

# Cross-cultural management essay sample

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



The boundaries between countries become less obvious and important today, people getting much closer than ever before. The whole world seems united into a single unit, and these changes are all brought by “Globalization”. International organization are also one of the products which produced by globalization. Working within a multi-national firm, it is unavoidable to work with people speaking different language, living with different culture. These cultural differences are always the main sources of conflict in the workplace.

### What is conflict

Before the discussion of sources of conflict, we need to firstly know what conflict is. According to Kevin Avruch (1998), “ Conflict is competition by groups or individuals over incompatible goals, scarce resources or the sources of power needed to acquire them.” Such competitions are determined by the people’s perception to power, resources and goals. At the same time, culture is one major determinant of people’s perception. In such words, conflicts are closely related to culture where people are living in.

### What is culture

As mentioned above, culture is a key to conflict and conflict resolution. But what is the “ culture” exactly referring to? The word “ culture” has more than a hundreds of definitions. By Hofstede (1980), he defined “ culture as a collective programming of the mind which distinguishes one group from another”. And he also stated that culture is a slow process of growing into society. The content of culture are included the following four elements, learning values (dominant beliefs and attitudes), partaking of rituals

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(collective activities), modeling against heroes (role models), and understanding symbols (myths, legends, dress and jargon).

These ingredients of culture are acquired from birth and are influenced by school, peers, religion, workplace, family, newspaper, television, books and other sources. Everyone “ has” culture. We are shaped by the culture we are living in. The way we behave, we feel, we act, we think are all influenced by the culture. Under every single culture, there can be different norms. We see the way we act daily are normal and correct as it is acted according to our “ norms”, meanwhile, we would feel odd and even discomfort when people violated our “ norms”.

Those “ norms” are a kind of reflection of our value system; it seems a rule that help us to determine what is right and wrong. People in different cultures always have different value system. When one violates another’s “ norm” and offense his value system, conflict occurred. Hence, the cultural difference is always said to be the main source of conflict between people with different culture.

### Individualism to Collectivism

Everyone has culture and they may also belong to more than one culture group. However, at the same time, many scholar and researcher agree viewing the culture differences by the dimension of “ Individualism and Collectivism” as they characterized the trait of almost all countries people. There is always a say of western countries, for example, American are tend to be in the group of Individualism advocate countries, whereas Eastern

countries, like China are tend to be in the group of Collectivism advocate countries. In the later discussion, I will try to explain how the people in these two different cultures have conflict in the workplace.

### Dependent and interdependent

Individualism and collectivism are subsets of whole world view, which have also been called, atomism and holism respectively. (Shore, 1996) Atomism is famous in the western hemisphere and refers to view things in terms of their component parts. On the other side, Holism refers to the tendency to view all aspects of life as inter-connected. Atomism and holism have different perception of how the boundaries among people are conceived, which, in turn, lead to differences between individualistic and collectivistic values (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

The preliminary individualistic view is that there are sharp boundaries between people. Each person forms a complete unit. In other words, people are considered to be independent. They are also generally thought that rights and responsibilities are more or less the same in many circumstances. The identity of one (i. e.: sense of self) in an individualistic society tends to be based mainly on their personal experiences, accomplishments, challenges, career, relationships with other people, etc.

In contrast, the primary collectivistic view is that people are not separate units, but rather are part and parcel of a larger group, such as an extended family, village, or tribe. In other words, people are interdependent. The

identity of one in a collectivistic society tends to be based on their roles and experiences within the group context.

### Source of Conflict: Contrasts between Individualism and Collectivism

The fundamental view of individualism and collectivism shows people in different culture have contrasting sets of values. More than seventy-five percent of the world's cultures can be described as collectivistic (Triandis, 1989). The following section summarizes some common contrasts in values of two particular cultures.

#### 1. Orientation to Self or Group

The individualistic view of people as independent units leads to emphasis self-reliance, independence, and, possibly, competition with other members in the group or the society. On the other hand, the collectivistic view of people as interdependent leads to emphasis on group-oriented values and they tend to place more importance on harmony, intimacy, interdependence, cooperation and sacrifice for the group.

In an individualist culture, people tend to perceive him or herself as an independent self who pursues his or her own interests and projects; while in collectivist culture, people tends to perceive the self in an interdependent relationship with others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Besides, the priority of personal and group goals also depends upon Individualism and Collectivism. In individualist cultures, personal goals tend

to take priority over group goals; while in collectivist cultures, group goals are more likely to have priority (Triandis, et al., 1988; Iwao & Triandis, 1993).

Similarly, the importance of personal beliefs and attitudes with respect to group norms and duties varies with Individualism and Collectivism. In collectivist groups, norms and duties among groups tend to be more important factor that affects decision making than personal beliefs and rights while it is almost reverse in the individualist cultures.

For the orientation of task-achievement and relationship maintaining, in individualist cultures, people tend to place greater importance on accomplishment of tasks than maintaining harmonious relationships. In collectivist cultures, people are more likely to sacrifice task achievement for the sake of good relationships with others (Triandis, 1995).

From the above description of the two cultures, we can see that different orientation toward a common goal in workplace usually leads to different in the result. In order to prove the different in practice for two cultures , Christopher Earley (1989) an American management researcher, gave forty-eight management trainees from China and a matched group of forty-eight management trainees from the American, an ' in-basket-task' consisting of 40 separate items requiring between two and five minutes each.

The task is comprised with activities such as writing memos, evaluating plans and rating job candidates' application forms. Half of the trainees from each country were given an individual goal of 20 items; the other half were given a group goal of 200 items to be completed in one hour by 10 people.

Besides, half of the trainees from either country, both from the group and from the individual goal subsets, were asked to mark each item with their name; the other half turned them in anonymously.

The Chinese, collectivist, participants performed best when operating with a group goal and anonymously. In contrast, they performed worst when operating individually and with their name marked on their work. The individualist American participants performed best when operating individually and with their work attributed to them personally, and performed very poorly when operating as a group and anonymously.

From the above experiment, the result clearly showed there are tremendous differences in working style among people in individualism and collectivism. The form of working directly affects the productivity of the worker. People in individualist culture work best when they do their job individually. In contrast, people in collectivist culture work best when they are in a group and all the members in the group strive for the common goal.

Work in a place which fit their working style is the best way to maintain their high working efficiency. However, it is impossible to do so in an international company as people always need to co-operate with people with different cultural background. Hence, there would be many conflicts in regard to the individualist and collectivist working style.

## 2. Relationship building In-group and Out-group

Another important aspect in the review of the individualism and collectivism dimension is how people in different cultures interact with others in and out of their group.

In the collectivist culture, people tend to pay more attention to the in-group relations, whereas individualists are more likely to trust strangers and outsiders, rather than the member within the group. (Triandis, 1991) In addition, individualists would show more attribution confidence regarding strangers than collectivists. (Gudykunst & Nishida, 1986) In other words, individualistic members would have less social interaction with other people in in-group relations than the members of collectivistic cultures do.

Other than that, individualists are very good at entering and leaving groups (Triandis et al., 1993), they have excellent skill in making friends (Triandis et al., 1988a), but often only establish relatively superficial and non-intimate relationships (Triandis et al., 1988a) with other members of a group. By contrast, collectivists are not good at making new friends, but they would spend much time in building relationships (Triandis, 1991, p. 83) with other members of a group and maintain a life-long intimate relationship (Triandis et al., 1988a, p. 325).

These cultural traits of in-group and out-group relationships support the view that “collectivists pay more attention to the views, needs and goals of their in-group” (Triandis, 1991, p. 79), whereas “individualists are more concerned with the relation of their behaviors to their own needs, interests, and goals” (Leung & Bond, 1984, p. 794).



Collectivists' put more emphasis on group harmony, interdependence, and intimate relationships; however, this does not necessarily mean that their whole society is harmonious and cooperative. Collectivists tend to believe the members in their group only, and they would view out-group people as "having a low potential for becoming group member" (Leung ; Bond, 1984, p. 795). Therefore, their behavior toward out-groups tends to be highly individualistic (Triandis et al., 1988a), and, as a result, cooperation with outsiders, other groups, and out-groups is hard to achieve in collectivistic cultures (Triandis et al., 1988b).

This fact and other evidence seem to support the view that the individualism-collectivism dimension shows the general in-group and out-group orientation differences among people in two cultures. We can see that there is a serious problem of " Trust-building" to the individualists and collectivists who need to work together. For individualists, they can make friend easily, but only with a superficial and non-intimated relationship.

As they trust themselves more than other people in-group, they would only focus on how to achieve the goal, rather than building a long-term relationship with group members. For collectivist, they would focus on building close relationship with the in-group members first, rather than striving for the accomplishment of the task. The thought of these two kinds of people are totally different, hence, " Trust" is hard to build with this circumstance. Without mutual trust, conflict would be raised easily when people are dealing with complex tasks.

### 3. Decision-Making and Responsibility

In all culture, people's decision or choice will lead to certain consequence in the future. This is the "cause and effect". However, there are different views of responsibility for those outcomes, and this will directly affect the decision making process for people in individualist and collectivist culture. In American, individualism emphasizes people have freedom to choose for himself. People are assumed to have free will, and from their childhood they may be taught that each choice has its consequences for which they need to bear the responsibility personally.

In collectivistic cultures, people seldom mention about the ideals of individual choice and free will, and less emphasis may be placed on personal responsibility for outcomes. Collectivistic cultures are more likely than individualistic ones to allow for external explanations for the cause of a good or bad event (e. g., fate, spiritual intervention, or the demands of social superiors). If there is consequence need to be borne, the whole group of people would take that.

For these kinds of understanding of responsibility, people in individualistic cultures may be allowed or even encouraged to make choices based on what he think the best, while people in collectivistic cultures are more likely to be expected to make the decision which is best for the group.

Under this perception, people in individualistic cultures can make prompt and quick decision as they know clearly that the reward or responsibility is only borne by him. He doesn't have to discuss with other anymore if he think he is doing the best decision. On the contrary, people in collectivist culture

usually have a slow process rate in discussion and thus, slow in decision making as well.

As people in-group know clearly that the responsibility would be borne by all members in the group, therefore, they would think of a decision which is in the best interest of the whole group. To balance all the interest of all people, the decision always take long time for consultation and discussion. However, this would be considered as time-wasting and annoying in view point of individualists. Therefore, conflicts would be raise if people in these two cultures are working on the same project or task.

#### 4. Tolerate to abusive supervision

Abusive supervision is defined as a “ subordinate’s perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact” (Tepper, 2000, p. 178).

In the workplace, “ supervisors may be motivated to abuse their subordinates because of subordinates’ undesirable behaviors such as poor performance, inadequate behavior, task-related mistakes, and violation of norms.”(Jae, Jaclyn, 2008 ) Even if supervisors do not notice these harmful behaviors, they can manage their subordinates in an abusive manner in order to proactively prevent those behaviors. Managers who abuse their subordinates tend to perceive this strategy as an effective management tool, and mistreat their subordinates to accomplish their objectives (Tepper, 2007).

For the abusive supervision issue, people in collectivist culture are likely to obey the order with less questioning than their counterparts in individualistic cultures as they value harmony and are more willing to obey with authorities. On the contrary side, people in individualist culture, since they are confident in the ability they own, they have greater chance to challenge the supervisors if abusive supervision is taken place in the office. As a result, there might be a high turnover rate or low morale in workplace. This is the consequence of the conflict for the issue of abusive supervision across individualism and collectivism.

## 5. Concepts of Progress

It is widely believed by the mainstream of American that people should continually improve themselves and advance in their careers, educations or some skills in specific fields. The effort of improving yourself is going to be compensated by the high standard living or social status.

In traditional collectivism, however, people may pay less attention to this kind of progress. For one thing, time may be viewed less like an arrow into the future and more like a circular process, as seasons change in their regular order and humans repeat their traditional activities, such as planting or harvesting crops (David, Rhonda, 2005). Family and community may only concern the activities that can sustain their lives, rather than try to change the current situation. Collectivists may put more focus on spiritual rather than material advancement (David, Rhonda, 2005).

Therefore, in the workplace, people with individualist traits are more aggressive, ambitious than their counterparts who have collectivist traits since they are looking forward to promotion and rewards. Individualists might have more innovation, creativity and bold idea as they are keen to show off what they are capable of, whereas collectivists want to avoid the risk of making wrong decision; they would mostly likely turn down the bold idea from their counterparts. This would cause conflict among people in the two contrasting cultures.

#### 6. Shame (Loss of Face)

People in all culture are likely to feel shame if they did badly in competition or committed into crime, etc. When employee is blamed and scolded by their boss or supervisor, normally, they will have a bad feeling. As social emotions, the feeling of shame, guilty and hurting is across culture dimension.

However, in individualist culture, as people know what they do wrong is going to borne by his own, therefore, they would not feel that hard since they have the expectation of bearing own responsibilities. In contrast, as people in collectivist culture value harmony, peace, “ Face” (prestige personal identity) once they are scolded, they would have a hard feeling and shame as well due to the loss of “ Face”.

In the workplace, if the supervisor ignores the effect of “ hurting employee” in a company which is dominated by people in collectivist culture, the scold may lead to lower in morale along with higher in turnover rate.

#### 7. Help Seeking

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In some collectivistic cultures, great importance is placed on maintaining the group reputation by not shaming it. Other than that, family members in a collectivistic culture may feel they have the obligation to take care other people in need as collectivism is interdependent in nature. Meanwhile, in individualist culture, people are expected to take care on their own; they only turn to their families as a “ last resort”.

It is almost the same case in the business environment, individualists are expected everyone should take care on their own, not depending on others help, while collectivists hold a contrast idea that people are interdependent, and should help others in need. The different views of help seeking are developed from the basic concept of “ dependent” and “ interdependent”. Hence, it is easy for these two kinds of people have conflict working in the same group, given that the ability of members is unequal.