



## Seven Dimensions of Culture

We look at the work of Fons Trompenaars who studied Economics at the Free University of Amsterdam and later earned a Ph.D. from Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania. Fons has studied how people in specific countries resolve dilemmas. After analyzing problem resolution behaviours, he identified 7 basic dimensions for culture.

- **Scale 1 Universalism v Particularism**

**Universalism** says good and bad can be defined for all circumstances; you see the world as being black and white, with few shades of grey. Right is right, and wrong is wrong: a contract, agreement or commitment is fixed and there is a clear distinction between what is true and a lie. Typical *universalist* cultures are the USA, Canada, UK, Germany, Scandinavia, The Netherlands, Switzerland, White South Africa, and Australia.

**Particularism** gives greater attention to the obligations of relationships and unique situations. Would you give evidence against a friend who had been speeding and caused a traffic accident? A contract is the basis for an agreement, rather than being fixed for all time – because people and circumstances may change after you have signed it which means you reinterpret its conditions. (Latin, African and Asian cultures)

- **Scale 2 Individualism v Collectivism**

**Individualism** leaves people free to contribute to the collective as and if they wish; ultimately, however, they are free to take their own decisions and lead their lives as they will. Equally, you are free to make your own mistakes, and there is little loss of face when you do. (UK, USA, Netherlands, Sweden, Finland, Australia, New Zealand)

**Collectivism** puts the emphasis on shared benefits and judges individuals by what they put in. Should the team take responsibility for a mistake made by one member? Keeping face in relation to the group becomes of great importance, and loss of face must be avoided at all costs. (Asian, Arab, African and Latin cultures)

- **Scale 3 Neutral v Emotional**

**Neutral** cultures spawn business relationships which are instrumental and focus on objectives (UK, Sweden, Netherlands, Finland, Germany, Czech Republic)

**Emotional** business dealings - involving anger, joy and passion - are acceptable at the other end of the scale. If you are upset at work, you display your feelings (Polish, Italian, French, Spanish, Latin American)

- **Scale 4 Specific v Diffuse**

**Specific** behaviour puts contractual before personal concerns; you put the job in hand first, and if any relationships result, it is a bonus, but not a prerequisite of successful working. (USA, UK, Switzerland, Scandinavia, Finland, Germany, White South Africa, Netherlands)

**Diffuse** behaviour overlaps the two sets of issues, and takes time to weave them together. You spend as much time on the relationship as on the business. You overlap the personal and the functional, and spend time outside working hours with your work colleagues and business contacts (Argentina, Spain, Russia, India, China).

- **Scale 5 Achievement v Ascription**

**Achievement-oriented** attitudes judge you on what you have recently accomplished. (USA, Canada, Australia)  
**Ascription-orientation** awards status according to birth, kinship, gender, age, connections, school. In your culture, does the “right” family name carry weight? (France, Italy, Japan)

Finally, as well as these five scales, Trompenaars also wrote about attitudes to time and the environment. According to his latest book *21 Leaders for The 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Fons argues that because business is run differently around the globe, there is a need for different managerial and leadership competencies.

In a recent interview he said “If you look at the leadership literature and you read for example the excellent work of Warren Bennis, you smell the Anglo-Saxon undertone of all this. This becomes even more obvious when you read *Les Grand Patrons* on French leadership, where personal history includes the village these leaders were raised and their attendance to one of the Grands Ecoles. Nothing new, right? Then read a book on Chinese leadership and you conclude that all leadership theories wrongly claim a universal set of traits or behaviours. What book will you need to read when you deal with the increasingly more popular multi-cultural teams? In short, we need a new paradigm of leadership that transcends culture. In our research we have found that the only competence that truly matters is the competence to reconcile dilemmas or to integrate opposites”.

Fons goes on to promote the idea of cultural “reconciliation”. He writes that foreign cultures have an integrity, which only some members will abandon. People who abandon their culture become weakened and corrupt. We need others to be themselves if partnership is to work. This is why we need to reconcile differences, that is, to be ourselves, but yet see and understand how other perspectives can help our own.

Once you are aware of your own mental models and cultural predispositions, and once you can respect and understand that those of another culture are legitimately different, it then becomes possible to reconcile differences. Why do this? Because we are in the business of creating wealth and value, not just for ourselves, but for those who live in different cultural worlds. We need to share the value of buying, selling, of joint venturing, of working in partnership.

What is reconciliation? In dealing with different cultures, you have several options:

#### **Ignoring other cultures**

One type of response is to ignore the other orientation. You are sticking to your own cultural standpoint. Your style of decision-making is to either impose your own way of doing things because it is your belief that your way of doing things and your values are best, or because you have rejected other ways of thinking or doing things because you have either not recognized them or have no respect for them.

#### **Abandon your standpoint**

Another response is to abandon your orientation and 'go native'. Here you adopt a 'when in Rome, do as the Romans do' approach. Acting or keeping up such pretenses won't go unseen – you will be very much an amateur. Other cultures will mistrust you – and you won't be able offer your own strengths to the marriage.

#### **Compromise**

Sometimes do it your way. Sometimes give in to the others. But this is a win-lose solution or even a lose-lose solution. Compromise cannot lead to a solution in which both parties are satisfied – something has to give.

#### **Reconciliation**

What is needed is an approach where the two opposing views can come to fuse or blend – where the strength of one extreme is extended by considering and accommodating the other. This is reconciliation.

If you are able to do this, you and your organization develop the ability to reconcile cultural differences and thereby become more effective in doing business and managing across cultures.