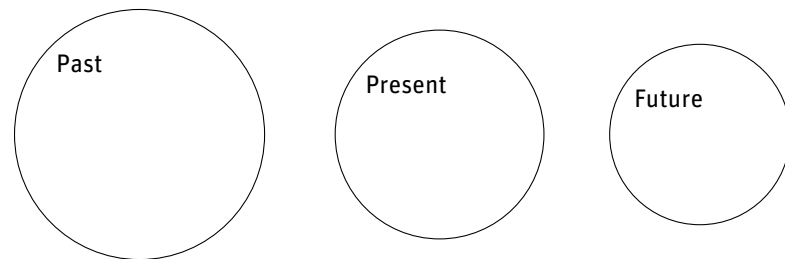


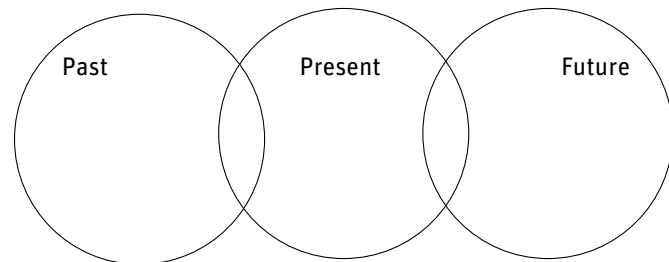
How would you represent your national or ethnic culture?

Use circles to illustrate your culture's time orientation. Think of the past, present and future as being in the shape of circles. In the space below draw three circles, each representing either the past, the present or the future. Use different sized circles to represent their relative importance. Arrange these circles in the way that best shows how your culture tends to feel about the relationship of the past, present and the future. If the circles you draw intersect, you see a connection between the various periods. If they are separate, you see no connection.⁵

The three circles below would indicate that the past is very important in comparison with the present and that the future is relatively speaking less important. All three periods are unconnected with each other.



The next three circles show how the three periods are regarded as equally significant and how the present is influenced equally by the past and future.



Best practice

Top-down or bottom-up or something else? | 4.6

How involved do you want your team to be in setting the direction? Is strategy the preserve of senior management or can others contribute to defining the direction and the objectives?

Top-down communication

In chapter 2 we saw how some cultures are more hierarchical than others. In these more hierarchical organisational cultures, there is often an expectation that top management should set the direction. Seniority gives leaders authority and encourages a willingness to obey and follow.

- ***The Malays still have almost a feudal attitude to power. The man who is at the top gets our support because he is at the top. Whether he's wrong doesn't come into it. We must follow him.***

■ Brian Cracknell (U.K.), Language Works, Malaysia

Bottom-up communication

In less hierarchical national and organisational cultures, you need to make sure that you don't 'talk down' to your colleagues, especially if you are their boss. In these cultures, the process of gaining consensus is vital for getting commitment – achieving buy-in – to a common goal.

- ***In Scandinavian countries it is no problem that a direct report of the CEO becomes his project leader, whereas in African countries where I have been working recently, this is impossible.***

■ Thorsten Weber (Germany), HLP, Germany

It is not always a question of hierarchy. In very structured and formal organisations or in cultures with a strong need to avoid uncertainty, everybody has a role and contributes only within their specific field of expertise.

- ***The feeling here is that you are responsible for bringing in your piece. It must be done. You should answer the questions you have to answer. But it's not the kind of cooperative working and learning we have more in the US.***

■ Timothy Taylor (USA), Henkel, Germany

Communicating direction to a team is vital. International managers need to get their international teams all moving in the same direction but, from the intercultural perspective, the mindful manager needs to be flexible about how to do this.



Communicating direction

Techniques	Advantages	Disadvantages
Top-down		
The leader decides and then communicates direction.	Can be inspiring if you have a broad enough range of influencing skills.	Less suitable for less hierarchical cultures.
Bottom-up		
The leader listens to the ideas and anxieties of the team's members before s/he and the team reach a consensus about direction.	Can create new alternatives and synergies.	May become a talking shop if you don't drive things forward. Less suitable for more hierarchical cultures.
Talk to individuals		
Giving direction on a one-to-one basis.	Each team member gets understanding of direction and may buy in to it. May be a useful addition in individualistic cultures.	Does not develop team spirit.
Talk to team		
Giving direction to the whole group.	Can be inspiring if you have a broad enough range of influencing skills.	May fail to gain buy-in from some individuals who the manager does not notice.
Big picture		
The leader stresses major goals and opportunities.	May achieve a broad commitment. May be more suitable in cultures tolerant of uncertainty.	May fail to convince pragmatic team members who may dismiss it as a public relations exercise and not take it seriously.
Details		
The leader presents goals and perhaps also methods in detail.	Will appeal to the practical team members. May be more suitable in cultures with a high need for certainty.	Leads to reflection about specific individual roles and not enough about the team as a whole.

In many cases, the answer is to balance a top-down with a bottom-up approach. Effective international managers need to have clear sense of where they want to go. But then they need to involve their teams in implementing this direction and adapting it to the particular needs of the situation. In this way, they may not only be creating something new in the culture of their organisation or part of the organisation. They will also be building on the cultural diversity of the group.

- ***I usually started by saying that this is our goal, now let's sit together and see***
- ***how we can adapt it to fit you and your country in your company. So it was a***
- ***common process as much as possible.***
- Birgitta Gregor (Germany), HLP, Germany

Notes

1

This insight was brought to intercultural management by Hofstede (1980, 2001).

2

One of the Worldwork international competency set.

3

This insight goes back to work by Chinese Culture Connection (1987) and was then also reported on in Hofstede (1994) and Hofstede (2001).

4

This is an insight developed by the anthropologists by Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) and made famous in the international management world by Trompenaars (1993).

5

This exercise is a variation of the Cottle Circle Test published in Cottle (1967). Cottle's original version was brought to international management by Trompenaars (1993).

