

Chapter 2

Difference and common ground

This chapter focuses on

the common ways in which all types of culture tend to vary in their values and behaviours

how values and behaviours may vary in a person depending on which culture is dominant in a particular activity

how individuals may have values and preferences which are different from the cultures of which they are a member

why knowledge about other cultures is a key competence for the mindful international manager

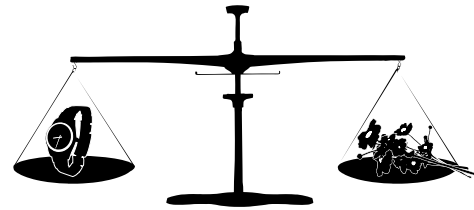


Competing values? | 2.1

In order to understand better the behaviours and practices you see when you work across cultures, it is necessary to explore the much larger part of the iceberg below the waterline. Here lie the values, beliefs and attitudes which underpin behaviour.

Some values are more or less universal, for example, the value of giving importance to the family and to the need to protect it. Other shared values are newer, for example, the growing sense in many parts of the world of the need to protect the planet from climate change and environmental damage. But most of our values have been formed from generations of experience within particular cultural groups.

These values guide the behaviour of members of the group. They help them to deal with the problems and opportunities which the group faces. These problems and opportunities may be similar for everyone but different groups call on different values, attitudes and behaviours for handling them.



Many cultures share some values, but the relative importance they give to these values may vary a great deal. For example, members of many cultures believe in the importance of honesty. In fact, we tend to be honest about different things and with different people.

Which options do you prefer in these situations?

1 You are rushing to an important meeting when you meet a colleague who you worked closely with up until five years ago. You have not seen her since then.

Do you stop to talk to her or do you greet her but then rush to make your meeting on time?

Here the value you place on punctuality and the task in hand could be in conflict with the value you place on relationships.

2 You arrive at the meeting and find that a key participant is not there. He arrives late and has not prepared an update as you, the project leader, requested. He says he has been very busy talking to a potential new client and decided this was more important than the update.

Do you feel he is unprofessional or flexible?

Here the value you place on planning and being prepared, plus respect for your leadership, may be in conflict with the value you place on flexibility and spontaneity.

3 Your boss keeps his distance from the team and communicates quite formally, saying it is a sign of respect for people he doesn't need to know personally. You think your boss is fair but not very approachable. You believe that communicating informally and breaking down the distance between people help to create a more productive working atmosphere.

Do you feel it would be better if your boss were more one of the team with a more informal style?

Here the value you place on showing respect may conflict with the value you place on informal relationships at work.

- ***I met the (German) boss of the market research agency and when we shook hands to say goodbye he actually bowed. And that seemed very strange and very formal.***
- Market research manager (U.K.), power generation, U.K.

Power in national cultures and organisational cultures | 2.2

In some societies, hierarchy does not play as important a role as in others. Countries such as Canada and Australia, which have thrown off their colonial past, reject the need for social hierarchies.

Australians talk about the "tall poppy syndrome", a phrase used to explain the ordinary Australian's lack of respect for wealth and power. The idea is that tall poppies should expect to be cut down.

In many countries in the past there was a traditional belief that a person's social rank was fixed at birth and was unlikely to change. This belief is less strong in some parts of the world and perhaps has less hold over young people and city dwellers in some countries, although it still influences many people today. In more traditional societies, there is a belief that people should 'know their place' and not only make the best of it, but dignify their position by accepting their role. Hierarchical societies show greater deference and respect to power and authority.

