The New Multi-Dimensional Talent Force: Multi-Cultural Differences

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Introduction

In the last issue of the IHRIM *Journal*, I introduced the four dimensions of the Evolving Multidimensional Talent Force and talked in detail about the first dimension: *multi-generational* differences. In this issue, I'd like to expand on the second dimension: *multi-cultural* differences that have become ubiquitous in the global work force. As we all know, there are significant cultural aspects that influence how people interpret and respond to events, act and react in the workplace, and in general determine and govern how we conduct business. These cultural influences include such things as differing styles of communication, multiple ways of making decisions, and various approaches to demonstrating engagement, commitment, respecting diversity, ethics, and so on.

Culture (from the Latin cultura stemming from colere, meaning "to cultivate") is defined in Wikipedia as:

(1) Patterns of human activity and the symbolic structures that give such activities significance and importance; systems of symbols and meanings that lack fixed boundaries, that are constantly in flux, and that interact and compete with one another.

(2) Different definitions reflect different theoretical bases for understanding and evaluating human activity; manifested in music, literature, lifestyle, painting, sculpture, theater, film, etc.

One of the greatest culturists of all time, **Geert Hofstede**, defines culture as "the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes one group or category of people from another. This stresses that culture is: (1) a collective, not an individual attribute, (2) not directly visible but manifested in behaviors, and (3) common to some, but not all people."

Analogies used to understand cultural differences have brought such images as "peeling an onion" – carefully removing layer after layer until getting to the core, or "the iceberg" – because most cultural aspects are hidden below the surface and hence not readily visible (see Figure 1). The first and most obvious layer of culture that we can see involves language, food, buildings, monuments, dress, fashions, art, etc. These artifacts are symbols with meanings from a much deeper level. The next layer of culture entails the norms and values that the culture holds, the mutual sense of "right/wrong" and "good/bad" that individuals share. Some of these are written and formally codified in the laws and social controls of a culture, while others are informal, learned early in childhood, and passed down through the generations. Finally, at the deepest, innermost level of culture, invisible and unconscious to human perception, are those aspects of basic human nature that control how we interpret and respond to various situations, for example, our sense of time and space, our focus on family and relationships, our view of status and hierarchy. These subtle aspects of culture are more difficult to understand and appreciate, making them ripe for misunderstanding.
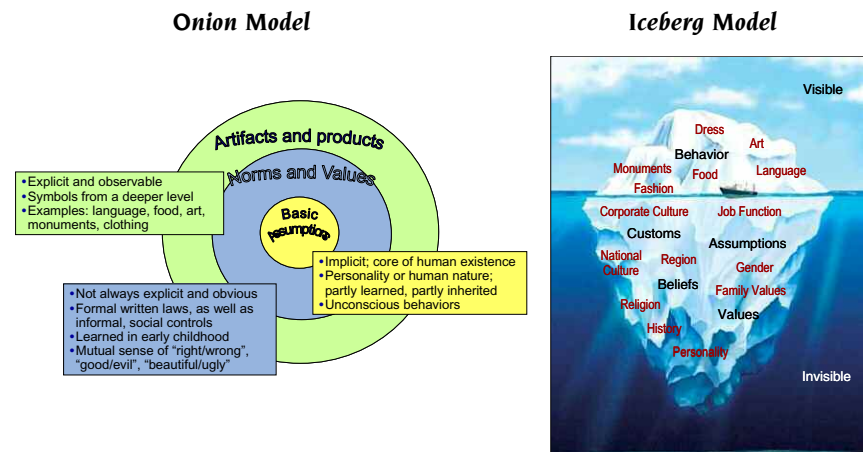

Figure 1. Two Cultural Models.

Some of the ways in which cultures can radically differ from one another include:

- Extent to which individuals are independent versus interdependent;
- Expression of individualistic intentions versus more collectivist, group behaviors;
- Belief in a more egalitarian versus hierarchical status;
- Degree of aggressiveness versus accommodation to others;
- More direct versus indirect styles of communicating;
- Feelings of neutral versus more affective relationships;
- Specific and closed relationships versus multiple and diffuse relationships;
- Orientation toward tasks and getting things done versus building relationships and rapport;
- Appreciation of universalism versus particularism;
- Tolerance for risk versus more conservative approaches;
- Short-term versus long-term planning horizons;
- Monochronic versus polychronious sense of time;
- Differences in sense of personal space (called proxemics);
- Tolerance for and acceptance of change versus resistance to change;
- Receptivity versus resistance to diversity; and,
- Acceptance versus resistance to new ideas.

If this seems like a lot to absorb, it is! Understanding and working effectively with cultural differences is one of the greatest challenges we have in the modern, global business world. So much is invisible and very different from our own way of thinking and acting that we often find it hard to fathom and work with.

In their fascinating book, **Developing Global Executives**, McCall and Hollenbeck (2002) contend that working globally is difficult because it combines complexity from two different dimensions: business complexity with cultural complexity. As business complexity increases, managerial abilities must also increase. Naturally, it requires much greater leadership skills to manage a large number of diverse functions, products, suppliers, business units, locations, etc. Likewise, as cultural complexity increases, facility in dealing across cultures must also increase. The greater the difference between geographies, languages, customs, values, habits, etc., the greater the skills the individual must possess to effectively work across cultures. Combining these two dimensions – an increase in business complexity with an increase in cultural complexity – creates an intensely multifaceted global environment, requiring more highly developed global management abilities.

Hence, we see the importance of HR's role in developing global executives. In the past, HR has tended to focus management development activities around more concrete skills such as business acumen, professional speaking abilities, financial management, etc. In the increasingly global world we live in, we must spend as much if not more development effort on understanding cultural differences and learning how to work with them. In this article, we will explore this important multicultural dimension of the modern talent force and HR's role in helping to improve the productivity and effectiveness of cross-cultural work.

Cultural Models

Many different cultural models have been developed over the years – all with the goal of more effectively explaining and understanding cultural differences between groups of people. The three most well-known models are those of Edward Hall, Geert Hofstede and Fons Trompenaars.

- **Edward Hall**, an American anthropologist, is most known for his research on the cultural perceptions of space or proxemics – the study of the human use of space within the context of culture, e.g., how close or far way people stand or sit from one another. While serving in Europe and the Philippines during World War II, Hall observed that the way different cultures define and organize space can lead to serious failures of communication in cross-cultural settings. His book, *Beyond Culture*, published in 1977, talked about the

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"unconscious culture" that shapes our thoughts and feelings. His concepts of *high-context* and *low-context* cultures describe the amount of information either implicit (high-context) or explicit (low-context) in the culture.

- **Geert Hofstede's** landmark book *Culture's Consequences*, originally published in 1981 and completely updated in 2001, analyzed cultural differences across 50 countries, synthesizing these differences into five major dimensions: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity and long-term versus short-term orientation.

- **Fons Trompenaars'** best-selling book *Riding the Waves of Culture*, published in 1998, took a similar approach to Hofstede, evaluating how different cultures respond to different management approaches. He synthesizes cultural differences into seven dimensions: universalism versus particularism, individualism versus collectivism, neutral versus affective, specific versus diffuse, achievement versus ascription, sequential versus synchronic and internal versus external control.

While it doesn't really matter which cultural model you ascribe to, it is important to understand the differing dimensions of culture in order to appreciate how they play out in the workplace. Failure to understand the influence that culture has on business can lead to miscommunications, misunderstandings, costly marketing blunders, lawsuits and a general undermining of corporate goals.

Clearly an important role for HR is in helping the business to understand the various aspects of culture and how they affect day-to-day business and the productivity and effectiveness of our interactions. Focusing on the different dimensions of culture can help to target training and development opportunities in areas where they are more likely needed. For example, an American project manager assigned to manage a global project with team members in Japan needs to learn about indirect styles of communication, the importance of status and hierarchy in group dynamics and the role of the group in day-to-day interactions. The German sales executive working on a big deal with a large French financial institution must understand the importance of building relationships and coalitions and getting everyone on board "before the big meeting" if he or she hopes to close the deal sometime in this century. Being aware that these differences exist, and then targeting specific training and coaching activities can ensure that individuals working across cultures will have greater success in reaching their goals.

Edward Hall's contextual model provides an effective approach for explaining a large set of differences between cultures and the resultant impact in the workplace. The issue of context is certainly one area where much communication goes awry, creating surprise and confusion over how the miscommunication occurred and why. Hall distinguishes cultures along two axes (see Figure 2):

- A *high-context culture* is one that is highly dependent on the context – that is, many aspects of the culture are only understood by those living within that culture – the "in-group" so to speak. In a high-context culture, people have had similar experiences and so many things are left unsaid. These "implicit" assumptions have grown out of the group's homogeneous roots, common history and many shared traditions, and are slow to change. High-context cultures are more common in Eastern and Middle Eastern countries, e.g., Japan, China, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and in countries with historically low racial diversity, e.g., France, Italy, Spain. Many indigenous societies, e.g., American Indians, are also high-context cultures.

- In contrast, in a *low-context culture*, many more things are "explicit" in the environment because members of the culture come from a wide variety of backgrounds and traditions. In low-context cultures, people tend to have many loose connections of a shorter duration. Because of its heterogeneity, such cultures can change significantly from one generation to the next. Some examples of low-context cultures are the U.S., UK, Canada, Denmark and Norway.

Figure 2. Low-Context and High-Context Cultures.

The Impact of Culture in the Workplace

Obviously, individuals moving from one type of culture to another have to be more flexible to learn new ways of working than individuals 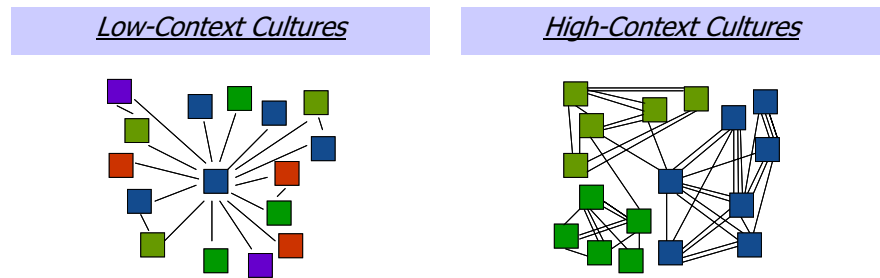moving to a different culture, but the same type of context. For example, language issues aside, workers moving among France, Italy, and Spain (all high-context cultures) have an easier time adapting than individuals moving from the U.S. to China (low- to high-context cultures) or from Italy to Canada (high- to low-context cultures). Generally, individuals from high-context cultures expect there to be underlying differences between cultures and so tend to be more attuned and ready to accept and work with the subtleties that lie implicit in the interaction.

In contrast, individuals from low-context cultures moving to high-context cultures often find it hard to believe that there can be so many unwritten rules of conduct and so many different ways of interacting. In this situation, low-context culture individuals need to hone their intuition and learn how to look for differences that may catch them by surprise and create that embarrassing "foot-in-mouth" situation. Individuals from low-context cultures must learn to listen and ask questions, rather than attempt to work out a solution based just on surface cues.

Figure 3 lays out many of the differences between low-context and high-context cultures that have an impact on the business environment.

	Low-Context	High-Context
Example Countries	US, UK, Canada, Germany, Denmark, Norway	Japan, China, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, France, Italy, Spain
Business Outlook	Competitive	Cooperative
Work Ethic	Task-oriented	Relationship-oriented
Work Style	Individualistic	Team-oriented
Employee Desires	Individual achievement	Team achievement
Relationships	Many, looser, short-term	Fewer, tighter, long-term
Decision Process	Logical, linear, rule-oriented	Intuitive, relational
Communication	Verbal over Non-verbal	Non-verbal over Verbal
Planning Horizons	More explicit, written, formal	More implicit, oral, informal
Sense of Time	Present/Future-oriented	Deep respect for the past
View of Change	Change over tradition	Tradition over change
Knowledge	Explicit, conscious	Implicit, not fully conscious
Learning	Knowledge is transferable (above the waterline)	Knowledge is situational (below the waterline)

Figure 3. Views of Different Cultures in the Workplace.

Low-context cultures are independent, individualistic and internally competitive, in contrast to high-context cultures that are more interdependent, cooperative and team-oriented. The decision-making process is more logical, linear, and rule-oriented and knowledge is more explicit in low-context cultures, as opposed

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to the intuitive and relational decision-making process and implicit expectations found in high-context cultures. Planning horizons, sense of time, and views on change are also diametrically opposed between the two types of cultures.

Thus, when individuals from high- and low-context cultures come into contact, many areas are ripe for cultural conflict and misunderstanding. One area particularly important in the business context is the decision-making process. The logical, linear thinkers from the low-context cultures quickly become frustrated by the intuitive, relational thinkers from the high-context cultures and neither ends up valuing the perspective that the other individual brings. Another area where there is often a lack of understanding between cultures is in different work approaches and styles: individuals from low-context, individualistic cultures who are very task- and results-oriented versus those individuals from high-context, collectivist cultures who are focused on building relationships and "saving face" in group settings. Add to these language differences, geographical distances, time zone changes, and organizational barriers, and it's no surprise that cultures come into conflict and progress suffers due to misunderstandings.

Conclusion

Cultural conflict will forever be a critical aspect of global business that has to be dealt with when working internationally. Understanding, accepting, and learning to work with these differences is fundamental to being successful in a global environment. Human Resources needs to broaden its perceptions of diversity beyond the traditional focus on gender, ethnicity, and generational issues and fully embrace global diversity, fostering understanding, acceptance, inclusion and leveraging cultural differences to enhance team productivity, organizational effectiveness and overall business performance.

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