

## seven dimensions of culture



### characteristics

author:	Hampden-Turner, Charles and Trompenaars, Fons
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### related models

five dimensions of culture

### description:

In 1998, management consultants Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner published their "Seven Dimensions of Culture" model to help explain national cultural differences in organisations and to show how managing these differences in a heterogeneous business environment is a major challenge for international managers.

Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner gathered data over ten years using a method that relied on giving respondents dilemmas or contrasting tendencies. Each dilemma consisted of two alternatives that were interpreted as indicators for basic attitudes and values. The questionnaire was sent to over 15,000 managers in 28 countries. At least 500 usable responses per country were received, enabling the two authors to make substantiated distinctions between national cultures.

The two consultants distinguished seven connected processes formulated as dilemmas. A culture distinguishes itself from others by 'preferring' one side of a dilemma's continuum. The seven, universal dimensions of cultures are:

#### 1. UNIVERSALISM versus PLURALISM

*"What is more important – rules or relationships?"*

The degree of importance a culture assigns to either the law or to personal relationships. In a universalistic culture, people share the belief that general rules, codes, values and standards take precedence over the needs and claims of friends and other relationships. In a pluralistic culture, people see culture in terms of human friendship and intimate relationships. While rules do exist in a pluralistic culture, they merely codify how people relate to one another.

#### 2. INDIVIDUALISM versus COMMUNITARIANISM

*"Do we function as a group or as individuals?"*

The degree to which people see themselves function more as a community or more as individuals. In a principally individualistic culture, people place the individual before the community. This means that individual happiness, fulfilment and welfare prevails and people take their own initiative and take care of themselves. In a principally communitarian culture, people place the community before the individual. Thus, it is the responsibility of the individual to act in ways which serve society. In doing so, individual needs are automatically attended.

#### 3. SPECIFIC versus DIFFUSE

*"How far do we get involved?"*

The degree to which responsibility is specifically assigned or is diffusely accepted. In a specific culture, people first analyse the elements individually and then put them together, the whole is the sum of its parts. People's lives are divided accordingly and, only a single component can be entered at a time. Interactions between people are very well-defined. Specific individuals concentrate on hard facts, standards and contracts. A diffusely oriented culture starts with the whole and sees individual elements from the perspective of the total. All elements are related to one another. Relationships between elements are more important than individual elements.

#### 4. AFFECTIVITY versus NEUTRALITY

*"Do we display our emotions?"*

The degree to which individuals display their emotions. In an affective culture, people display their emotions and it is not deemed necessary to hide feelings. However, in a neutral culture, people are taught not to display their feelings overtly. The degree to which feelings become manifested is therefore minimal. While emotions are felt, they are controlled.

#### 5. INNER DIRECTED versus OUTER DIRECTED

*"Do we control our environment or work with it?"*

The degree to which individuals believe the environment can be controlled versus believing that the environment controls them. In an inner-directed culture, people have a mechanistic view of nature; nature is complex but can be controlled with the right expertise. People believe that humans can dominate nature, if they make the effort. In an outer-directed culture, people have an organic view of nature. Mankind is viewed as one of nature's forces and should therefore live in harmony with the environment. People therefore adapt themselves to external circumstances.

#### 6. ACHIEVED STATUS versus ASCRIBED STATUS

*"Do we have to prove ourselves to receive status or is it given to us?"*

The degree to which individuals must prove themselves to receive status versus status simply given to them. In a culture with achieved status, people derive their status from what they have accomplished. Achieved status must be proven time and time again and status will be given accordingly. In a culture with ascribed status, people derive their status from birth, age, gender or wealth. Here status is not based on achievement but it is accorded on the basis of the person's being.

#### 7. SEQUENTIAL TIME versus SYNCHRONIC TIME

*"Do we do things one at a time or several things at once?"*

The degree to which individuals do things one at a time versus several things at once. Cultures developed their own response to time. Time orientation has two aspects: the relative importance cultures assign to the past, present and future, and their approach to structuring time. In a sequential culture, people structure time sequentially and do things one at a time. In a synchronic time culture, people do several things at once, believing time is flexible and intangible.

#### *Past-oriented cultures*

A culture that is oriented towards the past views the future as a repetition of previous events and experiences. Characteristics include: respect for ancestors and collective historical events.

#### *Present-oriented cultures*

A culture primarily directed to the present does not attach great value to the past or future. Instead,

individuals are directed by the daily demands of every day life.

#### *Future-oriented cultures*

A culture concentrated on future prospects and does not deem the past as significant for future events. Planning is a major activity among individuals in this culture.

The seven dilemmas help managers better understand the 'other side' e.g. when trying to make trans-national projects or mergers work. Better understanding reduces the number of cultural driven misunderstandings and conflicts thereby reducing coordination costs. The model helps marketers understand how consumers in different countries behave differently towards the same product.

#### assets:



##### seven dimensions of culture

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#### pros:

- Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner provided a tool to explain how national culture differs and how culture can be measured. Their research showed that cultural differences matter and that reconciling cultural differences can lead to competitive advantage to companies in consolidating / globalising industries.
- Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner's model gives employees who deal with cross-cultural relations a tool/context to better understand value sets and behaviours.
- Trompenaars' research shows that the way business is conducted in one part of the world is different from the way it is done in another. Culture is an important aspect in doing international business. For example, Office Depot has learned that Japanese customers do not like to buy their supplies in large, well-stocked stores that offer discount prices. Japanese prefer stores where service is personal and are willing to pay higher prices for this.

#### cons:

- The model fails to recognise the influence of personal characteristics on behaviour.
- The model distinguishes the differences between cultures, but does not provide recommendations on how to work with specific cultures.
- Additional dilemmas may be added to the seven original dimensions of culture. No assurance can be given that this list is complete.
- Trompenaars and others such as Hofstede emphasised that companies should acknowledge the differences between the cultures in which they operate. However, other authors including Ohmae (Borderless World) and Levitt (Globalisation of Markets) argue that national borders are diminishing and that the world should be seen as a whole and not made up of different countries with different cultures.

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