

Turning Cultural Dichotomies into Personal and Organizational Success | Global Mobility Articles and studies

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When on a global assignment, understanding the new culture of the foreign country is key to employee success. Cultural dichotomies—divisions resulting from national or regional characteristics that reflect fundamentally different approaches to business or everyday life—can often create obstacles for expatriates. But those differences can also present opportunities to maximize the positive impact of culture, for both the assignee and the organization.

Cultural dichotomies represent challenge and opportunity on two levels. For the organization, miscommunication resulting from failing to address the challenge is too often a primary reason why globalization plans don't succeed as quickly as

anticipated, or why an assignee fails to function effectively in the host country. On the other hand, recognizing and addressing the impact of cultural differences proactively can minimize problems and accelerate individual productivity and assignment success.

Mobility departments and providers alike must help their executives and clients recognize the effect of these differences and provide training in strategies and tactics to help them prepare and succeed.

Typical Dichotomies

Cultural dichotomies can reach across many aspects of professional and personal life. Subtle differences in basic thought processes and decision-making patterns, for example, can significantly influence communication. The French education system, for example, puts a high priority on teaching deductive reasoning. Therefore, French managers typically require in-depth information and work under the assumption that the thought process itself must be correct in order to reach a correct conclusion. Americans, on the other hand, may tend to pay less attention to the process and focus more on the ultimate decision, which can be revised if new information arises. The difference between these two approaches to decision-making can strongly affect multiple aspects of business management.

How we view and process time can be equally important, and the differences can be frustrating for managers from other cultures. American and Northern European cultures typically take a monochronic approach to time, viewing it as something to be organized and managed. The result is an emphasis on schedules, timelines and deadlines. Many other cultures—including several in Southern Europe, Latin America and Africa—are polychronic. They acknowledge that time exists, but view it as nearly impossible to organize, manage or control. And because time never stops, it never runs out, so schedules and deadlines can be much more flexible.

Cultural dichotomies are typically viewed as differences between nations, but significant differences can exist even within national borders. An assignee moving to New York must adapt to a different lifestyle than one moving to Atlanta, for example. Doing business in Shanghai is very different from working in a second-tier, provincial Chinese city. Even within a company with a long-established global presence and corporate policies, what works in the Stockholm office may not work in Mumbai.

An Example: Reconciling Low-Context and High-Context Communication

The list of potential dichotomies stretches endlessly, but a closer look at a common example, variations in communication styles, illustrates the positive impact that cultural awareness and training makes in a global assignment.

Communication styles are often described as ranging from low context to high context.

Low-context communicators are direct, precise and explicit. They take care to include all the information they intend to communicate in their words themselves rather than in their context. The Dutch are often cited as examples of very low-context communicators.

At the other end of the continuum are high-context communicators, as exemplified by the Japanese. They tend to embed their important information in the context of the conversation rather than in the explicit words. Because high-context communicators seek to avoid confrontation or embarrassment, their actual words may seem to obscure instead of clarify their intent.

This dichotomy can make communication difficult between Dutch and Japanese negotiators. The former might plainly ask, "Please tell me why you don't like the terms of this agreement." And the latter, seeking not to offend, might respond, "There are many fine points in this agreement. A few points perhaps need some further study."

If the low-context negotiator infers that the two positions are not too far apart, while the high-context party is in fact implying that there are significant differences to be resolved, the negotiation can quickly break down.

Such misunderstandings can be exacerbated in today's business environment, where communication is often by e-mail or teleconference and thus more difficult to detect and interpret a statement's implied meaning. However, communicators can be trained to mitigate this dichotomy, or even use their knowledge to enhance their communications.

At a strategic level, a low-context Dutch communicator can learn to structure meetings or teleconferences so as not to ask for on-the-spot reactions to ideas, because her Japanese counterpart might be reluctant to offer anything that could be interpreted as disagreement. Instead, she can provide background information prior to the teleconference and encourage participants to come with questions, which the Japanese can formulate so as not to risk disagreement or embarrassment. Similarly, she can invite comments to be submitted by e-mail after the teleconference, again avoiding the potential for confrontation.

At a tactical level, a low-context communicator can learn to avoid asking yes-or-no questions that might invite obfuscation. Instead of asking, "Can you deliver the report on Tuesday?" she might ask an open-ended question such as "What information do you need from me in order to prepare the report quickly?"

Awareness and Training Support Cross-Cultural Success

Of course, not all cultural dichotomies are so extreme. Britons and Americans, for example, tend to think of their cultures as similar. But both can profit from understanding that Britons tend to look for more high-context implications in communications and that Americans tend to be more flexible in revisiting decisions in light of new information or changing conditions.

What's most important in each case is that companies raise their awareness of the impact cultural differences can have on the success of international assignees, teams and globalization efforts. The failure of an individual assignment can negatively affect the overall success of a company entering a new market—far beyond the substantial cost of repatriating and replacing the assignee and his/her family.

In contrast, companies can profit significantly from recognizing that equipping assignees to succeed culturally in their new environment is just as important as providing them with housing or visa services—and that investing appropriate resources in professional, individualized cultural training can pay real business dividends.

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