

# Understanding the Influence of Culture

## Dr. Gary R. Weaver

*Dr. Weaver is professor of International Communications at the School of International Service at The American University in Washington D.C. He frequently lectures and writes on topics ranging from culture shock, cross-cultural communications, negotiation and hostage taking to the Black identity movement, cross-cultural child care, and multi-cultural organizational behavior. His latest book is Culture, Communication and Conflict.*

When seeking cross-cultural training, most people don't want in-depth presentations that delve into theoretical constructs of culture. Instead, they want advice-givers who provide training that is short, concrete, painless, entertaining and simple.

It is very tempting for trainers to provide cultural "cookbooks" full of "recipes" for how to behave, fancy charts and graphs, and a multitude of clever anecdotes. But like the self-help psychology books popular a decade ago, these quick-fix approaches are of dubious value. In fact, they may give people inflated confidence in their ability to communicate, false expectations about the difficulties of cross-cultural adjustment, and misleading stereotypes about other cultures.

While no single formula clearly emerges as "best" for orienting people to other cultures, it is vitally important to understand the profound influence that culture exerts on all of us. A solid training program should provide a conceptual framework that can be used to understand, interpret, and analyze differences and similarities in culture. For example, there is no such thing as a "typical" American or "typical" Japanese, but there are deeply ingrained cultural patterns that, when identified and understood, can help us understand each other and ourselves.

### Understanding the Concept of Culture

Culture itself is an abstraction we must understand before we can begin discussing our own culture, the cultures of others, or the process of cross-cultural interaction. Just as we cannot understand individual human behavior without understanding the concept of "personality", it is virtually impossible to discuss the behavior of people in a particular society without understanding the concept of "culture". Many people think of culture as society's behavior and customs, or its artifacts, such as music, art, and literature. Consequently, people who must deal with others possessing different cultural backgrounds are often concerned with mastering information about these external aspects when, in fact, the most important part of culture is internal and hidden.

Entering another culture is somewhat like two icebergs colliding—seen on the surface are only the "tips of the icebergs;" the real clash occurs beneath the

water where values, attitudes, beliefs, and thought patterns conflict. To understand the visible behavior, it is necessary to first understand the underlying or “submerged” cultural foundations upon which that behavior is based.

The terms “internal” and “external” culture are used by Edward Hall in his book *Beyond Culture* (1976). He suggests that what we normally refer to as “mind” is actually internal culture. For the most part internal culture operates outside our awareness. We unconsciously learn what to notice and not, how to divide time and space, how to walk, talk, use our bodies, behave as men or women, relate to other people, or handle responsibility. This applies to all people. The Chinese, Japanese, or Arabs are as unaware of their assumptions as we Americans are of our own.

Knowledge of internal culture is vitally important because it provides the framework for comprehending, analyzing and interpreting the behavior of both others and of ourselves. This point cannot be overemphasized – to understand people from other cultures, we must first understand ourselves. While many Americans may feel that we really don’t have a culture, this is not the case. There are patterns of “mainstream” American culture that can be identified – an emphasis on individualism, competition, achievement, and action; and intense outward regard for equality and fairness. Without some understanding of basic values such as these, it is almost impossible to explain why Americans behave as they do. The same, of course holds true for any other people.

### The Contrast Culture Continuum

Cultures are often compared in social structure, philosophical outlook, thought patterns, and basic values and placed along a continuum. When viewed on such a continuum, observations about a culture that may seem oversimplified by themselves can provide a conceptual framework to highlight values and thought patterns as the determinants of behavior. People begin to see there *are* similarities between cultures and that differences are only a matter of degree – of where they fall on the same continuum.

Two possible endpoints on a culture continuum of characteristic communication and thought patterns are the concepts of “low-versus high context” communication and “abstract versus associative” thinking.

### Low Versus High-Context Cultural Patterns

Edward T. Hall developed the conceptual model of “high-and low-context” communication which is particularly helpful in explaining differences in communication style in Japan and the United States. According to Hall, in some cultures messages are explicit-people put their trust in words to communicate. In other cultures, such as China and Japan, the verbal part of the message contains less information, while the context of the situation carries important meaning. That is to say, people may take for granted just how much the listener understands.

In cultures that tend to prefer more low-context styles of communication, speakers assume the listener knows very little and must be told almost everything. For this reason, Americans tend to place more value on direct forms of communication where most of the meaning is transmitted explicitly in words. The popular axiom “Say what you mean and mean what you say” reflects this.

Americans often don’t respect or trust people who “beat around the bush.” If the speaker cannot put his idea explicitly into words, they feel he has nothing to communicate. This is one reason the United States has a seeming overabundance of lawyers: when everything needs to be put into words to be understood and agreed upon, trained specialists are necessary to precisely translate and transcribe every possible contingency into a written contract so that all parties clearly understand the agreements.

In contrast, cultures tending to prefer high-context communication, like Japan, do not put the same premium on verbal communication. Because of Japan’s racial homogeneity and the virtually identical social and cultural conditioning that most Japanese receive while growing up, when two Japanese are talking they don’t have to come right out and say exactly what they mean. In high-context communication much of the meaning is already “pre-programmed” into the situation, so the meaning of the message does not have to be expressed directly in words; it is the responsibility of the listener to understand intuitively.

The Japanese word *haragei* refers to intuitive communication, without the use of words that one can only sense viscerally “through the belly”. *Haragei* is based on implicit, shared understanding. *Haragei* is important in traditional Japanese theater where the best actors supposedly communicate to their audiences without saying or doing anything.

For example, when an American asks a Japanese if his company can do something, and he replies “It’s a little difficult” (*chotto muzukashi*), the American assumes he means just that – it may be a little difficult, but we like challenges, so with some extra effort we can get the job done. But to the Japanese, this “difficulty” most often indicates a polite refusal. In this case, the Japanese is saying “no” in a high-context, implicit Japanese way.

### Memo Writers or Story Tellers – Abstractive or Associative Styles

Mainstream Americans tend to be more abstractive or analytical thinkers. Abstractive thinkers divide; they focus on dissecting events and concepts into pieces that can be linked by cause-and-effect relationships. The preferred pattern is to amass a great deal of quantifiable data, the “select out” those facts necessary to solve problems and make decisions. The emphasis is on specialization, quantification and inductive reasoning. Abstractive thinkers prefer to communicate only what they perceive as the most relevant “facts,” somewhat in the style of a good memo.

Conversely, the Japanese who tend to be more associative or relational thinkers, do not divide, but seek to connect. They prefer first to look at the whole picture, then see how the parts relate. The emphasis is on generalization, qualification, deductive thinking, and combining a much wider array of data than more abstractive people may be accustomed to. In solving problems or making decision, as well as in getting to know people, the Japanese seek much more background or “contexting” information than Americans ordinarily think is necessary.

For this reason, when presenting information, a Japanese speaker or writer will often cite greater amounts of data from more diverse sources than Americans might think relevant, and will likely present this information in a more roundabout fashion using imagery and analogy – more like telling a story than preparing a memo.

### Conclusion

Unsophisticated trainers sometimes draw from their own narrow experiences overseas and assume they can rely on experiential exercises and anecdotal materials alone. Without an understanding of theoretical approaches to cross-cultural adaptation and communication, they end up giving culture-specific information that does not allow for ongoing development of intercultural skills.

A good trainer should model the analytical and interpretive skills participants may adopt as they develop their own techniques. The trainer should never foster a dependency relationship, in which people expect specific behavioral advice that they feel they must follow if they are to succeed overseas. Rather, the ultimate goal of training is for each person to assume his or her own strategies for cross-cultural communication. ■

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