Individualistic Cultures: Everything You Need To Know

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Individualistic cultures are those that stress the needs of the individual over the needs of the group as a whole (Cherry 2020). In this type of culture, people are seen as independent and autonomous. Social behavior tends to be dictated by the attitudes and preferences of individuals. An individualist is motivated by personal rewards and benefits. Individualistic workers are very comfortable working with autonomy and not part of a team.

In *individualistic cultures*, people are considered "good" if they are strong, self-reliant, assertive, and independent (Alsaeedi & Male 2013). This contrasts with collectivist cultures where characteristics like being self-sacrificing, dependable, generous, and helpful to others are of greater importance (Morin 2020). Common characteristics of individualistic cultures include:

- Being dependent upon others is often considered shameful or embarrassing.
- Independence is highly valued
- Individual rights take center stage.
- People often place a greater emphasis on standing out and being unique.
- People tend to be self-reliant.
- The rights of individuals tend to take higher precedence.

INDIVIDUALISM VS COLLECTIVISM

Individualism and collectivism characterize opposite ends of a broad continuum. According to Hofstede 'Individualism pertains to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after himself or herself. Therefore individualism refers to the frame of mind in which an individual is governed by the need to protect oneself. Collectivism as its opposite pertains to cultures in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive ingroups, which throughout people's lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty (UK Essays 2018).

COUNTRIES WITH INDIVIDUALISTIC CULTURES

The generalized geographic clusters of individualism may be found in Anglo countries, Germanic Europe, and Nordic Europe (Purdue University 2020). Cindy Harpster illustrates that the importance of independence and individual achievement is one of the most distinctive traits of Nordic and US cultures. This sense of individuality can be one of the largest barriers when conducting business in a foreign country. To determine whether your country is an individualistic culture, it is important to familiarise yourself with the characteristics synonymous with the individualistic culture.

In *individualistic cultures*, people are usually considered self-centered and empathize with their own goals. Such cultures tend to use direct modes and clear methodologies of communication. Non-

westerners prefer to speak indirectly and politely pass their opinion across through inferences (Cherry 2020). In contrast, group achievement, group harmony, and saving face are supremely important than individual achievement in Asian cultures. For example, Australian's tend to conduct their private lives independently, valuing individual achievement and wealth above group goals. On the other hand countries such as China and Japan are more "we" conscious, and the group is the basic building block of social life and work (Purdue University 2020).

HOFSTEDES 5 CULTURAL DIMENSIONS

To successfully lead in different cultures, managers must consider and research the various cultural dimensions if they are to prosper abroad. Several studies have been completed that compare cultures. One of the most admired is Geert Hofstede's Cultural dimension model. His model aims to develop a framework for understanding how basic values motivate organizational behaviour. He proposes five value dimensions by which to identify national and regional cultural differences: those of power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism, masculinity, and long-term orientation.

1. **Power Distance**

The first of these value dimensions is power distance which focuses on the degree to which 'a culture believes how institutional and organizational power should be distributed (equally or unequally) and how the decisions of the power holders should be viewed (challenged or accepted)'. In countries such as Asia people accept high power distance, formal positions in the hierarchy are respected, whereas, in Australia where people display low power distance, officers tend to accord each other with mutual respect. In other words, in all societies some inequalities of power are acknowledged in all organizations, however, the degree of these power distributions seems to be communally determined.

1. **Uncertainty Avoidance**

The second value dimension uncertainty avoidance focuses on the level of tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity within society and tries to avoid them by establishing more structures. All governments and legal systems enforce strict laws and procedures on their citizens, however in countries, such as Japan, with a high level of uncertainty, avoidance rules tend to be more specific and precise. In countries with a lower level of uncertainty avoidance such as Australia and the US, company activities are less formal, less structured and managers seem to take more risks.

1. **Individualism vs. Collectivism**

The third value dimension individualism vs. collectivism describes the 'degree to which a culture relies on and has allegiance to the self or the group'. In Countries that prize individualism, such as Australia, people highly value individual initiative and achievement. On the other hand countries such as China, the emphasis is on the strength of the family.

1. **Masculinity vs. Femininity**

The fourth value dimension masculinity vs. femininity indicates the degree to which 'a culture values such behaviors as assertiveness, achievement, acquisition of wealth or caring for others, social supports and the quality of life'. A highly masculine society such as Australia and the US, experience a high degree of gender differentiation. In these cultures, males dominate a significant segment of the society and power structure, with females being controlled by male domination. Traditionally women were not expected to work outside the home when they were married, and those who did shame their husbands. A low masculine ranking indicates the country has a low level of differentiation and discrimination between genders. In these cultures, females are treated equally to males in all aspects of society.

1. **Long Term Orientation vs. Short Term Orientation.**

Geert Hofstede's fifth value dimension, which is based on Confucian dynamism, is long term orientation vs. short term orientation. Values associated with long-term orientation are thrift and perseverance as in china, however, short-term orientation is described as being more social and self-centered which is likened to Australia and the US.

CULTURE AND BARRIERS IT CREATES IN INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS

Individualistic traits can hinder with international business accomplishment is when managers have unrealistic expectations of their employees. In the "micro-managing" is a term used to describe 'the action of exercising excessive and unnecessary control over the minimal detail on other people's activities'. This over-bearing management style is insulting and offensive and can create a sense of resentment and lack of trust in workers' intelligence and capabilities, especially in fields where team members have a high degree of professional and technical expertise. It is more common for managers in the US and Australia to ask their team members how long it will take them to complete a task, whereas, in other cultures such as China or Thailand, managers are expected to dictate schedules and steps of action.

Working in another culture requires research to understand the cultural norms and how workplace environments differ from one country to another. Several studies have been done that compare cultures. One of the most popular is the Geert Hofstede cultural dimension model. This indicator of how different cultures compare on several key indicators is widely used in international business courses to help illustrate regional differences in such areas as time orientation and individualism. Understanding these indicators before beginning an international venture can greatly improve the chance of success. Even more important is keeping an open mind, being aware of the bias that cultural influences create, and being willing to learn new techniques and behaviors for interacting with others in the workplace.

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