

Connecting Banks and Communities Through Cultural Agility

Workshop Facilitation & Discussion Guide

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Key Cultural Variables

Some key cultural variables are:

1. Time orientation: Monochronic vs. Polychronic
2. Communication: High Context vs. Low Context
3. Orientation: Individual vs. Group
4. Status: Being vs. Doing
5. Focus: Relationship vs. Task
6. Power: Egalitarian vs. Hierarchical
7. Conflict Style: Harmony vs. Confrontation
8. Values: Tradition vs. Change
9. Mental Processes: Linear vs. Lateral

Key Cultural Variables Defined

1. **Time Orientation: How an individual uses and manages time.**

Monochronic: Monochronic time is tangible, linear and exact. People do one thing at a time. Time is tightly compartmentalized: schedules are almost sacred. Monochronic people value promptness and tend to sequence communications as well as tasks. Because “time is money”, there is never enough time.

Polychronic: Polychronic time is elastic, circular and relative: it allows many things to happen simultaneously, with no particular end in sight. Polychronic time is open-ended: completing the task or communication is more important than adhering to a schedule. Polychronic people value relationships and can do many tasks and carry on multiple conversations at once. As time is circular, there is always enough time.

2. **Communication: High context vs. low context cultures.**

High-Context Cultures: Communication is implicit and indirect. Body language counts as much or more than a speaker’s actual words. In fact, in high context cultures, verbal messages have little meaning without the surrounding context, which includes the overall relationship between all the people engaged in communication. As a result, people from high-context societies rely on their history, their status, their relationships and a plethora of other information, including religion, to assign meaning to an event.

Low-Context Cultures: Communication is explicit and direct. People from low-context cultures focus more on content – the actual words themselves, whether they are in oral or written form, than on the context in which the words are spoken. People in low-context cultures tend to compartmentalize their lives and relationships and use language with great precision and economy.

3. **Orientation: Whether the interests of the individual or the group are primary.**

Individual: The emphasis is on the individual. Self-expression and self-actualization are primary. People are expected to look out for themselves and their immediate family. Independence is valued and it is believed that individuals control their own destiny. Individual rights trump social responsibilities.

Group: The emphasis is on group cohesion. Conformity is valued as individuals are expected to put the good of the whole above individual self-interest. Emphasis is on group cohesion. Individuals are expected to accept their destiny. Responsibility to the family or society trumps individual rights.

4. Status: Being vs. Doing.

Doing: Who one “is” culturally, is largely defined by what one does by way of employment. Status is earned by what the individual achieves in life. Individuals “live to work”.

Being: Social status is ascribed by who one “is” in relationship to others as a function of one’s age, gender, social class and family background and heritage. Individuals “work to live” What one does occupationally is secondary to one’s identity within the family or group.

5. Focus: Task or Relationship.

Task: One’s top priority is “getting ahead” or “getting down to business.” Time is compartmentalized with task completion and orientation taking precedence over personal relationships.

Relationship: One’s top priority is “getting along” with others. Time is circular and flexible with building and maintaining personal relationships taking priority over specific tasks.

6. Power: Egalitarian vs. Hierarchical.

Egalitarian: societies question authority and emphasize equal status for all. It is assumed that all individuals have a right to participate in collective matters and make their own decisions. Gender equity is valued.

Hierarchical: societies respect authority, age, position in the family, chain of command and other measures of social status. Only those with the requisite status have a right to participate in collective matters. Decisions typically emanate from the top-down via a chain of command. Gender roles are valued.

7. Conflict Style: Harmony vs. Confrontation.

Harmony: Tension and conflict tends to be avoided in the interests of group harmony. Interpersonal problems are ignored or smoothed over in the interests of saving face. Discussing differences is seen as disruptive and counterproductive.

Confrontation: Interpersonal problems are dealt with directly and openly. Ignoring differences is seen as counter-productive, whereas discussing differences is seen as productive. Personal assertiveness is valued above group harmony.

8. Values: Tradition vs. Change.

Tradition: Order and stability is valued whereas change is seen as disruptive. Societal emphasis is on the individual adapting to the status quo for the sake of the greater good.

Change: is valued as bringing about innovation, progress and improvement. Societal emphasis is on continuous improvement as a means of achieving the greatest good for the greatest number. The status quo is seen as social and economic stagnation and a form of inefficiency.

9. Mental Processes: Linear vs. Lateral.

Linear: mental processes emphasize a logical, sequential ordering of thoughts in which each stage of an argument's rationale is carefully and methodically delineated. Main points are clearly stated. Objectivity is valued over intuition. Problem solving is done by following an organized, step-by-step method.

Lateral: mental processes are allowed to be more circular and meandering in order to allow the listener to infer the main point from the context of the story. Intuition is valued over rationality. Problem solving is done in a more spontaneous, less-ordered fashion.

Sources: Mary O'Hara-Devereaux & Robert Johansen, "Global Work: Bridging Distance, Culture and Time." Institute for the Future. 1994. Jossey-Bass Publishers. pp. 49-69.

Lee Gardenswartz and Anita Rowe, "Managing Diversity in Health Care." 1998. Jossey-Bass Publishers. pp. 38-60.

Cultural Variables Continuum

Instructions: Place an X on the continuum which represents your personal cultural preference at home/with family. Place an O on the continuum which represents your perception of your organizational culture at work. Place a Y on the continuum which represents your perception of the culture of the banking industry.

Orientation

Individualistic _____ Collectivistic

Focus

Task _____ Relationship

Communication

Low Context _____ High Context

Time

Monochronic _____ Polychronic

Conflict

Direct _____ Indirect

Affect

Neutral _____ Emotional

Mental Processes

Linear _____ Lateral

Status

Achievement _____ Ascribed

Power

Egalitarian _____ Hierarchical

Locus of Control

Internal _____ External