Do cultural models actually work?

There are many **different models trying to describe cultural differences** and how to **best leverage** them. Having worked with **diverse teams and executives** from **China, Japan, Europe, and the USA for over 12 years** I have come across a variety of models and **here's** what I found to **work best**:
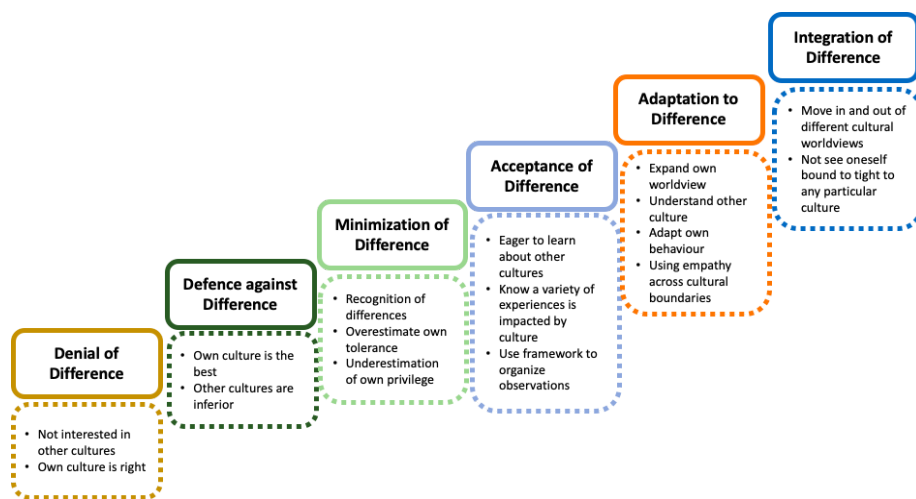
In a recent project I worked with a mixed team consisting of Chinese and American managers. Despite being aware of basic cultural differences, a number of issues kept coming up due to very **different ways of aligning strategy, handling process, escalation and communication**, etc.

Creating an **understanding of the differences in thinking modes, problem solving, organizational setup** and **communication** helped to not only **overcome these differences**, but **create synergies** from using the **best working methods** for **this** team **from both underlying cultures.** To achieve **team cohesiveness** and better **collaboration** we incorporated **not only cultural differences** but included each team members **individual personality preferences** and **strengths**.

To the expats, travelers and executives among us, who have lived and worked in different cultures, it doesn't come as a surprise that **cultural understanding is a process** and doesn't happen overnight.

Culture as a process

Milton J. Bennett broke down this process of cultural competence into the following phases[1]

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[1] Basic Concepts of Intercultural Communication: Paradigms, Principles, and Practices by Milton J. Bennett (Author)

So the **first step** according to Bennetts process is **understanding oneself** and **recognizing different is not better or worse**, just different. **Self awareness** and **familiarity with one's own cultural framework are,** in my view, **key** to be able to open up to this idea of integration of difference and being able to **adopt the preferred traits from any given culture**.

Working from there **international teams need to mature** and **derive synergies** from these differences, **adapt their behaviour** and **make some** of the other cultures **practices their own**.

Understanding cultural dimensions

A great starting point when trying to **comprehend cultural differences** and **how they influence decision making, leadership, team work** etc. is Geert Hofstede's insights of cultural modeling and cultural dimensions.

The **Hofstede model** looks at **visible** and **invisible components of culture** considering the following dimensions:
Power distance - how a society/ organisation handles hierarchy and decision making
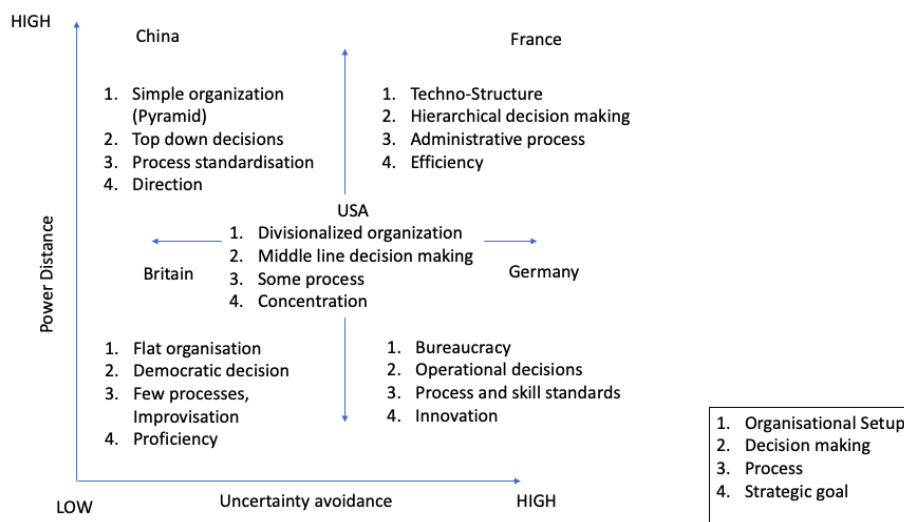**Individualism/collectivism** - behaviour within the group, support networks
Masculinity/femininity – Earnings, advancement, competition vs. relationships, cooperation, security
Uncertainty avoidance - the need for structure and formality
Long and short term orientation, i.e. organisational loyalty

Mintzberg added **organizational dimensions** to the model for multinationals to work with and **understand cultural differences in their organisations** better: He added **organisational configuration, coordination mechanisms** and **key part of the organisation** to Hofstede's cultural dimensions.

So doing business on a global level the Hofstede/ Mintzberg models explain that **Chinese business decision making** follows clear hierarchical rules and structure and is **usually top down** due to **high Power Distance** and **low Uncertainty Avoidance** (i.e. Chinese can live with a higher Uncertainty than most Western cultures). Looking at **German business decision making** shows **exactly the opposite**: **Low Power Distance** and **high Uncertainty Avoidance** lead to high levels of **bureaucracy** and **process** and decisions being made on the operational level of the organisation.

While these **models are great** to **understand** some **underlying cultural dimensions** and **how organisations operate** in these different cultural environments and why, they tend to **not take personality differences** of the people working in these organisations into account. Working with multinational teams it's important to look at **cultural orientations at an individual level**.[2]

Adding personality type to the mix

In order to understand oneself and others better, **personality type tools** can help, because they **abstractify different personality traits** and make it easier to accept that working in a diverse team can actually be beneficial: rather than argue about differences a team can use them to **derive synergies** and better results with **different approaches of thinking** and **problem solving.**
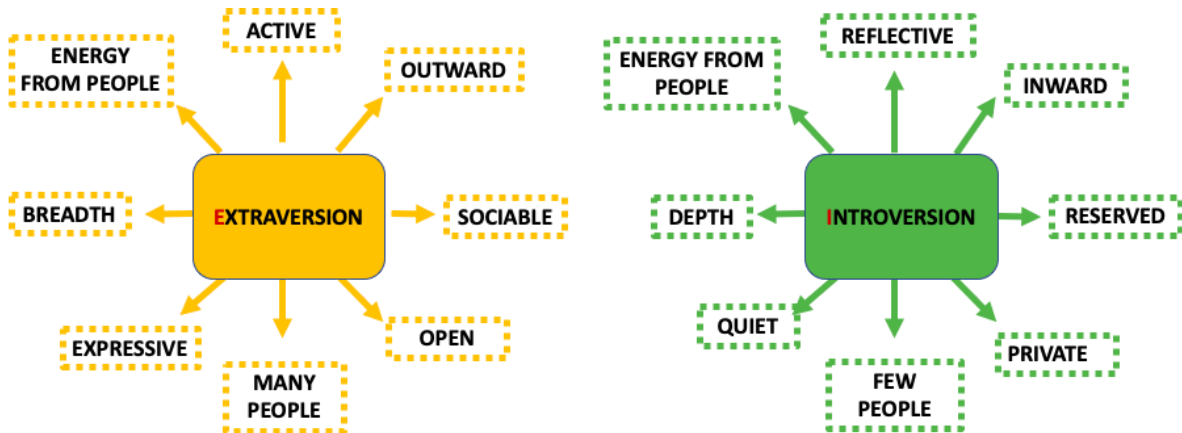
In order to create **understanding in cultural differences**, many **models** put **people and behavior in boxes** in order to make differences visible. The trouble is that these boxes **don't take personal preferences** and **personality types** into consideration.

Myers Briggs MBTI® divides **Personality types** into the following **preferences**, meaning that people can usually do both, but naturally have one preferred way of doing things and being, Extravert OR Introvert for example.

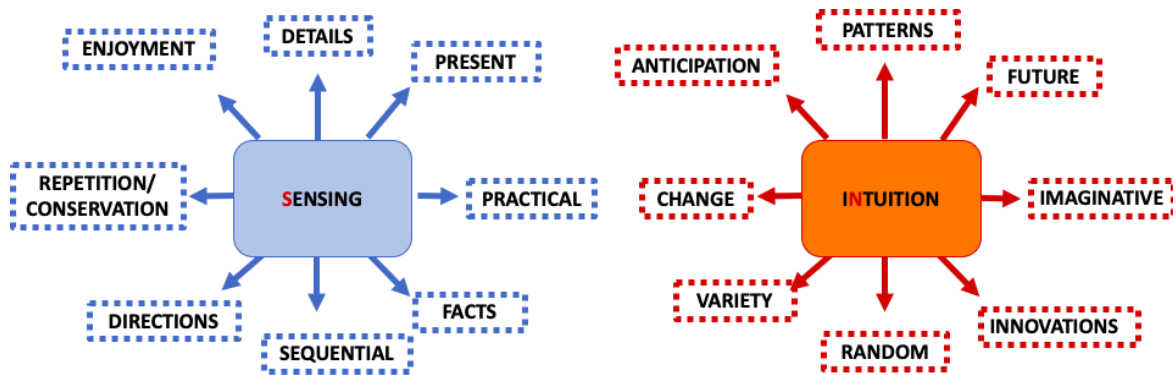This high level **MBTI® summary** serves a quick overview rather than an in-depth analysis, with view on workplace preferences:

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[2] Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind – May 24, 2010
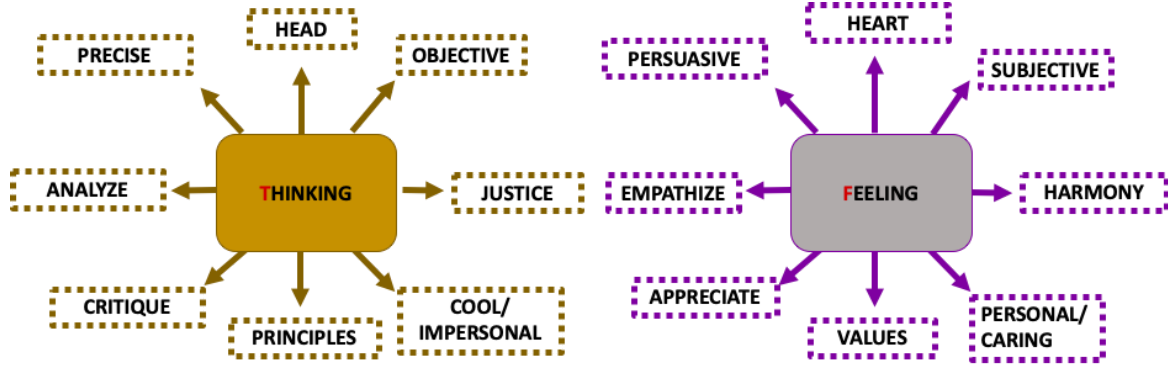by Geert Hofstede (Author), Gert Jan Hofstede

Facing the world: where people **get their energy** and charge their batteries:
Extravert with other people/ many people rather than a few, gregarious, outgoing
Talk-Think-Talk
Introvert mostly alone or with a few people, quiet, think things through
Think-Talk-Think

Taking in information: How people categorize and explain the world
Sensing
Using the senses for information processing, breaking down the details, step by step, using the known, in the present
I**N**tuition
Big picture thinking, using patterns, relationships, experimental, forward thinking

Decision making: what people use to make decisions
Thinking
Logical decision making with the head, principled, critiques
Feeling
Deciding with the heart, forming an immediate, personal view, value driven, appreciating

Lifestyle, attitude towards time and options

Judgement
Ordered lifestyle, control, decisive, comfortable to have closure

Perception
Flexible, flowing lifestyle, curious, likes openness, exploring without limits

Based on Carl Gustav Jung's Personality types the **MBTI®** isn't a perfect model, but describes **personal preferences** quite well and helps to understand **different ways of working**, **leadership styles** and **communication differences**.

Combining theses preferences the MBTI® tool ends up with **16 different personality types**:

ISTJ	ISFJ	INFJ	INTJ
FACTUAL	DETAILED	COMMITED	INDEPENDENT
PRACTICAL	TRADITIONAL	CREATIVE	VISIONARY
ORGANIZED	SERVICE_MINDED	DETERMINED	ORIGINAL
STEADFAST	DEVOTED	IDEALISTIC	GLOBAL
ISTP	**ISFP**	**INFP**	**INTP**
LOGICAL	CARING	COMPASSIONATE	INDEPENDENT
REALISTIC	ADAPTABLE	ORIGINAL	THEORETICAL
ADVENTUREOUS	GENTLE	CREATIVE	ANALYTICAL
DETERMINED	HARMONIOUS	EMPATHETIC	RESERVED
ESTP	**ESFP**	**ENFP**	**ENTP**
ACTIVITY-ORIENTED	ENTHUSIASTIC	CREATIVE	ENTERPRISING
VERSATILE	FRIENDLY	VERSATILE	OUTSPOKEN
PRAGMATIC	C-OPERATIVE	PERCEPTIVE	CHALLENGING
OUTGOING	TOLERANT	IMAGINATIVE	RESOURCEFUL
ESTJ	**ESFJ**	**ENFJ**	**ENTJ**
LOGICAL	THOROUGH	LOYAL	LOGICAL
SYSTEMATIC	RESPONSIBLE	VERBAL	STRATEGIC
ORGANIZED	DETAILED	ENERGETIC	FAIR
CONSCIENTIOUS	TRADITIONAL	CONGENIAL	STRAIGHTFORWARD

Working with **cross cultural teams MBTI® helps** to uncover **strengths and blind spots**, helps appreciate differences and create synergies by using each individual's strength.[3]

Diving deeper into MBTI® **individual team members** can **analyse** what **workplace preferences** they have, do they like routine work, or prefer a variety of tasks, do they prefer working in large teams or rather need private space to concentrate, do they like to make decisions or keep their options open, do they thrive on recognition or are they good at pinpointing issues etc.

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[3] Gifts Differing: Understanding Personality Type 2nd ed. Edition
by Isabel Briggs Myers (Author), Peter B. Myers (Author)

David **Keirsey** looked at MBTI® preference combinations to generate **four temperaments**, and derived the following different **leadership types**[4]:
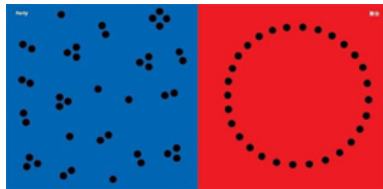
ESTJ/ ISTJ – ESFJ/ ISFJ Guardian	ENFP / INFP - ENFJ / INFJ Idealist	ESFP/ ISFP – ESTP/ ISTP Artisan	ENTJ/ INTJ - ENTP/ INTP Rational
Leadership Style Decisive Create & maintain traditions Monitoring quality Clear authority Set deadlines	**Leadership Style** Inspire people Act as catalyst Create a vision Harmonious work environment Appreciate others	**Leadership Style** Encourage risk taking Foster independence Create flexible environment Encourage action Appreciate	**Leadership Style** Give structure Set demanding goals Convincing communicators Goal oriented Architect of change
Strengths Precise directions Preserving values Offer Stability Dependable Hard working Persevere	**Strengths** Good listeners Try to understand people High standards Cooperative & flexible Thoughtful & considerate Like new ideas & information Looking for harmony	**Strengths** Reward out of the box Encouraging Deal well w. change Stimulating Giving praise	**Strengths** Situational organizing High standards Energizes people Well though out planning See long and short-term impact
Pitfalls Too direct Slow to change Too many regulations Tendency to blame Intolerant of delays Maintain unneeded procedures	**Pitfalls** Avoid conflict Emotionally reserved Controlling Overly prioritize others Impatient w. routine & details Create dependent relationships	**Pitfalls** Bored by routine Ignore hierarchy Appear unpredictable Avoid routine tasks Not invented here syndrome	**Pitfalls** Impatient w. inefficiency Too demanding Not enough praise Focus on plan might delay execution Ignore impact on people

These **leadership types** give a great **insight** into **how leaders make decisions**, **set** their **goals, motivate people, communicate** and **behave as leaders**. The **missing component** for to see the entire picture in **diverse teams** is the **cultural perspective**.

My favourite example for **cultural dimension in personality types** is that a Finnish Extravert on the Meyers Briggs scale seems like an American Introvert. And that is really simplifying the whole issue, because of course personality type models also put people in boxes. **Looking at both personality types** and **cultural dimensions** thus feels much **more accurate** when **measured on scales** with opposite ends and when looking at them **in combination**.

Outlining cultural differences

In order to **outline cultural differences between East and West**, I love using the **illustrations of Yang Liu**, a very talented Chinese artist and author who lives in Germany now. She created fabulous **Infographics that demonstrate with humour** some **fundamental differences**:

Behavior at parties/ gatherings Western/ Eastern cultures

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[4] Please Understand Me II: Temperament, Character, Intelligence, May 1, 1998
by David Keirsey

Working with mixed teams on cultural competence this usually **gets discussions started** and participants point out differences. In Bennets process, ideally these participants are in phase 4 and **eager to learn about the other culture** and then move on to phase 5 where they can **adapt their worldview and their behavior**.

In cultural training sessions, it quickly crystallizes that **people differ on an individual level: not** everyone from the **same cultural circle** sees themselves in a certain **box with attributed behavior**. Some prefer to talk to a few select people rather than a big group, which is usually a question of what gives them more energy (Extravert vs Introvert). Speaking in **general terms these boxes are still accurate** of course, having a party in China people tend to spend some of their time in group activities like KTV/ Karaoke for example and in Germany they tend to chat in little groups rather than have organized activities for everyone involved.

Problem solving Western/ Eastern cultures

For **teams working across cultures** it gets interesting when looking at **problem solving, thinking modes and organizational arrangements.** In her problem solving infographic, Yang Liu shows so beautifully how Westerners usually go through a problem, by taking it head on and how Eastern cultures usually prefer to find a way around a problem and prefer to avoid confrontation.[5] Again this is usually **also dependent on personality type** in MBTI® terms the Thinking/ Feeling dichotomy where Thinking types don't mind confrontation so much and find criticism helps uncovering and solving issues, but Feeling types prefer to maintain harmony and prefer to praise rather than critique.

Still, **boxes are boxes** and most people don't like to be put in them. Furthermore, they **illustrate differences rather than commonalities** and tend to be black and white - or blue and red in this case - in a rather two-dimensional way.

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[5] Yang Liu. East meets West – November 30, 2016

by Yang Liu (Artist)

The Cultural Orientations Framework

When we start talking about synergies it's vital to take into consideration that people are not only **shaped by** their **culture** but also **personality type, upbringing, age, environment**, **experiences** and such.

Philippe Rosinski has developed a great model, the **Cultural Orientations Framework** (COF) [6]allowing us to **look at both personal preferences as well as cultural imprint** at the same time. He **added** the crucial **seventh stage to Milton Bennett's model** to emphasize the notion of "**leveraging cultural differences**", so rather than just integrating into a culture, multinational teams can **find the gems in each others culture** and make the **most of existing differences**.

This allows international teams to **assess existing cultures**, **find synergies** and **build a common corporate culture** together. In his integrated approach he demonstrates that preferences can be summarized in the following **seven categories**, which are made of 17 dimensions:

Power and Responsibility, how we **manage our lives and work**, how important is harmony, how much control do we need to exert, how much influence on life do we believe we have.

Time Management and Approaches, how we **organize and view our time** (do we have plenty of time or very little, do we do things sequentially or at the same time, what matters most, past/present or future)

Definitions of Identity and Purpose explore how much our focus is on doing is versus being, how much importance the individual has vis a vis the group.

Organizational arrangements, how do we organize ourselves, is everybody equal, or is there a hierarchy that defines order, are there common processes across the board or do we look at each individual circumstance. Is stability important, or do we favor change and innovation. Does competition lead to success or is mutual support and sharing best practices better.
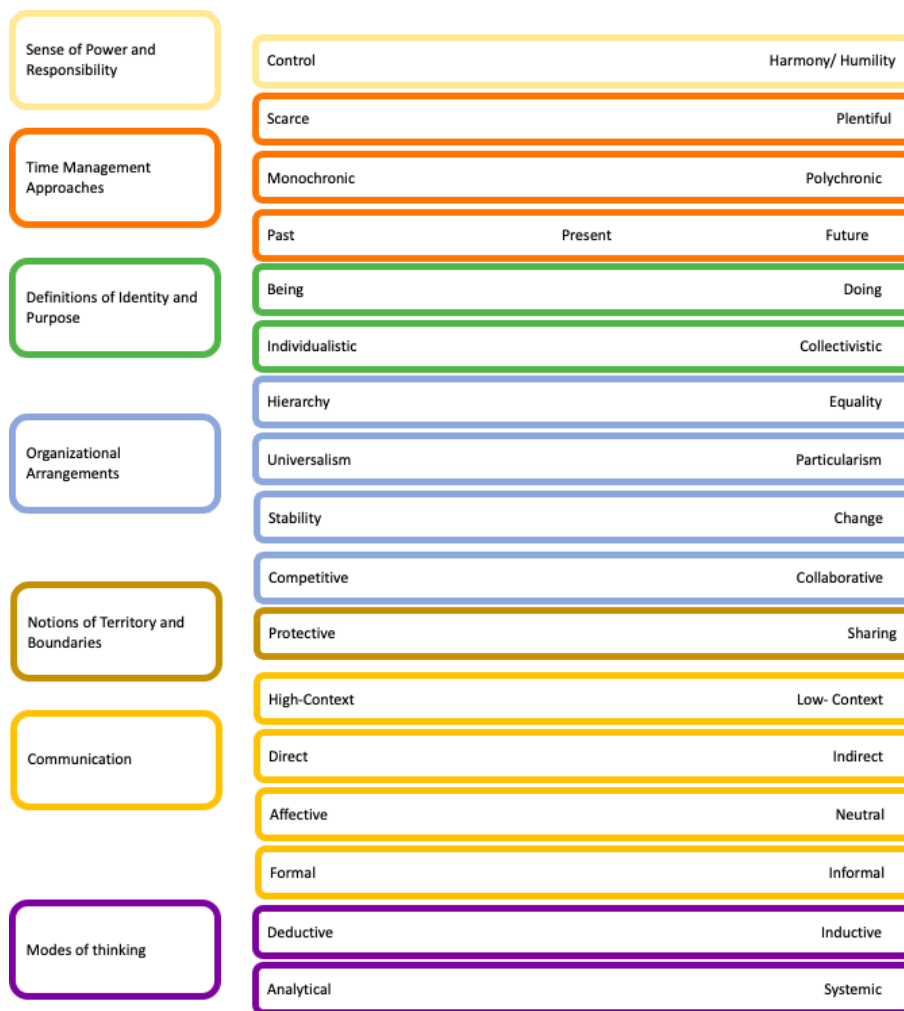
Notionions of Territory and boundaries looks at how much people keep personal with psychological boundaries and how they share space physical.

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[6] Coaching Across Cultures, New Tools for Leveraging National, Corporate & Professional Differences, January 30, 2003 by Philippe Rosinski

Communication Patterns compares high and low context communications, i.e. how much communication is shared explicitly/ implicitly, how direct or indirect is communication, how much emotions do we share during communication and how formal/ informal is the way we express ourselves.

Thinking Modes delves into how important theory and principles are versus experience when problem solving, as well as whether it starts with separating a problem into parts or assembling these into a cohesive whole.
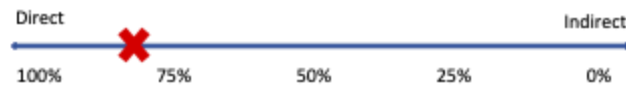
The COF is a **holistic view of culture** allowing to **combine both cultural and personality type** based **dimensions**:

Sense of Power and Responsibility	Control		Harmony/ Humility
	Scarce		Plentiful
Time Management Approaches	Monochronic		Polychronic
	Past	Present	Future
Definitions of Identity and Purpose	Being		Doing
	Individualistic		Collectivistic
	Hierarchy		Equality
Organizational Arrangements	Universalism		Particularism
	Stability		Change
	Competitive		Collaborative
Notions of Territory and Boundaries	Protective		Sharing
	High-Context		Low- Context
Communication	Direct		Indirect
	Affective		Neutral
	Formal		Informal
Modes of thinking	Deductive		Inductive
	Analytical		Systemic

Visualizing each of these **dimensions as a scale with opposite ends** allows for each individual to find their spot.

The COF makes it a lot easier and accurate for multinational team members to **place themselves** without having to choose a box they fit into (or worse being placed in one without choice). The **tool is very flexible** and organisations can **add any other dimension** to it when using it.

So talking about direct and indirect communication, someone from the Netherlands might be **very direct and outspoken** compared to someone from Japan **from a cultural point of view**, but even with a personality type that is very direct, he probably won't be direct 100% of the time and might place himself at 80%:

Let's say we discuss **self branding** in a well distributed **multinational team** with some remote workers, meaning how well team members market themselves to global headquarters and management:

Depending on where on the **Control/ Harmony/ Humility scale** team members find themselves they might from a **cultural point of view** be prone **not to sell individual success** to maintain harmony, like for example in China and on the other hand have a **gregarious and outgoing personality**, so not mind so much to sell their success. The **same position on the scale** could be potentially occupied by someone from a **culture where the belief to take control of one's success is learned at a very early point in life**, for example someone from the USA, but the **individual is very introverted and doesn't like to speak about success** stories and do self marketing.

Furthermore we **need to look at dimensions in combination**, because where someone sits on the scales of Individualistic/ Collectivistic, Hierarchy/ Equality, Competitive/ Collaborative, Direct/ Indirect communications, etc **will all influence how well or not they market themselves**. If the dimensions 'Self Branding' or 'Networking' are important to the team, we can also just add it to the tool.

Combining models, boxes and scales

Matching Yang Liu's Infographics with **Philippe Rosinski's Cultural Orientations Framework** and **keeping MBTI® in the back of the head** has lead to fantastic results in international teams I've been working with: it allows people to **quickly grasp** what **differences** we are discussing and at the same time have a more **three-dimensional view at themselves** and pick where they see themselves on a scale rather than be put in a box.

Understanding themselves and other team members cultures and **personalities** and **accepting different** is usually **neither better nor worse**, allows teams to truly **work out synergies** and **derive a common culture** they want for the team and their company.

No model is perfect, nevertheless I found the **Cultural Orientations Framework** works best when **working with diverse teams**, who **struggle with not only cultural and personality type differences**, but also with being **spread out over the world, language barriers** and **time zones**.

I found that **combining** the latter **with Yang Liu's Infographics** and **bearing MBTI® in mind** allows **looking at the teams from different angles** and gets the best results.
Different cultures and personality types can be assets, that are used to **create a common mission** and **unite** the **teams** in a **joint vision** driving business forward in the 21st century.

Julia Atkinson is a PCC (ICF) Executive Coach and Consultant with more than 8 years experience of living and working in China and 4 years in the USA. Prior to starting an executive development firm, Julia is drawing on first hand business leader experience of more than 10 years in multinational corporates and startups both in IT and Telco in Europe.
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