



# Five Frameworks of Culture

...for AFS  
& Friends

**Milton Bennett, best known for the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS),** has proposed five categories, or frameworks, for thinking about how cultures are different from one another. When someone is in an unfamiliar culture, what sort of clues should that person look for, to begin to understand how this culture differs from one's home culture?

## WHAT ARE THE FIVE FRAMEWORKS OF CULTURE?

The five frameworks of culture compiled by Milton Bennett provide general parameters for understanding some of the fundamental ways in which cultures differ. They support interactions between people from different cultures by assisting in the identification and categorization of cultural clues often so subtle that they are ignored or devalued. Also, these five frameworks encourage us to think about how cultures can differ from one another and why these differences may be relevant.

### Bennett's Five Frameworks of Culture:

- Language Use & Perception
- Nonverbal Behavior
- Communication Style
- Cognitive Style
- Cultural Values & Assumptions

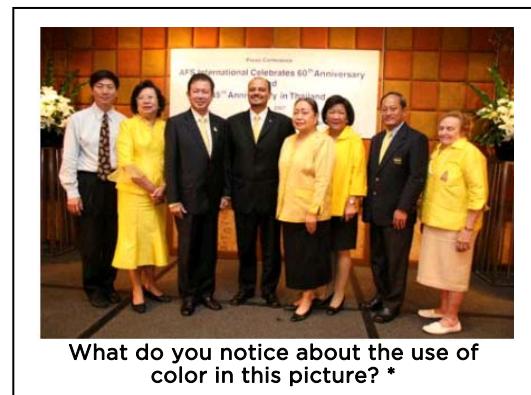
An awareness of these cultural differences can be useful in your daily life as you interact with many types of cultures, not just national or ethnic cultures, but also gender, generational, regional, religious, professional, educational, and sexual orientation cultures, to name a few.

## LANGUAGE USE & PERCEPTION

This framework is not about the use of different languages, but focuses rather on how language is used to communicate within the various social contexts of culture. Differences in language use may exist in the social contexts of greeting, leave-taking, arguing, negotiating, complimenting, asking for help, giving directions, disagreeing and criticizing, to name a few.

Perception is related to what we see, what we ignore, and the meaning we ascribe to what we pay attention to. Culturally influenced gestures and body language, non-verbal behavior (see below), and color-use can all be misinterpreted if one is not aware of their significance in the other culture.

**A language misunderstanding:** *Person A uses a greeting that lasts several minutes, while Person B uses a short greeting as a polite way to say hello and has no intention of speaking at any length. Person A may perceive Person B as brusque and impolite while Person B may feel Person A has revealed too much information*



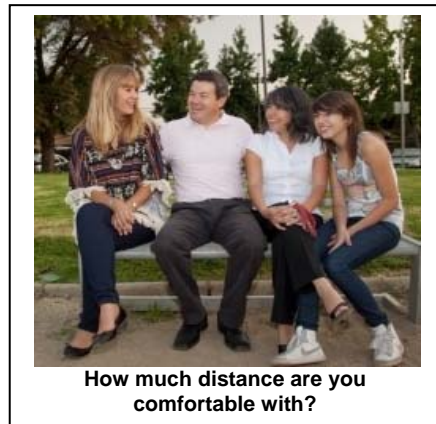
or is acting inappropriately by engaging in such a long interaction.

Often, differences in language use, as seen in the example above, are mistaken as individual characteristics, rather than cultural values and practices.

*\*In Thailand, different colors are assigned to each day of the week and it is auspicious to wear the corresponding color, especially in celebration of someone's birthday (it was Tachi Cazal's birthday in this photo). Monday's color is yellow.*

## NONVERBAL BEHAVIOR

Nonverbal behavior includes the use of voice quality (e.g., pitch, tone), body language (e.g., facial expressions) and gestures, eye contact, distance (e.g., physical proximity), and touching. We frequently make interpretations about the meaning of nonverbal behavior unconsciously and based on our own cultural values. Because of this, it is easy to overlook or disregard cultural explanations for feelings of discomfort, misunderstanding, or even conflict.



**A nonverbal behavior misunderstanding:** *Discomfort can occur if people engaged in a conversation have different preferences for how close they should be standing to each other as they speak. Some cultures prefer to keep a distance of at least an arm's length. Other cultures, however, prefer a distance less than an arm's length and are more inclined to use touch in communicating their thoughts and feelings.*

*Someone preferring closeness may view the other person as socially cold or reserved and someone preferring physical distance may feel that his/her space is being invaded. As one person pursues physical proximity and the other retreats, both may experience stress and a reduced desire to continue conversing.*

## COMMUNICATION STYLE

This framework has several pieces, many of which are based on Edward T. Hall's explanation of higher context or lower context communication styles. A person from a higher context culture will find meaning in a situation from more than the verbal dialogue, relying on the surrounding environment and nonverbal behavior to "read between the lines." A person from a lower context culture, however, will find meaning solely from what is verbally explicit. High context and low context behavior are at opposite ends of a continuum, so a person may find him/herself somewhere in the middle. High-low context misunderstandings are quite common.

**Communication style misunderstandings:** *US Americans or Northern Europeans, who tend to communicate in a direct, low context way, may find events held in Asia or Latin America (two regions of the world that tend to exhibit more indirect and high context communication styles) to be unstructured and/or unclear. In contrast, a South American may find the instructions for assembling a new item, such as a desk, to be unnecessary and a Japanese host mother may have trouble expressing her disappointment in a sojourner's clothing choices if that person is unfamiliar with receiving messages indirectly.*

## COGNITIVE STYLE

Differences in cognitive style refer to the ways people process their perceptions of the world around them. When collecting information, individuals from different cultures will place more value on certain pieces of information than others. If we consider the two extremes of concrete versus abstract information, those who place value on concrete information will want answers to the questions who and what, using descriptions and complex metaphors to capture their thinking. Individuals who value abstract information rely on theories and explanations, asking why and when

to complete their understanding. Generally speaking, Asian cultures will be closer to the concrete extreme of the continuum while Northern Europeans and North Americans will prefer abstract ways. Southern Europeans and South Americans often combine the two extremes and show cognitive qualities in the center of the continuum.

Bennett (2007), in his article Intercultural Competence for Global Leadership, demonstrates the kind of conflicts that can occur when people with different cognitive styles work together:

*The Asians want to know what seems to everyone else an excessive amount of detail of the project and the participants, while the North Americans just want to get started on the action and learn from their mistakes. The Northern Europeans are outraged by the idea of making mistakes and insist on assessing the historical record of similar projects, while the Southern Europeans who support the project are insulted that their credibility is being questioned. Meanwhile, the Asians have become distrustful of North American claims that turn out to only be partially true (but “within probabilities,” according to the Americans), while the Northern Europeans have become impatient with the Southern Europeans for their oversensitivity. (p. 7)*

Differences in cognitive styles inevitably lead to differences in leadership styles, as well, and the perception of which qualities make for a “good leader.” The best leader of a multicultural team is one who is aware of general differences in how we think, who can predict likely conflicts and who engages these differences so as to maintain team productivity and positive relationships.

## CULTURAL VALUES & ASSUMPTIONS

Values of a particular culture highlight the preferred behaviors or tendencies of its members. The following five value orientations are a good way to begin understanding how cultural values can differ.

**Individualism-Collectivism:** Do members of your culture believe it is good to act as an individual? Do they value independent decision making and individual achievement? Or do they believe it is better to act as a member of the family or other close-knit group? Do they value collective achievement and group decision-making? Many Western cultures tend to value individualism while other cultures such as many Asian cultures prefer to place more importance on groups.

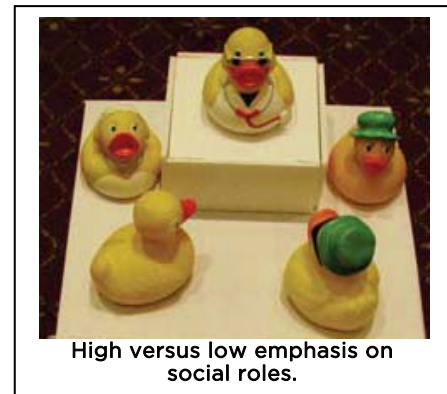


Collectivist cultures prefer to work in groups.

**Time Orientation:** Do you prefer to learn from the past and use past events to understand current situations? Or do you believe that “the past is in the past” and only the present and future matter? These are differences in time orientation values.

**Activity:** How much control do you feel that you have over what happens in your life and around the world? Many cultures feel a great sense of agency in controlling activities they are involved in while others find the notion of controlling the future to be fruitless and prefer to let things happen and to deal with situations as they come.

**Social Roles:** How comfortable are you with explicitly recognizing and emphasizing differences in social status among your peers and colleagues? People from many Asian, African, South American and European countries feel comfortable speaking frankly about status and often refer to themselves and each other using titles. North Americans, however, tend to ignore these differences in conversation and are generally not comfortable overtly mentioning role and status differences. Social roles are similar to, although not the same as, the concept of high and low power distance culture.



High versus low emphasis on social roles.

*\*\*In your culture, would the doctor duck be on a higher pedestal, on this pedestal, or on no pedestal at all? Have you observed social role differences in other cultures?*

**Tolerance of Ambiguity:** When things are uncertain, are you able to manage that uncertainty well or does it make you feel nervous? Some cultures tend to prefer clear and detailed agendas in order to feel comfortable, while other cultures feel they can work effectively even if they do not have all the information. This value is also referred to as high or low uncertainty avoidance.

**Other relevant cultural values:** Geert Hofstede, Edward T. Hall and Fons Trompenaars are intercultural experts who have written a great deal on cultural values. Other values frameworks explore value continuums such as masculinity versus femininity, long versus short term orientation, monochronic versus polychronic time, direct versus indirect communication, indulgence versus restraint, and preferences of personal space and territory.

## THE FIVE FRAMEWORKS AS CULTURE GENERAL REFERENCES

Milton Bennett's five frameworks of culture are useful references for when we come into contact with other cultures. If we are able to identify where our own cultures fall along the frameworks' continua, as well as other cultures, we can form an idea of how the cultures might differ and where they might coincide. It may also be beneficial to accompany these culture-general frameworks with additional culture-specific information.

### The Five Frameworks of Culture...

- ✓ provide a set of culture-general frameworks.
- ✓ demonstrate how different cultures approach language as a communication tool.
- ✓ remind us that cultures use different nonverbal clues to communicate messages.
- ✓ provide understanding of how cultures use alternative cognitive styles to process information.
- ✓ call attention to some of the cultural values that exist in the world.

### For more on these Five Frameworks:

Bennett, M. (2007).  
*Intercultural Competence  
for Global Leadership*