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The United States and Spain: A Comparison of Cultural Values and Behaviors and
Their Implications for the Multi-Cultural Workplace

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Abstract

As globalization becomes increasingly relevant, international business environments are more culturally diverse than ever before. Ethnic diversity in the workplace provides many opportunities for enrichment, however, many managers and employees remain ill-equipped for the task of evaluating, understanding, and maximizing the power of a multi-cultural workforce. Using social psychologist Geert Hofstede's cultural dimensions, this piece seeks to uncover, define, and explore the key cultural differences that exist between the United States and Spain, specifically as they impact business engagements, workplace interaction, and intercultural management. It also provides some general guidelines for conducting cross-cultural negotiations between the two cultures.

Keywords: intercultural management, multi-cultural workforce, cultural dimensions

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Over the years, citizens of the United States have earned a poor reputation for being arrogant, ignorant, and domineering while traveling or doing business abroad. Similarly, people from other cultures visiting or working in the United States may be perceived as unfriendly, lackadaisical, or timid when they fail to adhere to the traditional patterns of interaction in the U.S. These cultural differences have the potential to foster very rich professional relationships, but can also cause tension and generate conflict, especially in business settings.

Through the lens of Geert Hofstede's cultural dimensions, this document will begin with an examination of the behaviors, thought patterns, communication practices, and business preferences that dominate these two cultures. Following this comparison is a discussion of guidelines for negotiating between these two cultures in light of these differing cultural orientations..

A Cultural Comparison of the United States and Spain

Cultural comparison provides a window through which the thought and behavior patterns of people living and working within other societies can be better understood and valuable lessons can be learned. Before seeking to interact with a multicultural workforce or pursue cross-cultural negotiation, it is critical to first complete an analysis of the countries represented. While this piece focuses primarily on the United States and Spain, it can be used as a framework for the evaluation of any cultures.

The method of assessment utilized here relies heavily upon Social Psychologist, Geert Hofstede's cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 2001). These cultural dimensions, which

will be defined subsequently include: the uncertainty avoidance index, the power distance index, individualism vs. collectivism, masculinity vs. femininity, and long term orientation vs. short term normative orientation. A sixth dimension, indulgence vs. restraint, which was added by Hofstede in 2010, will not be discussed here due to a lack of research yet conducted on the topic. These dimensions are based upon the most recent and comprehensive studies of how values in the workplace are influenced by culture (The Hofstede Center, n.d.a, p. 1).

For each dimension discussed, a numerical rating and description of Spain's cultural tendencies will be given first, followed by a description and numerical rating of the United States. Each description will include information about the cultural dimension's presence in daily life, followed by an explanation of the impact on the workplace. Before beginning the analysis, it is important to acknowledge that while useful, data-backed generalizations can be made about a group of people for the purpose of study, all individuals are different and some people's personal orientations will differ from the national norms.

The Uncertainty Avoidance Index

According to Hofstede (2001), this index generally displays the degree to which a certain society avoids change, ambiguity, uncertainty, or the unknown future. Although Spain maintains a reputation for being laid-back, especially in the southern regions, it scores very highly in uncertainty avoidance. On this scale of one to 100, Spain receives a score of 86. For context, this can be compared to Greece, the highest ranking country with a score of 100, and Sweden the lowest scoring country at 8 (Hofstede, n.d.c., n.p.). Many Latin and Southern American countries tend to score in the 80's, similar to Spain's score of 86. As

a result, the high uncertainty avoidance preferences of the Spanish people can be observed in a variety of ways not only in Spain but also in many Latin countries.

One way these preferences can be seen, is through the Spanish approach to rules and laws. Spanish societies typically prefer to have rules for all situations; however, this doesn't necessarily mean the people follow all of them. People may be willing to ignore a rule or law if doing so will avoid a certain degree of complexity, or if a unique circumstance or obligation must be taken into account (Hofstede Center, n.d.a., p. 1). From a young age, children learn that ambiguous and high stress situations should be avoided and/or resolved as soon as possible. As a result, Spanish classrooms tend to be very structured, aiming to reduce uncertainty and make students feel comfortable (Samovar, Porter & McDaniel, 2009, p. 187). Similarly, confrontation, especially with higher-ups, is commonly avoided as conflict often escalates quickly, can be very emotional, and oftentimes causes anxiety (Hofstede Center, n.d.a., p. 1).

Within the workplace, high uncertainty avoidance tendencies can be seen in a number of areas. Regarding employment, Spanish workers may be more likely to stay in a job, even if they don't like it, to avoid the uncertainty of looking for other employment. Another recent study showed that 75% of Spanish people would prefer a civil service position that could ensure long-term employment, even if they had to sacrifice some pay (Hofstede, n.d.a., p.1). Similarly, many business owners will continue working with a less than satisfactory business partner that they trust because they prefer that to the risk of pursuing business with an unknown partner. Within those high uncertainty avoidance businesses, "there are many rules that govern the behavior of employees as well as the work process" (Mor Barak, 2013, p. 181). This preference for social behavior patterns can also be seen in personal relationships as people commonly have more

unspoken rules about what is or is not appropriate in public.

The United States differs greatly from Spain when it comes to matters of uncertainty avoidance. With a score of 46 on the scale, the U.S. is considered a low-to-moderate uncertainty avoidance culture. As a result, the people have a more Universalist approach to rules and laws, not feeling that there is so much unknown territory to account for with legislation (Hofstede Center, n.d.b, p.1). Citizens tend to accept change easily and are typically welcoming of new ideas and innovative products. Furthermore, studies show that workers within an organization are often willing to combat managerial resistance to the advancement of an idea by defying organizational, rules, procedures, and norms for the sake of developing the new concept (Scott, Venkataraman & MacMillan, 1995). Scott, Venkataraman and MacMillan (1995) write that, “the more uncertainty accepting a society, the more people will prefer a champion to violate organizational rules, norms and procedures to overcome inertia to new ideas.” As a result, people in the United States are particularly welcoming of new technology, business practices, food, and various forms of personal expression (Hofstede, n.d.b., p.1).

This extends to include increased comfort with confrontation, which is more widely accepted and typically less emotionally heated than confrontation occurring in Latin cultures, such as Spain (Hofstede Center, n.d.b., p. 1). In the same survey taken of Spanish youth regarding their preference for long-term employment or pay increase, only 17% of American youth answered that they would prefer a civil service job, or namely job security, over a higher pay grade. This contrasts greatly to the 75% of Spanish respondents who answered that they would prefer job stability. There are also generally fewer rules for social conduct in personal and business settings in low uncertainty avoidance cultures, as people are more comfortable adapting in the moment to an unexpected social interaction or odd remark.

Masculinity versus Femininity

As a cultural dimension, masculinity generally deals with the source of a particular population's desire to succeed (Hofstede, 2011). According to Hofstede (2011), "a high score (masculine) on this dimension indicates that the society will be driven by competition, achievement and success, with success being defined by the "winner" or "best-in-the-field. A low score (feminine) on the dimension means that the dominant values in society are caring for others and quality of life." Once again, Spain and the United States score very differently on this spectrum with Spain receiving a score of 42 and the U.S. a score of 62.

In Spain, competition is viewed quite moderately. Being relatively central on the scale for masculinity, people in Spain typically don't appreciate excessive competitiveness or complete compliance. This is evident in a number of ways, one being the education system. According to some researchers, Spanish schools are characterized by a lack of competition (Samovar, Porter & McDaniel, 2009, p. 187). Students are commonly taught to seek harmony and avoid standing out too much or causing a disruption (Hofstede Center, n.d.a., p. 1). Teachers are considered experts in the subject and disagreeing with them is highly discouraged (Samovar, Porter & McDaniel, 2009, p. 187). While this is also an example of the more natural hierarchy of power that exists in Spain, which will be addressed later, it also reflects the student's desire to cooperate and remain one with the group rather than competing to distinguish oneself. In situations where conflict does arise, compromise is usually preferred, finding a balance of satisfaction for all parties involved. Similarly, in the workplace, managers may prefer to ask subordinates for their opinion on an issue before enforcing any serious measures (Hofstede Center, n.d.a., p.1). This concern for the needs and preferences of others is also evident in the Spanish approach to caring for the poor and needy. The people of Spain typically have a more natural sympathy for the disadvantaged and the

inclusion of minority groups is valued (Hofstede Center, n.d.a., p. 1).

The United States, scoring a 62 on Hofstede's scale, maintains higher levels of competition. It is a common belief in the U.S. that people should strive to be the best they can be. Achievement is highly sought after, valued, and talked about. In educational settings, students are taught to strive for success. Often times an "achievement target" is defined and a student's work either meets these expectations or does not (Hofstede Center, n.d.a, p. 1). As a result, students commonly try to "out-do each other" to stand out above the rest. Even from a young age American children may be introduced to academically or athletically aggressive competition that fosters this attitude (Marshall, 2014, n.p.).

This competitive mentality in childhood and education has life-long implications and is commonly carried into the workplace (Hofstede, n.d.b., p.1). There is an increasingly common perception that Americans "live to work," rather than taking time to slow down and enjoy the life they are working so hard to earn. This tendency, it seems, is driven by a need to be the best and continually obtain a higher status. While this has many negative impacts (high levels of reported stress, depression, and anxiety), there are also positive aspects (Kessler, Chiu, Demler, & Walters, 2005). In the U.S., this constant competition creates a "can-do" mentality. Oftentimes, people believe there is always a better way to do things and work hard to innovate and make improvements. However, this desire to make improvements and strive for the best is often more focused on the individual, producing a lower amount of natural concern for the disadvantaged. This may be one reason why the U.S. maintains a higher level of national disparity than any other country in the world (Facundo, Atkinson, Piketty, & Saez, 2013, p. 14).

Individualism versus collectivism

As previously mentioned, the United States has a very strong tendency to emphasize the

individual, finding identity in personal successes. This demonstrates the individualist side of this dimension, which primarily deals with the interdependence of the members of a society (Hofstede, 2011). Hofstede expounds on this definition, explaining that, “in Individualist societies people are only supposed to look after themselves and their direct family. In Collectivist societies people belong to “in groups” that take care of them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty” (n.d.a., p. 1). With a score of 92 for individualism, the United States is commonly used as a prime example of this cultural dimension’s individualist side. Spain, with a score of 51, is far more moderate while still being considered clearly individualist.

In Spain, identity is often influenced by the in groups that one belongs to. Research has indicated, specifically in recent years, that this sense of belonging is determined by both the family in group as well as the friend in group (Goodwin & Plaza, 2000, p. 289). The family in group traditionally consists of the immediate family, as well as the extended family (Kwintessential, n.d.b., n.p.). Family values are considered very important and it is generally appropriate for the family network to provide both emotional and financial support for members (Hofstede Center, n.d.a., p.1). Children growing up in this closely-knit network of family support learn to value relationships and the responsibility that comes with supporting and being supported by the people around them.

This can be seen also in the workplace as teamwork is common and Spanish people collaborate naturally. As mentioned previously, the Spanish school system tends to foster an attitude of mutual success which later causes employees to work well together with little involvement or prompting from management (Hofstede Center, n.d.a., p.1). With a less competitive approach to learning, there may be less hostility transferred into the workforce later in life.

The approach in the United States is quite different. Identity is found in personal rights and achievements rather than in groups or relational ties. While family is significant, it typically only consists of the immediate nuclear family, with exceptions among some ethnic minorities. Hofstede writes that, “the [American] society is loosely-knit and the expectation is that people look after themselves and their immediate families only and should not rely (too much) on authorities for support” (n.d.b., p.1). As a result, people typically make their own decisions and value the ability to “go their own way.” This can be seen in the suggestion of “The American Dream,” or the idea that anyone, regardless of family background, social status, or history, can rise to the top with hard work and determination.

This sense of individuality begins in early childhood, as parents celebrate and reward a child’s independence (sleeping alone, walking, dressing oneself, etc.) and continues into education, the workplace, and beyond (Julian, McKenry, & McKelvey, 1994, p. 34). Although intense individual competition is still prevalent, there is a recent and growing trend toward collaboration and teamwork in both schools and the workplace. Organizations are putting increasing amounts of emphasis upon teamwork and fostering inter-office camaraderie which has been met with mixed results (Bryant, 1998, p.1).

This individualism in society also contributes to the prevalence of many other cultural customs in the United States. For example, because Americans typically belong to many in groups, fewer indirect codes of communication are shared between people and direct communication becomes more prevalent (Limaye, & Victor, 1991, p. 278). Also, because people do not feel so interconnected, there is less of a need to “save face” or compensate for one’s neighbor. Relationships in general take less priority, which lends itself to a punctual society where events start directly on the predetermined time, regardless of most outside circumstances.

In many cases, certain behavioral patterns of United States citizens can be linked back to this pervasive individualism, however, stereotyping must still be avoided.

The Power Distance Index

Hofstede (2011, p. 9) defines the power distance index as the “extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally.” Exploring these differences in each nation’s approach to the idea of superiority can illuminate ways in which workplace environments may differ from country to country. Power distance rankings have implications for both managers and employees seeking to be culturally sensitive in the multicultural workforce. For every nation, including Spain and the United States, there are different expectations of how to approach authority.

Spain receives a relatively high score of 57 for power distance, signifying that they have a generally hierarchical society in which everyone has an order or place and little justification for unequal power distribution is needed. These high power distance tendencies can be seen throughout Spanish culture and are typically engrained in children from a young age. As mentioned previously, students are commonly taught to regard school teachers as experts whose authority should not be questioned. Similarly, they are taught to respect their elders and to be obedient to their parents, sometimes at the cost of independence (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010, p. 8). Even the Spanish language reflects this desire to show respect as it has a form of conjugation (using “usted”) that is specifically used for speaking to authority figures, customers, or elders until told to do otherwise (Chhokar, Brodbeck, & House, 2008, p. 655).

The power distance index is perhaps most evident in business settings. In Spain,

subordinates often prefer and expect to be given clear instructions from their superiors and easily accept that the boss often holds most of the power (Bosrock, 2006). For this reason, the ideal boss is benevolent yet autocratic, making most of the decisions while keeping the best interest of the employees in mind (Hofstede Center, n.d.a). Centralization is common in business, as are family-based companies in which top leadership positions are reserved for members of the extended family (Bosrock, 2006, p. 400). In Spanish businesses, it may be more common for the boss to work separately from employees and to act, dress, or speak in a way that distinguishes him or her from subordinate workers (Back, 2012, p. 29). Employees may find it difficult to confront a higher-up about an issue and likewise, it may be hard for an authority figure to admit they don't have an answer or that a mistake was made (Back, 2012, p. 30). Also, unethical decision making can be enabled in high power distance nations as leaders have fewer people to contribute to and critique the decision making process. However, Back (2012) writes that, as the "new generation takes over the family business, they are more influenced by the American business style with young managers using a participative leading style" (Back, 2012, p. 30). This also demonstrates how generational aspects must be taken into account when dealing with culture.

The United States maintains a moderately low score of 40 on the power distance index. As a result, the nation is less dependent on hierarchy and more focused on creating equality. The American values of "liberty and justice for all" shine through in the legal system's protection of each person's rights in every aspect of society and government. In schools, education is more student-centric, and the independence of the pupil is to be acknowledged. Students are typically quite comfortable with finding their own path rather than following rigid guidelines and they may be speak-up spontaneously in class or even criticize the teacher (Samovar, Porter &

McDaniel, 2009, p. 334). In the family, children are taught independence and may learn to start making their own decisions from a young age. Respect of elders is not as strongly enforced and children are often shown more egalitarianism (Hofstede, 2011, p. 8).

In the American workplace, hierarchy is established for convenience and managers are accessible to the employees they oversee (Hofstede, 2011, p. 8). Hiring and selection for promotion may rely more heavily upon previous successes, rather than seniority in the company or simply being older (Khatri, 2009, p. 6). Higher-ups may be more comfortable relying on the accumulative expertise of the team, rather than feeling pressure to be the expert in all situations. Managers are expected to set goals and give resources to employees, however, the employee may be left to determine the best method for meeting the goals. As a result, employees are often expected to take initiative, innovate, and problem solve, sometimes only checking in with the supervisor occasionally.

The decision making process in American business also reflects this low power distance orientation. In a study done on the success of different leadership styles in multiple nations, American employees, and those from other low power distance nations, responded best to a participative leadership style (Dorfman et al., 1997, p. 233). Demonstrating that workers generally desire and expect to have some role in the decision making process. This also encourages more horizontal communication throughout the organization, rather than the top-down approach common in many nations with a high power distance orientation.

Long term versus short term orientation

This cultural dimension deals with the fact that every culture must maintain some connection to historic events and traditions while also facing today's challenges and preparing for the future. Nations on the low, or normative, side of the scale honor

traditions, stick to societal norms, and view change with skepticism. Countries with a long-term orientation take a more pragmatic approach valuing efficiency and modern education as it prepares people for what's to come. This is the one of few dimensions in which Spain and the United States score on the same side of the spectrum, with ratings of 48 and 26 respectively, both exhibiting very short-term tendencies.

Spain, although the country receives a rating of 48, exhibits many short-term tendencies. The Spanish have a reputation for "living in the moment" and may prefer immediate results and instant gratification over long-term benefits (Hofstede, n.d.a., p.1). Situations are typically dealt with as they occur rather than being seriously premeditated. Hofstede also explains that, "in short-term oriented cultures fulfilling social obligations, respecting tradition, preserving the face (not showing emotions) and national pride, related both to the past and present, is highly valued" (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010, p. 519-521) This stems from the fact that the Spanish are very people-oriented letting relationships interrupt daily tasks and sacrificing space and privacy for proximity to others (Ehlich, Wagener, & de Gruyter, 1995, p. 204). There is also a certain level of national pride and respect for tradition associated with short-term orientation; this is demonstrated in the high number of national holidays celebrated in Spain each year with ornate and time-honored rituals (Back, 2009, p. 27)

These short-term preferences are especially relevant when conducting negotiations in Spanish business environments. Studies show that following social norms in personal interactions, maintaining one's composure, and "saving-face" are typically more valued in short-term cultures (Hofstede, n.d.a., p. 1). As a result, proper greetings, reciprocating gifts, and maintaining an image of being composed in both dress and demeanor are important to

the Spanish people (Back, 2009, p. 47). Guidelines for dress and behavior when conducting business in Spain are included in the following section.

Furthermore, while long-term cultures tend to value thrift, perseverance, and planning for the future, short-term cultures, such as Spain and the U.S., are generally less willing to accept present losses in exchange for benefit in the distant future (Hamilton & Webster, 2015, p. 171). Members of short term cultures tend to think of truth as a concrete idea that does not change based on circumstances (Hofstede, 2011, p. 10). As a result, businessmen in these countries may maintain stricter contracts and expect them to be followed, regardless of changing circumstances.

In the United States, the short-term orientation is very evident in both social and business culture. Americans have a reputation for seeking instant gratification and wanting results very quickly (Roberts, 2014, n.p.). In his article titled, "Instant gratification" American economist, Paul Roberts poses a question that explains the phenomenon well, "as the economy gets ever better at satisfying our immediate, self-serving needs, who is minding the future?" (2014). There is a mentality of "living in the moment" that is only perpetuated by a steady stream of corporate advertising. This generates a relatively pervasive culture of spending rather than saving that is reflected in an average household credit card debt of \$7,283 for 2014 (Chen, 2014, n.p.). As the nation that contributed largely to the development of the internet, and later the smart phone, it is only fitting than the addiction to immediacy is increasing. However, the nation's short-term orientation is reflected in more than just an affinity for spending or a focus on the present moment. There is also a strong sense of patriotism and a natural pride in the American history and tradition.

In the business world, these short-term preferences are evident, and sometimes startling to workers from other nations. The fast pace of life mentioned previously is only accelerated in the business arena, making the negotiation process feel rushed to some. The idiom “time is money” reflects an attitude that time is an expiring resource rather than something to be enjoyed and savored with friends and family. In a similar way, building relationships and long-term partnerships is not always a priority to American businesspeople (eDiplomat, 2010, n.p.). The primary goal of a negotiation is typically to arrive at a signed contract; building relationships or determining long-term benefits may not compare in importance to the immediate deal (eDiplomat, 2010, n.p.). With an increased emphasis on quarterly earnings, share price, and executive bonuses, it is not necessarily surprising that immediate success often takes priority over long-term social, economic, and environmental responsibility and more.

Conducting Business between Spain and the United States

As globalization makes cross-cultural business partnerships increasingly possible, it is important to be sensitive to the cultural variations mentioned in the previous section. Due to the increasing number of comprehensive resources available to help prepare businesspeople for negotiation in any country around the world, this section will focus on the key differences between Spain and the United States and specific business practices that may help facilitate smooth negotiations between the two nations. While the application of these suggestions will vary from situation to situation depending on the negotiation setting and the corporate culture of the companies involved, they provide a starting point for considering the impact of Hofstede’s cultural dimensions on cross-cultural negotiation.

Greetings

In both cultures a handshake is the preferred method of business greeting, however, the Spanish party should focus on maintaining eye contact and giving a firm American-style handshake (Bosrock, 2006, p. 271). To respect Spain's high power distance preferences, the American negotiator may want to use a slightly more formal communication style until they perceive that it is okay to do otherwise. Also, the Spanish party should be mindful of personal space boundaries as Americans are generally less comfortable with touching and close talking, possibly due to their individualist preferences.

Business Meetings

When attending a business meeting in the United States it is very important to be punctual. Failure to arrive on time may be perceived as sloppy and unprofessional (eDiplomat, 2010, n.p.). If one must arrive late, 5-10 minutes is generally acceptable with an explanation. Any more than that and one should call ahead to inform the waiting party and offer an apology. When in Spain, the American negotiators should be prepared to accept that the schedule of events may not be followed exactly and that in some situations waiting may be necessary.

As mentioned previously, Spaniards can be very people oriented and commonly appreciate becoming personally acquainted with the person they will be doing business with before proceeding seriously. However, the American pace of business doesn't naturally allow time for this process (Kwintessential, n.d.a., n.p.). As a result, a compromise of these two styles is often ideal. The Spanish party may need to accept a less personal working relationship, and the American party may need to allow extra time for conversation before and after meetings. In some cases, the American negotiator can help

the Spanish party prepare for the large amount of information that will ideally be covered in each meeting by sending an agenda ahead of time. However, it is important that both parties do not unfairly impose their business culture on the members of the other company unless previously discussed.

If the meeting will be occurring over a meal, it is especially important that the American negotiator inform the Spanish party that they plan to conduct business while eating so the Spanish counter-part can come prepared to negotiate. In Spain, meal times are generally a time for relaxing, conversing, and enjoying the company of other people; if an American negotiator tries to conduct business during this time it may be seen as pushy or rude unless explained (Kwintessential, n.d.b., n.p.).

Communication

Americans tend to have a very direct communication style. For the Spanish party this means that they should ask questions if they don't understand something and that the American negotiators words can generally be taken at face value (eDiplomat, 2010, n.p.). In both Spain and the U.S. interruptions are common; however, they should generally be avoided until the groups have become well-acquainted (eDiplomat, 2010, n.p.). Spaniards should also be familiar with American standards of political correctness and polite topics of discussion as there are not as many social rules in this area in Spain (Abogados, 2014, n.p.).

Working Hours

One main difference between the United States and Spain are the hours of operation. While a 9am to 5 pm workday is common in the U.S., Spain is a bit more complicated. Stores are typically open from 9:00 am to 1:30 or 2 pm, then again from 4:30 or 5 pm until 8 pm, Monday through Friday, and Saturday morning (Abogados, 2014, n.p.). Large department

stores are open all day and professional offices usually open from 10 to 2, then from 4 to 7 (Abogados, 2014, n.p.). American employees visiting or working in Spain should keep these hours in mind so as not to be surprised or caught off-guard if a specific item is needed during those hours.

Conclusion

While there are many cultural differences that can be observed on the surface, deeper evaluation reveals that there are layers of communicative, emotional, and mental culture beneath the surface that cannot be uncovered without the help of socio-cultural psychology. By utilizing Hofstede's cultural dimensions to analyze Spain and the United States on the scales of uncertainty avoidance, power distance, individualism vs. collectivism, masculinity vs. femininity, and long term orientation vs. short term normative orientation, it is possible to see that there are many thought processes, behavior patterns and unspoken rules of interaction which may go almost unnoticed in one's home culture. However, if the same person is thrust into another culture, these differences can become a source of confusion, conflict, or eye-opening perspective depending on the individual's approach. Identifying, analyzing, and understanding these differences is the first step to harnessing the full potential that cultural diversity brings to a corporate setting.

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