leaders need an understanding of and appreciation for cultural diversity. Realizing the value of cultural differences is a key component of emotional intelligence and absolutely essential for leading in today's global environment. Technology has enabled cross-global

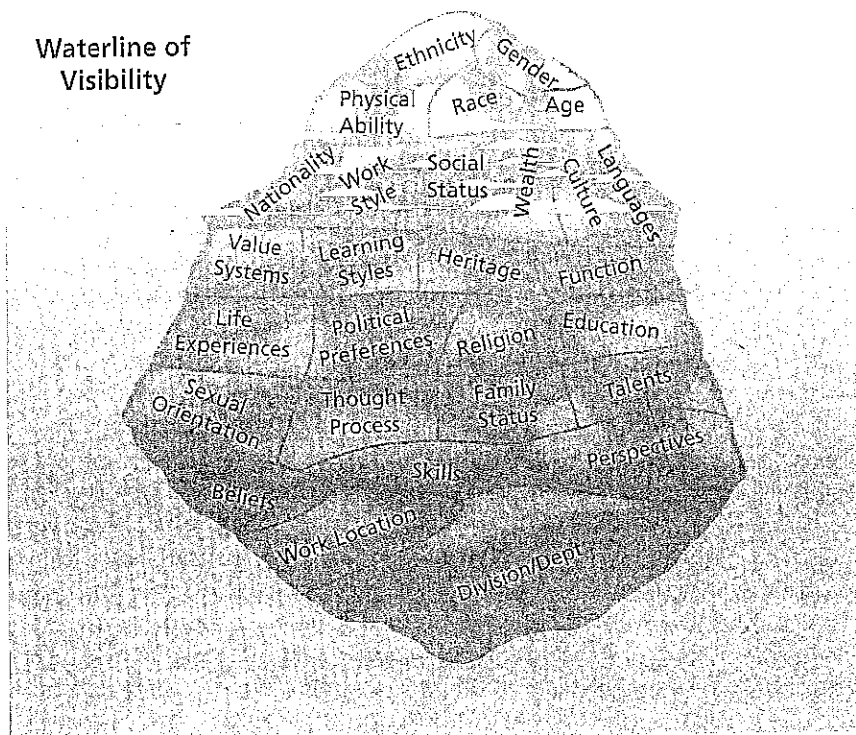
communication and made working across time zones, geographies, and nationalities a given for most professionals today. In addition, organizations seek diversity in order to compete, and leaders need to be better educated about culture to lead effectively and to take full advantage of the value diversity provides.

Successful multinational companies take understanding cultures seriously and have established comprehensive cultural diversity training programs to ensure all employees recognize the value of cultural differences and avoid misunderstandings because of them. For example, Royal Dutch Shell, a global group of energy and petrochemical companies headquartered in the Netherlands and operating in more than 90 countries, has a diversity vision statement and conducts frequent diversity training sessions across all employee groups. Shell's CEO Peter Voser is featured in a 2011 *Profiles in Diversity Journal* article where they discuss the importance Shell places on diversity and inclusion; they see the work they do on diversity and inclusion as directly "relevant to business success long term."¹ Shell uses the "Iceberg of Differences" (Exhibit 9.1) to demonstrate how complex culture is and to illustrate how many cultural differences lie below the surface.

EXHIBIT 9.1 The Iceberg of Differences

Used with permission of
Royal Dutch Shell.

Waterline of Visibility



Gender, race, age, physical ability, nationality, religion, and language are the tip of the iceberg, mostly visible on first meeting someone, although nationality and religion may not be obvious. These and the other differences suggest only the surface of culture with many core values and beliefs that affect behavior hidden below. An appreciation for all of the differences below the surface will increase a leader's emotional intelligence and greatly improve his or her interpersonal skills and ability to communicate effectively with today's typically diverse workforce.

Countries, areas of a country, companies, and even functions within a company can have different cultures, as can online and face-to-face social networks. Men and women exhibit cultural differences, as do generations. Often, these differences are thought of in a company context as diversity. Fortunately, most companies have come to realize the value of diversity and seek it.

The overall goal of this chapter is to facilitate greater sensitivity and rhetorical understanding and to build stronger intercultural competence, that is, the ability to use verbal and nonverbal communication and behave appropriately and effectively in all cultural contexts. This chapter will first define culture, then explain some approaches to understanding cultural differences, and conclude with how best to connect and communicate when encountering cultural differences.

Caveats When Discussing Culture

Any time we attempt to define culture and explain cultural differences, we face three major dangers: (1) minimizing the uniqueness of all individuals, (2) stereotyping and creating misguided expectations, and (3) distorting or misinterpreting differences because of ethnocentrism. Thus, we should approach the study of cultural differences with some caution. We want to be careful not to overgeneralize and to make sure we remember that as many similarities as differences exist, and within any group, no two people will be exactly alike. We live in a global world where the ease of communicating across it has made us closer than ever and geographical barriers are not as great as they once were. The Internet and social media have clearly flattened out many of the traditional cultural variables, although some of the deeply held values and beliefs that can lead to misunderstandings do still exist.² Therefore, while we should be careful not to make too much of the differences, some value still exists in pointing them out and explaining the differences researchers on culture have highlighted in the past because as long as we remain open, flexible, and nonjudgmental, breaking cultures down into common characteristics can help us understand others and communicate more effectively.

Defining Culture

The term "culture" has numerous definitions, some rather narrow and others much broader. For instance, some think of culture as associated with levels of society or with nationality or geography only. For anthropologists, culture is much broader: It is "the way of life of a people, or the sum of their learned behavior patterns, attitudes, and material things."³ It is the way people make sense of and give meaning to their world. It is the frame of reference and the behavior patterns of groups of people. It includes social characteristics as well as physical characteristics, gender, age, profession, organizational function, and company structure and style. Culture is not personality. Culture is learned and shared equally by those of the same group, whereas personality is highly individual and influenced by our genes more than our environment.

A definition that is useful when talking about communicating within and across cultures is that "culture is a fuzzy set of attitudes, beliefs, behavioral conventions, and basic assumptions and values that are shared by a group of people, and that influence each member's behavior and his/her interpretations of the 'meaning' of other people's behavior."⁴ The key words here are "interpretations" and "meaning." Culture is the lens through which we see others, understand them and their words, and interpret the meaning of those words and respond.

The Layers of Culture

Geert Hofstede, a leading researcher on understanding cultural differences, provides a very useful way to look at the layers of the cultures to which we belong (Exhibit 9.2).

Looking closer at Hofstede's layers of culture helps us realize how complex culture can be. Most of us realize that someone from Japan would differ from someone from Mexico or someone from Germany would differ from someone from Australia in language and behavior, but fewer realize that someone from northern Germany would behave differently than someone from southern Germany and someone from the Northeast coast of the United States would differ from someone from the Midwest. Still fewer recognize that those who use e-mail only differ in meaningful ways from those using Twitter, as do those who prefer LinkedIn over Facebook.

What we see are finer differences but differences worth realizing when communicating. For example, in business dealings with someone from New York, we would speak in English, but we would find the pace quick and the communication style usually very direct, whereas in a conversation with someone from Dallas, we would also speak English, but the pace would usually be a little slower and the communication style would be more indirect.

EXHIBIT 9.2

The Layers of Culture

Source: Hofstede, G. (1997). *Culturas and Organizations: Software of the Mind*. New York: McGraw-Hill. Used with permission of the author.

1. A national level according to one's country (or countries for people who migrated during their lifetime)
2. A regional/and or ethnic and/or religious and/or linguistic affiliation level, as most nations are composed of culturally different regions and/or ethnic and/or religious and/or language groups
3. A gender level, according to whether a person was born as a girl or as a boy
4. A generation level, which separates grandparents from parents from children
5. A social class level, associated with educational opportunities and with a person's occupation or profession
6. For those who are employed, an organizational or corporate level according to the way employees have been socialized by their work organizations

Then, if we layer gender on top of these differences, we would probably see more differences in behavior and communication, and even more if we added a generational difference. The behavior and communication style of a 25-year-old woman from New York would differ quite a bit from that of a 40-year-old man from Dallas.

In fact, much has been made of the huge generational differences in the newest group of individuals joining the workforce, the millennials. Exhibit 9.3 shows some of the generalized differences we would probably find across generations.

Anyone looking at Exhibit 9.3 and the description of his or her generation might say, "Wait; I am not like that." What this layering discussion shows us is the complexity of any discussion of culture,

EXHIBIT 9.3

A Brief Look at Generational Differences

Source: Alsop, R. (2008). *The Trophy Kids Grow Up: How the Millennial Generation Is Shaking Up the Workplace*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Label	Date of Births	Generalized Traits
Traditionalists	1925–1945	Patriotic, dependable, conformist, respect authority, rigid, socially and financially conservative, solid work ethic
Baby Boomers	1946–1964	Workaholics, idealistic, loyal, competitive, materialistic, seek personal fulfillment, value titles and the corner office
Gen Xers	1965–1979	Self-reliant, adaptable, cynical, distrust authority, resourceful, entrepreneurial, tech savvy
Millennials (also called Gen Y)	1980–2001	Entitled, optimistic, civic minded, close parental involvement, value work-life balance, impatient, multitasking, team-oriented

but it also highlights the danger of overgeneralizing, or stereotyping. Generalizing is potentially useful but also can be dangerous. People at the same national or regional area or of the same generation or gender may resemble each other in many ways, but they will also differ.

For example, in the United States are 9,408,802 square miles of geography, a melting pot of cultures representing tremendous diversity, and people brought up to be individualistic. We are also looking at people who have been born and raised in one area and never left it, and others who were born in another country, moved to the United States as a teenager, and are fluent in English and their birth language. We may also be looking at people with little education and travel experiences and those well educated and well traveled. In Europe or Asia we will see similar, even greater, mixtures of people and cultures. Europe has 284 living languages plus numerous dialects within each of these languages. Asia has 2,304. India alone has 461 different languages, with just over 20 officially recognized.⁵

If we add to this mix people with different professional interests—such as lawyers, doctors, accountants, philosophers—we cannot help but question the value of any attempt to describe cultural differences, but there is value.

To be sure, academic learning about culture can provide only a basic level of cultural literacy:

Productive cross-cultural relationships require each individual to embark on a personal learning journey that initially can be even more frustrating than it is rewarding. Academic learning is useful, of course, but it is the direct knowledge accumulated in the day-to-day act of conducting business across cultures that is ultimately most meaningful. This is the kind of learning that allows people to understand not simply the surface signs of cultural differences . . . but, far more importantly, the invisible meanings beneath such differences.⁶

Few would argue that, understanding a culture fully requires more than reading about it; we need to live it—breathing the air, speaking the language, existing as one with the people. However, using standard, reliable frameworks to learn about cultural differences, as well as being exposed to some guiding principles, will aid us in establishing a foundation on which to build a better understanding and appreciation of culture and its impact on the way we interact and communicate.

The next section provides frameworks and principles for approaching diverse audiences with greater confidence and an appreciation for the differences. Understanding another culture requires setting aside a tendency to judge others and being open and flexible. In short, it demands that we draw on the best of our emotional intelligence.

Establishing an Approach for Understanding Cultural Differences

The many books on international communication and on traveling in other countries, such as Roger Axtell's numerous and useful "Do's and Taboos" of international business, provide guidelines on basic verbal and nonverbal communication in most countries. They cover such topics as gestures to avoid, dining customs, gift giving, and even exchange of business cards.

Axtell's books cover many social customs, answering important questions such as the following:

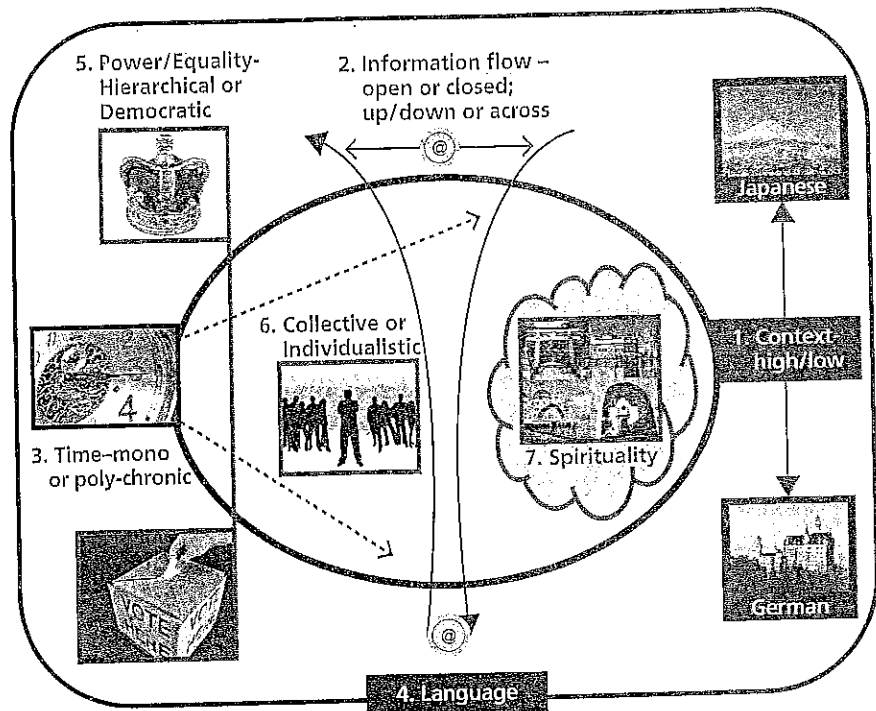
- What are some customs related to lunch and dinner invitations?
- How are gifts viewed? Are they expected in business settings or when visiting someone's home in another culture? If they are expected, what is acceptable?
- What are appropriate greetings?
- What is appropriate to discuss when? For example, are business topics acceptable in informal social gatherings? On the other hand, would it be polite to discuss families at business lunches?
- What gestures should be avoided?

When visiting another culture, we should always review such do's and don'ts, but this section does not provide that kind of information because it is so specific to the country or region being visited. Instead, it provides frameworks and questions to help in recognizing some of the differences that could lead to misunderstandings so that we can better understand the diverse audiences to whom and with whom we are communicating on a deeper, more universal level. Again, the goal is to build cultural competence.

One useful cultural framework in a business or professional context was developed by Mary O'Hara-Devereaux and Robert Johansen for their book *Globalwork*. They argue that, "while the learning process is endless, simple frameworks can help you develop a sense of competence. Understanding the various levels of diversity—physical, social, professional, functional, even spiritual—provides a good beginning."⁷ In their framework, they demonstrate that the five cultural variables of language, context, time, power/equality, and information flow are interrelated and interdependent. The framework illustrated in Exhibit 9.4 suggests the interdependence of the variables they isolated in their framework and adds two others very important to understanding cultures—collectivism versus individualism and spirituality and tradition.

EXHIBIT 9.4 The Seven Major Cultural Variables

Sources: Variables included in this framework were inspired by the work of Hall, Hofstede, Inglehart, O'Hara-Devereau, & Johansen. Variations of this model appear in Barrett, D. J. (2009). Put your finger on the differences: Achieving cross-cultural literacy. *Communication Director* and in Barrett, D.J. (2011). The Global Visions case: Determining the best practices for managing expats and intercultural difference in a multinational corporation (teaching notes), *Journal of Organizational Behavior Education*.



These seven variables are important to and applicable across all cultures:

Variable	Brief Description
Context	High, meaning more in the context and relationships, what is not said, or low, where meaning is primarily in the words, what is said verbally.
Information flow	Emphasis on how information is shared, whether open, across, down, or up in the organization; is it open or controlled.
Time	Focused on the past, the present, or the future; time is planned, measured, and valued or fluid and unimportant.
Language	First language learned and any secondary languages in which individual is fluent.
Power and equality	Respectful of authority and rituals, belief in hierarchies and titles or little respect for authority, view that everyone is equal.
Collectivism and individualism	Emphasis on "I" or "we," on the individual or on the group or the community.
Spirituality	Control and value in individual or outside self; nature serves humans or in symbiotic relationship.

These are the variables anthropologists use most often when making distinctions about culture.⁸ Understanding how each of these traditional cultural differences might affect interactions and communication in particular will increase cultural competence and facilitate analysis of your audience and development of a communication strategy.

Communicating When Encountering Cultural Differences

The discussion in the above section defines briefly some of possible cultural differences we might encounter when working in a diverse or multicultural environment. So what would each of the variables mean for us when interacting and communicating with those exemplifying any one of them? What follows is a discussion of how the differences could affect behavior and communication styles and how we should communicate to avoid problems or misunderstandings.

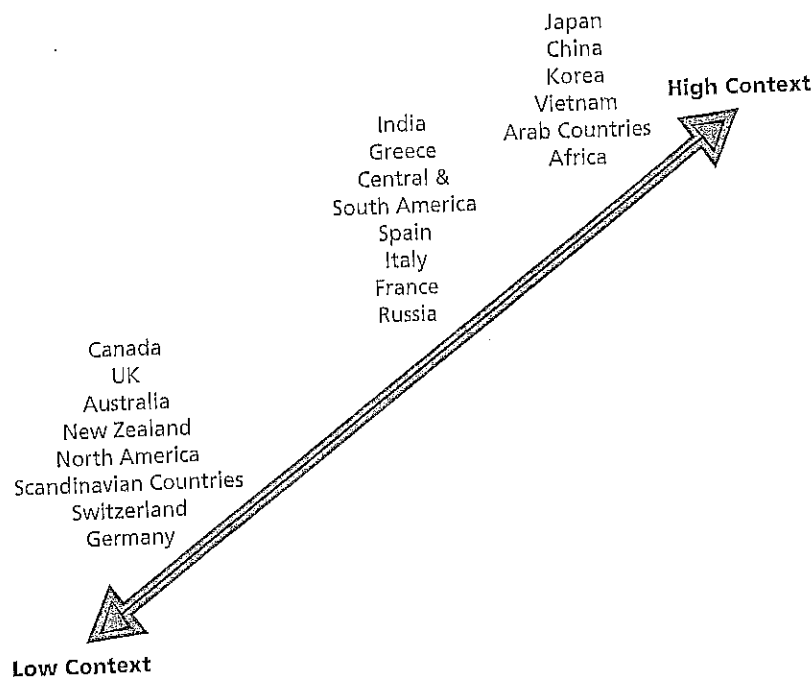
Context

The first topic in almost any discussion of culture will be "context," a theory first explored at length by Edward T. Hall in his groundbreaking work on culture. Context was used in Chapter 2 to denote what is going on around us that might affect the choices we make as part of a communication strategy. In cultural studies, context emphasizes what is going on outside **and** what is going on inside individuals that influences the way they interact with others and understand the words and behavior of others. In short, context is anything that surrounds and accompanies communication and gives meaning to it.⁹

Countries can be arrayed on a spectrum ranging from low-context to high-context (Exhibit 9.5). The highest on the high-context end is the Asian culture, particularly Japanese and Chinese, with others, such as Arab and African close by. At the opposite end, the countries usually thought of as the purest examples of low-context are the German and Swiss, with North American and Scandinavian countries close at hand. The other countries fall along the spectrum with some, such as the Spanish, Italian, and French closer to the middle, but tending more toward the high-context end.

High-context cultures rely more extensively on interpersonal relationships to understand meaning and place less importance on verbal messages and more on nonverbal, such as tone, gestures, and facial expressions. They emphasize trust, intuition, and the importance of getting to know people. These cultures tend to be community-oriented, valuing group harmony and consensus over individual accomplishments. Saving face is important to them. Their communication style tends to be indirect.

EXHIBIT 9.5
Countries Placed
on the High-/Low-
Context Spectrum



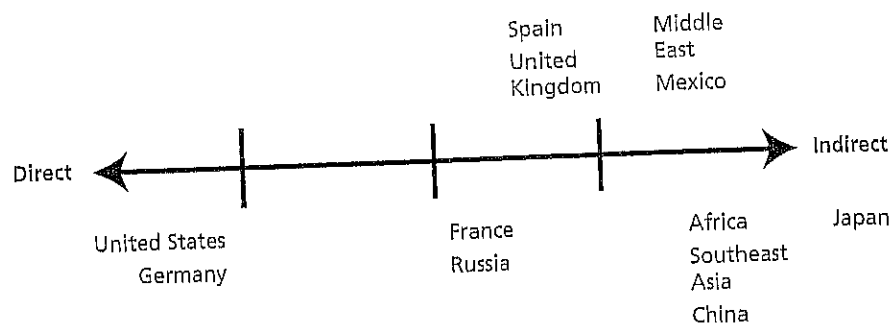
As a result of the need to get to know people before doing business with them, in high-context cultures, reaching agreements can take much longer than in a low-context culture, which tends to be more impatient and bottom-line driven.

In contrast, low-context cultures depend on explicit verbal messages and rely less on interpersonal relationships for meaning in communication. They tend to value facts and figures, are very direct and to the point when communicating, and expect contracts and legal agreements in business dealings. In fact, the attitude toward agreements and contracts is one major behavioral difference between high and low context. In the low-context cultures, contracts are seen as firm and inflexible. Once two sides have shaken hands, and particularly after they have signed the contract, the agreement cannot be modified without major problems and legal entanglements.

Low-context cultures tend to use a more direct form of communication, whereas high-context cultures will be more indirect. Exhibit 9.6 demonstrates the range of cultures in terms of direct and indirect communication styles. Cultures using a more direct style will usually emphasize independence and individuality. They will be forthright, appearing confident and authoritative. Their directness may be interpreted by some as being too aggressive when they state their opinions without qualification. In fact, those used to a more indirect style, may see the direct communicator as rude.

EXHIBIT 9.6**Direct versus Indirect Communication Styles**

Source: Storti, C. (1999).
Figuring Foreigners Out.
 Intercultural Press.



Indirect communication, on the other hand, will be used in cultures valuing harmony and community togetherness. They will avoid confrontations and often state their opinion so indirectly that those from direct cultures will not understand them. For example, they will not say "no" directly; instead they may say, "perhaps" or "maybe," which leaves the direct communicator thinking the door is open, when in the mind of the indirect speaker, it may be clearly closed.

As discussed earlier in this text, all communication exists in a context. Recognizing that the importance of context will differ from culture to culture is essential. For some cultures, context is more important than the words one individual might communicate to another. For others, getting to the point with words is all that matters.

Again, it would be easy to overgeneralize about context differences. It may be typical for a person from the United States or Germany to rely less on context and more on the words that are exchanged, looking for actual facts and figures and not for the meaning between the words, the way the words are spoken, or the body language that might accompany the message. However, this stereotypical expectation will not be valid for everyone from the United States or Germany.

Information Flow

The importance of context in a culture, high or low, influences how individuals approach exchanges of information and determines how messages flow between people and levels in organizations. It also controls who initiates communication and with whom, what kinds of messages are sent, what channels are preferred, and how formal or informal the exchange of information will be.

For instance, businesspeople in the United States are known for their directness and "bottom-line" mentality. They want the "so what?" right up front and do not want to read through a lengthy prologue to get to it. Information flow refers to "how" and "how fast" information is exchanged.

The following are some questions we should ask to understand better the cultural expectations of information flow:

1. How fast does a message travel from one part of the organization to another, from one person to another?
2. Can and does the information travel directly, or must it go through levels or channels?
3. How much context is needed to ensure that the information is understood?
4. How should information be linked and sequenced—or looped—to produce the intended results?
5. What are the most effective means of packaging information to produce the right responses?
6. Does the culture prefer words, graphics, or some combination?
7. How should the information be organized: directly or indirectly?
8. Does the culture prefer written communication to oral?
9. Is the culture comfortable with informality in presentations or meetings?

With the rise of social media, corporations in many areas of the world are feeling the pressure to make their organizations more transparent and to provide more information freely to the public at large. More and more, people expect to be able to connect with organizations through a variety of technologies, and they expect the organizations to respond in kind. This is having a powerful impact on information flow in many companies, with more of them establishing a strong Internet presence and using social media, such as Twitter, to give information to and obtain feedback from their clients, customers, and employees.

Time

Henry David Thoreau, a North American writer influenced by Eastern philosophical ideas and North American Indian culture, said, "Time is but a stream I go a-fishing in." This view of time is referred to in discussions of cultural frameworks as *polychronic*, that is, believing that time is a state of being consisting of many events occurring at once. Polychronic time is open-ended and flexible, and people are more important than promptness and schedules. The opposite cultural view of time is called *monochronic*.

People in monochronic cultures believe that time is linear, is divisible, and consists of one event at a time. Time is a commodity and is meant to be measured and managed, conserved or wasted, spent wisely or foolishly. Events are scheduled sequentially, one at a time, and this schedule takes precedence over relationships and people. High-context cultures tend to be polychronic and low-context

monochronic. For instance, North Americans see time as a scarce resource, and the expression "time is money" conveys the kind of value placed on time in U.S. business.

In addition to the polychronic/monochronic difference, cultures also differ in how they view the past, present, and future. Some see now as all there is and think it presumptuous to try to control or predict the future. Others value the past more. The typical North American is strongly oriented toward the future and devalues what is happening now as irrelevant. The following questions will help in uncovering differences in time orientation:

1. Does the culture emphasize promptness, or are people relaxed about starting times and even offended by those who arrive "right on time"?
2. Are they involved in several activities at a time, or do they do one thing at a time?
3. Do they take time commitments and deadlines seriously? How are appointments and schedules viewed?
4. How important is the way things were done in the past?
5. Are they more focused on the task or on people?
6. Do they expect privacy and respect private property?
7. What are their usual working hours?
8. When do they typically eat lunch and dinner?

Again, social media and technology are changing people's concepts of time as a commodity. In some work cultures, for example, employees with cell phones always accessible in their hands or pockets may be expected to be available at all times and to respond to text messages and e-mails even long after standard working hours. Responding in near-real time may be valued, particularly in monochronic cultures, even taken for granted.

Language

Language has been described as the "central influence on culture and one of the most highly charged symbols of a culture or a nation. . . . A language does not merely record and transmit perceptions and thoughts; it actually helps to shape both."¹⁰ According to Edward T. Hall, "Culture is language; language is culture."¹¹ We cannot separate language from culture.

Although language usually presents the most obvious differences when people from different cultures come together, it is not just a matter of someone speaking Spanish and someone else speaking Mandarin. All cultural levels have language differences: industries, professions, functions, and even genders. As Deborah Tannen's research has found,

men and women use language so differently at times that it is a wonder they ever connect. Language includes words, syntax, and vocabulary, as well as the various dialects and the jargon of disciplines.

Unfortunately, no easy way exists to solve the problems created by language differences. This is one place where the old adage "A little learning is a dangerous thing" bears out: "Without more than passing familiarity with the language of a culture, it is virtually impossible to scan the environment for business cues, negotiate, or evaluate performance."¹² Learning just a little bit of a language and trying to use it in a professional context could cause problems, although most cultures would appreciate our interest and our attempt. In international business negotiations, we should always consider hiring our own interpreter, even if we feel fairly comfortable with the language, to avoid any misunderstandings or a contractual agreement we did not intend.

Power

Cultures differ tremendously in how they view power and equality. Some believe in strict hierarchies with clear distinctions between levels and formalized respect for people at the higher levels of an organization. Others see everyone as equal, and although a title may command some element of respect, it is not as rigidly observed as in a hierarchical culture. Some cultures respect age; others do not. Some think education demands respect, while others see it as simply another item for a résumé. In other words, titles and position matter more for some cultures than they do for other cultures.

Hofstede discusses the differences in power perception and practice in cultures as "power distance," which he defines as "the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally."¹³ He describes a major study measuring power distance from country to country in which the researchers found that some cultures view the possession of power by relatively few people and the resultant inequality as the norm. Such cultures have high power distance values. Other cultures see power as spread fairly evenly across all members and believe all people are equal, resulting in low distance values.

The survey results indicated "high power distance values for Latin countries (both Latin European, like France and Spain, and Latin American) and for Asian and African countries" and "lower power distance values" for the "U.S.A., Great Britain and its former Dominions, and for the remaining non-Latin part of Europe."¹⁴

This difference in how power and equality are viewed leads to tremendous differences in how individuals approach reporting relationships within organizations, how they function on teams, and how they interact with one another on a daily basis. Exhibit 9.7 offers

EXHIBIT 9.7**Some Differences
between High/Low
Power Distance
Workplaces**

Source: Adapted from Hofstede, G. (1997). *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*. New York: McGraw-Hill. Used with permission of the author.

Low Power Distance	High Power Distance
• Inequalities among people minimized • Interdependence between less and more powerful people • More educated hold less authoritarian values than less educated • Hierarchy means inequality of roles, established for convenience • Decentralization is popular • Narrow salary range between top and bottom of organization • Subordinates expect to be consulted • Ideal boss is a resourceful democrat • Privileges and status symbols are frowned upon	• Inequalities expected and desired • Less powerful people dependent on the more powerful people • Both more and less educated show almost equally authoritarian values • Hierarchy reflects the existential inequality between higher and lower levels • Centralization is popular • Wide salary range between top and bottom of organization • Subordinates expect to be told what to do • Ideal boss is a benevolent autocrat • Privileges and status symbols for managers are expected and popular

examples of some of the differences found in low power distance and high power distance workplaces.

The differences in how cultures view power affect leadership in particular. "Different cultural groups may have different ideas regarding what leaders typically look like and how they should or should not behave. In some cultures a leader is thought of as typically an autonomous, strong, and decisive person; whereas in other cultures other images of ideal leaders may prevail."¹⁵

What might be considered leadership in one culture may be seen as tyranny in another. Leaders who move outside of the culture they know must be particularly mindful of how the culture they have entered views power.

In addition, changes in technology and the emphasis on communicating using social media place more pressure on organizations to be open with information and with power. Organizations are having to change power constructs or at least rethink them. Low power cultures will be more receptive to social media and accept their use, whereas high power cultures may try to hang on to traditional behavior and restrict information sharing and communication.

The following questions will help in determining and appreciating some of the differences in cultural perspectives on power and equality:

1. What is the attitude toward titles and positions?
2. Do individuals openly challenge authority?
3. Is the organization multilayered or flat?

4. How are decisions made (by one or many)?
5. Are subordinates consulted or told what to do?
6. What is the attitude toward individualism?
7. How is status displayed?
8. What is the attitude toward women in business?
9. What is the attitude toward age?
10. How open is the organization to social media? Is it an expected way to work or is it discouraged?

A couple of cultural variables that cut across context, information flow, time, language, and power are also important in understanding culture. These are questions of individualism versus collectivism and spirituality and tradition.

Collectivism versus Individualism

The individualism versus collectivism cultural difference is included in another popular framework for studying culture, that of Hofstede. Hofstede breaks the cultural differences into power, uncertainty avoidance, individual/collective, masculine/feminine, and long-term/short-term orientation. Cultural emphasis on context, on how information is shared, and how power is viewed are influenced by how individualistic or collectivistic a culture is. Hofstede explains the terms as follows:

Individualism pertains to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family. Collectivism as its opposite pertains to societies in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive ingroups, which throughout people's lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty.¹⁶

The major question to ask is, Does the culture emphasize the individual ("I") or the community ("we")? If a person's culture focuses on the individual, he or she will understand and feel concern about his or her individual needs, expectations, and welfare. On the other hand, persons concerned with the community will be looking for how what happens affects their group and family. The individually focused cultures will look for messages relevant to them specifically, whereas the more collective cultures will want to know what will happen to the group or community.

One way to consider whether the culture emphasizes the individual or the community is to examine the social media in which it gets involved. If blogs are common and social networking is less popular, the culture likely identifies more with the individual. Likewise, if more people are involved in a collaborative online culture, such as Facebook, Google, or LinkedIn, the focus may be more on the community.

Spirituality and Tradition

Spirituality and tradition include religion and traditional values as defined by Inglehart in his Values Map. Inglehart found that traditional versus secular/rational values and survival/self-expression values dominate all other cultural variables, explaining "more than 70 percent of the cross-national variance."¹⁷

The Traditional/Secular-rational values dimension reflects the contrast between societies in which religion is very important and those in which it is not. A wide range of other orientations are closely linked with this dimension. Societies near the traditional pole emphasize the importance of parent-child ties and deference to authority, along with absolute standards and traditional family values.¹⁸

The religion/tradition value is an important variable in determining behavior and how individuals will communicate and interpret messages. Many of the customs and ways of interacting with others depend on belief systems, and often very traditional cultures will adhere strictly to rituals that honor their beliefs. For example, in Islamic cultures, the call to prayer (Adhan) is honored five times a day with a speaker heard across the communities reciting the lyrical Arabic text of the Adhan. In the Middle East, Friday is a non-work day, since it is a holy day, whereas Sunday is still a non-work day in many traditional Christian countries.

Questions to understand how best to communicate with groups expressing spiritual or other traditional values are as follows:

1. Does this cultural group believe in a higher being or some other source of guidance or power outside themselves?
2. Are they more traditional in their beliefs and values or more secular?
3. What are the predominant religious influences?
4. What are the daily religious practices, expectations, and holidays and how will these influence how they interact on a daily basis?

How persons answer these questions will reflect their value system and will influence how they will respond to whatever messages we are communicating to them. It will influence where they will look for direction and how they will respond emotionally to authority messages in particular.

Again, one of the dangers of any discussion of cultural differences and classifications is stereotyping. The distinctions made in this discussion of all of the variables describe characteristics that are typical of a group but will not necessarily be found in each member of the group. The goal is to make each of us more sensitive to some of the deeply embedded beliefs and values that could affect how we interpret the meaning intended by others in their communication with us so that we are open and flexible and better able to connect and to communicate across the different cultures we encounter every day.

A Final Word on Connecting and Communicating across Cultures

By understanding and appreciating cultural diversity, leaders can better know how to connect and communicate with all of the different audiences that form the professional environment and most of the professional world today. If we are leading others, no matter the national or regional origin, race, gender, age, or whatever other cultural difference we will encounter, we want to be able to deliver our messages appropriately and effectively.

To connect and communicate, we should adopt the following approaches to any cross-cultural encounter, whether visiting another country, interacting in a new social medium, or meeting someone in our own backyard:

1. Be open and respectful. All cultures are valuable and important, and no individuals are better or right or wrong in the way they think or act. We need to be open and value the differences. We also need to respect individuals from all cultures, finding out what respect "looks like" to them.
2. Know the social customs. Use any of the numerous guides to the social customs to avoid the obvious and potentially dangerous gaffes caused by ignorance. Whether shaking hands, exchanging business cards, or dining, when attempting to connect and communicate with individuals from a culture other than our own, we must know the expectations and behave appropriately.
3. Learn as much about the culture, history, people, and even languages as reasonable. When we move outside our own culture into another, we realize the value of learning as much as possible about the culture. If we plan to do business with another country for any length of time, we will ideally want to learn the language, while still realizing that, if we are not fluent, we should use an interpreter before entering into business discussions or decisions.
4. Obtain pointers and feedback from members of the culture. Having colleagues and friends in different cultural communities is invaluable, and we should call on them to help us and coach us.
5. Be patient, be flexible, and value the time needed to develop relationships. Remember, cultures differ in their view of time, and when traveling for business meetings, for example, we need to allow enough time and avoid being rushed. We also need to realize relationship building is important in high-context cultures, and we need to build in adequate time for it to occur.
6. Keep a sense of humor. We have to be able to laugh at ourselves and know others will appreciate our ability to do so as well.

7. Keep language simple and avoid jargon. All languages are full of idioms and slang, so whenever working across language differences, we need to keep our language as free of jargon and colloquialisms as possible. For example, in English, we frequently use sports and war metaphors. Many of these will not translate well.

Even though we can only obtain a very basic level of cultural competence from reading online sources or watching YouTube videos, with the Internet, we have a wealth of information at our fingertips and we should take advantage of it. The cultural framework used in this chapter along with the discussion of some of the possible differences we may encounter and the questions to help us probe differences should provide useful tools for our analysis of our audiences and for the development of our communication strategy.

Cultural competence is essential in today's world and required for leadership communication and transformational leaders in particular. This chapter has provided an introduction and the basic foundation for leadership communication across cultures.

Application 9.1

Case Study: Proactively Managing Diversity

Case: OmniBank's Diversity Efforts

You have recently been named the new president of OmniBank, a medium-size but rapidly growing suburban bank that meets the needs of individuals and small businesses. During the interview process, you observed that, beyond the front office teller level, the more senior workforce at the bank is very homogeneous—mostly male and predominantly Caucasian. You have reviewed several marketing studies that profile your customer base and you realize that you not only have many customers of different ethnicities but also have a large number of international customers. In addition, you have a large number of “starter” accounts for students in high school who will soon move on to college—and may take their business with them if the bank does not meet their remote banking needs.

As the new president, you decide it is important to launch a comprehensive effort to improve both the diversity of the employees at the bank and the diversity with which it interacts with its constituents. You value diversity and believe that broadening your employee base and social networks as the bank grows will benefit everyone involved. Besides, it makes good business sense.

Your Assignment

You decide to form a committee to jump-start your efforts in improving hiring and networking diversity at the bank. In a group, list the steps you would take to create this committee and establish its charter. Pay special attention to how you would ensure that it accomplishes the goal of greater diversity, both at the bank and in community outreach.

Application 9.2

Case Study: Creating International Correspondence

The Case: PTI and Congoil

You are the vice president of operations for Production Tankers, Inc. (PTI), a U.S.-based oil services contractor that provides converted tankers to produce oil from offshore fields. PTI's converted tanker *Ocean Reliable (OR)* has been producing oil for Congoil P&P, a small but politically important division of a large West African national oil company, for the past seven years at a field called Naabila. Two years remain on the present contract. PTI hopes to renew the contract with Congoil for use of the vessel at another field when the present contract expires. You know in all honesty that other opportunities for the vessel are very limited. PTI's CEO has made the contract renewal a high priority for you and your group. Congoil pays PTI a fee of \$43,000 per day for lease and operation of the *OR*, a rate that has allowed PTI to fully recover its initial investment in the vessel. Oil production has been running at around 7,000 barrels per day, giving Congoil a revenue stream on the order of \$140,000 per day at current prices.

Congoil owns Naabila field, is in charge of production operations, and bears all production costs. The large U.S. oil company Amproco serves as commercial and technical advisor to Congoil as part of the agreement granting it the rights to explore and produce other promising areas on the country's continental shelf. Amproco receives no payment for its advisory role and does not pay any share of the costs of operating Naabila field. Amproco is believed to have some influence with Congoil, although the nature of the relationship between the two companies remains rather obscure to outsiders.

Two years ago, as oil production at Naabila began to decline, Congoil asked PTI to install a small natural gas compression system aboard the *OR*, so that it could implement gas lift operations, a technique used to help sustain production from aging fields. The need for gas lift had been anticipated, and PTI's contract with Congoil stipulated that, if a gas lift compression system were ever installed, Congoil would reimburse PTI within 45 days for all documented costs. These costs came to \$2.5 million and, under the terms of the contract, were invoiced to Congoil.

Gas lift operations began 18 months ago aboard the *OR*, but despite repeated requests from your operations manager and PTI's in-country business development manager, Congoil has not yet reimbursed PTI the \$2.5 million. The difficulty seems to arise from Congoil's belief that some provisions of the contract are unfair and should be overlooked or set aside. Congoil's general manager, Syanga M'bweni Rugeiro, has maintained that installation of the gas lift compressor represents a capital improvement to the *OR*, and thus PTI should bear the cost. He and other Congoil officials have also objected to the fact that Congoil is contractually bound to pay PTI the \$43,000 day-rate even if the vessel is not producing oil. They recall with considerable resentment an incident almost four years ago when needed repairs in conjunction with an extension of the original three-year contract required PTI to remove the *OR* from Naabila and take it to port for a 57-day period—during which they continued to pay the day-rate.

As vice president of operations, you have profit and loss responsibility for the *OR* and PTI's other production tankers. PTI's executives have made it clear to you that collecting the \$2.5 million, preferably with annual interest of 8 percent, will have a material impact on the company's earnings for the

current fiscal year, estimated by analysts to be in the range of \$18.5 million on revenues of \$390 million. Given the culture of PTI, you understand that securing payment from Congoil would be viewed very favorably and earn you additional status with your peers and superiors.

You decide to write to Syanga Rugeiro requesting immediate payment of the \$2.5 million. You have known Syanga for over seven years, and while you did not negotiate the original contract for the OR, you did negotiate the follow-on contract at the end of the first three years, when PTI agreed to reduce the original day-rate in exchange for the security afforded by a six-year extension. You feel that you know Syanga about as well as most Westerners get to know African officials, and you feel your relationship with him is sound. You know that he received his geology degree from the local university and later spent a year studying management at a British university. He speaks good English, and your business relations have been cordial. You have talked with him about his family and once even met his oldest son when Syanga brought him along on a business trip to Houston. He asked your assistance in getting the boy accepted into the engineering program at your undergraduate university, something you were happy to do.

Despite all these interactions with him, however, you have never felt that you understood Syanga very well. His Western education and business manner seem like a thin veneer over a much more substantial base of traditional African values and preferences. Your experience and some modest reading on the subject have indicated to you that the local West African culture is collectivist, high-context, high power distance, polychronic, and risk and uncertainty avoiding. Decision making requires consultation among all affected parties, but nothing happens until the highest-ranking official involved signals his approval. You realize you have drawn most of these assumptions from your reading, but you feel you have also seen some of it in Syanga's actions. You feel you need to appeal directly to him to pay the \$2.5 million owed to PTI.

You decide also to write to Amproco's assistant country manager, Carl Mouton, asking for his help in getting Congoil to pay PTI the \$2.5 million. You have met Carl on several occasions and have a number of common friends in the industry. Also, you have discussed the difficulties contractors can encounter doing business in West Africa. You believe that Carl might be able to influence Syanga to approve your request for payment.

The Assignment

In your role as PTI's vice president of operations, select the appropriate written media for this situation and for the cultures involved (consider text message, e-mail, or snail mail memo or letter) and write two correspondences responding to the situation described in the case:

1. To Syanga Rugeiro, requesting payment of the \$2.5 million owed PTI and
2. To Carl Mouton, asking for his assistance in persuading Syanga to pay.

In addition, write a short (one page maximum) explanation of your communication strategy and how your knowledge of intercultural communication issues influenced the decisions you made in organizing the information, expressing your ideas, and developing an appropriate style and tone. In your explanation, comment also on the choice of written media as appropriate for

your communication. If given the option, would you choose a medium other than written to communicate these messages? Explain your response.

Syanga Rugeiro's address is 26-30 Avenida Presidente dos Santos, Dist. Norte 4, Kinuanda, Congola.

Source: This case and assignment were prepared by Charles R. McCabe. Copyright Charles R. McCabe, 2002. Used with permission.

Application 9.3 Preparing an International Briefing

For this assignment, you will work in groups to research, prepare, and deliver a 15-minute presentation with 5 minutes for questions and answers. The presentation will show how the culture of an individual nation or world region affects the local business environment and practices. As a starting point for your research and preparation, you should use the information in this chapter on cultural variables and determine the characteristics of your selected country against each variable. For example, is the country high- or low-context? How do they feel about power and equality? Your research should result in an international communication audit for the nation or region you select. In addition, you might want to look at the Web site of a global company that sells its products in many countries—Procter & Gamble, for example (www.pg.com/en_US/index.shtml).

Your group should develop its presentation with a specific business-related audience and purpose in mind; for instance, you might want to approach the presentation as a briefing for employees assigned to a newly acquired foreign subsidiary or a negotiating team about to embark on negotiations for an international merger. You should make your presentation appropriate in every respect to this specific audience. You may take a creative approach.

To promote breadth of learning and avoid repetition, each group is encouraged to select a different nation or region.

Application 9.4 Designing International Communication Programs

For this assignment, you are to work in groups to select a country in which a currently established company is not marketing its products. For example, you might look at Dunkin' Donuts and decide to market it in Germany. Each group is to research, prepare, and deliver a presentation of 20 to 25 minutes, with 5 minutes for questions and answers, or 30 minutes total.

The presentation will describe your marketing plan for the introduction of your company's product or service into a country other than your own. Your primary objective is to show that you understand enough about the country and its culture to argue that the country will be a successful target market for the product or service that you have selected. The presentation will address the business opportunity (the market), your product or service, the competitive landscape, your positioning, and your communication strategy (paying special attention to cultural differences).

The overall purpose of the presentation is to showcase to your CEO and senior executive team your team's approach to promoting and marketing your selected product or service. They will want to see your rationale and your preliminary plan for introducing and marketing the product or service.

Your group must decide on (1) the company, (2) the product or service of that company, and (3) the country where the product/service will be introduced. You must be able to make a case for the introduction of your product

or service; in other words, there must be a market for the product or service. In addition, you must include your approach to the social media sphere and justify why that approach will work.

Notes

1. *Profiles in Diversity Journal* (2011). www.diversityjournal.com/2481-peter-voser-ceo-royal-dutch-shell-plc/.
2. Barrett, D. J. (forthcoming 2013–2014). Has new digital media reconfigured traditional intercultural variables. Research conducted for the *Journal of Rhetoric, Professional Communication, and Globalization*.
3. Hall, E. T. (1959). *The Silent Language*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
4. Spencer-Oatey, H. (2000). *Culturally Speaking: Managing Rapport through Talk across Cultures*. London: Continuum.
5. *Languages of the World* (2013). www.ethnologue.com/world.
6. O'Hara-Devereaux, M., and Johansen, R. (1994). *Globalwork: Bridging Distance, Culture, and Time*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
7. O'Hara-Devereaux, M., and Johansen, R. (1994).
8. For more on the variables, see the books by Edward T. Hall, a prolific researcher and writer on culture and the one to whom most recent writers on the subject refer. In addition, you will want to look at Hofstede's *Culture and Organizations* and Inglehart and Welzel's *Modernization, Culture Change, and Democracy*, as well as their Value Map. If you desire a more complex but also useful framework, you should look at the one provided by Walker, Walker, and Schmitz in their book *Doing Business Internationally*. Although some have criticized Hall and Hofstede for being dated and limited too much to geography, recent studies have shown that their concepts still have validity and that the communication patterns today "still resonate with the cultural dimensions proposed decades ago." See in particular Würtz, E. (2005). A cross-cultural analysis of websites from high-context cultures and low-context cultures. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 11, No. 1, article 13. jcmc.indiana.edu/vol11/issue1/wuertzt.html.
9. O'Hara-Devereaux and Johansen have pulled much of Edward T. Hall's distinctions on space under context, so this discussion will follow that combination as well.
10. Condon, J. C. (1975). *An Introduction to Intercultural Communication*. New York: Macmillan.
11. Hall (1959).
12. O'Hara-Devereaux and Johansen (1994).
13. Hofstede, G. (1997). *Culture and Organizations: Software of the Mind*. New York: McGraw-Hill, p. 28.
14. Hofstede (1997), p. 26.
15. Den Hartog, D.N. (2004). Leading in a global context: Vision in complexity. In *The Blackwell Handbook of Global Management: A Guide to Managing Complexity*. Eds. H.W. Lang, et al. Also, see Den Hartog, et al. (1999). Culture specific and cross-culturally generalizable implicit leadership theories, *Leadership Quarterly*, 10 (2), 219–256.
16. Hofstede (1997).
17. www.worldvaluessurvey.org/.
18. www.worldvaluessurvey.org/.

