

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

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Abstract:

Since business is a collaborative activity, intercultural communication has developed into being an essential part in the business world. Understanding how to communicate effectively with people from other cultures has become a priority for many organizations as individuals from different cultural backgrounds do not only have different languages, but also different rules and strategies of interacting. As a consequence, problems of intercultural misunderstanding often arise in multinational organizations because of the difficulty of finding appropriate ways to communicate intentions, expectations, attitudes, feelings, and beliefs. The paper gives an overview of the interdisciplinary field of intercultural business communication by focusing on some key cultural dimensions identified by Geert Hofstede, such as power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism and collectivism, masculinity and femininity, as well as the concept of low- and high-context cultures developed by Edward T. Hall.

Key words: intercultural business communication; low- and high-context; power distance; uncertainty avoidance; individualism/collectivism; masculinity/femininity

JEL classification: C18, C49, C60, C80, Y80, Z11, Z13, Z19, M29

1. INTRODUCTION

In a globalized economy, cultural sensitivity is essential. Since business is a collaborative activity, intercultural communication has developed into being an essential part in the business world. Understanding how to communicate effectively with people from other cultures has become a priority for many organizations as individuals from different cultural backgrounds do not only have different languages, but also different rules and strategies of interacting. As a consequence, problems of intercultural misunderstanding often arise in multinational organizations because of the difficulty of finding appropriate ways to communicate intentions, expectations, attitudes, feelings, and beliefs. Several studies have emphasized the importance of shared cultural assumptions in people's ability to predict each other's reactions, imagine potential conflicts, and avoid them by being tactful (Bradac, Bowers and Courtright, 1980; Arndt, Janney and Pesch, 1984; Arndt and Janney, 1985a, 1985b; Arndt and Janney, 1987b; Janney and Arndt, 2005). Nowadays, more than ever before in human history, more and more people are getting into contact with people from other cultures for a wide variety of reasons. First and foremost, the Internet can link individuals across national boundaries. Also, technology makes it possible for people to travel further and faster than ever before. The workforce is steadily more mobile, becoming more diverse globally.

2. INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Intercultural communication is an interdisciplinary relatively new field of research, drawing on several different disciplines such as communication studies, linguistics, sociology, psychology, anthropology, business studies etc. Communication can be defined as a process that involves an exchange of meaning between a sender and a receiver through the use of words or non-verbal factors. Intercultural communication takes place when the sender and the receiver are from different cultures. A common communication model is shown in Figure 1 (Jandt, 1998), which comprises eight basic components: *source, encoding, message, channel, receiver, decoding, feedback* and *noise*. When communicating with a partner, much of what is meant is transmitted through body

language and non-verbal cues, which may be interpreted very differently by the *receiver*, depending on the cultural background (Prince & Hoppe, 2000).

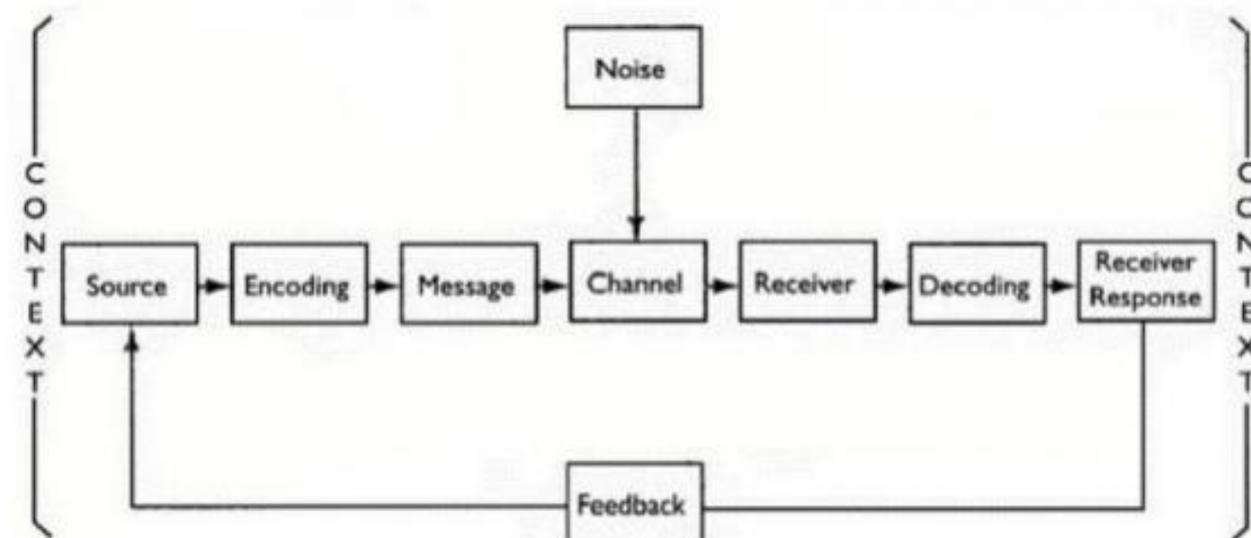


Figure 1. Communication Model (Jandt, 1998)

Among the first researchers who carried out studies in intercultural communication was the anthropologist Edward Hall, who has become well-known for his ideas on low-context and high-context cultures, published in his books “The Silent Language” (1959) and “The Hidden Dimension” (1966). Also, Geert Hofstede published his findings in his seminal book “Culture’s Consequences” (1980). Thus, Hofstede’s terminology for describing national cultures consists of four different criteria which he called ‘dimensions’ as they occur in nearly all possible combinations: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism versus collectivism, and masculinity versus femininity. His work, even though sometimes criticized for concentrating too much on national cultures, has had a tremendous impact on further studies relating to intercultural communication. Furthermore, Fons Trompenaars conducted research on 15,000 managers from 28 countries and published his findings in the book “Riding the Waves of Culture” (1997), in which he described three cultural dimensions: relationships with people, attitudes to time, attitudes to the environment.

Knowing that there are sometimes barriers to interpersonal understanding in intercultural situations because of cultural barriers can be beneficial in business communication. For this reason, understanding cultural differences has become a crucial skill for succeeding in business as intercultural communication does not occur between “idealised ‘members of culture’ in vacuo (e.g. Italians, Poles, Russians, Americans), but always between real people in real situations (e.g. a German dentist and his Turkish patient, a French businessman and his Spanish client, an American diplomat and his Russian counterpart)” (Janney and Arndt, 2005:38), so some aspects may be taken as a reference point, taking into account the partner’s goals. To demonstrate the three levels of uniqueness (human nature, culture, and personality) in human mental programming, Hofstede (1991) has used the model of the pyramid (see Figure 2). Human nature includes the universal and inherited characteristics, culture comprises the characteristics which are learnt, whereas personality contains characteristics that are both inherited and learnt. Thus, when talking about intercultural communication, we should consider Hofstede’s (1991) levels of uniqueness, as depicted in Figure 2:

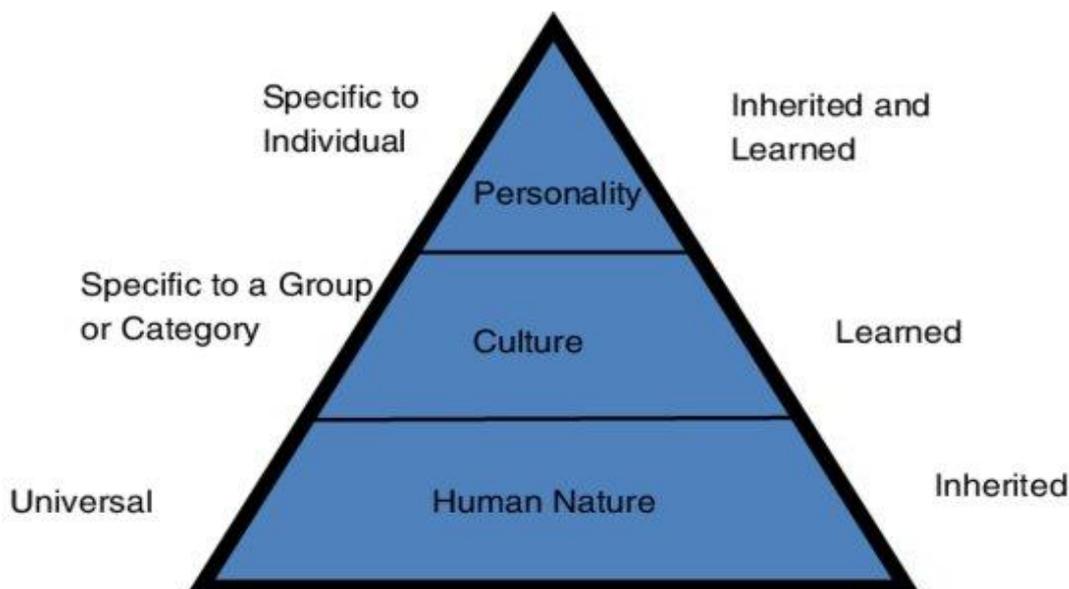


Figure 2. Levels of Uniqueness (Hofstede, 1991)

Culture describes attitudes and behaviors that characterize a group of people, so differences in culture exist among countries and subsets of a population (e.g. rural and urban). Since business people are shaped by the culture they come from, they display certain attitudes based on their cultural beliefs when negotiating, reaching an agreement or concluding a contract. Since workplaces are growingly multicultural, individuals should prepare themselves to communicate with people from other cultures by understanding key ways in which cultures differ and honing their communication skills to succeed in the worldwide economy. Thus, cultural understanding may help business people avoid misinterpreting verbal and nonverbal communication of their co-workers or customers from other cultures as well as showing ethnocentrism.

3. CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

To get an overview of the main cultural differences in business communication, the paper uses Geert Hofstede's four dimensions of culture as well as Edward T. Hall's distinction of low-context versus high-context communication. The pivotal issues of cultures to which the four dimensions described by Hofstede (1983) apply comprise power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism/collectivism, and masculinity/femininity (see Tables 1-6). Table 1 shows the index values and rank of the fifty countries and three regions on the four cultural dimensions, which apply to countries as social systems, not to individuals within those countries (Hofstede, 1983:52):

Table 1. Index Values and Rank of 50 Countries and 3 Regions on 4 Cultural Dimensions

Country	Abbreviation	Power Distance		Uncertainty Avoidance		Individualism		Masculinity	
		Index (PDI)	Rank	Index (UAI)	Rank	Index (IDV)	Rank	Index (MAS)	Rank
Argentina	ARG	49	18-19	86	36-41	46	28-29	56	30-31
Australia	AUL	36	13	51	17	90	49	61	35
Austria	AUT	11	1	70	26-27	55	33	79	49
Belgium	BEL	65	33	94	45-46	75	43	54	29
Brazil	BRA	69	39	76	29-30	38	25	49	25
Canada	CAN	39	15	48	12-13	80	46-47	52	28
Chile	CHL	63	29-30	86	36-41	23	15	28	8
Colombia	COL	67	36	80	31	13	5	64	39-40
* Costa Rica	COS	35	10-12	86	36-41	15	8	21	5-6
Denmark	DEN	18	3	23	3	74	42	16	4
* Ecuador	EQA	78	43-44	67	24	8	2	63	37-38
Finland	FIN	33	8	59	20-21	63	34	26	7
France	FRA	68	37-38	86	36-41	71	40-41	43	17-18
Germany (F.R.)	GER	35	10-12	65	23	67	36	66	41-42
Great Britain	GBR	35	10-12	35	6-7	89	48	66	41-42
Greece	GRE	60	26-27	112	50	35	22	57	32-33
* Guatemala	GUA	95	48-49	101	48	6	1	37	11
Hong Kong	HOK	68	37-38	29	4-5	25	16	57	32-33
* Indonesia	IDO	78	43-44	48	12-13	14	6-7	46	22
India	IND	77	42	40	9	48	30	56	30-31
Iran	IRA	58	24-25	59	20-21	41	27	43	17-18
Ireland	IRE	28	5	35	6-7	70	39	68	43-44
Israel	ISR	13	2	81	32	54	32	47	23
Italy	ITA	50	20	75	28	76	44	70	46-47
* Jamaica	JAM	45	17	13	2	39	26	68	43-44
Japan	JAP	54	21	92	44	46	28-29	95	50
* Korea (S.)	KOR	60	26-27	85	34-35	18	11	39	13
* Malaysia	MAL	104	50	36	8	26	17	50	26-27
Mexico	MEX	81	45-46	82	33	30	20	69	45
Netherlands	NET	38	14	53	18	80	46-47	14	3
Norway	NOR	31	6-7	50	16	69	38	8	2
New Zealand	NZL	22	4	49	14-15	79	45	58	34
Pakistan	PAK	55	22	70	26-27	14	6-7	50	26-27
* Panama	PAN	95	48-49	86	36-41	11	3	44	19
Peru	PER	64	31-32	87	42	16	9	42	15-16
Philippines	PHI	94	47	44	10	32	21	64	39-40
Portugal	POR	63	29-30	104	49	27	18-19	31	9
South Africa	SAF	49	18-19	49	14-15	65	35	63	37-38
* Salvador	SAL	66	34-35	94	45-46	19	12	40	14
Singapore	SIN	74	40	8	1	20	13-14	48	24
Spain	SPA	57	23	86	36-41	51	31	42	15-16
Sweden	SWE	31	6-7	29	4-5	71	40-41	5	1
Switzerland	SWI	34	9	58	19	68	37	70	46-47
Taiwan	TAI	58	24-25	69	25	17	10	45	20-21
Thailand	THA	64	31-32	64	22	20	13-14	34	10
Turkey	TUR	66	34-35	85	34-35	37	24	45	20-21
* Uruguay	URU	61	28	100	47	36	23	38	12
U.S.A.	USA	40	16	46	11	91	50	62	36
Venezuela	VEN	81	45-46	76	29-30	12	4	73	48
Yugoslavia	YUG	76	41	88	43	27	18-19	21	5-6
Regions:									
* East Africa	EAF	64	(31-32)	52	(17-18)	27	(18-19)	41	(14-15)
* West Africa	WAF	77	(42)	54	(18-19)	20	(13-14)	46	(22)
* Arab Ctrs.	ARA	80	(44-45)	68	(24-25)	38	(25)	53	(28-29)

*Based on data added later

3.1. High- and Low-Context Communication

Edward T. Hall (1976) introduces the concept of high- and low-context communication in his book *"Beyond Culture"* and asserts that in a high-context culture a person needs to belong to a group or community to have a well-defined identity. Thus, a high-context message is one in which "most of the information is either in the physical context or initialized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message", while in a low-context one "the mass of information is vested in the explicit code" (Hall, 1976:91):

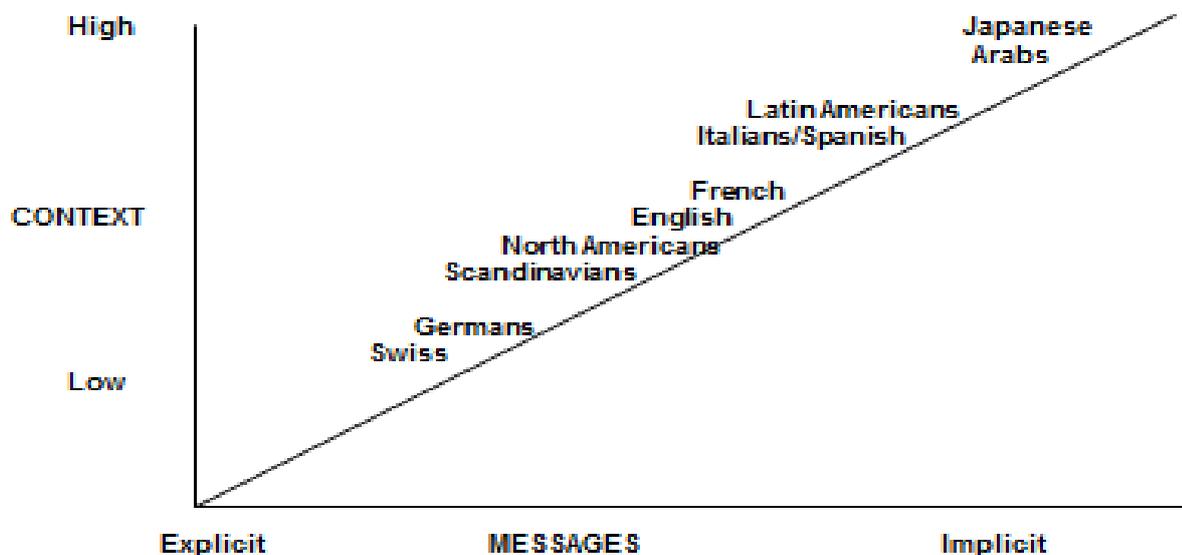


Figure 3. Continuum of Low- and High-Context Communication

In a high-context culture (such as the Japanese one), people convey meaning not only by using verbal communication, but also by the entire context surrounding the message: the nonverbal behavior of the communicator (through facial expressions, body language etc.), the history of the relationship between communicators, or how something is said, with an overall assumption that the receiver grasps what the speaker wants to convey by reading between the lines. Hence, the receiver is expected to comprehend and take responsibility for understanding the message (Hall, 1976). On the other hand, in a low-context culture (e.g. Germany, Swedish, European American and English communities), people rely more on explicit language to clearly communicate their messages in an unequivocal way (Gudykunst & Kim, 1998). Thus, Americans value direct conversations that get to the point right away, whereas Japanese place reliance on subtle cues. For instance, if a Japanese businessman has the intention to say 'no', he may keep silent or may reply with an answer such as "interesting" and would rely on the interlocutor to interpret the message correctly, based on that specific context. In addition, cultures vary in the emphasis they place on positive versus negative message content in communicative events. As a consequence, positive messages should be greatly emphasized, while negative messages (when disagreeing, criticizing, refusing etc.) should be sufficiently de-emphasized, otherwise conflicts may arise.

Accordingly, if the business partner or co-worker comes from a high-context culture, where such a display of enthusiasm is part of the culture, there should be no problem interpreting the verbal, vocal, and kinesic intensity of the message. However, if the person comes from a low-context culture, where emotive displays are restrained, the intensity of such a communicative event may be perceived as uncomfortable. Therefore, in intercultural communication it is essential to create 'a sense of affiliation' between business partners or co-workers who share common interests in specific situations and communicate in good faith to reduce the danger of threats to interpersonal face. This 'sense of affiliation' allows partners to view each other's inappropriate behavior (i.e. unexpected directness, excessive loudness, too little smiling, too much eye-contact, unusual formality etc.) as accidental rather than intentional (Arndt and Janney, 2005:37-40). Misunderstandings, natural in intercultural business communication and more difficult to adjust, cannot be dealt with by using some techniques of tact as they can potentially have significant interpersonal consequences among business partners. For this reason, people become suspicious,

starting to view each other's unexpected or rude behavior as intentional rather than accidental and tactful behavior as dishonest or deceitful rather than sincere (Berger 1979). Table 2 sums up Hall's low- and high-context cultural factors (adapted from changingminds.org):

Table 2. Hall's Low- and High-context Cultural Factors

Factor	High-context Culture	Low-culture Culture
Overtness of messages	Many implicit messages, that are need to be read between the lines	Many explicit messages, which are simple and clear
Locus of control and attribution for failure	Inner locus of control and personal acceptance for failure	Outer locus of control and blame of others for failure
Use of non-verbal communication	Focus on nonverbal communication	
Expression of reaction	Reserved, internal reactions	More focus on verbal communication
Cohesion of groups	Strong sense of family	Visible, external reactions
People bonds	Strong bonds between people within family and community	Flexible grouping patterns, changing as needed
Level of commitment to relationships	High commitment to relationships; relationships more important than tasks	Fragile bonds between people with little sense of loyalty
Flexibility of time	Time is flexible; process more important than product	Low commitment to relationships; tasks more important than relationships
		Time is highly organized; product more important than process

3.2. Power distance

The concept of 'power distance' is defined by Hofstede as "the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally" (1991:36). The term, inspired by the work of Mulder (1977), reveals how "a society's way of dealing with power relationships is established through the values of superiors as well as of subordinates" (Hofstede, 1983:51). The same author uses this concept to illustrate how inequality and authority are perceived in various cultures. Therefore, in the workplace people get respect based on their position alone and expect to do business with partners of equal rank. Additionally, a power distance index (see PDI values for the fifty countries and three regions in table 1), that shows independence on the superior, has been composed of the country scores on the following items (Hofstede, 1983:50-51):

1. the percentage of subordinates who consider that their superiors reach decisions autocratically;
2. subordinates' perceptions that their colleagues are afraid to disagree with their superiors;
3. the percentage of subordinates who do not prefer a superior who makes decisions in a consultative way, but prefer one who reaches a decision in an autocratic way or, conversely, who goes along with the majority of his subordinates.

Table 3 points out the differences between low power distance cultures and high power distance cultures (adapted from Hofstede, 1983:60):

Table 3. Low Power Distance - High Power Distance Dimensions

Low Power Distance Cultures	High Power Distance Cultures
Hierarchy means an equality of roles, established for convenience.	Hierarchy means existential inequality.
The use of power should be legitimate; power is subject to the judgement between good and evil.	Power's legitimacy is irrelevant; power is a basic fact of society and precedes good or evil.
Powerful people should try to look less powerful than they are.	Powerful people should try to look as powerful as possible.
People at both high low power levels feel less threatened and more prepared to trust people.	Other people are a potential threat to one's power and can rarely be trusted.
There is dormant harmony between the powerful and the powerless.	There is dormant conflict between the powerful and the powerless.
Cooperation among the powerless is based on solidarity.	Cooperation among the powerless is hard to get as little faith in people is the norm.
All must have equal rights.	Power holders are entitled to privileges.
Inequalities in society should be minimized as much as possible.	Inequalities are expected and welcomed; there is an order of inequality in this world and everyone has his/her earned place.
The system is to blame for things that go wrong.	The underdog is to blame for things that go wrong.
The stress is on legitimate and expert power.	The stress is on coercive and referent power.
There is a narrow range of salaries.	There is a wide range of salaries.
The ideal manager is a democrat; subordinates expect to be consulted.	The ideal manager is an autocrat; privileges for managers are expected.

3.3. Uncertainty avoidance

Hofstede argues that the concept of 'uncertainty avoidance', inspired by Cyert and March (1964), is "the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations" (1991:125). Hence, cultures which are dependent on clear guidelines and rules to reach predictable results are not comfortable with risk and change. As a consequence, countries with high uncertainty avoidance have a "lower tolerance for ambiguity, which expresses itself in higher levels of anxiety and energy release, greater need for formal rules and absolute truth, and less tolerance for people or groups with deviant behaviour". Table 4 shows the main features of low versus high uncertainty avoidance cultures (adapted from Hofstede, 1983:61):

Table 4. Low Uncertainty Avoidance - High Uncertainty Avoidance Dimensions

Low Uncertainty Avoidance Cultures	High Uncertainty Avoidance Cultures
Uncertainty is a normal trait of life; each day should be taken as it comes.	Uncertainty is felt as a continuous threat that must be fought.
People are unworried in ambiguous situations; there should be as few rules as possible.	People are uncomfortable in equivocal situations; there is a need for more rules and regulations than necessary.
If rules cannot be maintained, they should be changed.	If rules cannot be maintained, people are seen as sinners and should repent.
Competition and conflicts are used constructively and managed at the level of fair play.	Competition and conflicts may release aggressive behavior and thus should be avoided.
People are open-minded to innovation; there is more willingness to take risks in life.	People are resistant to change; people are concerned with security in life.
There is a lower stress level and hard work is not a virtue	There is higher anxiety and stress level and an inner urge

per se.	to work hard.
There is a strong belief in generalists and common sense.	There is a strong belief in experts and their knowledge.
The authorities are there to serve the people.	People are incompetent compared to authorities.
Achievement is determined in terms of recognition.	Achievement is interpreted in terms of security.

3.4. Individualism versus collectivism

Individualism (IDV), one of the key dimensions of culture, shows “the relative importance in the country of the job aspects personal time, freedom, and challenge and the relative unimportance of training, of use fo skills, of physical conditions, and of benefits” (Hofstede, 1983:54). In other words, in an individualistic society individuals value their own achievements, satisfaction and independent thinking. Conversely, in collectivist cultures people are supposed to put the good of the group/organization before their own individual interests in exchange for loyalty and protection when they are in trouble (Hofstede, 1983). Table 5 highlights the main features of collectivist and individualist cultures (adapted from Hofstede, 1983:62):

Table 5. Individualism – Collectivism Dimensions

Low Individualism	High Individualism
Expertise, order, duty, and security are provided by the organization.	Autonomy, variety, pleasure and individual financial security are important traits.
Employer-employee relationships are like a family link.	Employer-employee relationships are based on a contract.
Relationships are more important than tasks.	Tasks are more important than relationships.
The focus is on group management and belief in group decisions.	The focus is on management of individuals and belief in individual decisions.
The social group to which one belongs defines his/her identity; there is a strong emphasis on belonging to organization; membership ideal.	Identity is based on the individual; there is a strong emphasis on individual initiative and achievement; leadership ideal.
Decisions to hire people take the group into consideration.	Decisions to hire people take skills into account.
There is a focus on maintaining harmony in the group; “we” consciousness prevails.	Speaking your mind is considered being honest; “I” consciousness rules.
There is emotional dependence of individual on organizations and institutions.	There is emotional independence of individual from organizations/institutions.
The private life is invaded by organizations or groups to which people belong; their opinions are predetermined.	Everyone has a right to a private life and opinions.
Involvement of individuals with organizations is primarily moral.	Involvement of individuals with organizations is primarily calculative.

Indeed, individualist and collectivist values have a huge influence on business communication. For instance, in the USA, which is characterized by an individualistic culture, many companies reward individual leaders (CEOs, other executives) with multi-million dollar bonuses for the company’s successes. All 50 countries studied by Hofstede have been placed along the individualist-collectivist scale and each country was given an Individualism index score: 100 represents a strongly individualist society and 0 a strongly collectivist society. Thus, wealthy countries (e.g. the U.S., Great Britain, the Netherlands) appear to be more individualist, while poor countries are more collectivist (e.g. Colombia, Pakistan, and Taiwan).

3.5. Masculinity versus femininity

According to Hofstede, masculinity (MAS) illustrates “the relative importance in the country of the job aspects earnings, recognition, advancement, and challenge and the relative unimportance of (relation with) manager, cooperation, desirable (living) area, and employment security (Hofstede, 1983:55). In masculine cultures, men are supposed to be self-reliant, and focused on material success, while women are socialized towards modesty, tenderness, nurturance, responsibility. On the other hand, in feminine cultures the roles of men and women coincide, that is both men and women should be humble and be more interested in the quality of life (Hofstede, 1991:82). Also, in more ‘masculine’ countries the gap between the values for the men and for the women is wider, while in most of the ‘feminist’ countries it is reduced to zero (Hofstede, 1980:282). Table 6 illustrates the masculinity-femininity dimensions (adapted from Hofstede, 1983:63):

Table 6. The Masculinity - Femininity Dimensions

Low Masculine Cultures	High Masculine Cultures
The dominant value is caring for others; quality of life and environment are important.	The dominant value is material success; performance and growth are important.
Relationships are more important than things; people orientation.	Things are more important than relationships; money and things orientation.
Both men and women deal with facts and feelings; men need not be assertive, and can also assume nurturing roles.	Men should behave assertively, while women are more nurturing and deal with feelings.
People work to live; service is ideal.	People live to work; achievement is ideal.
Managers should aim for consensus.	Managers are expected to make decisions.
Equality and solidarity are important at work; leveling: don't try to be better than others.	Competition and performance are critical at work; excelling: try to be the best.
Differences in sex roles must not mean differences in power; sex roles in society should be fluid.	Men should dominate in all settings; sex roles in society should be clearly differentiated.
People resolve conflicts by compromise in the workplace.	People battle it out to resolve conflicts at work.

Therefore, the countries showing a combination of a willingness to take risks (low uncertainty avoidance) and a masculine desire for visible success (high masculinity) are all Anglo-Saxon countries (Great Britain, The United states, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, South Africa) as well as a number of their former colonies (Singapore, Hong Kong etc.). A low uncertainty avoidance shows a predominance of risk-taking over security, whereas masculinity involves a predominance of assertiveness over nurturance (Hofstede, 1983). Also, in cultures with a low uncertainty avoidance and a low masculinity (e.g. Scandinavia and The Netherlands) there is a relative predominance of social (belongingness) needs over self-actualization and esteem needs. Another example is that of Sweden, with an approach to humanization of work, that is group-centered, in comparison with the US, which is centered on individual job-enrichment. On the other hand, in the Japanese culture, characterized by a high masculinity, prevails performance motivation combined with life-time employment (Hofstede, 1983:67-68). Cultures that avoid uncertainty are often collectivist and set a high value on consensus and harmony, being rather cautious about integrating new people in the group. Conversely, cultures that can tolerate uncertainty are open to new people, new ideas, and risks (Shwom, Snyder, 2013:65).

4. CONCLUSION

In short, when people know the cultural backgrounds of the people the work or do business with, they can use several strategies (Shwom Snyder, 2013) to help them communicate, such as

being polite and courteous. Also, when appropriate, try to learn how to greet people in their native language as well as main traits about the culture of the people you have to work or do business with. Avoid humor as individuals from other cultures may not understand it or, worse, find it offensive and always ask for feedback to ensure successful communication. Moreover, we should pay attention to nonverbal communication to avoid cultural mistakes, observe how the people act, if they maintain eye contact, how closely they stand together to talk etc. (e.g. in the US, the comfortable distance when conversing is about 1 to 2 meters, while in Southern Europe it is half). Another key point is to be clear and concise, by focusing on being very specific with the words you choose when communicating with people from other cultures. Hence, people should try to avoid idioms as their meaning cannot be deduced from those of the individual words as well as jargon, the specialized terminology of a specific field, as it may be unknown to individuals from a different culture. Besides, we should not talk at a fast pace, but focus on talking relatively slowly and uttering words clearly so that people can understand what is being communicated. Last but not the least, we should ask for verbal feedback to check for mutual understanding and do not rely on individuals' nonverbal communication clues (smiling, nodding etc.) as they may be interpreted differently in another culture. All in all, the paper has provided a synopsis of cultural differences in business communication by focusing on some key cultural dimensions such as power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism and collectivism, masculinity and femininity, as well as the concept of low- and high-context cultures to get a better understanding of how to communicate effectively in the business environment.

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