



When Cultures Collide

We look at the work of Richard Lewis who speaks 10 European and 2 Asiatic languages and spent 5 years in Japan. In his book "When Cultures Collide", Richard categorises cultures into multi-active, linear-active and re-active cultures.

Linear-Active cultures include the Germans, Swiss, Americans, Scandinavians, Austrians, British, Canadians, New Zealanders, Australians, South Africans, Japanese, Dutch and Belgians.

According to Lewis, they are introvert, patient, quiet, mind their own business, like privacy, plan ahead (methodically), do one thing at a time, work fixed hours, punctual, dominated by deadlines and schedules, compartmentalise projects, stick to plans, stick to facts, get information from statistics/ reference books/ database, job-oriented, unemotional, work within departments, follow correct procedures, accept favours reluctantly, delegate to competent colleagues, complete action chains, like fixed agendas, brief on telephone, use memoranda, respect officialdom, dislike losing face, confront with logic, have limited body language, rarely interrupt and separates social-professional.

Linear-active people like Swedes, Swiss, Germans and Dutch, do one thing at a time, concentrate hard on that thing and do it within a scheduled timescale. These cultures consider this way they are most efficient and get more done.

Americans are also very linear-active, but there are some differences in attitude. As Americans live in the present and the future, they sometimes push Germans into action before the latter want to act. Germans would prefer to explain a lot of background to their partners to put present actions into context. This can irritate Americans who want "to get on with it".

By contrast, **Multi-Active** cultures include Latin Americans, Arabs, Africans, Indians, Pakistanis, Spanish, Southern Italians, Mediterranean peoples, Polynesians, Portuguese and Russians. They are typically extrovert, impatient, talkative, inquisitive, gregarious, plan grand outlines only, do several things at once, work any hours, unpunctual, timetable unpredictable, let one project influence another, change plans, juggle facts, get first-hand (oral) information, people-oriented, emotional, get opinions from all departments, pull strings and seek favours, delegate to friends and relations, complete human transactions, interrelate everything, talk for hours, rarely write memos, seek out (top) key person, have ready excuses, confront emotionally, unrestricted body language, interrupt frequently and interweave social with professional.

Multi-active people are not very interested in schedules or punctuality. They pretend to observe them, especially if a linear-active partner insists. They consider reality to be more important than manmade appointments.

Reactive cultures are known as listeners, the members of which rarely initiate action or discussion, preferring first to listen to and establish the other's position, then react to it and formulate their own.

Reactive cultures are to be found in Japan, China, Taiwan, Singapore, Korean, Turkey and Finland. Several other East Asian countries, although occasionally multi-active have certain reactive characteristics. In Europe, only Finns are strongly reactive but Britons, Turks and Swedes fall easily into 'listening mode' on occasions.

Reactive cultures are introvert, distrust a surfeit of words and consequently are adept at non-verbal communication. This is achieved by subtle body language, worlds apart from the excitable gestures of Latins and Africans. Linear-active people find reactive tactics hard to fathom. Multi-active people, used to extrovert behaviour, find them inscrutable – giving little or no feedback. The Finns are the best example of this, reacting even less than the Japanese.

Finally, to work best with reactive cultures, Lewis suggests the following approach:

Listen carefully – establish understanding of the other's intent – allow a period of silence in order to evaluate – query further – react in a constructive manner – maintain a certain amount of inscrutability – imitate the other's strengths or products – improve on them – refine – perfect if possible.