

Finding our shared roots when managing across cultures

When managing cross-cultural teams, we need to understand our common humanity and appreciate our interconnected cultural heritage. A study of four non-Western cultural zones reveals how.



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By [Alvaro San Martin](#)

Ever since Geert Hofstede's ground-breaking study into the cultural differences between IBM employees working in subsidiaries worldwide in the 1960s and '70s, the individualism-collectivism label to distinguish Western vs. Eastern cultures has stuck and is frequently invoked when managing across cultures.

This [recent reflection](#) by a German Global Executive MBA graduate from China-Europe International Business School (CEIBS) makes a familiar observation: "German business culture is quite in your face. People tell you to your face that they're not happy and will argue their point. In China, you must be sensitive in terms of how you communicate. I quickly realized that it's about building credibility and trust. It's highly rule-oriented and requires the alignment of many stakeholders to get anything done."

The central premise that different cultures exhibit different psychological tendencies that need to be understood to be managed, while true, continues to be refined as researchers try to discern more nuanced, less binary East-West distinctions.

For one thing, if culture is so deeply ingrained in a person's psyche that they are unconscious of how it may be shaping them, like a fish in water, then asking people to self-report their cultural traits, as some cross-cultural studies do, is inadequate for capturing what we now refer to as the richer field of "cultural psychology."

Also, with so much globalization and migration over the years, combined with the spread of Western (predominately U.S.) management models, might we be seeing a blurring of cultural boundaries?

For example, we see Western cultural tendencies like self-assertiveness, high emotional expressiveness and analytic argumentation also turning up in Arab, Latin American and South Asian cultures. Might these be telltale signs that people are becoming more similar than different?

Not quite. I collaborated with researchers from the University of Michigan, Duke University, the University of Toronto, Nanyang Technological University and Hong Kong Polytechnic University to probe such behaviors to see what was really going on beneath the surface. [We studied four non-Western cultural zones](#) (Arab, Latin America, East Asia and South Asia) to see how apparent similarities with Western cultural traits still manifest themselves differently in those places.

Our goal was to move the conversation beyond simple cultural paradigms. In our [award-winning research](#), we reveal how the individualistic, independent streak we mostly associate

with the Modern West actually finds its roots in an ancient commitment to interdependence — a value shared throughout the world for millennia.

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