The Impact of International Organizational Styles

Inquire: How Has Your Culture Impacted You?

Overview

How does your culture impact how you work in a team? Did you learn how to play nice with others? Do you want to be the center of attention? Do you hate the idea of group work? All of the answers to these questions are shaped by your culture. This lesson will investigate how different cultures organize groups, the difference between individualistic and collectivist cultures, how different cultures handle criticism, and how understanding different cultures can influence your performance in a group.

Big Question: What influence does your culture have on how you act in groups?

Watch: Working Together with Your Differences

Imagine you are working in a company with a coworker from a different country. Communicating with that person can be daunting if you have no idea what their culture is like. You might wonder, what will this person laugh at? What will they be offended by? When working on an international team, it is important to know what a person’s culture is.

One of the most important pieces of information you could learn about their culture is if they come from an individualist culture or a collectivist culture. An individualist culture values the good of the individual over the good of the group. A person from an individualist culture will probably act more independent on a team. They will most likely work best on their own and value friendly competitions between teammates.

On the other hand, a collectivist culture values the good of the group over the good of the individual. This means that a person from a collectivist culture will strive to work with the team and value the accomplishments of the team as a whole.

Let’s imagine again that you work at a company with an international team. You have just been assigned a group project. After some talking with your new coworker, you learn that she comes from an individualist culture. While working, you notice that she rarely asks for help, and she hasn’t been focused on making any friends in the office. Now that you know what kind of culture she comes from, you feel more comfortable leading the group. You create a chart that shows how each person on the team is doing with the progress of the project. You also create incentives for each person to help everyone stay on track. By learning how to best communicate with people of different cultures, you have created a more successful team.

Have you ever had to adapt like in the previous example? In this lesson, you will learn about the styles of communication that different cultures use and how to integrate those styles into group work. Being able to...
work with people from many cultures will be a valuable life skill in any work setting in which you find yourself in the future.

Read: Cultural Influences in a Group

Overview

Cultural differences impact many parts of our lives, from communication habits to organizations. There are two broad categories of cultures we will cover in this lesson: collectivist and individualistic. These categories influence many parts of organizational structures and work patterns. This lesson will cover these cultural organizations, the difference in group work, how different cultures provide criticism, and cultural understanding in group work.

Cultural Organizations

Different cultures structure their organizations based on their values. Collectivist cultures — those that value the good of the group over the good of the individual — structure organizations in a way that benefit the group as a whole. This means that organizations are focused more on cooperation and teamwork. On the other hand, individualistic cultures — those that value the good of the individual over the good of the group — structure organizations in a way that focuses on competition and allows for individual members of the group to stand out based on the amount of work they put forward.

Collectivist vs. Individualistic Group Work

This dichotomy between cultures — a group focus versus an individual focus — impacts all levels of organization, from the formation of groups to the work that group actually does. In a collectivist group, work is divided equally among members in a way that tries to ensure the group can accomplish its goal. This is done with a heavy focus on cooperation between team members, where everyone contributes equally toward accomplishing tasks that are needed to reach the end goal.

By contrast, individualistic groups focus less on cooperative work and instead promote a sense of individual work and competition. Individualistic cultures believe that competition will promote the best ideas coming forward, and the best product being produced. This focus on individual performance is so prominent that the goal is not to finish the task assigned to a group, but rather to perform individually as strongly as possible so as to stand out when the task is finished.

Cultural Influence on Criticism

Cultures impact more than how we behave, but also how we give and receive criticism. Collectivist cultures, with their focus on the group, focus their criticism toward building up the group in the future. They provide criticism based on what a person can do to better support the group. Similarly, since they focus more on group success, they take feedback seriously to not only help themselves alone, but to also help the group.

Individualistic cultures, with their focus on personal effort, give feedback to improve personal performance so that the individual will be able to perform better. Oftentimes, this criticism can be taken personally, though the feedback is not a comment on personal failure, just things that can be improved. Sometimes, individualists can take criticism as a form of motivation, seeing ways they can make themselves better to achieve more in the future. Offering feedback to members of a group that need that form of personal goal setting can be vital to the success of the group.
Cultural Understanding in Group Work

There is no right or wrong when it comes to which kind of cultural focus is better. Both individualist and collectivist values are helpful to a group. Knowing how to cooperate and accomplish goals as a group is just as important as ensuring each person is contributing in the best way they can. Finding a balance between the two, and catering to the cultural background of each group-member, is the way to ensure groups function optimally.

Groups that are able to take the cooperative aspects of collectivist members and the individual work ethic of individualist members will be able to excel in any work environment. The struggle comes when the two styles are both present without a strong way to coexist. Members must be aware of cultural differences and find ways to harness the strengths of all cultures present to thrive in modern work environments. The key is to develop tasks in a way that allow everyone to contribute to its success, while still providing rewards and incentives for individual members that contribute more than others. This balance can be hard to find, but once done, the reward is a group that can function under any circumstances to maximize their productivity.

Reflect Poll: Your Cultural Background

When you are in a group, do you tend to take a collectivist approach or an individualistic approach?
- Collectivist
- Individualist

Expand: The Formation of Culture

Overview

Cultural norms are regulated by the way we interact with others. This interaction begins from the very earliest of stages in the development process. In this section, we will look at how different cultures instill value through the notion of play, and how that style of play influences the communication habits of children as they learn cultural norms.

First, it is important to note that feminine communication is not only used by females. Similarly, masculine communication is not only used by males. These terms reference values associated with Western definitions of masculinity and femininity, and all people have some masculine traits and some feminine traits.

Play

As children grow, they enter into a stage of development where they learn how they are supposed to behave and how they are supposed to communicate based on how they play. Play as a developmental force is very strong. Different cultures have different expectations for how children are supposed to play and how they are supposed to behave. This play stage lays the foundation for how we develop within our culture, and that foundation later influences how we behave in groups and teams. Our group work style can be directly related back to how we learned how to play as a child, and whether it was more masculine or feminine.
Feminine Communication

Feminine communication is a style of communication that focuses on developing and maintaining relationships, supporting others, and working as a group. This is learned in the West when young girls are taught how they are expected to play. These values, relationships, support, and group work are the central pillars of traditional play patterns of girls. This communication style, focused on supporting those around you and taking care of them lends itself to a collectivist cultural style.

Masculine Communication

Masculine communication is a style of communication that focuses on creating and maintaining rules, promoting self over a group, and asserting dominance over a group. In Western cultures, this is taught to young boys when they begin to play with other young boys. Traditional boy play patterns include communicating to create and enforce rules, to assert dominance, and to maintain the center of attention in conversations. This self-focus that comes from masculine communication styles lends itself to the values of an individualist culture.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

A video providing an in-depth look at collectivist cultures, their belief systems, and how they work in groups

- Link to resource: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dls1ObNwWbo

A video comparing and contrasting the two kinds of cultures and explaining their strengths and weaknesses

- Link to resource: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RT-bZ33yB3c

A video explaining the differences between masculine and feminine cultures and how to adapt your message based on your audience’s background

- Link to resource: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gp8-WKcheYA

Lesson Glossary

**collectivist**: cultures that value the good of the group over the good of the individual

**individualistic**: cultures that value the good of the individual over the good of the group

**feminine communication**: a style of communication that focuses on developing and maintaining relationships, supporting others, and working as a group

**masculine communication**: a style of communication that focuses on creating and maintaining rules, promoting self over a group, and asserting dominance over a group

Check Your Knowledge

1. Collectivist cultures focus on individual success.
   a. True
   b. False
2. Individualist cultures can use criticism as a form of motivation.
   a. True
   b. False
3. Groups that can harness both individualist and collectivist methods will excel.
   a. True
   b. False

Answer Key:

Citations

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