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August 2005

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Blanton, Karen Kniep and Barbuto, John E. Jr., "Cultural Constraints in the Workplace: An Experiential Exercise Utilizing Hofstede's Dimensions" (2005). *Faculty Publications: Agricultural Leadership, Education & Communication Department*. 43.  
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# Cultural Constraints in the Workplace: An Experiential Exercise Utilizing Hofstede's Dimensions

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*This article describes an original exercise developed to apply Hofstede's cultural dimensions. The exercise creates simulated subcultures within a multinational organization. Managers are required to function in various subcultures as they work to develop an incentive plan with salespeople. Hofstede's dimensions are reviewed, followed by the exercise. We provide purpose, preparation requirements, instructions for facilitating and processing the exercise, student reactions, and strategies for understanding and applying the concepts. The authors also assessed content retention derived from participating in the exercise. In preliminary tests, three independent studies demonstrate significant improvements in content knowledge.*

*Keywords: cultural constraints; experiential exercise; sales management*

Instilling in students an appreciation of the vast dimensions of culture, applied in an international and cross-cultural setting, is among the most arduous endeavors in higher education (Hansen & Williams, 2003). This article presents an original, educational, and entertaining experiential exercise designed to apply cross-cultural dimensions to a realistic multinational role-play (Hofstede, 2001). The upcoming section provides a primer of Hofstede's work. Then, the purpose, intended audience, and intended benefits of the exercise are provided. The specific instructions for facilitating and processing the exercise are provided next. We then discuss student reactions and explore opportunities for advancing the applications of the

concepts. Finally, we report three studies that test the effectiveness of the exercise, in terms of content retention.

## Background

Hofstede (1976) studied the espoused values of 372 managers from 40 nations in a multinational organization and identified "crude cultural clusters" from their responses. This seminal work inspired a resurgence of cultural characteristics research. Most notable is Hofstede's 7-year study examining culture's consequences (Hofstede, 1980).

Hofstede's work has become a foundation for the study of cross-cultural characteristics as most textbooks and journal articles examining the concept refer to it. This exercise is derived from Hofstede's four, and later five, cultural dimensions (see Hofstede, 1976, 1980, 2001), which include the following: power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term orientation. Each cultural dimension has an opposite, creating "high" and "low" polar positions (see Table 1 for brief definitions of each dimension).

## Purpose and Audience for the Exercise

This 1-hour exercise (see Appendix A) engages students to examine Hofstede's (1980, 2001) concept of cultural constraints and apply it to simulate a multinational, multicultural corporation. Through the interactive group process, cultural differences between group members and managers become barriers to successful completion of assigned task. Participants of this exercise will benefit in the following ways:

- They will better understand Hofstede's five cultural dimensions.
- They will better appreciate the constraints inherent in culturally diverse working environments.
- They will develop a vocabulary to discuss cultural differences.
- They will consider a more culturally inclusive perspective of organizational behavior.

This exercise was originally developed for use in a graduate-level leadership theory course. However, it has since been effectively used in undergraduate leadership and organizational behavior courses and a graduate cross-cultural management course. This exercise may be useful for diversity training, or in comparative American culture, diversity, international business, and management courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels. The exercise provides a good introduction to the con-

**TABLE 1**  
**Hofstede's Five Dimensions of Culture**

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Definition</i>
Power distance (high versus low)	Amount of perceived power differential between authority figures and subordinates.
Individualism (versus collectivism)	Degree to which personal needs are valued over the needs of the group.
Masculinity (versus femininity)	Tough values such as competition and achievement, versus tender values such as interpersonal relationships and care for others.
Uncertainty avoidance (high versus low)	Degree of comfort one has with ambiguous or risky situations, versus situations in which the outcome is assured.
Long-term orientation (versus short-term orientation)	Refers to orientation toward savings, thrift, and future plans versus a need for immediate gratification.

NOTE: Adapted from Hofstede (1980, 2001).

cept of management in a multicultural setting and may serve as a capstone experience to a module on the topic.

### Preparation for Experience

Instructors may facilitate this exercise in one of two ways. The first method requires preparation for the students, who may read Hofstede's (2001) dimensions or participate in a minilecture on the five dimensions. A minilecture introduces and defines the dimensions. To avoid some of the stereotypical bias associated with the terms *masculinity* and *femininity*, the terms *quality of life* versus *quantity of life* may be substituted for this dimension (Campbell, Converse, & Rogers, 1976; Diener, 1984).

The second method of instruction requires no student preparation as dimensions are discussed after experiencing the simulation, while processing the learning. In our experiences, both approaches were equally effective. Depending upon class size, the exercise and processing discussion takes 1 hour.

### Instructions for Facilitating the Exercise

The instructions are based on a class size of 24. There will be four district managers and 20 sales representatives. All students participate. Depending on class size, instructors may have more or less numbers of groups.

Select four students to role-play as district managers and ask them to wait outside of the classroom for further instructions.

Divide the remaining students into four groups to role-play as sales representatives.

Distribute the roles to the students and instruct them to read their scenarios. Do not inform the district managers of the different characteristics of each group they will encounter prior to their participation.

Take some time to answer questions that sales representatives may have about the roles they must play.

Once all roles are clear, bring the district managers back into the classroom and assign one manager to work with each group. After 10 minutes, rotate the district managers to the next group. Continue this process until each district manager has met with each group of sales representatives.

The instructor should visit each group periodically throughout this exercise to answer any questions and ensure that students role-play effectively. Do not be concerned with how much progress has been made until processing the exercise. The exercise is designed to make progress difficult to achieve.

### Processing Instructions

#### PROCESSING QUESTIONS

After each of the district managers has worked with each group of sales representatives, begin processing.

Ask the district managers

- to react to the assignment they have been given;
- to explain the differences between the various groups of sales representatives;
- to discuss their emotions, frustrations, and/or disappointments experienced while working with each group;
- to describe which group they were most compatible with and why; and
- to discuss the challenges faced with each group and if they were successful in mitigating these challenges. Did they alter their approach based on the cultural differences of the groups?
- Which group(s) best represented the sales culture in the United States?

Ask the sales representatives to describe the characteristics that they were demonstrating in the role-play.

Ask all students if their awareness of these concepts would alter the way they would work in an international setting? How?

Ask all students to consider the implications of leadership and cultural constraints.

### STUDENT REACTIONS

Reactions to this exercise typically feature district managers discussing the apparent differences between each group. The district managers often report frustration with groups that are most culturally different from them. For example, assertive, risk-taking district managers reported strong frustrations when working with Group 1 (high power distance, high uncertainty avoidance).

Conversely, most students will feel more comfortable working with cultural characteristics similar to their own. The district managers typically report that the members of Group 3 (individualistic, masculinity, low power distance) fit their ideal of a U.S. salesperson. Their willingness to take risks, self-interest, and materialism evoke images that many district managers associate with the U.S. sales culture. Often the district managers will select Group 4 (short-term orientation, low power distance) as another representative of U.S. sales culture due to their impatience for implementation, enthusiasm for new ideas, and creative brainstorming.

It is common for district managers to discuss the differences between cultural groups and how these differences affected their experience. However, in several iterations, few district managers report that they changed their leadership styles. Those who altered their approach found success through active listening, persistent questioning, and offering suggestions. Those that did not alter their approach were more constrained in the exercise and reported greater frustrations.

If students are prepared to self-monitor their approaches based on cultural characteristics, then they will experience less cultural constraint. A student respondent during a pilot of this exercise viewed Hofstede's constraints as "a lens for looking at different cultures. This lens perspective helps leaders to *begin* to understand the culture." Another student participant felt that when "discussing leadership it is important to have in mind that a team might comprise of people belonging to any of these categories or those falling in between. I therefore believe it is important to know [about this concept] while leading such a team."

### Advancing the Applications of the Concept

At the conclusion of this exercise and discussion, there are several options to continue the dialogue on Hofstede's cultural constraints. Instructors may ask students to develop specific strategies they might use with each constraint to become more amenable. Selected readings relative to this topic can also be assigned (see suggested readings in reference list).

Other learning applications may be explored using resources readily available (Hofstede, 1993; Hofstede & Pedersen, 1999; Hofstede, Pedersen, & Hofstede, 2002), which provide an array of activities and simulations designed to facilitate the understanding of cultural constraints. For example, a business simulation, "The Windmills of our Minds" (Hofstede, 1996) provides 10 to 30 participants with a longer experience of 4 to 16 hours. Participants are divided into four synthetic cultural groups, asked to develop a communication infrastructure, and work with four delegates from each national subsidiary. Due to the context of this simulation, it may be more useful for information technology and intercultural communications audiences.

The exercise described in this article provides a more parsimonious treatment of the concept. If time is not an issue, this exercise can be repeated, asking the district managers to be sales representatives. Four of the sales representatives may role-play as district managers. This enables students to gain a broader perspective of the experience. The task and problem developed for this exercise can also be altered to provide students with a different experience. Repeating the exercise will strengthen participants' skills in working with diverse cultures. What is lost in novelty will be made up in practical skills training.

Students may also research a particular country of interest and determine how the culture compares to their native culture. Investigation into other countries' approaches to organizational behavior may also be a worthwhile assignment.

### Assessing the Effectiveness of Exercise

The effectiveness of the exercise was assessed using three independent student samples. This section describes the research design used.

### SAMPLE

Data from 61 students enrolled in three separate classes (one graduate, two undergraduate) at a large Midwest university were used to test precomprehension and postcomprehension of the material. The first study consisted of 16 students enrolled in a graduate-level cross-cultural leadership course. The average age of this sample was 33.5 years. A total of 50% had earned a B.S. and 50% had earned a master's degree. The second study consisted of 22 students enrolled in an evening undergraduate leadership skills course. The average age of this sample was 22.4 years, the average year in school was a junior, and none was enrolled in the major in the department offering this course. The third study consisted of 23 students enrolled in a traditional

undergraduate leadership skills course. The average age of this sample was 20.3 years, the average year in school was a sophomore, and 4% were enrolled in a major within the department offering this course.

## PROCEDURES

The data were collected in a classroom setting during normal class hours. Prior to beginning the exercise, students were administered a brief, two-page quiz consisting of five identical questions (one for each dimension of Hofstede's cultural dimensions) on each page. Students were asked to write the definition of each cultural dimension on page one. Once the exercise was completed, students were asked to complete page two, which contained the same five questions and two additional open-ended questions. Participation in the exercise was part of the normal classroom environment, and the quizzes were not graded. Students were informed that the quizzes were designed to determine their knowledge of the concept prior to participating in the exercise.

## MEASURES

Posttest and pretest measures consisted of five questions (pre) and seven questions (post) (see Appendix B). Students were asked to provide the definitions for each of Hofstede's dimensions. The responses for the questions were examined to determine the accuracy of students' definitions. Students could score between 0 (none of the five definitions were correct) and 5 (all five of the definitions were correct) on the pretests and posttests. Students were also asked to discuss the implications of these dimensions in the workplace and in leadership scenarios. The open-ended format was used to ascertain the impact of the exercise on their learning. These results were compiled for student reactions, discussed earlier in this article.

## Analysis and Results

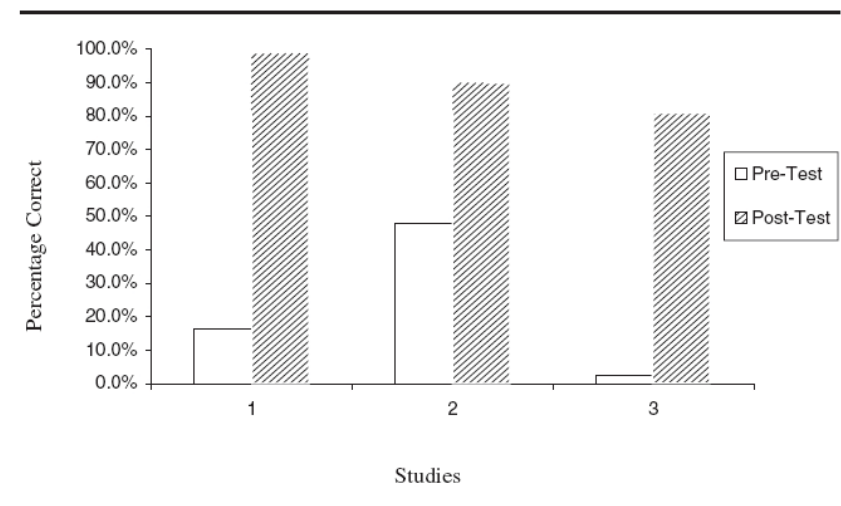
To compare preexercise and postexercise comprehension of Hofstede's dimensions, we used simple *t* tests. Across three samples the pretest mean (ranging from 0 to 5 correct) was 1.13 ( $sd = 1.37$ ), whereas the posttest mean was 4.44 ( $sd = .76$ ). *t* tests indicate that this difference was significant at  $p < .001$  (see Table 2). Overall, after the exercise was processed, students' posttest scores greatly increased. For the graduate-student sample, an increase of 82% occurred. For the undergraduate-student sample,

**TABLE 2**  
Comparison of Means for Pretest and Posttest Content Knowledge

	n	Mean	SD	Standard Error	t	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower	Upper
Pretest	61	1.13	1.37	0.18	6.44*	0.78	1.48
Posttest	61	4.44	0.76	0.1	45.40*	4.25	4.64

NOTE: Maximum Score = 5.

\* $p < .001$ .



**Figure 1: Content Knowledge Increase Across the Three Student Populations**

an average increase of 60% occurred. The responses to Questions 6 and 7 also showed a comprehension of the applications of the concept.

Further analysis was conducted examining the three student samples (see Figure 1). Study 1, graduate students enrolled in a cross-cultural leadership course, demonstrated an increase of 82 percent in content knowledge. Study 2, the evening undergraduate leadership course, demonstrated an increase of 42% in content knowledge. Study 3, the daytime undergraduate course, demonstrated an increase of 78%. In each study, the improvement in content knowledge was dramatic.

Study 2 (nighttime undergraduate class) showed the highest pretest comprehension among the three populations. One explanation for this is that the students received their instruction sheets and then took the pretest, whereas the other two samples took the pretest prior to receiving their instructions. Another contributing factor may have been the presence of the normal instructor throughout the exercise, which was not the case for the third sample (undergraduate daytime). On average, students from this class were further along in their program than the other undergraduate sample, perhaps gaining more exposure to the material prior to participating in the exercise. Furthermore, the length of the night class (3 hours) may have contributed to increased participation by the students.

For Study 3 (undergraduate daytime) the absence of the normal instructor and time of the class (noon) may explain their much lower pretest scores. This may suggest that the presence of the instructor and time of day may contribute to student comprehension; this phenomenon may also speak to student motivation or engagement. Taken together, these results demonstrate that across three independent student samples, postexercise content knowledge was higher than pretest knowledge of the cultural dimensions.

## Conclusions

This exercise was designed to create an active learning experience for students exploring culture in organizational behavior courses. More specifically, the exercise applies Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions to a simulated multinational workplace environment. Although participants report a valuable experience gained from the activity, the objective indicators also demonstrate increased content knowledge. Three studies testing the effectiveness of the exercise appear to demonstrate a useful learning tool for instruction. It is our hope that instructors and trainers utilize this exercise to help promote cultural sensitivity, awareness, and comprehension.

## Appendix A

### District Manager and Sales Representatives Role-Plays

*Purpose:* To understand and apply Hofstede's cultural constraints.

*Group Size:* 4–8 per group.

*Time Required:* Approximately 60 minutes (class of 15–25).

*Preparation Optional:* Review Hofstede's (1976, 1980, 1993, 1996, 2001) cultural dimensions in a brief lecture.

### Part 1: District Manager Role-Plays

You are a district manager at PW Inc., an international manufacturer of premium widgets. You oversee sales representatives who receive a standard 25% commission for every sale, in addition to their base salary of \$15,000. Last year, the average salary ranged from \$18,000 to \$100,000. Unfortunately, overall sales and employee motivation were down last year at PW Inc. Your task is to meet with four different groups of sales representatives and try to resolve these issues by designing a new incentive plan. You will spend a short period of time with each group before rotating to another group. Each group represents a separate branch of the company. Take notes of your experiences so that you will be able to recall the progress and challenges that you face.

### Part 2: Sales Representatives Role-Plays

#### GROUP 1

You are a sales representative at PW Inc. You sell Premium Widgets and receive a standard 25% commission for every sale, in addition to your base salary of \$15,000. Last year, sales reps averaged between \$18,000 and \$100,000 in total compensation. Unfortunately, overall sales and employee motivation were down last year at PW Inc.

Your task is to create an incentive plan with your coworkers and district manager to resolve these issues. However, each of you will be adopting specific characteristics that will govern your behavior in the group. Remember to stay “in character” throughout the entire exercise. Each member in your group is going to behave the same way, according to the following characteristics:

*High Power Distance:* You are comfortable deferring to your boss on important matters. You respect authority and look to management to guide your actions. You value proper etiquette and social norms of politeness.

*High Uncertainty Avoidance:* You are uncomfortable with ambiguity, prefer low-risk activities, and hesitate to make major changes. You prefer the status quo and are skeptical of new policies, unless they are highly detailed and structured. You need to know that there is no risk involved before you will agree to a change.

#### GROUP 2

You are a sales representative at PW Inc. You sell Premium Widgets and receive a standard 25% commission for every sale, in addition to your base salary of \$15,000. Last year, sales reps averaged between \$18,000 and \$100,000 in total compensation. Unfortunately, overall sales and employee motivation were down last year at PW Inc.

Your task is to create an incentive plan with your coworkers and district manager to resolve these issues. However, each of you will be adopting specific characteristics that will govern your behavior in the group. Remember to stay “in character” throughout the entire exercise. Each member in your group is going to behave the same way, according to the following characteristics:

*Long-Term Orientation:* You are more inclined to save resources and be thrifty. You are also more likely to persist. You are aware of how present actions will affect the future of the company.

*Collectivist:* Your perspective of the world is one of inclusiveness. You prefer to be an active member of a group. You are concerned with how the group is affected by any actions taken by the company. No individual's needs are more important than the needs of the whole.

*Femininity:* You are more concerned with tender values and humility than with aggressive or competitive activities. You value quality of life, service, care for the less fortunate, and solidarity. It is important to you to have quality personal relationships. You are sensitive to and concerned with how your actions will affect others.

### GROUP 3

You are a sales representative at PW Inc. You sell Premium Widgets and receive a standard 25% commission for every sale, in addition to your base salary of \$15,000. Last year, sales reps averaged between \$18,000 and \$100,000 in total compensation. Unfortunately, overall sales and employee motivation were down last year at PW Inc.

Your task is to create an incentive plan with your coworkers and district manager to resolve these issues. However, each of you will be adopting specific characteristics that will govern your behavior in the group. Remember to stay "in character" throughout the entire exercise. Each member in your group is going to behave the same way, according to the following characteristics:

*Individualistic:* You prefer to act independent of others and rarely consider the group's needs. Priority is given to your own needs and you are relentless in your pursuit of whatever is best for you. Actions that may be detrimental to the group are inconsequential if they can benefit you in some manner.

*Masculinity:* You value assertiveness, performance, and success. Competition is an accepted and valued part of the work environment. It is vital to be resilient and never appear weak with others in your interpersonal relationships.

*Low Power Distance:* You believe everyone should have equal input in decision making, regardless of position-based power. You will challenge management and be firm in your convictions.

### GROUP 4

You are a sales representative at PW Inc. You sell Premium Widgets and receive a standard 25% commission for every sale, in addition to your base salary of \$15,000. Last year, sales reps averaged between \$18,000 and \$100,000 in total compensation. Unfortunately, overall sales and employee motivation were down last year at PW Inc.

Your task is to create an incentive plan with your coworkers and district manager to resolve these issues. However, each of you will be adopting specific characteristics that will govern your behavior in the group. Remember to stay "in character" throughout

the entire exercise. Each member in your group is going to behave the same way, according to the following characteristics:

*Short-Term Orientation:* You seek immediate gratification. You are more concerned with developing a plan that will work today than considering hypothetical circumstances associated with long-range planning. You are impatient with long-term strategies.

*Low Uncertainty Avoidance:* You are open to taking risks, valuing creativity and innovation in the workplace. From your perspective, change provides opportunity for growth.

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## Appendix B

### Pretest and Posttest Questions

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#### Pretest Questions

- Define high power distance and low power distance.
- Define high uncertainty avoidance and low uncertainty avoidance.
- Define collectivism and individualism.
- Define masculinity and femininity.
- Define long-term and short-term orientation.

#### Posttest Questions

- Define high power distance and low power distance.
  - Define high uncertainty avoidance and low uncertainty avoidance.
  - Define collectivism and individualism.
  - Define masculinity and femininity.
  - Define long-term and short-term orientation.
  - What are the implications for these dimensions in the workplace?
  - What are the implications for these dimensions when discussing leadership?
- 

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\*Suggested readings for learning content.