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**FACILITATING HARMONY IN DIVERSITY: USING DELIGHTS, PUZZLES AND
IRRITATIONS TO MEET THE CHALLENGE OF DIVERSITY"**

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Abstract

The article proposes the need to examine the eight pairs of underlying assumptions which determine the way members of a culture perceive, think, feel and act in different cultural contexts.

Introduction

One of the many ways for facilitators to learn about people from another culture is to examine the underlying assumptions and values they revere and uphold. These assumptions are not always clearly articulated but they form the basis of the way we perceive, think, feel and act. A good understanding of the assumptions of our own culture as well as that of another can help us develop an empathetic understanding for the similarities we have with others and the differences that make us truly unique.

Culture can be defined as the collective programming of the mind, body and spirit which describes a group of people who live in a particular society. The culture of a group of people can be distinguished from others by its shared *values* and practices expressed through *symbols*, which evoke meanings in people, *rituals* that form bonds of communication and what their *role models* do to inspire members with how to behave. All these are based on a set of *underlying assumptions* that determine one's way of perceiving, thinking, feelings and expressing.

Based on the seminal works of several writers in the field of intercultural and cross cultural management from the West (Hofstede, Trompenaars, Adler and others), and the author's own research in Malaysia, the underlying assumptions of members of a particular culture can be categorised in terms of their relationships with the *environment*, with *people* and *God*. These assumptions are important because they influence our day to day interactions with others.

This article will attempt to describe the 8 pairs of underlying assumptions of our cultural programming, and how they can be used to identify and manage conflict at the workplace.

The following chart may serve both as an outline of the paper and a guide to organizing the eight pairs of assumptions describing how different cultures perceive, think and evaluate:

<p>KEY ELEMENTS OF CULTURE</p> <p>The culture of a society is the collective programming of the mind, body and spirit which distinguishes its members from another (born into, immersion, acculturation, internalization).</p>						
<p><i>Symbols</i></p> <p>Language..artifacts...company jargon...objects....ways of addressing</p>						
<table border="1" style="margin: auto;"> <tr> <td colspan="2" style="text-align: center;"> <p>Rituals</p> <p>Meetings.....celebrations</p> </td> </tr> <tr> <td colspan="2" style="text-align: center;"> <p><i>Role Models</i></p> <p>Founders, Heroes, Heroines</p> </td> </tr> </table>			<p>Rituals</p> <p>Meetings.....celebrations</p>		<p><i>Role Models</i></p> <p>Founders, Heroes, Heroines</p>	
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<p><i>Shared practices</i></p> <p>To demonstrate core Values</p>	<p><i>Values</i></p> <p>Shoulds and musts</p> <p>Values can be inferred from behaviours</p>	<p><i>Shared practices</i></p> <p>To demonstrate core Values</p>				
<p><i>Basic Underlying Assumptions</i></p> <p>Ways of perceiving, thinking and evaluating</p> <p><i>I. Relationship with Environment</i> Mastery/Control and Harmony</p> <p><i>II. Relationship with People</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Task and Relationship b. Equality and Hierarchical c. Guilt and Shame d. Low and High Context Communication e. Monochronic & Polychronic Time Orientation f. Individualism and Collectivism <p><i>III. Relationship with God</i> Secular and Spiritual/Religious</p>						



Description of eight pairs of assumptions:

I. Relationship with Environment: Mastery/Control and Harmony

Mastery/Control

In some cultures, the forces of nature must be harnessed through technical and scientific devices to meet the needs of man. This means separating themselves from Nature and establishing mastery by looking for ways to control and manipulate it to human advantage. People are expected to challenge their existing boundaries without being directed to do so. It would also be possible to work with someone they disagree

Values and behaviours at workplace:

Inquisitive, Not afraid to question, challenge existing ways

Harmony

In some cultures, people believe that it is important to live in harmony within their environment. People find it difficult to challenge existing boundaries and as a result it can be difficult to work with someone they disagree. As a result they are more inclined to adopt an accommodating posture with their environment and promote a healthy co-existence with other people and a willingness to accept things the way they are.

Values and behaviours at workplace:

Accommodating, Tolerance, Willingness to give and take,

Compliance

II.Relationship with People

a. Task and Relationship

Task

Some cultures believe that when doing business with another person it is important to agree on a written contract. Cognitive competencies (critical thinking, problem solving, etc) are more valued than social competencies. In this instance, the task is the boss; relationships are secondary in nature.

Values and behaviors at the workplace:

Critical thinking, Detailed and specific, Contractual agreement

Relationship

In some cultures it is important to recognize that the basis of doing business with another person is to first build good and friendly relationships. Only then will the task get done. They believe that it is only by understanding and having a "feel" for the other party that they are able to live and work smoothly with them. In addition, social competencies (being friendly, accommodating, etc) are more valued than cognitive competencies.

Values and behaviours at workplace:

More sensitive to feelings, Not wanting to hurt others, Easy to get along with

b. Equality and Hierarchical

Equality

In some cultures members regard each other as equals and believe that inequalities in society should be minimized. In this instance, people are seldom afraid to disagree and expect to be consulted before decisions are made. Work, duties and responsibilities are given to those who are competent, regardless of seniority. Superiors/elders are addressed on first name basis as



status and privileges are minimized. Subordinates can question the instructions given by their superiors.

Values and behaviours at workplace:

Deviations are not tolerated, Competence, Encourage opposing views, Meritocracy

Hierarchical

Some cultures are more able to tolerate differences in status and wealth and believe that those at the top of the social hierarchy are entitled to more privileges. Inequality in power is accepted and considered normal "A place for everyone and everyone in his place." In this case, people are more likely to receive instructions positively from their superiors and would be cautious about expressing disagreement with them.

Work, duties and responsibilities are distributed according to seniority as superiors /elders are revered and addressed with honorifics. As a result, power, status and privileges are emphasized. Subordinates accept directions from their superiors without question.

Values and behaviours at workplace:

Tolerate inequalities, Status and Class consciousness, Seniors are respected, Use of honorifics, Loyalty

c. Guilt and Shame

Guilt

In certain cultures people are driven by a sense of guilt which is based on an internal locus of control (inner conscience) and tend to take control of their own destiny and do things on their own volition. They are not so much concerned about what others will say about them if they do something differently from others. They are concerned about not breaking their own code of conduct. For them there is a strong sense of absolute right and wrong

Values and behaviours at workplace:

Speaking up, Admitting mistakes, Speaking one's opinion

Shame

In other cultures, members are driven by a sense of shame which is based on an external locus of control. They are expected to demonstrate an acute sense of social sensitivity towards others in the group. These feelings tend to discourage them from committing any wrongdoing because of the adverse social consequences on the other members of their group. Truth to them also depends on certain philosophies and the unseen knowledge as revealed through their religious and spiritual tenets. Being different in these cultures tends to be equated with being wrong.

Values and behaviours at workplace:

Shy, Cautious, Sensitive to what others have to say about them, Not wanting to admit mistakes

d. Low and High Context forms of communications

Low Context

In some cultures, communication means that what is said is what is meant, i.e. "Mean what you say, say what you mean". The message containing facts and information means everything; hence the more detailed and specific, the better. Meaning is more explicit or easily understood. People focus on facts and information of the explicit verbal message - Say what you mean and mean what you say. An individual's behavior is regarded as an event in time, not necessarily representing the sum total of the person himself/herself. As a result people in these cultures are not afraid to speak up when they have something to say.

Values and behaviours at the workplace:



Explicit and to the point, Facts and information valued

High Context

In other cultures which are homogenous, the meaning of the message is also conveyed through shades of tonal qualities, modes of non-verbal channels, and the use of imprecise and ambiguous language to say more or to say less. What is not spoken may be just as important as the spoken word in building and maintaining relationships. People focus on meaning of the implicit nonverbal message - What you see is not what you get as there is more than meets the eye. People also find it difficult to separate the person from behavior. As a result people are guarded in stating their views and opinions

Values and behaviours at workplace:

Politeness, Good manners, Protocol, Guarded, Implicitness, Indirectness, Tolerance for ambiguity

e. Monochronic - Polychronic Time orientation

Monochronic

People who are monochronic see time as a scarce, indeed, finite resource; communication between business people is done with directness and speed. In this setting, work is planned and execution of work within the time specified is seen as most important. A person's orientation towards time also clearly connotes the economic value he or she places on the other resources used to create wealth and prosperity. As a result monochronic time people tend to compartmentalize their life and accept the schedule as sacred and unalterable with an ordered life cycle and clear priorities. People do one thing at a time and are intolerant of those who are not punctual as time is money and must be saved. They take turns, are linear-oriented and sequential i.e. queuing. Planned events and scheduled datelines must be adhered to.

Values and behaviours at the workplace:

Displaced, Time is money, Linear, Sequential, One thing at a time

Polychronic

A polychronic orientation is one, which sees time as not so significant and where constraints and failures to work to deadlines are often tolerated. Time is not a concrete commodity, which can be negotiated and measured. Punctuality and deadlines are not absolute. People do many things at one time and are tolerant of constant interruptions. People are circuitous, non-sequential and non-linear i.e. cut in. Datelines and events organized can be adjusted.

Values and behaviours at workplace:

Diffused, Stretchable time, Flexible, Time as part of life, Do many things at one time

f. Individualism and Collectivism

Individualism

Members regard themselves as unique and independent individuals " I did it for myself" and are more concerned with their own behavior, needs, interests and goals. They value the spirit of competition, individual achievement, independence, assertiveness and pursuit of material wealth. Personal freedom, autonomy and self-interests are regarded as the best impetus to advancement. People tend to express an opinion without being influenced by what others have to say.

Values and behaviours at the workplace:

Competitive, Assertive, Speak out one's opinion, Not shy, Achievement, Independence



Collectivism

Members regard themselves as affiliated to a group or collective "I did it for my group" and are therefore willing to sacrifice personal interests for the attainment of the group. They tend to be concerned about the impact of their behaviour on others and will only give their opinions on a specific issue after knowing what others have to say. Their sense of related self means that they need to have interdependent relationships with others as collaboration and group achievement are important.

Values and behaviours at workplace:

Group orientation, Not speaking up one's opinions, Reserve, At ease when others close are present,

III. Relationship with God: Secular and Spritual/Religious

Secular

In some cultures people believe that there has to be a secular approach of development - a separation of State from religion. Religion is considered to be a private matter and not an appropriate part of one's work life. In these cultures "spiritual" concerns may be distinct from "religious" concerns. Workplace ethics are guided by organizational principles and code of conduct, not necessarily based on any one set of religious beliefs.

Values and behaviors at workplace:

Work should not be influenced by religious belief

Religious

In other cultures it is important to incorporate a more holistic approach which combines both religious and material dimensions in one's outlook towards life. The whole person - his mind, body and spirit has to be taken into consideration as it is important for Man to blend

spiritual and material dimensions in order to have a sense of interconnectedness with the world around him. In this instance both the revealed knowledge (associated with the scared books of all religions) and acquired knowledge (based on research done through the scientific method) are equally important. As a result, workplace ethics must be guided by one's religious teachings. Members also believe that religious obligations must be met - even at the sacrifice of productivity

Values and behaviors at workplace: God fearing, Religious based work ethics

In Conclusion

On the basis of the 8 pair of cultural assumptions, the culture of a group of people in a society will have its own set of shared values, which are considered vital for its survival, growth and development. Values are the "shoulds" and "musts" which serve, guide and shape the behaviour of members in a particular culture.

As mentioned earlier, values are expressed through symbols which are the visible and clearly identifiable objects and artifacts such as buildings, logo, language and vocabulary used, ways of addressing, beliefs about the use and distribution of power and privileges. They are used to enhance commitments and compliance among insiders and give outsiders a mental image of what the culture represents in a society. They evoke meanings in people and impel them to action.

Rituals refer to established ways, standards of decorum of interpersonal behavior and mode of presentation of getting things done. They are a means of how members in the culture provide visible and realistic examples on the accepted mode and process of conducting activities critical for perpetuating its culture. Heroes and heroines are those who provide tangible or living symbols or role models of acceptable behaviors for members to adopt.



Example of how assumptions work in Asia:

The following behaviours are an expression of the underlying assumptions of *harmony*, *high context form of communication*, *hierarchy and shame*, which have to be understood in identifying and managing conflict among Asians.

- Because of the underlying assumption of *harmony* people tend to avoid conflict as it can dampen team spirit and relationship building .
- Most people tend to remain silent, shy away and hold back -- hoping that the conflict will go away. Sometimes, members will refrain from being too articulate for the sake of maintaining *harmony*. They will go along with the views of the majority even though individually they may not agree
- Because of the value of *respect for elders*, subordinates do not challenge or be in a situation where they can raise questions, become critical of the actions of their superiors as these actions may cause him to lose face
- Because conflict is difficult to express openly, **covert ways** of channeling it through symbolic aggression, gossiping, poison pen letters, name-calling, back-biting, character assassination, gestures, silence of contempt, slander, paranormal aggression like black magic witchcraft, sorcery and sudden outburst of hysteria like "amok" are used.

Some of the skills that can be used are as follows:

- A respected "third party" or an elderly person who is willing to listen to the views of both affected parties can help to resolve the conflict. By using a *non-confrontational approach* he or she can serve as an intermediary. At all times, a manager has to *preserve harmony* by showing a "give and take" attitude, be accommodating and flexible.

- Look for signs of resentment between the two parties in conflict. At all cost avoid becoming too specific and detail-oriented in wanting to discuss the reasons of the conflict and how it should be solved. If possible, use analogies to describe how the conflict is damaging the team's morale.
- Observe facial expressions and tonal variety as anger and true emotions can be covertly displayed through nonverbal gestures.
- Use the language of requests rather than demands while at the same time focus on intangible outcomes such as gaining respect and trust, maintaining relationships, preserving face and creating harmony at the workplace.

With increasing exposure to different cultures and lifestyles through the print and electronic media, satellite TV, and travel we need to be able interpret different behavioural patterns from the perspective of an insider. By understanding the underlying assumptions of cultures facilitators will be able to understand their hidden dimensions which are often unstated but have to be explained and interpreted.

This means we have to be aware not only of our own revered values but also those belonging to the other party in order to be contextually appropriate when we relate across cultures.

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Workshop Presenters

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