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A Cultural Response to a Pandemic

The global nature of our work and personal lives leaves us highly interdependent around the world. When a global health crisis or pandemic occurs, wrong or miscued behaviors that are culturally laden can lead to panic and very ill-feelings. Our natural responses become less filtered and can easily undermine even the strongest of individual cultural and personal identities.

A New Social Norm

When concepts such as, "social distancing" and "social isolation" are introduced, relationships, as we have known them to be, will come under attack. In times of considerable uncertainty and unknown consequences, it is essential to focus on 'what we can control' and 'do as we are told,' because it could be a matter of life or death.

The Impact of a Pandemic on Cultural Intelligence

History has demonstrated time and again that a significant global event impacts culture and our ability to maintain an inter-cultural mindset. During such occasions, it is tempting to see the actions of people from only one point of view, your own.

Culture is the deeply rooted patterns of values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that are shared and passed down by groups over generations. Culture is more than nationality. Culture also includes ethnicity, gender, age, and other personal identities. When we speak of Cultural Intelligence, we mean the capability for each of us to relate and work effectively across cultures and identities.

To Know and To Do

Our goal should be to manifest inclusive behaviors as we learn how to adjust our interactions during these times. The following pages provide strategies and tactics to ensure we continue to grow our cultural intelligence in trying times.

The Cultural Orientations Model®

At Berlitz, we embrace the Cultural Orientations Model® (COM) as the basic building block of the Cultural Orientations Approach® (COA). The COM's primary function is to introduce a valid, neutral, and non-judgmental vocabulary for explaining culture.

The foundation of the COM is the Cultural Orientations Indicator® (COI). The COI measures preferences, not behaviors. It can allow us to focus on specific cultural preferences to determine how global events may impact them.*

The COI reveals 34 cultural preferences grouped inside three dimensions of culture: interaction style, thinking style, and sense of self. This guide focuses on 12 cultural preferences that are particularly relevant in this pandemic and helps us respond to colleagues around the world.

Interaction Style

The Interaction Style outlines how people tend to communicate and engage with others at work. One such preference is **Being/Doing**. The Being/Doing continua tells us how we balance relationships and tasks.

Also, under the Interaction Style dimension of culture is the continua of **Expressive/Instrumental**. Expressive/instrumental describes how we like to handle and display emotions.

Thinking Style

The second of the three dimensions of culture is called Thinking Style, which determines how people tend to process information at work. One preference that is measured is the **Low/High Context** continua. This continuum tells us how we prefer to derive and package meaning.

The **Past/Future** continua tells us how we prefer to reference information.

Sense of Self

The third of the three dimensions of culture is called Sense of Self, which determines how people tend to view identity and motivation. One preference that is measured is the **Control/Constraint** preference. This tells us how empowered we see ourselves over the circumstances of our work/life.

Also, under the Sense of Self dimension is the preference **Individualistic/Collectivistic**. This preference describes how we experience group membership or how we identify with a given group.

* To learn more about the Cultural Navigator and the Cultural Orientations Indicator assessment, go to:
  https://www.berlitz.es/en/cultural-orientations-indicator

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Interaction Style

BEING/DOING

To Know An individual with a *Doing* preference takes pride in accomplishing tasks and driving measurable outcomes. For an individual with a strong preference for doing, the social distancing concept may be viewed as an enabler. They may achieve work-related goals while increasing productivity.

It is necessary to be mindful that for many of our colleagues with a *Being* preference prioritizing focus on relationships rather than tasks may be difficult. They may feel isolated and over anxious depending on where they are. The *Being* preference values engagement with people over goal attainment.

To Do
- Think of the human side of virtual work.
- Concentrate less on output and practicality; it's the personal connections that are valued here.
- Understand the significance of building and maintaining relationships with your colleagues with a *Being* preference yet, responding to deadlines, and meeting goals for the *Doing* preference.
- Virtual and remote workers need to be especially mindful here.

Relationship or Task! Pick one! A person with a more definite preference for Being will be seeking ways to visually and aurally connect. Empathic communication is critical here. An individual with a very strong Doing preference may appreciate written checklists, daily updates, and quickly go along their way. In both cases, cultural regard for one's preference is the centerpiece for a healthy working relationship.

EXPRESSIVE/INSTRUMENTAL

To Know *Expressive* work is an emotional experience. Expressiveness plays an integral role in convincing and persuading people with whom you work to adopt a point of view.

Instrumental work values factual, objective, and pragmatic exchanges. Communications are focused on problem-solving or are issue centered. *Instrumental* communicators tend to have limited tolerance for displays of emotion in the workplace.

To Do During this time, *Instrumental* communicators will need to be mindful of how they communicate with their *Expressive*-oriented colleagues. Here are some tactics that can assist in this process:
- Take time to understand the emotional needs of your coworkers. Individual attention in a virtual environment is particularly needed here.
- Allocate time to discuss the pandemic so that they feel you are interested and empathetic to their experiences.
- To build rapport, you may need to emotionally connect with coworkers – identify your strategies to demonstrate emotion.
- Empathize with others when appropriate or identify an opportunity to be the first one to discuss the emotional challenges of experiences during these difficult times.

Drama Queens, Unite! Poker Faces Rock! Expressive communication refers to the ability to communicate using verbal language and non-verbal cues, such as gestures and facial expressions. Social distancing and isolation could significantly impact a person with a high cultural need for expressive communication behaviors, both in person and virtual. There could be a lot of miscommunication.

Instrumental communication (outcome-oriented) carries a primary goal to 'transmit' an intended meaning (informational and persuasive) accurately and effectively, and in which communication is merely a means to an end. In a 'just the facts' environment, hurt feelings and increased anxiety can be more present during times of crisis. So, not having as much access to people due to social isolation or, for other reasons, the use of non-verbal measures can be extra stressful for both the Expressive and Instrumental communicator, but for different reasons.

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Thinking Style

To Know As a *Low Context* communicator, we tend to pay close attention to words and focus less on the circumstances of the situation and non-verbal behavior. We tend to make our instructions and demands precise and possibly ignore subtleties in communication that might imply a concept without clearly stating it.

This can be daunting for our *High Context* colleagues, especially during this new normal. *High Context* communicators pay attention to, and give meaning to all within their purview. Here are some strategies to enhance our communications with *High Context* counterparts.

To Do
- For online meetings, keep the video on whenever possible so that you can see each other.
- Pay more attention to non-verbal, para-language behaviors and overall contextual components of communication.
- Correct miscommunications diligently using an empathic communication style.
- Be patient with silence during virtual sessions as silence could mean someone needs time to formulate a response.

Low Context cultures have a low level of shared context and they tend to be implicit and insular therefore their communication style may cause more offense and resentment during a crisis.

High Context cultures assume a higher level of shared context and are strongly inclined to indirect methods of communication. In a crisis they are more vulnerable to communication breakdowns.

Be mindful that when Low and High Context communicators interact, they take away different messages from the same conversation when they do not recognize the difference in styles. This can impact their ability to build trust and healthy relationships.

PAST/FUTURE

To Know Individuals with a *Past* preference look to the past as a guide and model for present and future behavior. In many instances, their response is guided by the need to preserve consistency.

For *Future*-oriented individuals, they are guided by long-term projections and evaluating the past by its potential for the future. These individuals judge ideas based on their long-term benefits.

During a global crisis, our patience to work with the other orientation will be limited as it is easier to gravitate to what is familiar and known.

To Do *Past Orientation*
- Practice visioning and long-term planning to accommodate future thinkers.
- Pause and listen more carefully to potential advantages of something new before discounting it.
- Resist blocking initiatives that require a change in proven processes.

Future Orientation
- Focus on present requirements – especially considering the new normal and how work is changing now.
- Recognize the significance and importance of history, tradition, and consistency.
- Consider immediate concerns when you are deciding on a plan of action.

*If your cultural orientation is strong in the **Past** preference, you will need to move toward the understanding that in a pandemic, which affects everyone, there will be no returning to the way things used to be. Much the way the world was affected by the 9/11 attacks, there will be a new normal that you will need to embrace.*

*If your cultural orientation is strong in the **Future** preference, you will need to understand that not everyone sees the benefits of a new normal just yet. During a pandemic where everyone is being affected in different ways, you should embrace empathy and understanding as everyone works toward understanding how a new normal might look.*

Sense of Self

CONTROL/CONSTRAINT

To Know Individuals with a *Control* orientation believe destiny is primarily in their own hands. Following the rules associated with social distancing or isolation can be extremely challenging as they want to find solutions now, which may not be possible based on our challenges with the environment. A *Control*-oriented person is proactive, assertive, and naturally likes to take charge and initiative.

On the other hand, a *Constraint*-oriented person lives and acts within the limits of their environment. They believe that in the larger scheme of things, the situation will generally work out, and it is presumptuous, even naïve, to claim direct control over organizational and business environments.

During challenging times, someone with a *Constraint* environment may need more empathy and understanding from their *Control*-oriented counterparts.

To Do Here are some suggestions to work effectively with a *Constraint* preference:
- Patience will go a long way in interacting with a constraint preference.
- Approach new situations carefully and slowly – let it take its course rather than taking over.
- Phase-in your initiatives and contributions incrementally and adjust your timelines if possible.

> *Let others lead. Acting on a control preference is not the best answer in a crisis. While businesses or organizations can offer a centralized response from their headquarters, the decisions and actions must be made by leaders in their regions as they know best what works in their environment.*
>
> *Be aware of the leaders in the field and how empowered they feel. You will have to adjust your conversations and be flexible with decisions and actions made by leaders. Empowerment can only happen when headquarters is willing to relinquish control. Be mindful, give direction, set the boundaries, and then be willing to support where required and get out of the way when it is not necessary.*

INDIVIDUALISTIC/COLLECTIVISTIC

To Know An *Individualistic* culture is one that is motivated primary by their own personal accomplishments and potentials. Most cultural groups in Western societies are individualistic cultures where they emphasize individual motivation and personal independence and achievement as the cornerstones of identity.

In a *Collectivistic* culture, the needs and goals of the group are prioritized over the needs of individuals. Most cultural groups in Asia, Africa, Central, and South America exhibit collectivistic behaviors.

To Do *Individualistic Preference*
- Consider the impact of your decision and action on the group rather than you as an individual.
- Understand the need of those who identify with and are motivated by collective undertakings.
- Increase tolerance for situations in which an individual's choices are absent.

Collectivistic Preference
- Develop a comfort level in doing something based on your motives or in your interest.
- Be willing to share your personal opinions rather than the group's opinion.
- Put your attention before the groups and take accountability for a given project.
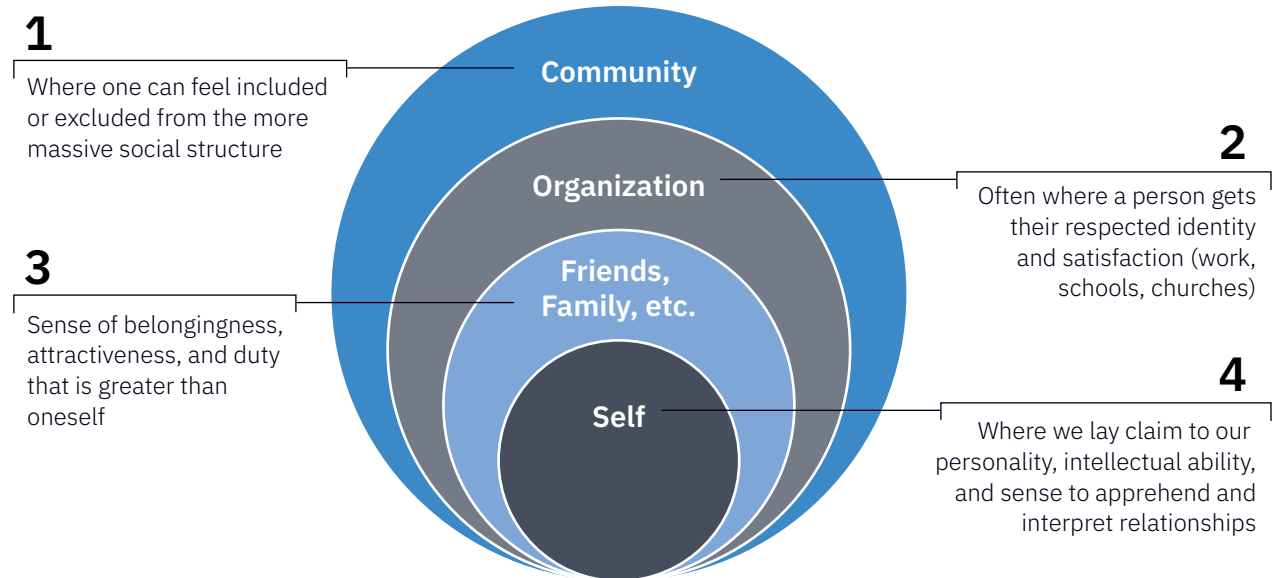
> *To wear or not to wear a mask. Panic over this global crisis has seen a shortage of face masks worldwide. The ease of wearing or not wearing a mask depends on whether we are part of an individualistic or collectivistic society. In Asia, wearing face masks is often seen as a collective responsibility to reduce disease transmission, and often it symbolizes solidarity. Many see it as a collective responsibility to minimize transmission of any disease, and many businesses in Asia have signs barring customers without masks from entering, while authorities have made the wearing of masks compulsory in public. In many European countries and the United States, people have been encouraged not to wear masks when they go out and to wear them only when they are infected. These differing views can be used to racialize or stigmatize other cultures; hence it is essential to recognize the fundamental differences based on national cultural preferences.*

Social Isolation

Social isolation ranges from the voluntary isolate who seeks disengagement from social intercourse for a variety of reasons to those whose confinement is involuntary or imposed by others. Isolation prevents the spread of an infectious disease by separating people who are sick from those who are not. It lasts if the condition is contagious. It is thought that 14 days of isolation is appropriate as it relates to the COVID-19 virus. Quarantine and isolation have similar objectives but are not the same.

- Isolation separates sick people with a contagious disease from people who are not ill.
- Quarantine separates and restricts the movement of people who were exposed to a contagious disease to see if they become sick.   *https://www.cdc.gov/quarantine/index.html*

Isolation can occur at four levels. They are:

1
Where one can feel included or excluded from the more massive social structure

Community

Organization

2
Often where a person gets their respected identity and satisfaction (work, schools, churches)

3
Sense of belongingness, attractiveness, and duty that is greater than oneself

Friends, Family, etc.

Self

4
Where we lay claim to our personality, intellectual ability, and sense to apprehend and interpret relationships

Social Distancing

Social distancing is a way to keep people from interacting closely or frequently enough to spread an infectious disease. It is deliberately increasing the physical space between people to avoid spreading an illness. Staying at least six feet away from other people lessens your chances of catching COVID-19.

What is social distancing doing to me? How am I relating to this requirement? How am I internalizing this social distance concept? What can I do to take care of myself? How can I keep it all in perspective?

These questions are perhaps things you've asked yourself over these past few days. Social distancing has personal and cultural fallout that are processed very differently across individual identities and cultural expectations.

We suggest the following things to think about and do:

1. **Educate yourself.** Genuinely engage in cultural due diligence behaviors and ask questions, so you are responding to fact or informed science-laden opinions, not politicized or ill-informed comments.

2. **Connect with others**, including loved ones, coworkers, community leaders, reputable media resources, etc. to justify your feelings. Be careful and mindful of what you are considering as information, then behave as appropriate.

3. **Find your sweet "coping" spot and relax.** Whether a solitary spiritual moment is your thing, catching up on reading while lying in a hammock, or deep cleaning and de-cluttering areas in your living space is your thing, do it!

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In Summary

As we implement COVID-19 precautions, we all must do two things:
1) engage in social isolation, and 2) practice social distancing.

Social isolation and social distancing are ways to keep people from interacting closely or frequently enough to spread an infectious disease. It is deliberately increasing the physical space between people to avoid spreading illness.

Therefore, here are a few things to be mindful of during these difficult and uncertain times:

1. Review the "To Know and To Do" sections on pages 3-5. Realize that people with different cultural preferences will have different reactions to the suggested and mandated pandemic health precautions.

2. Take the initiative to recognize stereotypes and personal biases that could be at play due to misinformation and offensive public response to specific groups.

3. Educate yourself with up-to-date facts about the outbreak and behave accordingly.

4. Apply the conventions of cultural due diligence by learning about cultural and personal identities for which you are not a member.

5. Be prepared to switch your preferred style to meet others where they are.

6. Reframe your mindset to think of social distancing as socializing at a distance.

For more information please send an email to Louisa Ajami, Director of Cultural Content at *louisa.ajami@berlitz.com*

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