

Global Patterns: Culture's Influence on Managerial Behavior

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Following is a series of eight articles that appeared between January and September 1994 in monthly issues of *Worldwide Business Practices Report*, a publication of International Cultural Enterprises, Deerfield, Illinois. These are the original, unedited typescripts.

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January 1994

Hierarchical Versus Egalitarian Relationship Patterns

As a person with experience abroad, you know that leaders and followers are found in *all* societies. Hierarchy in social, political, and business affairs is a fact of life everywhere. But how people deal on a daily basis with their supervisors (or subordinates) differs widely around the world. The American way with hierarchies is not imitated in many other cultures. In your travels, you have encountered contrasting ways. Using them as points of comparison, you probably have gained insight into Americans' patterns. What generalizations would *you* offer to describe supervisor/subordinate relations in the United States?

Most observers agree that Americans are strongly influenced by an egalitarian mindset. "All men are created equal" captures our faith that human beings everywhere are alike in dignity and worth. On a practical level, that means leaders are viewed as people just like the rest of us. We can treat them informally, give them advice, even disagree with them. Our belief that no one is *inherently* entitled to lead separates us from cultures in which leaders are selected by ascribed characteristics such as family membership and age. Although this is not unknown in the U.S., we usually identify our leaders on the basis of their achievements. People from disadvantaged backgrounds, young people, and women all are eligible to become boss. We like to see the lowly rise to prominence, and give them much admiration.

Short and Tall Ladders

Outside the U.S., people are more likely to give much *deference* to executives and supervisors, and even to teachers and trainers. They are more likely to address leaders using a title and family name ("General Manager Hu"), to avoid disagreeing openly with them, to await their directives without expecting to participate in the decision-making process, and, in general, to assume that their superiors come rather close to being infallible. Because leaders abroad tend to be viewed as a higher order of being, their followers are reluctant to do anything that would even appear to usurp their power or prerogatives, such as taking personal initiative while completing an assignment.

Think of two ladders, each with ten rungs. One is very tall and one is short. The short one symbolizes our American way with hierarchies. People are above and below us on this ladder, but *not far* above or below. The difference is so small that we can ignore it much of the time. The rung above us is within our reach and, if we are achievers, we can climb higher. The tall ladder symbolizes the way people in many other cultures handle hierarchies. Those above and below them are far away. The level at which one finds oneself is given (ascribed); fast-track climbing is rarely an option. Those who are higher are there by right; their position, the depth of their expertise, and their decisions should not be questioned.

What Experienced Travelers Know

Some of the lessons learned by American businesspeople with extensive overseas experience are

1. Emphasize the formal, dignified side of your personality; act like your grandparents did.
2. Be confident in your own expertise; playing the eager learner could lose you respect.
3. Do *not* expect that everyone would like to take initiative or share decision-making power.

February 1994

The Mysterious Concept of "Face"

Understanding "face" (as in "saving face") is a key to establishing good working relationships with business counterparts in much of the world. Americans rarely think about "face," but as an American with experience abroad you've probably bumped into -- or collided with -- the face concept. (Perhaps your mishap occurred during performance appraisals.) If so, the explanation usually given about face, relating it simply to the preservation of dignity, might not seem adequate to you. It didn't to us, so we probed deeper. We soon realized that Americans *do* have a familiar basis for understanding face: telling "white lies." Here's why.

In all societies, each adult presents him- or herself to others as a certain type of human being, as someone who claims to have certain characteristics and traits. We can make our claims by explicit (verbal) means: "I judge people by their achievements, not by age, alma mater, or family background," for example. Much more often, though, we make our claims by implicit means: choice of friends and associates, typical attire, habitual patterns of behavior, preferred topics of discussion, and so on. We expect others to accept these claims. We also

learn to recognize and accept others' claims about themselves. One might say that people learn to accept "at face value" each other's "line" regarding the type of person he or she is. *This set of claims, or line, is a person's "face."*

As long as each person accepts every other person's face, their interactions can proceed smoothly. In the case of businesspeople, for example, this does not guarantee that they will make business deals with each other. It *does* guarantee that their focus of attention can be their business concerns, not their claims about traits and characteristics. It is possible to question someone else's claims. One can do this explicitly, as when someone says, "You have no intention of fulfilling these contract terms!" When something like this happens, the focus of the situation shifts abruptly from the business concerns of its participants to the image that one of them is putting forward to the others. The accuser is saying, in effect, "Your traits and characteristics are not what you claim." The accused loses face.

It also is possible to question someone's claims implicitly. Suppose a young female MBA graduate presents herself for a job interview, dressed for success and skillfully behaving as a professional should. If the interviewer talks down to her by explaining a simple point in her field and refers to her as "honey," he has called into question the young woman's claims about herself, causing her to lose face.

How White Lies Save Face

White lies? They deftly enable us to avoid questioning another's claims about him- or herself -- and our claims about ourselves. If you hand in your budget projections late, you might portray yourself as at the mercy of an external factor ("computer went down"), thereby preserving your claim to be diligent. Purposeful duplicity, even of the white variety, is hardly the only way to maintain one's own face and that of others. Personal qualities such as tact and diplomacy also can play a major role and should be perfected in order to smooth the way for productive international business relationships.

In much of the world outside the United States, people are conscious of face at all times. Many societies, unlike ours, have been extraordinarily stable over the centuries. People tended to spend their entire lives in the company of the same friends, neighbors, relatives, and co-workers. When people are attached for life to a given group, maintaining harmonious relationships among its members becomes of paramount importance. Face-saving behaviors take on great significance; they maintain harmony, avoid conflicts, and protect the integrity of the group.

Concern for face exists in the United States but remains out of most people's awareness. Life in North America has been relatively mobile from the earliest days of European colonization and is highly mobile today. The composition of one's community and friendship groups changes often during one's lifetime; even relatives can be left behind when one decides to search for opportunity elsewhere. Rarely is the maintenance of group integrity and harmony paramount in a lasting way, making face-saving less critical. Our low concern for face is understandable, but we can't allow ourselves to be ignorant or apathetic about face when we are doing business abroad, especially in Asia, where concern for face is high.

What Experienced Travelers Know

Some of the lessons learned by American businesspeople with extensive overseas experience are

1. *Never show anger!* Avoid direct confrontations at all costs; use intermediaries instead.
2. Apologize for possible affronts, even those that would never upset others in the U.S.
3. Do not insist that your hosts respect your "rights" or opinions.
4. Defer to those above you by virtue of age or rank; be considerate of those below you.
5. Address people using honorific and professional titles until asked to do otherwise.
6. Be very mild if, in the presence of others, you are invited to offer criticism. In some cultures, an underlying purpose of meetings is to "give face" (demonstrate positive mutual regard).
7. Avoid direct criticism during performance appraisals. Find an indirect way of giving bad news, e.g., by using an intermediary or quietly withdrawing a perquisite previously enjoyed.

March 1994

Interpreting Time Worldwide

Time's seemingly relentless passage is so much a part of our business and social lives that we must force ourselves to stop and reflect that, actually, time is an *idea*, not an object that we can see or touch. It's been said that time is the creation of human beings because it is experienced only subjectively. Put differently, instruments to measure time are human creations. If we had been born into a society with no such instruments and no sense that they were needed, would we think of time at all? And if so, how? It is true that the sun rises and sets daily, but even *that* is a matter for varying interpretations.

Two fundamentally different interpretations of time have emerged. We'll refer to one as *intense*; it is our cultural inheritance as Americans. Along with Canadians and many Northern Europeans (including Australians and New Zealanders), we view time as moving by us rapidly in incremental steps, one moment inexorably following another. Our business culture is deeply influenced by this linear conception of time. We assume we can do only one thing at a time and that, therefore, it is vital to plan ahead and to adhere strictly to those plans. We are serious about speed, efficiency, punctuality, and sequencing. We also try to "save" time, not only in the present but also in the future by taking timely (advance) action. One of our favorite proverbs is "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." We try to foresee problems and opportunities that might occur in the near future, and to act promptly in the present to forestall the problems and benefit from the opportunities. Not surprisingly, our business culture has been home to time & motion studies, assembly lines, penalty clauses for late delivery, and fast bucks.

(As we were drafting this, we became aware that we'd just checked our watch for the third time in 20 minutes. We assume we *ought* to write this short column in short order, which requires faster progress than we've been making. So we are nervous, dissatisfied. High job stress. Time, the cruel taskmaster!)

An Alternative View of Time

Casual is our name for the other way of experiencing time. Unlike our task-oriented approach, this idea of time is people-oriented. It says, in effect, "It's far more important for me to be fully available to the human beings I'm with *right now* than for me to do *anything* by the time the sun reaches a certain place in the sky." In other words, business and social relationships are the most significant reality in anyone's life. This conception of time reflects the deep and durable mutual involvements people in many regions of the world build with each other, relegating the completion of tasks -- even business-related tasks -- to lesser priority. Lacking our assumption that one-thing-at-a-time is the only way to go, they are quite adept at dealing with several people simultaneously, much as a juggler deals with balls. (We experience these parallel involvements as loaded with frustrating interruptions.) Whether they are involved with many or one, they bring each involvement to its full conclusion without consulting their wrist.

In *Riding the Waves of Culture* (1993), Fons Trompenaars tells the story of two telecommunications companies trying to win a major contract with the Mexican government. The Americans, whose product was technologically superior, had a presentation that was tightly-organized, fast-paced, and full of high energy. Their plans included leaving Mexico City on the last flight of the evening. The French arrived two days later. Their agenda was loosely conceived, but they did have an idea of the goals they hoped to attain during their *two-week* visit. In their formal presentation, they emphasized the history of their company and the fact that it had done business with the Mexican government in the 1930s. The French got the business. It was the *relationship*, past and present, that had reality and the power to convince, not the technological quality of the product.

Imagine yourself in the mindset of someone from a relationship-oriented culture (one with a "casual" way with time). You've agreed to have lunch in your native city with an American businessperson. On the way, you encounter a friend with whom you take the time to chat. You arrive 20 or 25 minutes after the time you scheduled with the American, a matter of no concern to you because, after all, schedules are merely advisory. (So why does the American seem upset?) Then, when you are in the middle of the main course and deep in conversation, the American notes that he will have to depart in ten minutes because he's got another appointment. You experience the American's behavior as rude. Why? Because he or she has given higher priority to impersonal, intangible time than to your budding relationship.

What Experienced Travelers Know

Some of the lessons learned by American businesspeople with extensive overseas experience are

1. Adopt as much as possible a relaxed, paced manner; schedule yourself *very* loosely.
2. Recognize their view of schedules, agendas, and deadlines: suggested, not rigid, objectives.
3. Be patient about interruptions: one-thing-at-a-time is *not* the rule in many parts of the world.
4. Emphasize your alertness to the human factors in your counterparts' operations.

5. Focus on the quality of your relationship with people who initially strike you as inefficient.
6. Be prepared for "eleventh-hour" schedule changes, which in some world regions are routine.
7. Project your business goals as broadly and far into the future as you can. View counterparts as potential *long-term* partners in achieving those goals, and deal with them accordingly.

April 1994

Deciding Whom to Hire, Promote, and Trust, Part I

Business owners and managers around the world need to decide whom to hire for certain positions, whom to promote, and whom to trust as a partner, key aide, or close associate. Those of us doing the deciding sometimes agonize over the selection process, searching far and wide for suitable candidates and giving careful thought to those on the short-list.

Does culture influence this aspect of managerial behavior? Yes. Culture's influence is greatest when we are searching for suitable candidates. *Who is suitable?* We are so focused on job descriptions and resumes that we don't think about basic suitability. It's worth some thought.

As you scan a resume, what *type* of information do you expect to find? Probably you like to see something like, "Managed staff that grew from eight to 13 professionals; remained within budget while exceeding Amalgamated Widget's business objectives by establishing new accounts with nine *Fortune* 100 companies. . . ." You know the routine. The point is that the basic suitability question in American culture is answered very largely by reference to a person's individual *achievements*.

Can Suitability Be Determined at Birth?

You're probably thinking, "Well, of course!" But wait. Comparing people's achievements is *one* way of sorting them out and deciding who should have higher or lower status, who should have this or that job. If you've spent time abroad, you know that in other cultures one's personal accomplishments count for less, sometimes much less. In those cultures, people sort themselves out by paying attention to one or more of the following: gender, ethnicity, family or clan background, age, place of origin, university affiliation, social connections, and so forth. Most of these factors are "ascribed," that is, determined by chance at birth. The basic suitability question in these cultures is decided largely by *ascription*.

Suppose you supervise a small department and have an opening to fill. There are three candidates, all well qualified, one of whom is your nephew. Do you select your nephew, or do you pointedly *not* select your nephew? As an American, your response almost certainly is the latter. People in our culture who hire close relatives are criticized for nepotism. Hiring the nephew means you've made the hiring decision on the basis of ascription, which makes

Americans uncomfortable -- unless, of course, the nephew's achievements make him far better qualified than the competition.

People in many other cultures don't understand the fuss we make about nepotism. To them, it's good to hire a close relative. In a highly family-oriented culture, the primary objective in life is to advance the interests of one's family and all its members. This objective is shared by everyone, so nephew-hiring isn't cause for criticism. Furthermore, people in such cultures want to have a trustworthy and loyal subordinate who is accepted in their social and business circles. They are less concerned about having someone who has experience doing the work. (After all, just about anyone can learn to do the work!)

Performance or Harmony?

Ascription isn't merely about favoring relatives. It's about feeling comfortable, connected, and accepted, about readily establishing close and enduring relationships. Economic activities in all cultures involve people accomplishing tasks *and* in relationships with each other. It's a matter of emphasis. The United States is a good example of a culture in which the emphasis is on the tasks; the principal criterion for evaluating people is on their ability to perform. People who perform the task equally well are interchangeable; in fact, Americans do change jobs frequently.

Japan is a fine example of a culture where the emphasis is on relationships; the principal criterion for evaluating people is on their loyalty, contribution to group harmony and team spirit, and social "fit." The work group gives an employee his or her social and personal identity; it's amazingly like a family. People change jobs infrequently, sometimes never. So at the time people are selected for hiring, promotion, or special trust, their ascribed characteristics are carefully taken into account. Their on-the-job performance is less important; *everyone* performs reasonably well on the job, so performance isn't a particularly effective way of making choices among them.

Americans tend to believe that people in important positions who got there *because* of their ascribed characteristics probably aren't up to the job. But it's quite possible that one's ascribed characteristics will make him or her *better* able to do certain jobs. If a position requires extensive social contact and business negotiation with certain groups of people, one's background can be a very important job qualification. If you wanted to hire someone to sell shrimp-fishing equipment to the Cajuns of the Louisiana gulf, would you prefer a 25-year-old Cajun shrimp-fisherman (ascription) or someone with 25 years of experience selling fishing equipment from Maine to Minnesota (achievement)?

Why, After All, Does One Do Good Work?

The belief that a person who acquired his job via ascription isn't up to it rests on an assumption that he isn't competent or doesn't care about it. But the reverse might be true. Having obtained a job because of ascribed characteristics, he might work extremely hard to live up to others' high expectations. In short, ascribed status can *lead to* achievement. Another way that ascribed status can lead to achievement is through the practice of insuring (as the Japanese do) that older, senior employees have far more training and many more advisors than younger, junior

people. The senior people command respect not only because they are senior but also because they really do have an array of resources at their command.

Ascription *has* played a role in our culture, primarily in keeping people with certain ascribed characteristics (women, minorities, etc.) *out* of the workplace or at least out of the executive suite. We as a nation have become concerned about this denial of equal opportunity. Through legislation, litigation, and business initiative, we've been trying to bring about a cultural shift in our collective American mindset so that ascription counts for less while achievement counts for more. "Diversity" encompasses business initiatives to insure that people from all across the demographic spectrum are given full opportunity and encouragement to contribute as much as they possibly can to a company's growth and excellence, and thereby to their own individual success as well.

American companies harvesting the benefits of diversity are now considering export of these initiatives to their operations abroad. They should be wondering whether there might be problems in transferring business initiatives that spring from an achievement-oriented culture into a new, ascription-oriented culture. The two of us have just completed research on this question and will share some of our findings with you in our next installment of *Global Patterns*.

What Experienced Travelers Know

Some of the lessons learned by American businesspeople with extensive overseas experience are

1. When sending teams abroad, select leaders who reflect the ascribed traits of the senior people there.
2. Note that, in many countries, people use titles such as Director and Doctor frequently. Do likewise.
3. Do not criticize or "show up" the expertise of senior people; doing so causes them to lose face, which is serious.
4. Recognize that performance evaluation, MBO, and pay-for-performance are *very* American.
5. Never propose a scheme in which a subordinate could receive greater reward than his boss.
6. Do your best to present yourself as a highly knowledgeable expert; do *not* admit to not knowing.
7. Remember that loyalty and family ties are good reasons for hiring and promoting in many cultures.

May 1994

Deciding Whom to Hire, Promote, and Trust, Part II

Last month, *Global Patterns* called attention to one of the key differences among cultures: the extent to which people evaluate each other's worth primarily on the basis of *individual achievements* or on the basis of *ascribed characteristics* (demographic traits such as gender, ethnicity, age, place of origin, and family or clan background). American businesspeople rely

mainly on achievement when deciding whom to hire for certain positions, whom to promote, and whom to trust as a partner, key aide, or close associate.

Our orientation towards achievement has surfaced most recently among American businesspeople who ask, "How can we enable people from all across the demographic spectrum to contribute their talents and energies to our company? How can we harness the richness of human differences?" We use the term *diversity* to refer to business initiatives that attempt to answer these questions. An example of a diversity initiative is enabling mothers to bring their youngsters to childcare facilities at the workplace, which makes it more likely that the company will benefit from the women's talents.

At the end of last month's column we asked another question: "To what extent can diversity initiatives be transferred to business operations abroad?" A year ago, our firm was engaged to discover the answer to this question by a major American corporation. The answer, it turns out, is neither "yes" nor "no" but rather "it depends." It depends on the culture into which one is trying to introduce diversity. We discovered that it is risky to *assume* that human resource policies and practices that work well here in the United States (such as diversity) also will work well in cultures abroad. Let's consider the case of Japan.

"Men Do Not Report to Women!"

During our research, our most memorable interview was with an American manager who had recently returned to the U.S. after working for a Japanese company for seven years. At one point he began to tell a story. "I was very disturbed by what I saw happening to Japanese women. Many were highly productive. Some even had MBAs. Yet they were typing, filing, answering phones, and serving tea."

If this manager had seen women's talents unused in an *American* office, he could have exercised his decision-making power to bring about change, confident that his efforts would enjoy wide (if not unanimous) acceptance. Why? Because the values that were motivating him - bedrock American values such as individualism, equality, and achievement -- would be very largely shared by the women, by their colleagues, friends, and families, and most importantly by influential segments of the American public. *This is not necessarily the case abroad*, where other widely honored sets of values lead people to have perspectives on human differences (and on diversity initiatives) that are unlike ours here in the U.S.A.

"One woman in my department was especially bright and able," continued the manager. "I decided to see if I could get her promoted. I spoke to a Japanese senior executive about this idea. He definitely was not enthusiastic about a promotion for this or any other woman. Late one evening he revealed the reason for his opinion: "In Japan, men do not report to women!"

Alternative Points of View

This Japanese executive provides a fine example of someone who is quite comfortable assuming that people's birth-given or ascribed traits (in this case, male or female) are a *proper* basis for assigning them to an economic role and social status. The American manager preferred instead to sort people out on the basis of their demonstrated achievements.

People abroad are not as enamored of achievement as we are. In Germany and the U.K., achievement and ascription are *both* involved when people evaluate each other's worth. In Mexico and Japan, ascription is far more significant than achievement in evaluations of others. The Japanese executive's attitude toward women did not take achievement, or even potential, into account. Does this mean that our diversity-minded American manager should have given up? Fortunately, he did not.

"I met with the managers of the group to which the woman belonged," he reported, "and easily got them to agree that she was the most productive person, male or female, in their group. After several rounds of discussion, they all reached consensus that she should be promoted -- but only to Assistant Manager. Upon hearing the news, the woman herself was astounded and embarrassed. She dreaded being singled out as the only woman to be promoted. She begged me not to publicly announce the promotion at the regular Monday morning staff meeting. I agreed. Her promotion was later listed in the staff newsletter, and drew contradictory reactions from the *other* women in the office. Some complained to me that they had no one to go to bat for them as I had done for the woman who was promoted. But others expressed *dread* that I or someone else might actually try to develop their careers!"

Note that the female employees themselves were divided about this diversity-inspired promotion on the basis of achievement. The ones who were opposed were not fuddy-duddy Japanese grannies mired in tradition; they were young, modern women who, from our American perspective, would directly benefit from such promotion policies. But achievement as a way of deciding who does what is not widely embraced in Japan -- which is *one* reason why those who would introduce Made-in-America diversity initiatives there might be courting disappointment.

Bringing About Change. . .The Smart Way

The American manager attained a victory for diversity that is hardly worth mentioning by our standards but is significant by Japanese standards. How he did this is important. First, he chose a modest goal (a small promotion for one woman). Second, he knew the local culture well and recognized the limits of its tolerance for rapid social change. Finally, he used local methods (consensus building) in trying to encourage his local colleagues to accept change. This manager had a cautious, thoughtful approach to the introduction of diversity-related practices abroad. We commend his approach to American companies that intend to export their diversity initiatives as well as their products.

If your company is considering the deployment of its diversity initiatives abroad, we suggest to you that it's wise to look before leaping. In our research project, we learned much that the executives of any globalizing company might want to consider as they formulate a global diversity strategy. Above all, we learned that achievement is a value that works well for *us*. But businesspeople in other cultures have other values that have worked well for them, and they are likely to resent us if we impose our values and ideas on them.

What Experienced Travelers Know

Some of the lessons learned by American businesspeople with extensive overseas experience are

1. Examine your basic (American) assumptions about human resource policies and practices.
 2. Remember: Diversity is a Made-in-America response to human differences in the workforce.
 3. Some aspects of diversity *might* work abroad. *How* they are introduced is very important:
 4. Rule 1: *Go slow*. Select modest diversity objectives and adopt a gradualist approach.
 5. Rule 2: *Be in the know*. Understand the local culture's tolerance for various types of change.
 6. Rule 3: *Go with the flow*. Use local methods to encourage local people to accept change.
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June 1994

To What Extent Can Feelings Be Openly Expressed?

A difference among cultures that can undermine mutual understanding concerns the extent to which one's feelings and emotions are openly revealed in the course of professional and managerial work. For example, imagine that during a negotiating session, your counterparts from abroad become agitated about the issue under discussion, raise their voices and gesture effusively, then abruptly leave the room. How would you interpret this behavior? Conversely, suppose that you're having a discussion about a highly important matter with someone from abroad; he or she is exceptionally soft-spoken, reserved, and emotionally flat. How would you regard this behavior? And what about your *own* emotional tone and expressiveness? How are your counterparts from abroad "reading" you? Is their reading accurate?

Your friends and colleagues tend to express themselves emotionally in varying degrees and in different ways. Knowing them well, you recognize that "Sam just needs to blow off steam," or that "Linda gets very enthusiastic when she's fascinated by an idea, but that doesn't mean she's decided to implement it." These are features of individuals' personalities. Culture is to a society as personality is to an individual. Cultural groups have tendencies, too, when it comes to emotional display. In some, the norm is for people to express their emotions quickly, openly, and animatedly, whereas in others the reverse is true.

The Norm Among White Males in the U.S.

Another way in which cultures differ is the extent to which a person's speech and expression is guided by emotions or by rational thought. In the United States, we call the first "subjective" and the second "objective." The norm -- among white male professionals if not necessarily among all other American demographic groups -- is that it's best to keep the two separated in important business-related contexts. We Americans are reasonably comfortable with expressing our feelings in many social situations, but we tend to believe that, *when at work*, the consummate professional or manager is objective, dispassionate, and self-possessed. "Unprofessional" is the criticism we use for people who become vehement or upset on the job.

A reason given by some American men for not wanting women in business or politics is that "women are too emotional." Do you recall Patricia Schroeder's bid for the presidency?

The notion that on-the-job coolness, rationality, and emotional evenness is desirable is *not* shared by people in all other cultures. Some cultures simply permit and expect people, on the job as well as off, to express their feelings freely. Italy and France come to mind here. Other cultures have norms that compel people to hold their feelings in reserve for display only on carefully circumscribed occasions. Finland and Japan come to mind in this case. Of course, individual differences are found in these and other cultures, but right now we are thinking in terms of pervasive *societal* norms and tendencies.

It's easy to misread someone from a culture with norms that differ from your culture's norms. If you interpret someone's energetic display of positive or negative feelings as dogged determination to stick to her negotiating position no matter what (which could be the correct reading of a fellow American), you might agree to unfavorable terms or walk away. It is conceivable, though, that her vehemence did *not* signal do-or-die determination. If you view someone's quietness, reserve, and conversational pauses as lack of interest or seriousness about a vital business issue, you might say "no" to an alliance opportunity in which your potential counterpart was actually disclosing maximum interest.

Conversational Conundrums

Even routine conversation is affected by cultural norms regarding the expression of emotions. People in many parts of Asia tend to speak in even tones and with pauses of silence between speakers. People in many parts of Latin America tend to speak excitedly, with tone changes and inflections, and to overlap each other's speech frequently. As outsiders to these cultural regions, our interpretations of these tendencies can be negative. Latins "insult others by interrupting." Asians are "inscrutable" -- a stereotype largely based on *our* discomfort at not being able to read them emotionally. But insiders know, implicitly if not explicitly, that nothing is amiss. The controlled, reserved style of some Asians displays respect for the topic and for the person spoken to. Their conversational silences mean, "I'm thinking carefully about this vital matter." The emotion-revealing style of some Latins reveals that, "I am committed to this topic in heart as well as mind." Apparent interruptions demonstrate that one is so involved in the conversation that he or she already knows what the other is about to say.

It's always useful to be curious about the meaning of emotional heatedness or coolness on the part of counterparts from other cultures. Healthy curiosity better enables us to avoid judging *their* behavior on the basis of *our* cultural norms. And it's occasionally useful for us to try, as much as possible, to imitate their communicative style. How far will you get as a salesperson abroad if you dispassionately offer a logically organized, statistic-laden presentation to potential buyers who are culturally disposed to be influenced by a salesperson's warmth, humanity, sense of conviction, and flair for the dramatic?

Let's think about the opposite scenario and imagine that *we* have gathered here in the U.S. for a presentation by someone representing an overseas supplier. He is effusive and warm, and he tries to persuade us to buy the product or service by emphasizing his overwhelming (subjective) conviction that it's just right for us. "Well," we'd say, "I like this guy personally but, let's face it, the numbers simply aren't there."

What Experienced Travelers Know

Some of the lessons learned by American businesspeople with extensive overseas experience are

1. Societies have differing norms about emotional displays in professional situations.
2. Cool, "professional" demeanor might be read in some world areas as lack of heart.
3. Imitate others' conversational style and emotional tone when you want to persuade them.
4. Don't be intimidated into agreement by the vehemence or enthusiasm of another's expression.
5. Avoid interpreting emotional flatness or reserve as necessarily signaling lack of commitment.
6. If you encounter an unfamiliar emotional style abroad, seek advice from a seasoned expat.
7. Take more frequent breaks in meetings with people who are emotionally dissimilar from you so that you can privately reflect on the probable intention of their heatedness or coolness.

August 1994

Individualist vs. Collectivist Values

Believe it or not, Jesus recounted a parable that we can relate to culture's influence on managerial behavior: A man said to his first son, "Go and work in the vineyard today." The son readily agreed to work there, but did not. The man gave the same directive to his second son, who said that he would *not* go. But soon afterward the second son changed his mind and did the requested work. "Which son," asked Jesus, "did the will of the father?"

Chances are, your answer is that the second son did the will of his father because he actually carried out the work. But a former Dutch missionary in Indonesia reports that his native parishioners favored the first son because he was more pleasing to his father. Their reasoning was that the first son did not openly contradict his father; he preserved the harmonious relationship between them. In the Indonesians' view, the son who said "no" directly to his father was more disrespectful than the one who said "yes" but failed to go to the vineyard. The Indonesians' point of view signals that they are from a *collectivist* culture. An answer favoring the son who actually did the work indicates that the respondent is probably from an *individualist* culture. (The missionary's story is reported by Geert Hofstede in *Cultures and Organizations*, McGraw-Hill: London, 1991.)

Accuracy versus Politeness

The difference between individualist and collectivist values is most likely to influence your managerial efforts with employees in countries outside the U.S. or with immigrant or expatriate employees here. Collectivism refers to the strong link that exists in many cultures between a

person and the groups with which he or she is most tightly associated. The extended family is one's first such group in life; other groups are added, most often from one's student days, one's neighborhood, and one's work relationships. A member of such a mutually dependent "ingroup" thinks much more in terms of *we* than of *I* and senses that his or her identity is inextricably interwoven with that of the group as a whole.

The missionary's report highlights one aspect of this value difference: In collectivist cultures, it is supremely important to maintain harmonious relationships when in direct conversation with other ingroup members. It's relatively less important to report facts and feelings accurately or to carry out a requested task. What about we individualists? While we don't wish to insult others gratuitously, we do place high value on speaking our own mind and "telling it like it is" even though the facts may not be palatable. We value accuracy over face-saving politeness; collectivists reverse that value-choice. We give our colleagues negative feedback directly (although we try to do so tactfully). Collectivists convey negative feedback indirectly via an intermediary or by quiet withdrawal of a perquisite. Sometimes they omit saying anything that's negative. If you are managing employees in (or from) a collectivist culture, you might not find out what's going wrong in your operation until the proverbial eleventh hour; there's deep reluctance to upset group harmony by telling you the bad news.

One for All, All for One

Management theories have almost all been conceived in the West, the individualist part of our world. (Note that significantly more human beings live in collectivist cultures than in individualist cultures.) These theories are strongly rooted in the premise that employees are independent contractors who, like the organization they work for, are seeking private advantage. Employees are viewed as motivated by desire for self-actualization and individual distinction, both social and financial. One of many outcomes of this perspective is performance appraisal systems that put heavy emphasis on demonstrated skill and productivity and ideally culminate in a frank supervisor-employee discussion about the latter's strengths and shortcomings.

This approach collides with the sensibilities of members of collectivist cultures. They suffer loss of face in any conversation that dwells on their shortcomings. Surprisingly, they also are uncomfortable with open references to their individual excellence because this distances them from the other members of their ingroup. More profoundly, they are baffled, even offended, by the idea that they should be motivated by private advantage, *self*-actualization, and individual distinction. Rather, the employer-employee relationship is seen in moral terms, as mutually *supportive*, very much like a close-knit family.

In our research for a major corporation, we are discovering that managers of recent Asian descent are poorly represented in upper management. Their sophisticated technological competence draws them into the lower management ranks but, because they do not seek private advantage through networking (or "politicking," if you will) and are reluctant to claim personal credit for work well done, they are overlooked at promotion time. Another factor we suspect is that their "one for all, all for one" group orientation makes them seem uninspiring leaders to Americans who still admire rugged individualism.

Birds of a Feather

In many non-Western business contexts, nepotism is likely to be viewed as a positive good. Relatives of the owner or employees often are preferred in hiring. From the collectivist point of view, hiring kinfolk reduces risk: A misbehaving worker will be dealt with by cousins and uncles employed by the firm. In addition, trust is assumed because the new hire is not an isolated, unknown individual but a member of a well-known and trusted family. In these cultures, it is desirable to keep together in work groups or teams people from the same families, clans, or ethnicities -- groups whose identities are external to the workplace.

Here in the U.S., the beliefs and practices associated with "diversity" prompt us to seek the richness of multiple points of view when putting together work groups or teams. We assume that individuals from a variety of external identity groups can learn to work together productively -- and they often do. But if we transfer this assumption abroad, we could run into trouble. There, employees' identities might be embedded in their family, clan, and ethnic group far more than is the case here in the U.S. In collectivist cultures, your putting people from diverse backgrounds together in working groups could create almost insurmountable barriers to the development of cooperation and teamwork.

What Experienced Travelers Know

1. **W**e-consciousness animates more people in organizations than **I**-consciousness.
2. Decision-making in collectivist cultures involves gradual consensus-building, which is time-consuming.
3. Collectivists distrust decisions by voting, which they see as suitable for trivial matters only.
4. Training events with direct sharing of participants' feelings might be objectionable to collectivists.
5. Collectivists prefer group-level goals and might not respond well to being "empowered" individually.
6. Favoritism toward certain people (e.g., family members) is expected by collectivists.
7. American-style performance evaluation systems tend to offend the sensibilities of collectivists.

September 1994

The American Way. . .At Home and Abroad

In his speech proposing the League of Nations in 1917, Woodrow Wilson advocated what he called "American principles, American policies." These, he said, "are also the principles and policies of forward-looking men and women everywhere, of every modern nation, of every enlightened community. They are the principles of mankind and must prevail." He said that American involvement in the affairs of other nations, whether military, economic, political, or

cultural, would have the tone of a moral duty to help the less favorably endowed foreigner enjoy the advantages of being an American.

What is your reaction to Wilson's views? We hope that, as a reader of *WBP Report*, you are a little shocked. We hope you are aware that people born and raised in other nations have their own values, thought patterns, perspectives, and ways of life that, while different from ours, are *entirely workable* in the social and cultural context in which they live. The two of us fear, though, that many Americans still subscribe to Wilson's view. Students of American culture call this view the "missionary mentality," suggesting that Americans tend to be eager to convince others to adopt our ways of life.

Universalism and Particularism

A closely related term is "universalism," defined as the tendency to develop and rely on norms and rules assumed to be valid for all people everywhere. Universalism is an American trait. It was harmless enough in Wilson's day, perhaps. After all, as a nation born and built by wave after wave of immigrants, the U.S. had a compelling reason to develop standards that would apply to all newcomers and gradually bind them into a nation about which it could be truthfully said: *E pluribus unum*.

Universalism is at one end of a value continuum, "particularism" is at the other. Particularism means that I respond to you in terms of your personality and circumstance in life today, not in terms of rules with broad application to everyone in situations yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Particularism is about specific relationships as these evolve and mature with changing times. Particularism recognizes -- and responds flexibly to -- exceptions to the rules and variations in customary patterns of behavior.

These days, when globalizing companies are trying hard to become customer-focused, the universalist-minded missionary mentality is a force for failure. It blinds Americans to the nuances in other nation's value systems, nuances that must be fathomed if many potential customers are to become actual ones, and if local employees and alliance partners are to dedicate themselves wholeheartedly to their work.

The Art of the Deal at Home and Abroad

Most *WBP Report* readers will already know that the American approach to deal-making and contracts is quite different from that prevailing in many other world regions: Americans prefer long, legalistic contracts that attempt to spell out all foreseeable eventualities and provide for their resolution. People in many other regions, especially Asia, prefer short, generally-worded contracts that, in the Americans' view, seem far too ambiguous. This difference might seem merely an oddity or quirk, but actually is part of the cross-cultural pattern described by the term universalism and its opposite, particularism.

American-style contracts attempt to create a set of rules and standards that apply equally to all parties over a long period of time, and that are intended to be literally interpreted and enforced. Americans view this as a necessary check against parties who might otherwise seek their own self-interest. That's a fine example of universalism in action, and it makes us Americans feel we've done things right. But others abroad react differently. How would *you*

answer the questions they might ask, such as: "Does all this detail mean the Americans don't trust us?" "Where is there room for flexibility and maneuvering when unforeseeable circumstances, including unforeseen opportunities, arise?" And: "Isn't this arrangement ultimately about mutual support and benefit, and about a gradually deepening relationship that is *just beginning* with this initial agreement? Then why all these lawyers? Why all this nit-picking?"

On the Horns of a Dilemma

A good way to grasp cultural differences is by imagining yourself facing a dilemma. Here's a dilemma about universalism and particularism. You have discovered that two subordinates in your business unit have participated in a scheme that was prohibited by company policy. Both participated equally. One is young, single, and has worked for your company for two years. The other is married with children and has worked for the company for more than 20 years. How do you deal with them? If you think you'd give them identical or very similar punishments, your tendency is universalist. If you think you'd deal with them differently, your tendency is particularist.

Here's another dilemma outside the workplace. Suppose you're riding in a car with a close friend who strikes a pedestrian at 30 miles per hour while driving in a 15-mile-per-hour zone. Your friend's lawyer tells you that your friend will avoid serious consequences if you will testify under oath that he was driving at 15 miles per hour. Will you so testify? When a researcher put this question to people from a wide variety of cultures, 90% or more of those from the U.S., Canada, Switzerland, Australia, Sweden, Norway, Germany, Ireland, and the U.K. said they would *not* lie to protect their friend. That's the universalist answer because it favors abstract rules over personal connections. But that answer was given by under 50% of the respondents from China, Indonesia, Russia, Venezuela, and South Korea. (Reported in Fons Trompenaars, *Riding the Waves of Culture*, Irwin Professional Publishers, New York, 1994.)

What concerns the two of us most is *not* whether you make the universalist or particularist choice in specific dilemmas. Rather, it's that you might have the well-known American tendency to assume, across the board, that overseas customers, clients, and colleagues are governed by the same habits, norms, and standards as we Americans. . .or that they *should* be. It's that sweeping, unexamined assumption that can place speed-bumps, and occasionally road-blocks, in your way as you confront the challenges of globalization. True: *Some* people overseas are drinking Coca-Cola, wearing Levi Strauss jeans, and listening to Michael Jackson tapes. But those product preferences, routinely hyped and showcased by the media, actually represent only the most superficial level of cultural borrowing. Deep values persist!

What Experienced Travelers Know

1. People abroad deeply resent our American habit of assuming that our ways are superior to their ways.
2. The authority of the head office might be overtly respected but covertly ignored in some cultures.
3. Contracts abroad tend to be short and ambiguous, leaving room for supportive relationships to evolve.

4. From an overseas perspective, a good alliance partner responds to events regardless of contract details.
5. Colleagues abroad often want plenty of time to develop a trusting relationship *before* making a deal.
6. Hiring, promotions, and other personnel actions abroad might seem to our eyes to lack consistency.
7. Decisions abroad about customers and suppliers might seem to our eyes to lack a business rationale.



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