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*Cultural Differences*
by Angelica Larios
Advisory Article

# Cultural Differences: Knowing the Nine Dimensions of Culture to Succeed in Project Management [1, 2]

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## Introduction

In a world that always changes—one that has become globalized, interdependent of each nation economically, technically, socially, politically, and culturally—the need for leaders capable of facing challenges is growing every-day. We need leaders and project managers who are capable of understanding cultural and ideological differences, are respectful of different habits than their original environments, and are able to succeed in project goals. "In addition to fighting their own prejudice, leaders face the challenge of dealing with the prejudice of followers" (Northouse, 2013). Leaders need to be even more aware of the differences that can come from dealing with people from all around the globe. Project managers who are leading global projects need to be conscious of respecting their teams, customers, and stakeholders, with high esteem for their differences. In this article, we review the nine dimensions of culture, giving suggestions on how to benefit from these dimensions when we manage projects and teams with cultural differences.

## What is the concept of global?

After several changes in our world following World War II—including processes, standardization, industrial development, expansion of our frontiers, and technological advances—the world has become closer than ever before. As Carr (2004) stated, "Most of us will recognize diversity in our work." The global environment could either mean an extended project where resources are located practically everywhere, or a workplace that has contact with global resources. In this context, *global leadership* is defined as "the exercise of influence involving completely understanding important differences between people that affect the success of such influence" (Maranga & Sampayo, 2015). Nowadays, more and more projects are developing broadly, and there are a lot of cases where leaders are physically located in long distances away from where the resources and customers are located. "Thus, it is generally understood that global leaders are

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required to work with people of other cultures as coworkers" (Maranga & Sampayo, 2015). A global leader or project manager should be aware of differences in others' cultures, motivating beliefs, and fundamental behavior systems which could affect the outcome of their management style. In doing so, project managers could have better chances of success by identifying and learning about differences in culture among the participants of the project.

## Cultural differences

When discussing project management practices in the global environment, we have to include culture differences, as the conceptualization of what a leader means differs from culture to culture.

In 1991, a research program was initiated by Robert House with the intention of reviewing cultural differences and leadership. Using this study, we can take a better approach in how to deal with preferences according to peoples' origin. They defined nine cultural dimensions:

- Uncertainty avoidance
- Power distance
- Institutional collectivism
- In-group collectivism
- Gender egalitarianism
- Assertiveness
- Future orientation
- Performance orientation
- Human orientation

These dimensions were clustered into ten regions around the world and were grouped by common language, geography, religion, historical accounts, and the preferences of these dimensions.

Let's take a deeper look to help understand what these dimensions referred to, with some examples on how to best leverage this knowledge while managing our projects.

1. **Uncertainty avoidance**. According to the model, this is related to how much society, organizations, or groups deal with having rules, laws, policies, and structures so that things more predictable and less uncertain. According to this, there are several cultures more open to taking a risk and to trusting in others. For example, there are countries that rely on their social and legal systems enough to

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do business or develop new projects, such as in the United States. Some other cultures are less likely to trust in others and avoid taking risks because it takes time to build trust in relationships—mainly because there is a lack of legal and right protection systems.

2. **Power distance**. This aspect relates to the fact that there are groups that are still stratified and expect and respect that there is a distance between leaders and followers where the power is shared unequally because some have more power, authority, prestige, status, wealth, and material possessions. There is a reality that there are still societies that have social classes—some of them are remarkable, like the society in India—that operate under a caste system, where this type of distance is not unusual. The person with a great hierarchy or knowledge is respected in such a way that what this person says is almost the law; nobody refuses or dares to argue against this person. In cultures like this, the project manager has a lot of power for what he/she represents. The downside is that without having feedback or highlights, the project manager could lose sight of important aspects.

3. **Institutional collectivism**. This dimension refers to whether a group or organization supports the development of the collectivity instead of individualism. Being competitive and individual recognition is something that is valued in the occidental hemisphere; we tend to think about heroes and prefer to highlight individual achievements, rather than compensate team efforts. In countries like North Korea, collectivism and social interest are in the personal interest. That is the reason why group cohesion and loyalty are required in these types of cultures. In a project, where what is most important and valued is the team, project managers have a better chance of achieving success if they take the well-being of the entire group into consideration, rather than benefitting or supporting a few individuals.

4. **In-group collectivism**. This aspect studies the degree to which people express loyalty, pride, and cohesiveness in their organizations or families. In this phase, cultures show a high regard for their families and religious affiliations. Examples of these cultures include some areas of the Middle East, where religion has a relevant role in many aspects of people's lives and careers. As project managers, we need to ponder and respect in-group collectivism and balance it with work and assignments.

5. **Gender egalitarianism**. This dimension concerns the fact that some cultures tend to minimize gender differences and promote equality between the sexes, while others keep more traditional gender roles. This egalitarianism can bring additional challenges if the team consists of different beliefs about gender roles—such as an individual who feels that women should not be involved in the workforce.

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6. **Assertiveness**. In this case, the degree to which people are determined, assertive, confrontational, and aggressive in their social relationships is observed in several cultures and could vary in the way people show their thoughts, obedience, submissiveness, or assertiveness. Some cultures in Latin America tend to be less assertive and confrontational, while those in other parts of the world like Germany are very assertive. This aspect has to be taken into consideration as well, knowing whether people are willing to be as direct as possible or on the contrary, if they will put their heads down.

7. **Future orientation**. This dimension refers to the degree to which people in a culture engage in actions such as planning, investing in the future, or delaying gratification. The study found that some cultures in the Middle East are more past-oriented, focusing on traditional values and routines. In the United States, where the culture tends to be more oriented toward the future, change is generally more accepted. Part of our daily job as project managers is planning and following that plan; if you have members or clients from the Middle East, the studies show that you may have a hard time trying to keep your project on track.

8. **Performance orientation**. This refers to the degree to which culture, society, or organizations encourage and reward the setting and achieving of goals. Cultures like this, such as that in the United States, are oriented to achieving more and more and improving each time. Again, part of our job is to achieve the goal for which the project was started, and this job will be easy with cultures that are performance-oriented.

9. **Humane orientation**. This refers to the way an organization or society emphasizes support to others, being fair, generosity, and altruism. In the study, Switzerland was a country often cited for high human orientation. Project management is focused on people, even more so than tasks.

Looking into this model benefits project managers by helping them to better understanding cultural differences and give them better approaches to dealing with people coming from different cultures. The researchers organized countries (according to participant results) into ten groups that have common characteristics (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004). Table 1 summarizes the results of the groups and dimensions according to how high or low cultures score in regard to each cultural dimension.

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| Country | Cluster | Cultural Dimension | High Score | Low Score |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Canada<br>USA<br>Australia<br>Ireland<br>England<br>South Africa (white sample)<br>New Zealand | Anglo | Performance orientation | X | |
| | | Uncertainty avoidance | X | |
| | | In-group Collectivism | | X |
| Austria<br>The Netherlands<br>Switzerland<br>Germany | Germanic Europe | Assertiveness orientation | X | |
| | | Future orientation | X | |
| | | Performance orientation | X | |
| | | Uncertainty avoidance | X | |
| | | Humane orientation | | X |
| | | In-group collectivism | | X |
| | | Institutional collectivism | | X |
| Israel<br>Italy<br>Switzerland (Francophone)<br>Spain<br>Portugal<br>France | Latin Europe | Humane orientation | | X |
| | | Institutional collectivism | | X |
| Zimbabwe<br>Namibia<br>Zambia<br>Nigeria<br>South Africa (black sample) | Sub-Saharan Africa | Humane orientation | X | |
| Greece<br>Hungary<br>Albania<br>Slovenia<br>Poland<br>Russia | Eastern Europe | Assertiveness orientation | X | |
| | | Gender egalitarianism | X | |

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| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Georgia<br>Kazakhstan | | In-group collectivism | X | |
| | | Future orientation | | X |
| | | Performance orientation | | X |
| | | Uncertainty avoidance | | X |
| Turkey<br>Kuwait<br>Egypt<br>Morocco<br>Qatar | Middle East | In-group collectivism | X | |
| | | Future orientation | | X |
| | | Gender egalitarianism | | X |
| | | Uncertainty avoidance | | X |
| Singapore<br>Hong Kong<br>Taiwan<br>China<br>South Korea<br>Japan | Confucian<br><br>Asia | In-group collectivism | X | |
| | | Institutional collectivism | X | |
| | | Performance orientation | X | |
| Philippines<br>Indonesia<br>Malaysia<br>India<br>Thailand<br>Iran | Southern Asia | Humane orientation | X | |
| | | In-group collectivism | X | |
| | | Power distance | X | |
| Ecuador<br>El Salvador<br>Colombia<br>Bolivia<br>Brazil<br>Guatemala<br>Argentina | Latin America | In-group collectivism | X | |
| | | Future orientation | | X |
| | | Institutional collectivism | | |

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| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Costa Rica Venezuela Mexico | | Performance orientation | | X X |
| | | Uncertainty avoidance | | X |
| Denmark Finland Sweden | Nordic Europe | Uncertainty avoidance | X | |
| | | Institutional collectivism | X | |
| | | Gender egalitarianism | X | |
| | | Future orientation | X | |
| | | Assertiveness orientation | | X |
| | | In-group collectivism | | X |
| | | Power distance | | X |

**Table 1: Countries by cultural dimensions *Source: House et al., 2004),
adaptation into a single table by Angelica Larios, PMP.**

## Conclusion

Leadership in a global environment is very challenging. Project managers, in addition to managing their scope, time, cost, quality, resources, and other aspects of projects, must be overall leaders. When projects are running all around the world and have resources, team members, customers, providers, and others from different cultures and ideologies, many aspects of cultural awareness are needed to be successful.

The Globe research (House et al., 2004) has shed some light on the fact that there are many organizations that each have different values, this can benefit project managers in the best possible way. The clustering of groups and findings doesn't intend to label people and treat them in a certain way. The objective is to have a better idea of the standard features that some cultures around the globe possess, so that we open our minds and our hearts and bring them together to work and interact in the best possible way.

Leadership and management are two concepts that mainly deal with people—understanding their reasons, motives, and beliefs and solving any difference or distractors so that projects can achieve their goals. It is also important to make people feel appreciated and important for their contributions to the success of projects—which is a major key to success.

Besides our primary focus as project managers on obtaining the best benefits in our projects, as global leaders, we need to go beyond and think more about how our contributions will help others beyond our own expectations. We need to be open to understanding other realities and contribute to creating a better place to live—with the ultimate goal of our job to be to make a social contribution that leaves the world a better place than we found it.

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# About the Author

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**Angelica Larios**, MBA, PMP, is a project manager with more than 20 years of experience in implementing software projects related to business intelligence, planning and budgeting, and financial consolidation solutions based on software applications to support the business decision process. She is the owner of ALACONTEC, an I.T. consulting company founded in Latin America. She has held several professional positions in private and public organizations, such as the Health Ministry in Mexico as I.T. director, and as a business manager for several firms in Mexico.

She holds a master's degree in business administration and a bachelor's degree in computer science from the National University of Mexico (UNAM). In addition to her studies in project management and her Project Management Professional (PMP)® certification, which have helped her to consolidate her career and have a better understanding of what businesses and projects need nowadays. She is a doctoral student in strategic leadership at Regent University, VA. She is a volunteer since 2007, starting in the local Mexico chapter, being Past President and in several positions within PMI (CMAG, BVAC) and currently serves on the Ethics Member Advisory Group (EMAG) that supports the PMI Global Operations (2018–2020).

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