

TUTORIAL
4.13

Culture in the workplace

This tutorial examines the impact of cultural differences that occur when people are working together - specifically differences in *concepts of power, attitudes to uncertainty and the concept of status*.

Introduction

Culture comes into sharpest focus in human interactions, and one of the greatest arenas for such interaction is when people are working together. So, in this tutorial are going to examine the impact of culture on a variety of work-related behaviors and the underlying values associated with those behaviours. We will look at three dimensions of cultural difference that have particular implications for the workplace:

- The *concept of power*.
- The *attitude toward uncertainty and the unknown*.
- The concept of *the source of status*.

The concept of power: high and low power-distance

The attitude of a society toward inequality, or how cultures deal with people's different levels of status and their access to power, is referred to as *power-distance*. Power-distance is especially evident when people are working together, particularly in the role and relationship of the person 'in charge' and their subordinates. Here are brief descriptions of the two poles of this concept, high and low power-distance:

High power-distance

People in these cultures accept that inequalities in power and status are natural or existential. In the same way they accept that some people are smarter than others, people accept that some will have more power and influence than others. Those with power tend to emphasize it, to hold it close and not delegate or share it, and to distinguish themselves as much as possible from those who do not have power. They are, however, expected to accept the responsibilities that go with power, to look after those beneath

them. Subordinates are not expected to take any initiative and are closely supervised.

Below is a list of characteristics and behaviours that reflect an attitude of high power-distance.

- People are less likely to question the boss because there is more fear of displeasing the boss in high power distance cultures.
- Elitism is the norm. Because it is normal to emphasise distinctions between the boss and subordinates.
- Those in power have special privileges in high power-distance cultures.
- There are greater wage differences between managers and subordinates.
- Workers prefer precise instructions from superiors and close supervision, the visible exercise of power, is common to these cultures.
- Bosses are independent; subordinates are dependent. There is an unequal distribution of power.
- Freedom of thought could get you into trouble and independence is not valued in subordinates.
- Less social mobility is the norm, which keeps those with and without power separated.
- The chain of command is sacred because rank must be respected; you should not 'go around' people.
- The pecking order is clearly established, there is a need to show who has power over whom.
- Management style is authoritarian and paternalistic. Bosses are supposed to wield their power.
- Interaction between boss and subordinate is formal, which emphasises the power gap.

Low power-distance

People in these cultures see inequalities in power and status as largely artificial: it is not natural, though it may be convenient, that some people have power over others. Those with power, therefore, tend to de-emphasize it, to minimise the differences between themselves and their subordinates, and to delegate and share power as much as possible. Subordinates are rewarded for taking the initiative and do not like close supervision.

Below is a list of characteristics and behaviours that reflect an attitude of low power-distance.

- Students question teachers because superiors do not have to be deferred to.
- Freedom of thought is encouraged and no one is threatened by independence or thinking for oneself.

- The chain of command is mainly for convenience, power differences are not emphasized.
- Interaction between boss and subordinate is more informal because the distance is minimized.
- Subordinates and bosses are interdependent. 'We're all equal here so we all depend on each other'.
- It's okay to question the boss because he's just another worker.
- Management style is consultative and democratic because 'We are all in this together', power distance is de-emphasised.

Working with power-distance differences

Cultural misunderstandings can occur when people from a low-power distance culture and a high-power distance culture work together. This could be in any environment where people are working together, including a church or religious group, a community group, an office or business, or when working with government or local officials.

Because power distinctions are not recognized in the same way, probably the most commonly occurring misunderstanding is that a person from a low power-distance culture can inadvertently communicate a lack of respect for the person or authority of those "in power" in a high power-distance culture. It can cause tension and relationship problems when low power-distance working practice is applied in the high power-distance work environment, for example:

- *Questioning the boss* - In low power-distance cultures it is normal practice to ask the boss for some clarification or to give input into a decision that has been made. But in many high power-distance cultures, bosses are not used to having their decisions questioned or, worse, having to explain them to subordinates. In these cultures, bosses make decisions, and subordinates carry them out. And if there are questions, they would normally be raised in a very delicate way and always through the proper channels. This doesn't mean bosses are unapproachable or infallible, but you do have to think long and hard before challenging those in power, and then do so in the appropriate way.
- *Taking initiative without asking the boss first* - In many low power-distance cultures it is a good thing to see something that needs to be done and just do it, without waiting to be told. In high power-distance cultures, that kind of behaviour is often interpreted as taking power that hasn't been given to you. You have made a decision that wasn't yours to make, and in the process usurped and threatened the authority of the person who is supposed to make such a decision. In cultures where power is highly centralised and closely guarded, taking initiative is a risky business.
- *Being too informal with those in power* - In high power-distance cultures, interaction between the higher ranks and the lower ranks, or

any mixing of the ranks, is relatively uncommon and tends to be quite formal. People in power don't just spend social time with their subordinates on the spur of the moment; most people in that situation would feel quite uncomfortable and awkward. In these cultures, people of higher status tend not to regard themselves as being like workers, nor do they want to be seen that way. The greater the gulf between the higher ranks and the lower echelons, the better for everyone.

- *Bypassing the chain of command* - In many cultures, bypassing the chain of command will not be appreciated. The proper thing to do would be to discuss an issue with the person directly above you in the chain of command, not to go directly to a higher boss. If the one above you doesn't respond, then you could either announce that you are going to talk to the boss or ask the one directly above you to do so. If he still does nothing, then you can go to the higher boss with relative impunity, having gone through the proper channels.

People from low power-distance cultures can find the formality, lack of independence and the more authoritarian management style frustrating to work with as it can seem inefficient and counter-productive. Conversely, people from high power-distance cultures can find people from low power-distance cultures disrespectful, pushy, threatening, and disruptive of the working harmony.

If you are working cross-culturally, it is important to take time to get to know your new community or coworkers, and *how* they work together - don't just assume that you know how to work in another culture without a time of learning first. It is very helpful to take a back seat in the beginning - to observe and learn with an open mind and a positive attitude. Don't try to jump in and improve things or change things in the early days, but take time to learn how things work first. Recognize the fact that things do get done and that the society does work, but that things get done differently to what you are used to. Eventually, if you go carefully and learn as you go, you will find that you become more like the local people and are able to fit in and to work well with them.

Attitude toward uncertainty and the unknown: high and low uncertainty avoidance

Another dimension of culture that particularly affects the workplace is how people respond to the inherent uncertainty of life. This uncertainty creates anxiety in all cultures, with characteristic responses - technology to control uncertainty in the natural world; laws, regulations, and procedures to control the uncertainty in human behaviour; and religious rituals to address people's spiritual uncertainty.

While all societies feel threatened by uncertainty, some feel more threatened by it than others do. Depending on their attitudes, different cultures have developed different ways of dealing with it. The two extremes, called *high uncertainty avoidance* and *low uncertainty avoidance*, are described below:

High uncertainty avoidance -

Cultures characterised by high uncertainty avoidance feel especially anxious about the uncertainty in life and try to limit and control it as much as possible. They have more laws, regulations, policies, and procedures and a greater emphasis on obeying them. They also have a strong tendency toward conformity, hence predictability. People take comfort in structure, systems, and expertise - anything that can blunt or even neutralise the impact of the unexpected. The unknown is frightening.

These behaviours are more commonly associated with high uncertainty avoidance cultures:

- Punctuality is highly valued because sticking to the schedule is comforting.
- People should keep emotions under control, because when people lose control of emotions, anything can happen!
- 'Different' is dangerous, because it is unpredictable or unknown.
- People expect more formality in interactions because that assures a certain order in the unfolding of interactions.
- The chain of command should never be bypassed - going around the structure threatens its very survival, and where would we be without structure?
- People believe less in 'common sense' - they are more likely to listen to people with expertise; the common person couldn't know that much.
- Conflict in organizations should be eliminated as it threatens the smooth running of things.
- People change jobs infrequently because stability is sought and provided for; change is threatening.
- A general sense of anxiety prevails because of the fear of the unknown.
- People accept authority more readily; authority is comforting because it guarantees order and keeps things under control.
- Rules should not be broken - they are the foundation of order.
- Risks should be avoided - they are inherently unsettling because they involve the unknown.

Low uncertainty avoidance -

People in these cultures do not feel quite so threatened nor anxious about uncertainty, and therefore do not have such a strong need to limit or control it. They seek to legislate fewer areas of human interaction and tolerate differences better. They feel boxed in by too much structure or too many

systems. They are curious rather than frightened by the unknown and are not uncomfortable leaving things to chance. Life is interesting but not especially daunting.

These behaviours are more commonly associated with low uncertainty avoidance cultures:

- People change jobs with more frequency because change is not so frightening.
- People more readily accept dissent because differing views are nothing to be afraid of; nothing is set in stone.
- Take things one day at a time, you can't know or control the future anyway.
- People should let their emotions out, there's nothing to fear from emotions.
- Conflict in organizations is natural and nothing to be afraid of. Order doesn't break down or get undermined that easily.
- Differences are interesting - the unknown is not frightening.
- A general sense of well-being prevails and there isn't that much fear of what can't be understood or controlled.
- People accept authority less readily; authority is limiting and control is not that comforting.
- Rules can be broken if it makes sense, for pragmatic reasons. Rules can be limiting; there's nothing inherently satisfying about rules.
- Risks are opportunities, since the unknown isn't particularly worrying, risks are not to be feared.

This area of culture, just as with power-distance, can cause tension in the workplace where people with different views are trying to work together. It will help you greatly if you face conflict or issues when working with people of another culture, to consider whether differences in uncertainty avoidance or another deeper cultural attitude may be a root cause. Remember to ask local friends for advice - tell them you are still learning how to relate and that you need their help. If you make a mistake, don't worry too much, explain, apologize and then move on.

The source of status - achieved or ascribed

Another work-related cultural area to think about is how people come by their status - in their organisations, and in society in general. This concept is related to power-distance in some ways and also to individualism/collectivism. The two poles of this concept are sometimes referred to as *achieved status* and *ascribed status*, or as *doing* cultures and *being* cultures. They are briefly described below.

Achieved status ('doing' cultures) -

In these *doing* cultures, people are looked up to and respected because of their personal and especially their professional accomplishments. You get ahead into positions of power and influence by virtue of your achievements and performance. Your status is earned and not merely a result of birth, age, or seniority. You are hired based on your record of success, not on the basis of family background, connections, or the school you attended. People aren't particularly impressed with titles. Education is important, but not the mere fact of it: you have to have done something with your knowledge. Status is not automatic and can be lost if you stop achieving.

Ascribed status ('being' cultures) -

In these *being* cultures, a certain amount of status is built into the person; it is automatic and therefore difficult to lose. You are looked up to because of the family and social class you are born into, because of your affiliations and membership in certain important groups, and, later, because of your age and seniority. The school you went to and the amount of education you received also confer status, whether or not you did well in school or have done anything with your education. Titles are important and should always be used. You are pressured to justify the power, respect and deference that you automatically enjoy. You cannot lose your status completely, but you can lose respect by not realising your potential.

**DISCUSSION POINTS***Culture in the workplace*

1. Discuss the two following incidents which have come about in part because of cultural differences involving status. Think about what you would do in each situation.

Sitting down or standing up?

You are teaching English in an Asian country. When you enter the classroom, all your students automatically stand up until you give them the signal to sit. You are uncomfortable with this deferential behaviour and tell your students they don't need to stand when you enter the room.

After two weeks, the headmaster tells you that the other teachers are upset with you because they have heard that your students don't stand when you enter the room. They think the students are showing disrespect, and are worried

it could spread to their classrooms. They also think that you are trying to be popular by deliberately blurring the distinction between teacher and student (and if students put themselves on the same level as teachers, chaos will result). What would you do about the teachers' reactions?

Back of the bus

You have a job working for the local government in another country. Every morning a bus carrying labourers to work stops at your house to give you a ride to work. Your boss, a department manager, and a second professional always sit up front together, but you like to sit in the back and talk with the labourers. After a few days, your boss says you are confusing the workers with your informal behaviour and warns you that you will lose their respect if you don't start acting like a professional. How do you respond?



ACTIVITIES

Culture in the workplace

1. For each of the continuums below, (which are all cultural areas related to working), identify the point on the spectrum that you think best represents your own behavior.

Concept of Work

Work As Part Of Identity

Work As Functional Necessity



Work has value in and of itself. Your job is an important part of your identity. People live to work, in the sense that getting things done is inherently satisfying.

Work is the means to paying bills and meeting financial obligations. It may be satisfying but doesn't have to be. Life is too short to revolve around one's work. Work is what I do, not who I am.

Motivation

Professional Opportunity

Comfortable Work Environment



Professional opportunity and success are important motivating factors. People want to learn, get ahead, move up in their professions or organisations and have greater power, authority and responsibility. Job security is not so important as the chance to make more money and advance in one's career.

People are motivated by the desire to have a pleasant work setting and good relationships with co-workers. Job security is important, as is an organisation that takes care of its employees. Having more time off to spend with family is also very motivating. More power and responsibility are not of themselves attractive, even if they mean more money.

Personal and Professional

Personal/Professional Separated

Personal/Professional Intertwined



Personal matters should not be brought to work. Personal/family obligations should be scheduled around work. The personal and professional lives should and can be kept separate. The human factor is real but can't be indulged in the workplace. People won't understand if you plead a family emergency.

It is impossible to separate personal and family matters from work. You may have to interrupt work to take care of personal business. The personal and professional lives inevitably overlap. People will understand if you plead a family emergency.

The Key to Productivity

Results

Harmony



Focusing on the task ensures success. People won't always get along, but you have to move forward anyway. Harmony is nice but results are what count. If you get results, people will be more harmonious. Getting results is ultimately more important than how you get them.

Working well with other people is the key to success in any enterprise. Harmony in the workplace will ensure eventual success. Getting things done hinges on people getting along well. Results bought at the expense of harmony are too costly. How you get results is just as important as the results themselves.

The Ideal Worker

Technical Skills

People Skills



What matters most in a worker is his/her technical qualifications: education, work experience, and specific skills. "People" skills are important, but they don't contribute as much to the bottom line. Hiring a relative would be sheer coincidence and only if he/she had the skills you needed. Demonstrated competence is the key to getting promoted.

What matters most in a worker is his/her ability to work well with others and not rock the boat. Experience and technical skills are important, but they don't contribute as much to the bottom line. Hiring a relative is always a good bet. Age and seniority are important for getting promoted.

It is interesting to note that the mark indicating the more global, Western cultural position is normally on the left side on all of these continuums. People from other cultures (that tend more toward the right) often categorise people from a Western culture in the following ways:

- *Power-distance*: They don't respect bosses very much. Or bosses are entirely too chummy with subordinates.
- *Uncertainty avoidance*: They take too many risks and don't respect traditions enough.

- *Source of status:* Achievements matter too much to them. They don't believe in the wisdom of experience or the significance of one's social class and upbringing.
- *Concept of work:* They can't enjoy life because work and success matter too much to them.
- *Motivation:* They think too much about the professional side of work and life; they should worry more about the human side. They want to get ahead, but for what? We all die, even those who are ahead.
- *Personal/professional:* They try to separate life into artificial boxes. It's not as black and white as they think. Life is grey.
- *Key to productivity:* They are too fixated on output and results, the 'what'; they aren't concerned enough about the 'how'. They don't realise the 'how' affects the 'what'.
- *Ideal worker:* Anybody can have skills (or get them); what matters is personal qualities. Westerners focus on the superficial, what the person can do; they should focus on the substance, on who the person is.