CAPLOR HORIZONS
RIPPLE
PAPERS

...creating ripples of change

Cross-Cultural Communication

Rosie Bishop

Dr Peter Moore
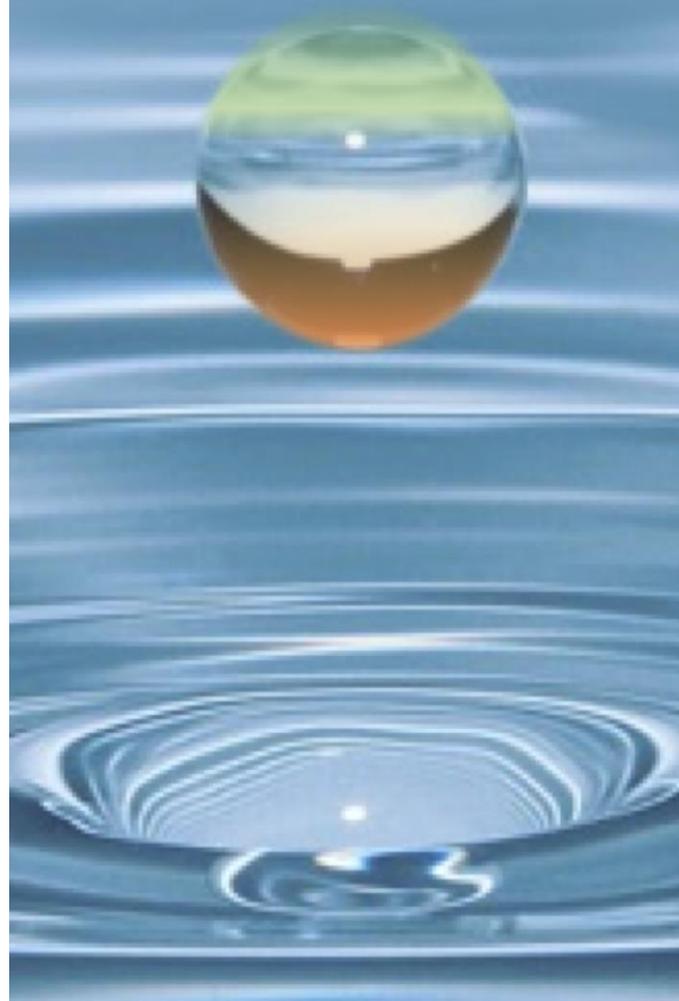
Learning differently

Thinking differently

Acting differently

CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION
_____

Summary

"Cultural differences should not separate us from each other, but rather cultural diversity brings a collective strength that can benefit all of humanity" Robert Alan

This paper introduces the topic of cross-cultural communication, providing perspectives on its importance and offering advice relevant to international contexts in not-for-profit organisations and businesses.

Cross-cultural communication includes speech, body language, text and pictures by a range of media across differences in culture. Culture is defined as 'the way we do things around here' and it is often described as a set of shared assumptions about what is important and how to behave. This paper focuses on differences in *national* culture. These differences are relative and deep-rooted. They apply to groups of people, not necessarily to any one individual.

Cross-cultural communication has grown in importance as the internet and other developments have created new ways of working and closer links between people all over the world. Benefits of lower cost, greater speed and closer cooperation are partly offset by increased potential for misunderstanding.

After an introduction, this paper has three main sections to support cross-cultural communication. The first section is Hofstede's model of national culture which consists of six dimensions.

The second section provides guidance that reduces the often-unexpected disadvantages faced by a first language speaker communicating in what is a second language for others.

The final section of the paper offers advice based on our experiences from working in an international context. It lists principles of cross-cultural communication and provides specific recommendations.

We live in a rapidly changing world. Covid-19, climate change and other global challenges exist alongside opportunities for greater digital inclusion. In a presentation on 'diversity and inclusion' Professor Herminia Ibarra suggested that breakthroughs in technology could help enable 'different voices to be heard', a key issue affecting cross-cultural communication (London Business School, Pandemic Webinar Series, June 2020).

We all face deeper challenges, including unconscious bias, that affect cross-cultural communication. We can all consider how we use technology, and how we develop to ensure we are ever more effective leaders that value diversity and hear the voices of others. This requires listening carefully with open minds and hearts. As one person famously put it: there are many principles of leadership, but only one rule: that is to *'listen first and speak second'*.

What is Communication?

"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." Maya Angelou

Communication is a vital part of leadership and leading change, but effective communication is not straightforward.

Communication entails the transfer of ideas, thoughts, and feelings from one person to another, or one organisation to another, or a mixture of both. It includes speech, body language, text, and pictures through the following media:

Immediate dialogue

- Face-to-face meetings
- Phone
- Instant messages
- Video links

In-your-own-time dialogue

- Email, mobile texts
- Film, recorded video messages
- Paper

There are many other subtle ways that we communicate (perhaps even unintentionally) with others. For example, our body language, gestures, eye contact, how we dress or act, where we stand, and even our scent. One widely cited study suggested that 55% of communication comes from body language, 38% is how we say it or our tone of voice, and only 7% is the actual verbal content[1].

The 'Connected Communication' model of Cresswell, Davidge and White shows how communication is in fact a series of processes that link thought to completed action:

Thought → Said → Heard → Understood → Believed → Supported → Acted on → Completed

Effective communication involves minimising potential misunderstanding and overcoming any barriers to communication at each stage in the communication process.

An effective communicator understands their audience, chooses an appropriate communication channel, hones their message for this particular channel and conveys the message effectively to reduce misunderstanding by the recipients. They will also seek out feedback from the recipient to ensure that the message is understood and attempt to correct any misunderstanding or confusion as soon as possible.

What is Cross-Cultural Communication?

"Culture does not make people. People make culture." Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Cross-cultural communication is what happens when one communicates across differences in culture.

There are many definitions of culture. A simple one is 'the way we do things around here'. More specifically, culture consists of a set of shared assumptions about what is important and how to behave.

---

[1] Mehrabian, Albert (1971) *Silent Messages*. Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company.

It is a characteristic of groups of people who have found different ways to solve social problems, resolve priorities, ease personal interactions and reduce potentially stressful uncertainties about how to behave. These different approaches are relative and sometimes hard to describe but powerful, partly because they are often unconscious assumptions.

Cultures lie in the middle of a spectrum of shared characteristics. At one end, we are all human with a great deal in common and at the other end each person is unique. In between are people grouped by shared characteristics, including age, gender, ethnicity, wealth, learning style, nationality and educational background, many of which are associated with shared cultures.

These shared characteristics are not simple, rigid or clear-cut. Cultural differences are relative differences of groups of people within all the rich variety of humanity.

For example, on average, British people are more individualistic and Chinese more collective in the sense that in general Chinese people are more likely to form integrated relationships that tie extended families and others into groups of people who support each other. However, any one individual may not fit this generalisation. If the proportion of the population is plotted on a scale of individualism versus collectivism the result might look like this:

British   **Chinese**

← **More individualistic**   **More collective** →
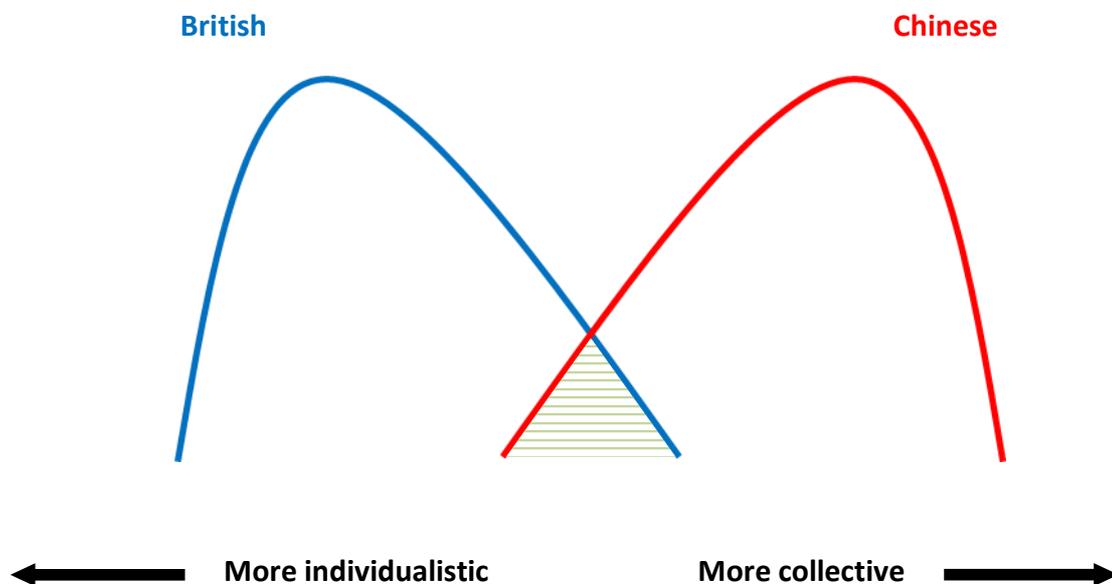
People who fit within the green hatched section of this diagram generally behave in ways that do not fit this particular cultural generalisation: British who tend to be more collective than some Chinese and Chinese who tend to be more individualistic than some British.

The groups that possess cultures can be of several kinds:

- Family: immediate or extended

- Organisation: e.g. my employer, community group

- Function: e.g. lawyer, biologist

- National: e.g. French

- Other groups based on geography: e.g. Basque

- Faith, ethnic and other groups: e.g. Jewish, African-American

Most of us live in a range of different cultures. Those especially likely to be prominent in an international organisation overlap as shown below:
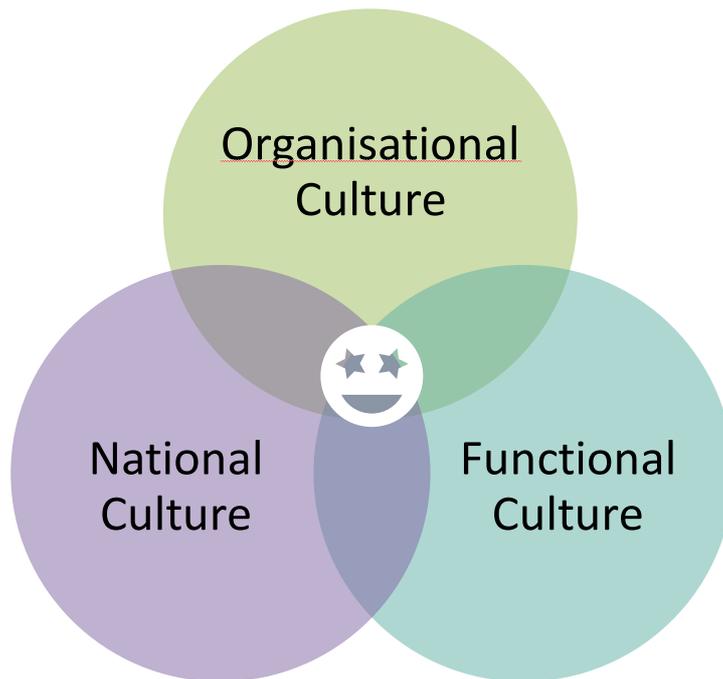
This paper focuses on communication across differences in national culture.

Why is Cross-Cultural Communication important?

"In today's interconnected and globalized world, it is now commonplace for people of dissimilar views, faiths and races to live side by side. It is a matter of great urgency, therefore, that we find ways to cooperate with one another in a spirit of mutual acceptance and respect." Dalai Lama

Communication across differences in national culture has grown in importance in the last few decades in many different areas of work for the following interlinked reasons:

- The internet and greatly reduced phone charges facilitate fast and cheap international communication

- Mobile phones enable travellers to stay in touch and gain flexibility

- Air travel has become cheaper and more flexible

- International trade and business have normally grown faster than the world economy as a whole

- Businesses in countries with high labour costs have outsourced activities to countries with lower labour costs

- More organisations combine people from more than one country in teams, for reasons including saving money, tapping scarce skills and benefiting from a diversity of perspectives

- Development of the EU has facilitated the movement of people across borders within the EU

The result is a huge growth in cross-cultural communication. This brings substantial opportunities such as speed, lower costs, greater creativity, enhanced cohesion for international organisations and closer cooperation with customers, partners and suppliers. It tends also, however, to increase the potential for misunderstanding:

- Direct and immediate communication between people who are unfamiliar with each other's contexts. In particular, first impressions are very powerful and can be especially misleading across cultural differences.

- Communication by, for example, email is deceptively fast and easy, compared with the time and cost of personal travel, yet the cultural assumptions on both sides remain deep-rooted and often invisible and unknown.

- Personal relationships and trust remain very important for most types of international work and are more difficult to develop without face-to-face meeting.

- The spread of business ideas, notably from international business schools and their academics, has created a shared vocabulary that is not always matched by shared meaning.

How can you tell if there is a Cross-Cultural Communication problem?

"The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place."
George Bernard Shaw

All communication between people can be misunderstood for a host of reasons such as differences in temperament, differences in the use of language and differences in knowledge or understanding of the topic being discussed. The Connected Communication model shows how the results can lead to disconnection between what is thought and intended and what is acted on and completed.

Cultural differences add to the likelihood of misunderstanding, but it can be hard to notice that this is happening because cultural differences involve deep-rooted assumptions on both sides. They can also be obscured in any one interaction by individual differences between the people concerned or by the complication that at least one person is using a second, third or fourth language.

Indications that there might be some kind of cross-cultural communication problem, well before substantial operational problems emerge, include the following:

- Unexplained discomfort or embarrassment (though this may be shown by a smile).

- No reply or very slow reply to a written message (perhaps it was written to a too junior or too senior member of a hierarchy).

- Very speedy response (for example when a substantially improved offer is met by a quick and casual response "yes that seems fine").

- Changes in tone (what seemed to be going along fine suddenly gets frosty).

- Feedback from observers such as local staff or partners who may have seen problems before and know what to look out for ("I know that you are frustrated that we never talked about the contract last night, but that dinner was all about building the relationship").

- Situations in which both organisational and national culture differ (for example where a person from an office in a European country meets a client in an office based in Asia).

Cross-Cultural Communication Tools

"The key to cross-cultural success is to develop an understanding of, and a deep respect for, cultural differences." Unknown

One way to improve cross-cultural communication is to use a model that analyses aspects of cultures, alerting one to areas where big differences can be expected. Nardon & Steers[2] have identified six such models, of which the most widely used is that of Geert Hofstede:

Hofstede's Model of National Culture

Geert Hofstede developed his model by analysing results of large-scale surveys of a business in Europe. The model has been extended and now consists of six dimensions. Hofstede Insights[3] gives a helpful summary of the dimensions which we have added some examples to:

1. **Power distance index**: This dimension expresses the degree to which the less powerful members of a society accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. The fundamental issue here is how a society handles inequalities among people.

   People in societies exhibiting a large degree of Power Distance (e.g. China, Iraq) accept a hierarchical order in which everybody has a place, and which needs no further justification. In societies with low Power Distance (e.g. Denmark, New Zealand), people strive to equalise the distribution of power and demand justification for inequalities of power.

---

[2] "The culture theory jungle: divergence and convergence in models of national culture" by L Nardon & R M Steers www.ekof.bg.ac.rs/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/convergence-divergence.pdf - chapter 1 of "Cambridge Handbook of Culture, Organizations, and Work" edited by R S Bhagat, 2009, CUP
[3] "The 6 dimensions of national culture" in www.hofstede-insights.com/models/national-culture/

2. **Individualism vs collectivism**: One side of this dimension, called Individualism, can be defined as a preference for a loosely knit social framework in which individuals are expected to take care of only themselves and their immediate families (e.g. USA, UK).

    Its opposite, Collectivism, represents a preference for a tightly knit framework in society in which individuals can expect their relatives or members of a particular in-group to look after them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty (e.g. China, Senegal). A society's position on this dimension is reflected in whether people's self-image is defined in terms of "I" or "we."

3. **Masculinity vs femininity**: The Masculinity side of this dimension represents a preference in society for achievement, heroism, assertiveness, and material rewards for success. Society at large is more competitive (e.g. Japan, Hungary). Its opposite, Femininity, stands for a preference for cooperation, modesty, caring for the weak and quality of life. Society at large is more consensus oriented (e.g. Sweden, Netherlands). Please see comments below under "Using Hofstede's model" for challenges with the terminology of this dimension.

4. **Uncertainty avoidance index**: The Uncertainty Avoidance dimension expresses the degree to which the members of a society feel uncomfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity. The fundamental issue here is how a society deals with the fact that the future can never be known: should we try to control the future or just let it happen?

    Countries exhibiting strong Uncertainty Avoidance (e.g. Greece, Spain) maintain rigid codes of belief and behaviour, and are intolerant of unorthodox behaviour and ideas. Weak Uncertainty Avoidance societies (e.g. Jamaica, UK) maintain a more relaxed attitude in which practice counts more than principles.

5. **Long-term orientation vs short-term orientation**: Every society has to maintain some links with its own past while dealing with the challenges of the present and the future. Societies prioritise these two existential goals differently.

    Societies that score low on this dimension (e.g. Argentina, Senegal) prefer to maintain time-honoured traditions and norms while viewing societal change with suspicion.

    Those with a culture that scores high (e.g. China, Japan) take a more pragmatic approach: they encourage thrift and efforts in modern education as a way to prepare for the future.

6. **Indulgence vs restraint**: Indulgence stands for a society that allows relatively free gratification of basic and natural human drivers related to enjoying life and having fun (e.g. Venezuela, Sweden). Restraint stands for a society that suppresses gratification of needs and regulates it by means of strict social norms (e.g. Czech, Russia).

To see where certain countries rank on this Hofstede Model, see Annex 1.

Using Hofstede's model

There are several criticisms of cultural models such as Hofstede's. The scores in the model describe relative tendencies in large groups of people but if applied rigidly to individuals this brings the danger of putting people in stereotypical boxes. A further criticism is that the range of alternative models, as described by Nardon & Steers (footnote 2 above), suggests that no one model should be treated as definitive. For example, another well-known model is that of Fons Trompenaars & Charles Hampden-Turner[4], which has seven dimensions with very limited overlap with those of Hofstede. A specific criticism of Hofstede's work is that it stems from a corporate, European context from some time ago, though subsequent work has given it a global reach.

One particular dimension in Hofstede's model often causes concern: masculinity vs femininity. The terminology is sometimes seen as implying, for example, that women are less assertive than men. Within Caplor Horizons we have naturally been concerned about the controversy surrounding this issue. In short, Hofstede found that societies differ in their preferences for *social* goals as opposed to *ego* goals. He labelled those with preferences for social and ego goals respectively "feminine" and "masculine". Our conclusion is that the concerns and misunderstandings that have arisen suggest that different terminology would be better.

On the other hand, models such as Hofstede's offer significant benefits if used carefully:

- They are of particular value when dealing with large numbers of people, for example for planning marketing.

- They alert one to areas where big differences can be expected and hence to possible sources of misunderstanding.

- They highlight one's own assumptions.

- They also help people to see cultural differences as neutral and interesting rather than matters of right and wrong, where my culture is normal and right.

- A particular virtue of Hofstede's model is that it is relatively well-known so that the language of its dimensions is quite widely used and recognised.

The range of models suggests that this is a complex and subtle issue to study, where there is value in various perspectives, though Nardon & Steers attempt to identify common ground between the models.

Speakers with differing language skills

The second tool to aid cross-cultural communication concerns language, a core element of communication. Cross-cultural communication often involves at least one person using a language other

---

[4] "Riding the Waves of Culture: Understanding Diversity in Global Business" by F Trompenaars & C Hampden-Turner, 1998, McGraw Hill.

than their first language. This section offers advice for a situation in which those speaking or writing have differing language skills.

Mandarin (920 million) and Spanish (460 million) are the languages most often spoken as a first language, while English (900 million) and Hindi (300 million) are the languages most often spoken as a second language[5]. There are particular challenges when a conversation takes place between people using a language which is the first language for some but not all those taking part. For example, a study by Canning[6] of 400 clients from 26 countries found that 58% said speakers of English as their first language were more difficult to understand in English than speakers of English as a second language.

Some practical guidance for first language speakers in conversation with second language speakers is as follows:

- Speak slowly

- Keep It Short and Simple (KISS)

- Clarity is more important than elegance.

- Restrict yourself to one idea per sentence

- Avoid idioms (for example English "swings and roundabouts", "pear-shaped")

- Avoid false friends, words that have a shared Latin root in several European languages but with different meanings (for example the root "assist" forms words meaning "attend" in French and Spanish but "help" in English).

- Remember a shared national language may vary significantly between countries – and someone of another nationality may have learned either form. For example, in English, "momentarily" is likely to mean "very soon" to an American but "for a brief moment" to the British while "sanctioned" means "prohibited" to an American but "approved" to the British.

Advice on improving Cross-Cultural Communication

"When you talk you are only repeating what you know. When you listen, you learn something new."

Dalai Lama

Canning's book[7] is full of practical advice laid out with numerous, often amusing, case studies. It includes 47 scales, similar to those described above for Hofstede's model, as the basis for some of the advice. It is

---

[5] en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_languages_by_total_number_of_speakers
[6] "Bridging the Culture Gap" by P Carté & C Fox, 2008, KoganPage, page 137
[7] "Bridging the Culture Gap" by P Carté & C Fox, 2008, KoganPage

subtitled "A practical guide to international business communication" but most of the advice can be applied also in not-for-profit contexts.

The following advice is much less comprehensive but has the merit of being more selective and based directly on our work and experiences at Caplor Horizons:

General principles of cross-cultural communication

- Approach with respect and curiosity

- Listen, observe and keep an open mind, not judgmental, acknowledging differences

- Use a cultural model such as Hofstede's for national culture

- Be aware of your own cultural assumptions and unconscious bias

- Check for points of substantial difference

- Consider the interaction from the perspective of each dimension

- Don't use a model if you find it typecasting individuals for you

Preparation <u>before</u> a visit or first meeting

- Invest in relationships from the start – e.g. through informal conversations and building on existing relationships

- Clarify who are the right people to talk with and who should represent you

- Do your homework, for example:

    o History of the country/locality/business/sector/organisation

    o Culture of the country/locality/business/sector/organisation

    o Gender norms and expectations

    o Business culture e.g. payments and intellectual property

    o Names, status and positions of those to be met

    o Likely dress code

- Listen to the advice of local staff

- Remember to bring your business cards – and presents, if appropriate

<u>During</u> a visit or first meeting

- Ask for help. Be open about any doubts you have about the right way to behave e.g. how to address people – ask about social norms, normally easiest at the start. Play the naïve newcomer. People often enjoy explaining and it is an easy way to begin.

- Remembering people's names and how to pronounce them is always helpful

- Be alert to consequences of differences in gender, hierarchy, ethnicity, power

Developing a relationship over time

- Move carefully at first, mindful of potential cultural differences, before bringing in higher emotional content. The first contact should reduce uncertainty.

- Besides cultural constraints on behaviour there are also laws about behaviour, for example concerning intellectual property, which have priority over the cultural rules. Nonetheless there is a cultural distinction: some people may place such laws at the centre of discussions while others, with an emphasis on relationships, may make a priority of developing good relationships.

Speaking

- If speaking in your first language with those for whom it is a second language:

    o See the advice above under 'Speakers with differing language skills'

    o Lack of understanding is not stupidity – or deafness

    o Learn a few phrases of the other person's language such as greetings – to acknowledge the issue and make a gesture, at least at the start

    o Remember that it is very tiring speaking a foreign language all day

    o Feedback loops: ask to hear a summary of what has been agreed to check there really is a shared understanding

- Interpretation costs money and takes twice as long but can be really helpful – time to think, less likely to get distorted (if interpreter knows the sector) and more equality than if one side is having to use the other's language.

- Protocol in titles when speaking and headings when writing may be different from your normal practice

Specific to communication media

- **Immediate dialogue:** Phone, instant messages, video links

    o Ensure there is only one person speaking at a time

    o Facilitate/chair so that it is clear who speaks when and how all can contribute

- **In-your-own-time dialogue:** Email, mobile texts, fax, paper

    o These media give more time to someone operating in a foreign language, with the added advantage that there is a record afterwards to refer to

    o Think carefully about who is copied – there may be hierarchy issues

- You may need to add extra greetings at the start and end of emails to ensure they are perceived as polite

Conclusion

This paper has explored cross-cultural communication: why it is important and why it can be difficult.

Two tools have been offered that may help. The first is Hofstede's model for national culture which offers a neutral framework for thinking about cultural differences. The second is guidance that reduces the often-unexpected disadvantages faced by first language speakers.

Practical advice from our work and experiences incorporates these two tools and should make it easier to communicate effectively across the world's fascinating cultural differences.

Annex 1: Hofstede's Model of National Culture, country rankings

Sample levels – with low and high levels indicated

	Power Distance	Individualism	Masculinity	Uncertainty Avoidance	Long Term Orientation	Indulgence
USA	40	91	62	46	26	68
Brazil	69	38	49	76	44	59
Argentina	49	46	56	86	20	62
UK	35	89	66	35	51	69
Nether-lands	38	80	14	53	67	68
Germany	35	67	66	65	83	40
Czech	57	58	57	74	70	29
France	68	71	43	86	63	48
Spain	57	51	42	86	48	44
Senegal	70	25	45	55	25	
Zambia	60	35	40	50	30	42
S Africa	49	65	63	49	34	63
Russia	93	39	36	95	81	20
Saudi Arabia	95	25	60	80	36	52
India	77	48	56	40	51	26
Japan	54	46	95	92	88	42
China	80	20	66	30	87	24
Thailand	64	20	34	64	32	45
Australia	36	90	61	51	21	71

Caplor Horizons – Background

Established in 2014, Caplor Horizons is an independent charity. We work with other charities and responsible businesses and now have over 50 Advisors. These are outstanding people that bring specialist knowledge and experience. They contribute their time on a voluntary basis, or at reduced rates, so that Caplor Horizons can provide high quality and distinctive services at an accessible cost.

Working locally, nationally and internationally, we help other organisations think differently about themselves and the new horizons that they face. We support them in strengthening their leadership, renewing their strategy and improving their influence.

We want to encourage and assist a new generation of organisations that are committed to making a positive and lasting impact. We believe that if we are to achieve real, sustainable change, we need to inspire and enable people to learn differently, think differently and act differently.

Our vision is: *A world where leaders deliver a sustainable future for all*

Our purpose is: *To be courageous, compassionate and creative in facilitating transformational change*

Our values are:

- **Courage** – We are courageous change makers committed to challenging assumptions, taking risks and having difficult conversations

- **Compassion** – We are open, understanding and heartfelt, encouraging the nourishment of our whole selves and others

- **Creativity** – We learn, think and act differently, and are innovative and resilient in an ever-changing world

Our beliefs are:

- Through diversity we ignite dynamic innovation

- Collaboration helps achieve greater impact

- Everyone matters

- We are all leaders in our individual and collective ways
  – we are all change makers!

- Learning is more effective if it is fun, engaging and creative

- Building on people's strengths creates greater resilience

Our strategic goals:

- Goal 1: Transforming Leadership

- Goal 2: Strengthening Resilience

- Goal 3: Increasing Collaboration

Learning differently
Thinking differently
Acting differently