



# Echos of Culture in the Corporate Environment



# Echos of Culture in the Corporate Environment

Culture's influence on; Business negotiations,  
Communication, Creativity, Employees,  
and Buying Behavior

Ashraf Haggag

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## Introduction

**A**fter delivering the final manuscript of my previous book *No Place to Stand Alone* to my publisher, I went for a short vacation, hoping to take a break and clear my mind from almost a year of continuous hard work on a daily basis. To my amazement, when I returned, I couldn't resist the strong inner desire to rush back to the office to begin drafting the outline of my new book, *Decision-Making Process in Different Cultures*. The concept of this book occupied my mind endlessly and pushed me to think about how the cultural differences among nations can affect and influence the decision-making processes in the corporate environment. Especially intriguing to me was the extent to which our mental activity, influenced by these cultural differences, plays an integral part in planning and decision-making at a vast range of levels, including budget planning, policy making, et cetera. People and organizations all over the world are engaged daily in these activities. The underlying cross-cultural differences

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in the decision-making process can contribute greatly to efficiency in cross-cultural communications and conflict resolution. Without the significant support of those close to me, this book would certainly not exist. I was truly blessed to have the extraordinarily dedicated support of these people. They challenged me to create and complete the final manuscript. I hope the contents will be enjoyable to my readers but also a road map to understanding the cultures of different nations and how they affect behavior and decision-making.

Enjoy the read.

One

## The Definition of Culture

### WHAT IS CULTURE?

**T**he word *culture* is a notoriously difficult term to define. Most of the difficulty in understanding the concept of culture stems from the different usages of the term. However, look at the following definitions and consider the characteristics of culture that each draws attention to:

1. Culture is a complex topic that includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, customs, and habits acquired by a society.
2. Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups. The essential core of culture consists of traditional ideas, especially the values attached to them.

3. Culture consists of the derivatives of the experience of populations, more or less organized, that are learned or created by individuals, including those images or their embodiments and interpretations transmitted from past generations or contemporaries.
4. Culture is the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another.
5. Culture is the set of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors shared by a group of people but different for each individual, communicated from one generation to the next.
6. Culture is the hazy set of basic assumptions and values and orientation to life, beliefs, policies, procedures, and behavioral conversations that are shared by a group of people and that influence each member's behavior and his or her interpretation of the meaning of other people's behavior.

### **SOME KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF CULTURE**

1. Culture is manifested at different layers of depth. When analyzing the culture of a particular group or organization, it is important to identify three fundamental levels at which culture manifests itself:

- Observable artifacts
- Values
- Basic underlying assumptions

2. Culture affects behavior and interpretations of behavior. Although certain aspects of culture are physically visible, their meanings are invisible. Their cultural meaning lies in the way these practices are interpreted by the insiders.

For example, a gesture such as the ring gesture (thumb and forefinger touching) may be interpreted as a conveying agreement, approval, or acceptance in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada but as an insult or obscene gesture in several Mediterranean countries. Similarly, choice of clothing can be interpreted differently by different groups of people in terms of indication of wealth, ostentation, and so on.

3. Culture can be differentiated from both universal human nature and unique individual personality. Culture is learned, not inherited. It derives from one's social environment, not from one's genes. Culture should be distinguished from human nature on one side and from individual personality on the other.

Human nature is what all human beings have in common from Egyptian professors to the Turkish aborigines. The human ability to feel fear, anger, love, joy, sadness, and the need to associate with others is universal.

On the other hand, the personality of an individual is a uniquely personal set of mental programs that is not shared with any other human being. It is based on traits that are partly inherited with the individual's unique set of genes and

partly learned by the influence of collective programming (culture).

4. Culture influences biological process.

The great majority of our conscious behavior is acquired through learning and interacting with other members of our culture. Even those responses to our purely biological needs are frequently influenced by our culture.

For example, people share a biological need for food. Therefore, all people eat, but what we eat, how often we eat, how much we eat, with whom we eat, and according to what set of rules we eat are regulated at least in part by our culture.

5. Culture is associated with social groups.

Culture is shared by or more people. Everyone belongs to a number of different groups and categories of people at the same time. People unavoidably carry several layers of mental programming within themselves, corresponding to the different levels of culture:

- A national level according to one's country
- A gender level according to whether one was born as a girl or a boy
- A generation level that separates parents and children
- A role category: parent, son, daughter, teacher, student
- A social class level associated with educational opportunities and with the one's occupation or profession

6. Culture is both an individual and a social construct.

Culture is as much an individual psychological construct as it is a global social construct.

Individual differences in culture can be observed among people in the degree to which they adopt and engage in the attitudes, values, beliefs, and behavior that by consensus constitute their culture. If you act in accordance with those values or behaviors, then that culture resides in you. If you don't share those values or behaviors, then you don't share that culture.

7. Culture is always both socially and psychologically distributed in a group, and so the figuration of a culture's features will always be hazy.

Culture is a hazy concept in that group members are unlikely to share identical sets of attitudes, beliefs, and so on. The assumption that culture is uniformly distributed is unwarranted for two types of reasons:

- Sociogenic (related to social groups and institutions)
- Psychogenic (related to cognitive and affective processes characteristic of individuals)

8. Culture has both universal and distinctive elements.

Humans have largely overlapping biologies and live in fairly similar social structures and physical environments, which create similarities in the way they form their culture, but within the framework of similarities, there are differences.

9. Culture is learned.

Culture is learned from the people you interact with as you are socializing. Watching how adults react and talk to new babies is an excellent way to see the actual symbolic transmission of culture among people.

If two babies were born at exactly the same time in two different parts of the world, they may be thought to respond to physical and social stimuli in very different ways. For example, some babies are thought to smile at strangers while others are thought to smile only in very specific circumstances.

In some parts of the world, most children are asked from a very early age to make decisions about what they want to do and what they prefer, while in many other cultures, a parent would never ask a child what he or she wants to do but would simply tell the child what to do.

10. Culture is subject to gradual change.

The culture of any society is a type of snapshot view of a particular time. An individual who is witnessing and experiencing a certain situation in certain time would not find exactly the same situation several years later.

There are no cultures that remain completely static year after year.

11. Culture is a descriptive not an evaluative concept.

The interpretation of culture is often linked with terms and concepts such as *civilized, well educated, refined or cultured* and is associated with the results of refinements such as art, music, et cetera. However, our notion of culture is not something exclusive to certain members; rather, it relates to the whole of society. Moreover, it is not value laden. It's not that some cultures are advanced and some are backward or that some are civilized and polite while others are coarse and rude. Rather, they are similar to or different from one another.

**CULTURE AND RELATED TERMS**

1. Culture and nation

In our everyday language, people commonly treat *culture* and *nation* as equivalent terms.

Some nations are predominantly inhabited by one culture group, but most nations contain multiple cultures within their boundaries. Therefore, *nation* is a political term referring to a government and a set of formal and legal mechanisms that have been established to regulate the political behavior of its people.

2. Culture and race

*Race* commonly refers to genetic or biologically based similarities among people who are distinguishable and unique and functions to separate one group of people from another.