

# Communication Styles of Business Students: A Comparison of Four National Cultures

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**Abstract**—Culturally diverse global companies need to understand cultural differences between leaders and employees from different backgrounds. Communication is culturally contingent and has a significant impact on effective execution of leadership goals. The awareness of cultural variations related to communication and interactions will help leaders modify their own behavior, and consequently improve the execution of goals and avoid unnecessary faux pas. Our focus is on young adults that have experienced cultural integration, culturally diverse surroundings in schools and universities, and cultural travels. Our central research problem is to understand the impact of different national cultures on communication. We focus on four countries with distinct national cultures and spatial distribution. The countries are Finland, Indonesia, Russia and USA. Our sample is based on business students ( $n = 225$ ) from various backgrounds in the four countries. Their responses of communication and leadership styles were analyzed using ANOVA and post-hoc test. Results indicate that culture impacts on communication behavior. Even young culturally-exposed adults with cultural awareness and experience demonstrate cultural differences in their behavior. Apparently, culture is a deeply seated trait that cannot be completely neutralized by environmental variables. Our study offers valuable input for leadership training programs and for expatriates when recognizing specific differences on leaders' behavior due to culture.

**Keywords**—Culture, communication, Finland, Indonesia, Russia, USA.

## I. INTRODUCTION

INTERACTIONS with people of different cultures is common in the working place, neighborhood, hobbies and classrooms. More of our colleagues are from different cultures and we could be in the same team, yet located in different countries. Hall concludes that culture is communication and communication is culture. Communication activates culture as a continuous process [1]. Once cultural habits, principles, values, and attitudes are formed, they are communicated to each member of the culture [2]. The heart of the culture is language, religion, values, traditions, and customs [3]. In line with previous cultural studies, Triandis' definition of culture emphasizes that it is a set of human-made objective and subjective elements which has been become common pattern during the history via communication with the people in the same areas [4]. When people from different cultures try to communicate, difficulties arise due to differing values, beliefs, communication styles, expectations, norms, and behaviors.

These difficulties can be managed more efficiently by individuals with higher communication competence. Communication competence is the ability to identify and choose among available communicative behaviors in order to successfully accomplish goals during an interaction within a certain context or situation [5].

According to Dai [6], [7], interculturality consists of the interactions between cultures that are flowing and evolving, which provide connections, relationships, negotiations and growth among culturally different individuals. Interculturality penetrates cultural boundaries, increases cultural awareness, and facilitates the proper development of intercultural relations. Interculturality requires proper, insightful and competent communication [6], [7]. Communication is complex and involves controlling, informing, persuading and relating to others. In leadership positions the higher you go the more the complexities and nuances of communicating; followers increasingly pay more attention to verbal and nonverbal cues. The leaders' work is communicating and the higher you go the more there is communication with in-groups and out-groups [8].

## II. BACKGROUND THEORIES

### A. Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions

The description of Hofstede's culture as "the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another" [9] implies that cultural norms are manifested in individuals' values, norms, cognitions, motivations, beliefs and behaviours.

#### Power Distance

Power Distance (PDI) expresses the degree to which the less powerful members of a society accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. Societies exhibiting a large degree of PDI accept a hierarchical order, control and obedience to those with power. Everybody has a place that needs no further justification. Individuals from high power distance cultures accept power as part of society. Superiors consider their subordinates to be different from themselves and vice versa. People in those countries believe that power and authority are facts of life [9].

#### Individualism

Individualism (IDV) refers to societies that prefer a social framework in which individuals are expected to take care of themselves and their immediate families. On the other hand, collectivist societies take care of the larger extended family in exchange for loyalty. Collectivism here is not to be understood

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in a political sense. It does not refer to the power of the state over the individual but to the power of the group. For these societies, instead of “I”, there is “we” group (our family, our school, our society, our ingroup), that is distinct from other people in society who belong to “they” groups, of which there are many. The ingroup offers protection and identity. In return lifelong loyalty is given to one’s ingroup, and breaking that loyalty is one the worst things a person can do. In individualist societies everyone is expected to look after herself or himself and his or her immediate family. People from individualist countries place great importance on individuality and self-reliance. Evidently, also work should be organized in such a way that employee’s self-interest and the employer’s interest coincide [9].

#### Uncertainty Avoidance

Uncertainty avoidance (UA) dimension expresses the degree to which the members of a society feel uncomfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity. High UA implies that the society exhibits strong beliefs and norms of behaviour and is uncomfortable with new ideas and the unknown situations. Human societies have developed different ways to mitigate anxiety. For example, technology offers tools that help to avoid uncertainties caused by nature. Religion is a way for accepting the uncertainties, including perceived supernatural forces that one cannot defend oneself against. Laws and rules try to prevent uncertainties in the behaviour of other people [9]. In uncertainty avoiding countries there are many formal and informal laws, internal rules and regulations controlling the rights and duties and work processes. Sometimes the need for laws and rules lead to dysfunctional behaviours, for example the waiter cannot change the meal in the menu, because it cannot be changed in the ordering system. Countries with weaker UA have more relaxed attitude towards problems and issues can be solved without formal laws [9].

#### Masculinity

Masculinity (MAS) represents a preference for achievement, heroism, assertiveness, and material rewards for success. MAS has also been associated with traditional male values such as compensation, recognition and career advancement [10]. The masculinity (and femininity) index measures how society views assertiveness, competitiveness, and toughness versus modesty, tenderness, and compassion. The two terms are derived from what nations consider important in life: masculine attributes include financial success, recognition, advancement, and challenge. On the other hand, feminine attributes include cooperation, nurturing and employment security. MAS index values were computed separately for women and men for each country. The results show that in the most feminine or tender countries, both women and men expressed similar tender and nurturing values. In more masculine countries, both women and men became more masculine. However, men became more masculine than women on higher values of the dimension [9].

Masculine countries try to resolve conflicts by fighting, while feminine countries by compromise and negotiation. The

masculine manager is assertive, decisive and aggressive, maybe macho. Manager makes the decision alone without involving group discussions in the process. In feminine cultures the manager is less visible, intuitive rather than decisive, and used to seeking consensus. [9]

#### Long-Term Orientation

This dimension was not originally found in Hofstede’s IBM results, but after being discovered by Michael Bond and his research group in 1987, it has joined in Hofstede’s studies as well [9]. A difference in a country’s orientation can affect business. A short-term orientation is concerned with the bottom line, control systems, respecting tradition, preserving face, and fulfilling social obligations. The East Asian respondents emphasized face-saving and tradition-respecting consciously. Excessive respect for tradition hinders innovation. Western countries scored relatively higher on short-term orientation because they are used to look for rapid economic growth as well as consume rather than save money [9].

#### Indulgence

The sixth and the last dimension is called indulgence versus restraint. It measures happiness and life satisfaction, aspects that correlated quite well together, although exceptions were found. The dimension was found by Misho Minkov after reanalyzing the results of the World Values Survey. Indulgence measures about subjective feeling of wellbeing (i.e. happiness), feeling of life control, and importance of leisure. Opposite is restraint which measures pessimism, cynicism, being careful about trusting people [11].

#### *B. Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness Research Program (GLOBE Studies)*

The GLOBE Studies were designed to address some of the weaknesses and criticisms of Hofstede’s research. In the GLOBE studies, societies were clustered into ten different groups to provide a “convenient way of summarizing intercultural similarities as well as intercultural differences” Related to this study USA belongs to Anglo, Indonesia to Southern Asia, Finland to Nordic Europe and Russia to Eastern Europe groups [12]. The Globe study has the following dimensions [13]:

- *Performance orientation* measures encouraging and rewarding of members of accomplishments
- *UA* describes how much members want to avoid uncertainty by relying on for example social norms, rituals.
- *Humane orientation* is the degree to which an organization or society encourages and rewards individuals for being fair, altruistic, friendly, generous, caring, and kind to others.
- *Institutional collectivism* is the degree to which organizations encourage of collective distribution of material and behavior.
- *In-Group collectivism* is the degree to which individuals in organizations or societies engage and support team-oriented behaviors.

- *Assertiveness* is the degree to which an organization or society are assertive, confrontational, and aggressive in social relationships.
- *Gender egalitarianism* is the degree to which an organization or a society minimizes gender role differences while promoting gender equality.
- *Future orientation* is encouragement in future-oriented behaviors such as planning.
- *Power distance* describes thinking that members expect and agree that power should be concentrated at higher levels.

The researchers found that there was wide variation in the values and practices relevant to the nine core dimensions across the 10 cultural groupings. However, some universally endorsed leadership qualities appeared in the GLOBE study including being trustworthy, just, and honest; having foresight and planning ahead; being positive, dynamic, encouraging, motivating, and building confidence; and being communicative, informed, a coordinator, and a team integrator [13]. Cultural dimensions that are most likely to show affect communication are power distance (PD), UA, humane orientation (HO), and assertiveness (AS).

Recent studies have found interrelationships between national culture and communication [14]-[17]. For example, in [18] results indicated significant influences of PD, HO, UA, and AS on various communication variables. Our study advances the knowledge by identifying similarities and differences in communication style between four national cultures that are culturally, linguistically and spatially isolated from each other.

### C. Relevant Countries and Cultural Differences

*Finland* has 5,5 million population. GDP per capita is 43 500 USD. Largest sector of the economy is service sector, followed by the manufacturing and refining. Finnish people are sometimes regarded as slow in interaction and also more closed than Anglo-Saxon cultures. Finns are also regarded as certain, serious and reliable [19]. According to Hofstede's findings (see Fig. 1) Finland's national culture is characterized by high individualism, UA, and indulgence. There is low PD and MAS and moderate long-term orientation. GLOBE studies found that Finland had high values of performance orientation, future orientation and HO. The society reflected low AS and PD [20].

In *Indonesia* population is 268 million, being the 4<sup>th</sup> largest country at world after China, India and United States. GDP per capita is 4450 USD. Indonesia has the largest economy in Southeast Asia and is considered one of the most important emerging market economies in the world (Statista, 2020). Indonesia is a collectivist country with a strong hierarchy in all relationships. This means that for example leaders have a paternalistic status, and they are expected to put group interest ahead of individual interest. Indonesian employees do not consider working for the organization but they are working for the leader [21] According to Hofstede's findings (Fig. 1), Indonesia had high PD and long-term orientation. It had moderately high MAS and UA. According to GLOBE studies,

Indonesia reflected relatively high values of AS, future orientation, and collectivism. There was relatively low gender egalitarianism [20]

*Russia* is the most populous country in Europe and ninth-most populous country in the world with 146,7 million people. GDP per capita is 11 582 USD. The economy of Russia is largely propelled by the country's oil and gas industry, and Russia's economic success is depending on export trade. Russia has huge global oil and natural gas reserves [22]. Russian management is based on hierarchy and people with high positions make all decisions. [23]. Employees prefer working in teams which might also be a relic from the history, when Russians lived on large open spaces and were forced to work together. [19] Hofstede's research found high values of PD, UA and long-term orientation in Russia (Fig. 1). The society reflected moderately low MAS and individualism; while indulgence was low. GLOBE studies found high values of future orientation, HO, in-group collectivism and UA. There was low PD and AS [20].

*USA* has population 330 million, GDP per capita is 65 100 USD. Largest sector of the economy is service sector. Values consist of the right to pursue personal wealth, and the longing for something greater than own narrow interests is evident. This combination of values can also be detected in the characteristics of successful leaders that stress an entrepreneurial mindset, passion, ambition, and courage, as well as a sense of communal responsibility [19]. USA reflected high values of individualism, MAS and indulgence of Hofstede's values (Fig. 1). There was relatively low PD and long-term orientation. GLOBE studies indicated high performance orientation, HO and in-group collectivism. On the other hand, there was low PD [20].

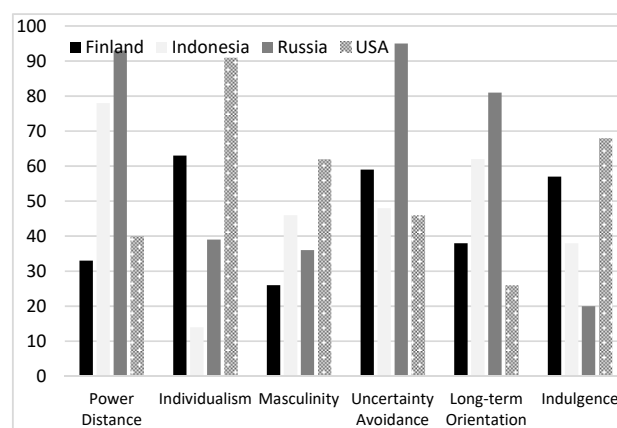


Fig. 1 Countries in Comparison of Hofstede's Dimensions

### III. METHODOLOGY

The sample included business students representing four countries; Finland (39 students), Russia (54 students), USA (61 students) and Indonesia (61 students). Biographic data were not included in the survey. Respondents completed two questionnaires related to communication style and coaching..

The communication style questionnaire with established

scales had been previously used in leadership studies [24]. It measures communication with 34 items with Likert scale of 1-7. Communication styles included are Emphatic, Clear Dialog, Insecure, Dominating, Unable to Listen and Impatient.

#### IV. RESULTS

Results from our analysis (Tables I and II respectively) show distinct differences in communication style between the four countries. Between countries there were statistically significant results in every dimension (Table I). Emphatic communication style was used more by USA and Finnish respondents than Russian and Indonesian respondents. Clear dialog was strongest with Russian respondents. The Finnish sample had the lowest score on insecure communication style. Authoritarian style was most prevalent in Indonesia and USA. In case of dimension Unable to Listen the statistical analyses produced post-hoc difference between Finland and Indonesia, indicating that Finnish people have better listening skills than Indonesian people. Lastly, Impatient style was highest among the Finnish.

TABLE I  
MEANS BY COUNTRIES BY COMMUNICATION STYLE

	Emphatic	Clear Dialog	Insecure
Russia n = 54	4,51 (1,23)	5,96 (0,92)	3,59 (1,68)
Finland n = 40	5,65 (0,71)	5,42 (0,66)	2,90 (1,21)
USA n = 61	5,33 (0,879)	4,92 (0,73)	3,63 (1,36)
Indonesia n = 61	4,53 (1,68)	4,48 (1,47)	3,54 (1,40)
	Authoritative	Unable to Listen	Impatient
Russia n = 54	2,63 (1,69)	3,31 (1,03)	4,30 (1,48)
Finland n = 40	2,39 (0,98)	2,60 (0,86)	4,69 (1,06)
USA n = 61	3,50 (1,19)	3,23 (1,02)	4,21 (1,19)
Indonesia n = 61	3,49 (1,48)	3,57 (1,35)	4,15 (1,0)

TABLE II  
COMPARISON OF COUNTRIES - ANOVA AND POST-HOC

Communication Dimensions:	F-value	Sig	Post-hoc
Emphatic	20,087	0,000***	RUS, IND < USA, FIN
Clear Dialog	29,737	0,000***	IND, USA < USA, FIN < RUS
Insecure	3,594	0,014*	FIN < USA, RUS, IND
Authoritative	12,414	0,000***	FIN, RUS < USA, IND
Unable to Listen	2,571	0,055	FIN < IND
Impatient	3,245	0,023*	IND, USA, RUS < FIN

#### V. CONCLUSIONS

Results indicated that there exist cultural differences of communication and leadership with business students in the countries of Finland, Indonesia, Russia and USA.

The USA communication style that is characterized by being emphatic, insecure, authoritative and patient is consistent with certain cultural dimensions. Emphatic and authoritative variables suggest a more direct style of communication that reflects MAS, individualism and

performance orientation. On the other hand, insecure and patient styles are consistent with empathetic human values that align with HO.

The preferred Finnish communication style was emphatic, secure, non-authoritative, good listeners, impatient. Emphatic and good listening skills most likely reflect the need to remove doubt from communication through UA and performance orientation. On the other hand, non-authoritative and impatience styles are characteristic of the HO of the Finnish society.

Russia demonstrated low-empathy, clear dialog, insecure, non-authoritative and patience styles. These reflect HO and UA where both the context of communication and underlying values are expected. The non-authoritative and patient communication styles also appear to reflect low MAS and in-group collectivism. Indonesia reflected low-empathy, low-clear dialog, high insecure, authoritative, unable to listen and patience variables. These styles appear to resonate with AS, UA, and MAS.

The global society is characterized by significant cross-cultural communication, real time flow of information and global travel. These interactions have led cross-cultural scholars to hypothesize cultural convergence on certain cultural attributes, and a less central role of culture on communication styles. Our findings indicate that communication style is a distinct and idiosyncratic cultural artifact that continues to represent our cultural identities. The results are somewhat surprising for younger generations whose lives have been shaped by globalization, homogeneous external environments, education and information.

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