
Map Your Team's Cultural Differences



By [Erin Meyer](#), INSEAD

The way we are conditioned to see the world in our own culture seems obvious and commonplace. To maximise a multicultural team, managers should identify what is typical in their culture but different from others to open a dialogue of sharing, learning and understanding.

During a course I conducted on multicultural negotiations, a young MBA student from Ukraine approached me during a break and said “Erin, you have been talking about the importance of cultural differences, but I have always believed that no matter where we come from, humans are fundamentally the same. Isn’t this true?”

Of course the answer to this question is yes and I answered as such. At a deep level, no matter where we come from, we are driven by common physiological and psychological needs and motivations. Yet the culture in which we grow up in has a significant bearing on the ways we see communication patterns as effective or undesirable, to find certain arguments persuasive or lacking merit, to consider certain ways of making decisions or measuring time “natural” or “strange”.

While leaders have always had to understand personality differences and manage how people interact with one another, as globalisation transforms the way we work we now need the ability to decode cultural differences in order to work effectively with clients, suppliers and colleagues around the world.

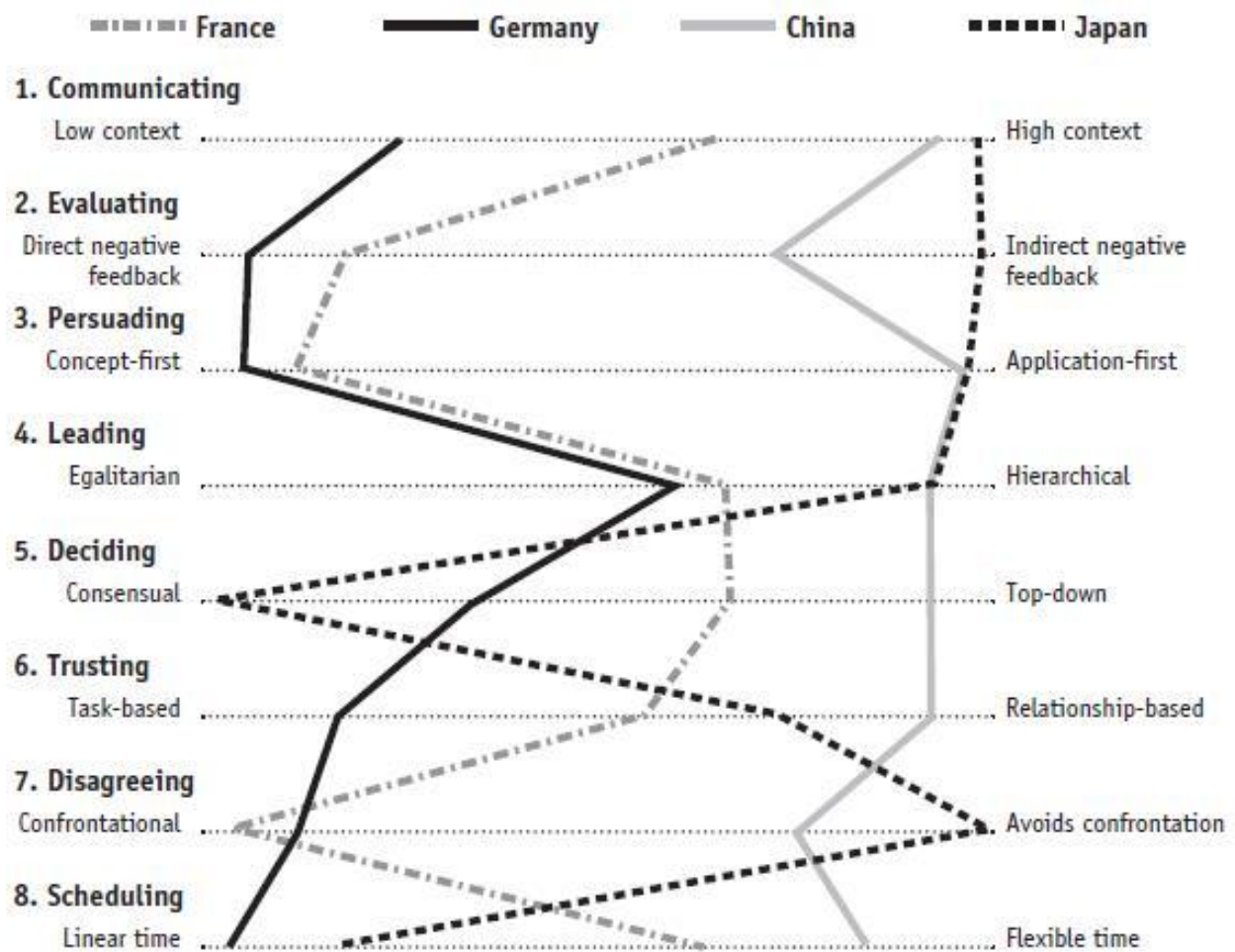
Mapping cultures

Olivier, a former student and vice president at automotive supplier Valeo, a French firm with big bases in Germany and Japan, and a growing presence in China, emailed me about his challenges working with colleagues across all four countries.

“When I moved to China, I thought the difficulty would be in bridging the cultural differences between Asians and Europeans. And it is true that the Asian members of my team are uncomfortable with the way our French and German members publicly disagree with them and give them negative feedback. I’ve coached the team members on how to moderate their approaches and reactions to work more effectively together.

“But to my surprise, the most serious difficulties we have on the team are between the Chinese and the Japanese. The Chinese gripe that the Japanese are slow to make decisions, inflexible, and unwilling to change. The Japanese complain that the Chinese don’t think things through, make rash decisions, and seem to thrive in chaos. Not only do these two Asian groups have difficulty working together, but the Japanese in many ways behave more like the Germans than like the Chinese—something I never anticipated.”

As I’ve outlined in my book, [*The Culture Map*](#), Olivier should start addressing his problem by creating a culture map across eight scales I have identified that show how cultures vary from one extreme to its opposite. By analysing the position of one culture relative to another, the scales can help you decode how culture influences behaviour.



In this example, which I did for Olivier, you can see that on several scales, the Chinese and Japanese cluster together. As he'd experienced, the Chinese and Japanese are both uncomfortable with direct feedback and open disagreement. On the other hand, France and Germany cluster towards the other side.

However, when we look at deciding and scheduling, we're able to identify the likely source of frustration for Olivier. Although Japan, like China is very hierarchical, it's a consensual society where decisions are often made by the group in a bottom-up manner. That means decisions take longer, as input from everyone is gathered before decisions are made. By contrast, in China, decisions are most often made by the boss in a top-down fashion. Once the decision is made, there is a great rush towards the finish line.

Furthermore, the Japanese build plans and stick to them. Being organised and on time are values they share with their German colleagues and are rooted in culture. Germany, for example, was one of the first countries in the world to become heavily industrialised and it's still a manufacturing-dominated economy. If a German factory worker turns up late for a shift, the cost is clear and calculable.

In comparison, the Chinese tend to make decisions quickly and change plans often, valuing flexibility and adaptability.

It comes down to awareness

The next step for Olivier, having identified his team's differences on the map, is to increase the awareness of his team members about how culture impacts their effectiveness. He might start by organising a team gathering where these issues are discussed openly and good humouredly over a dinner. Just as a fish doesn't know it's in water, people often find it difficult to see and recognise their own culture until they start comparing it with others.

At a higher level, he could organise his team so there is less cultural homogeneity at each location by having Germans, French and Chinese all living and working together in Japan. He could also rotate his team members when possible, so they all spend a few months or even years in another location. Another valuable step could be hiring people who are bi-cultural or have extensive experience living in more than one culture.

While sometimes cultural diversity on global teams creates fault lines, at other times the same level of diversity can be a great advantage. A project with lots of tight deadlines might be better off with people on your team who have strong linear-time preferences. If you have a client who is constantly changing their mind and serving him or her well requires flexibility, having team members who are flexible with time will help meet their needs. Having people with a frank feedback style are invaluable, but at other times, you might need a small group of people to give negative feedback to a sensitive and valued client. Here is an opportunity to call on those who are pros at indirect negative feedback.

When you look at your team, consider not just the difficulties that might arise from the gaps but also the strengths that the differences provide. Managed with care, cultural diversity can become your team's greatest asset.

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/map-your-teams-cultural-differences>

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