Overview of Key Cultural Differences

1 Concept of Self

Individualism: success of team depends on success of individual
Collectivism: success of individual depends on success of group
Face: ways that pride, ego and image are built up or damaged

2 Sense of Responsibility

Particularism: what is right depends on the situation
Universalism: right is right and wrong is wrong
Personal: treat each person as unique
Societal: treat everyone equally

3 Beliefs about Productivity

Harmony: getting along well with others and minimizing conflict important
Results: getting the task done is most important
Process: process improvement will ensure success

4 Motivational Approach

Association: success is determined by personal relationships
Accomplishment: success means getting ahead and having opportunities

5 Response to Ambiguity

Uncertainty Avoidance: perfection and past experience valued
Risk Tolerance: trial and error experimentation valued

6 Decision Making

Hierarchical: centralized authority and clear instructions
Egalitarian: democratic authority and initiative

7 Assumptions re: Status

Ascription: position, title, social class, age, seniority
Achievement: meritocracy—rank and respect based on performance

8 Gender Roles

Differentiation: roles in society are distinguished according to gender
Unity: gender does not influence roles in society

9 Language

Language: as a role in determining what we see and how we can talk about it
Fluency: the degree to which the language is spoken without effort

10 Communication Style

Verbal   **Body Language**
Space   **Volume**
Touch   **Tone**
Pace   **Turn Taking**

11 Communication

High Context: meaning is implicit, in the context
Low Context: meaning is explicit, in words
Media: the mode of communication that is used and its efficacy

12 Trust

Protective: an inner circle of lifelong friends and reserve towards others
Open: initial openness and friendliness with clear personal boundaries

13 Holding of Beliefs

Tight: belief that there is one correct way to practice spirituality
Flexible: belief that there are many ways to practice spirituality

14 Control Orientation

Fate: belief in predetermined, natural limits
Effort: people can do anything if they make the effort

15 Spirituality

Holism: everything is interrelated and religion is part of work
Compartmentalization: religion has no place at work

16 Orientation to Time

Monochronic: limited time is available—use it wisely
Polychronic: time is a tool and circumstances take precedence
Simultaneous: multitasking
Sequential: one thing at a time
Past: focus on heritage and tradition
Present: focus on the here and now
Future: focus on how to improve things next time

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3 PRODUCTIVITY Harmony—Results—Process

4 MOTIVATION Association—Accomplishment

5 AMBIGUITY Uncertainty Avoidance—Risk Tolerance

6 DECISION MAKING Hierarchical—Egalitarian

7 STATUS Ascription—Achievement

16 ORIENTATION TO TIME Mono—Polychronic • Simultaneous—Sequential • Past—Present—Future

14 Control Fate—Effort

15 Spirituality Holism—Compartmentalization

1 Concept of Self Individualism—Collectivism, Face

2 Sense of Responsibility Particularism—Universalism, Personal—Societal

8 Gender Roles
9 Language
10 Communication Style
11 Communication
12 Trust
13 Holding of Beliefs

Detecting the Culprits of Miscommunication –
Values, Actions and Beliefs

As a Cultural Detective, you might analyze clues in the following categories. Ask yourself the following questions about the misunderstanding that has occurred. Be sure to answer the questions in context, for a particular scenario or situation, in order to avoid stereotyping people or cultures.

1. CONCEPT OF SELF
Definitions
Individualism: the belief that the success of the team depends upon the success of the individual
Collectivism: the belief that the success of the individual depends upon the success of the group
Face: the ways in which pride, ego, and image are perceived to be built up or damaged through daily interaction

Based on the work of Harry Triandis, Geert Hofstede, Stella Ting-Toomey and many others

Questions to Ask to Determine if Concept of Self is an Issue
1. Was one party expecting people to take care of themselves, to be self-sufficient and independent, while another party was emphasizing harmony, interdependence and the needs and feelings of others?
2. Was one person singled out for recognition or censure?
3. What were expectations about how relationships are built?
4. How do the parties define their relationship—lifelong or for the purpose of the task?
5. Do the parties like having a personal choice a see choice as a hardship/prefer others to make the decision?
6. What were assumptions around decision making—one decision maker or group consensus?
7. Did one of the parties (or both) lose face in any way?
8. Who introduced the parties to one another, and what is that third party's role?

2. SENSE OF RESPONSIBILITY
Definitions
Particularism: the belief that what is right depends upon the situation
Universalism: the belief that certain absolutes apply without exception
Personal: value treating each person as unique
Societal: value treating everyone the same

Subjective: personal feelings should be relied upon to get to truth and fairness; the heart takes precedence over the head

Objective: personal feelings should be set aside to get to truth and fairness; the head takes precedence over the heart

Based on the work of Fons Trompenaars, Charles Hampden-Turner, Craig Storti and others

Questions to Ask to Determine if Sense of Responsibility is an Issue
1. Did one party feel that the verbal or written agreement should be upheld at all costs, or that the change in circumstances takes precedence and the agreement revised accordingly?
2. Is one party focusing on "principles," "consistency," "rules" and "fairness," while the other focuses on "friends," "the situation" and "bending the rules?"
3. Is there a disconnection between logic and feelings, between ideal and real?
4. Does one party seem to expect special treatment while the other does not?
5. Do the parties value more the involvement of an objective and expert outsider or of a sympathetic, knowledgeable and trustworthy insider?
6. Do the parties seem to emphasize friendship over contract or vice-versa?
7. Are the parties viewing ethics as universal or as situational?
8. Do the parties view favoritism as positive or negative?
9. Do the parties view all people the same, or does one party seem to view affiliations via "in-group" and "out-group?"

3. BELIEFS ABOUT PRODUCTIVITY
Definitions

Harmony: a belief that focusing on a harmonious work environment and positive working relationships will ensure success; importance of ability to get along well with others; minimization of conflict is important

Results: a belief that focusing on the task will ensure success; importance of technical skills and expertise; conflict may be productive

Process: a belief that focusing on continuous process improvement will ensure success; importance of ability to see and describe process and its effects on both people and the task; balance of verbal honesty and relationship building

Based on the work of Dianne Hofner Saphiere and others

Questions to Ask to Determine if Beliefs about Productivity are an Issue
1. Do the parties seem to have different beliefs about sequencing—business first/fun later, vs. interpersonal trust first/business later?
2. Are the parties involved using different vocabulary—one person saying "get the job done," "on time," "efficiency," while the other talks about "people's feelings," "quality," "doing it right and effectively?"

3. Do you see specialists involved, while the other party desires more generalist/interpersonal competence? Who gets promoted/is valued in the organization and what is the effect of that?
4. Do specialists seem to look down on the generalists?
5. How do the parties talk about openness and honesty? In what venues, in what way, between what people is disagreement acceptable?
6. How do the parties feel about telling someone what they want to hear—is it dishonest, or respectful?
7. How do the parties respond if someone interrupts a task discussion to focus on process or feelings? Is time given for all three?

4. MOTIVATIONAL APPROACH
Definitions

Association: belief that success is determined by the quality of the relationships one builds and time with family; work to live

Accomplishment: belief that success means moving up, getting ahead, having professional or financial opportunities; live to work

Questions to Ask to Determine if Motivational Approach is an Issue
1. Do the parties seem to deal differently with timelines and work pressures?
2. Does one party view a deadline as a goal to aim for if possible, and the other party sees it as the goal to achieve at any cost?
3. Does one party put family and community priorities ahead of long work hours, and the other party values a commitment to work and a willingness to sacrifice personal time?
4. Is there a gap between enticing employees with pay increases, bonuses and titles, and a desire for a more pleasant, flexible, colleaguial work environment?
5. Does one party seem to focus on accomplishments and sacrifices, while the other party focuses on enjoyment, contacts, and socializing?
6. Is there a disconnection between a focus on task and getting the work done, vs. a focus on people and how the work is done?

5. RESPONSE TO AMBIGUITY
Definitions

Uncertainty Avoidance: risk taking and failure have strong negative consequences and are to be avoided; something is shared only after it is fairly perfected; past experience is respected

Risk Tolerance: trial and error experimentation is valued as a learning and improvement method; change is generally seen as positive; new is better

Based on the work of Geert Hofstede and others

Questions to Ask to Determine if Response to Ambiguity is an Issue
1. Does there seem to be a gap between desire to take action and desire to obtain more information?
2. Is one party emphasizing tradition and the resistance that will occur, while the other party emphasizes the positive expected outcome of change?
3. Does one party desire frequent interchange of work-in-progress, while the other wishes to go off, do the work, and hand in a finished product, particularly in a superior-subordinate relationship?
4. Does one party seem to place little or no value/cost on people's emotions, saying things like, "change is a fact of life; we all need to learn to deal with it"?
5. Does one party seem to disrespect the other because they frequently have "this year's pet project" or "the corporate flavor of the month?"
6. Is there pride around historical consistency and steadfastness of purpose, and resentment against/disrespect of the pressure to change?

6. DECISION MAKING
Definitions
Hierarchical: authoritarian, centralized authority; subordinates do not take initiative but wait for explicit instructions; no open disagreement with boss; many privileges for and trappings of high rank
Egalitarian: democratic, shared authority; subordinates take initiative and are not overly deferential to managers; decision making is consultative; OK to disagree with the boss; relations are fairly informal

Based on the work of Geert Hofstede and others

Questions to Ask to Determine if Decision Making is an Issue
1. Do the parties involved seem to have differing expectations about the level of initiative the subordinate should take? How forcefully or directly the subordinate should speak up?
2. What are the expectations of the subordinate for how the superior should behave? Does s/he look to the boss for general guidance, or concrete instruction?
3. Whose role is it to create a trusting and open work environment: everyone's, or the boss'?
4. Is one party using a direct communication style, while the other party is insulted by this? Is one party using an indirect communication style, and wondering why the other party is so obtuse?
5. Do there seem to be issues around formal vs. informal space, differing expectations of the need to socialize?

6. Does one party expect a superior to have all of the answers, while the other party allows the "expert" to come from any level?

7. ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT STATUS
Definitions

Ascription: position, title and social class determine status; promotions based on performance as well as age and seniority; respect for age

Achievement: meritocracy; rank and respect are earned; promotions based on performance; fluidity of status

Questions to Ask to Determine if Assumptions about Status are an Issue
1. Do either of the parties feel disrespected around issues of competency or position?
2. In the organization, are there issues around representation in top management, questions about who is promoted and why?
3. Are there disagreements about who would be the best choice, or what are the qualifications, for a job or position?
4. Is one of the parties frustrated due to a perceived failure to acknowledge or reward his/her contributions?
5. When feedback on performance is requested, does the answer seem to be "off topic" or superficial, not really related to performance?

8. GENDER ROLES
Definitions

Differentiation: roles in society are very much distinguished according to gender, with women performing certain roles and men performing others.
Unity: gender does not influence roles in society; men and women perform most roles without restriction.

Based on the work of Geert Hofstede and others

Questions to Ask to Determine if Gender Roles are an Issue
1. Do either of the parties feel uncomfortable in their roles due to gender issues?
2. Does the client or customer feel uncomfortable or feel a lack of respect due to the gender of the service provider?
3. Does the party have differing expectations of his/her access to a role than the society, organization or community at large?

9. LANGUAGE
Definitions
Language: vocabulary and grammar help determine what we see and how we can talk about it
Fluency: the degree to which the language is spoken naturally, without extra thought or effort

Based on the work of Sapir and Whorf, Dianne Hofner Saphiere and others

Questions to Ask to Determine if Language is an Issue
1. Are either of the parties making fairly harsh judgments about the other's abilities and intelligence?
2. Do you notice waning focus of the native or fluent speaker when the parties of conversing?
3. Does the non-native or non-fluent speaker seem to lose his/her train of thought, or have trouble communicating his/her personality, to the other party?
4. When the parties talk, is there a focus on communicating or on communicating correctly?
5. Are there mechanisms or processes in place to manage language differences?
6. Does one party seem to misunderstand or become upset by the vocabulary or usage of the other—even if it's two versions of the "same" language but from different regions or countries?
7. How is it determined which language will be used?
8. Are native speakers accustomed to speak to non-native speakers?
9. Is there a power differential related to language?
10. Do foreign colleagues speak or attempt to speak the local language?

10. COMMUNICATION STYLE
Definitions
Verbally Direct: say what you mean and mean what you say; tell it like it is; "yes" means "yes"
Verbally Indirect: ambiguity of verbal meaning; need to read between the lines; use of implication and suggestion; "yes" may mean "maybe" or "no"
Verbally Circular: often described as a storytelling style; speaker may take the listener to the main point but not explicitly verbalize it; may jump between story lines or points
Verbally Comprehensive: talking to many or all points that are related to the topic, usually simultaneously; may jump between points without verbal transitions
Verbally Linear: usually main point first with supporting explanations and details following; outline style; clear verbal transitions

Space: the interpersonal distance at which it is comfortable to sit, stand or speak with another

Touch: the degree to which touch is appropriate during communication; often gender-specific and depending on intimacy, location, purpose

Pace: slowness or fastness of communication

Body Language: gestures, facial expression, eye contact, posture—the nonverbal aspects of communication that often communicate very loudly

Volume: voice loudness and quality and the effect it produces—comfort, trust, dominance, tension

Turn Taking: the degree to which and timing with which one person feels free to interrupt another; expectations around the interactivity of the communication process; includes verbal and nonverbal feedback and encouragement

Based on the work of Edward T. Hall, Barbara Kappler, Basma Ibrahim DeVries, Dianne Hofner Saphiere and others

Questions to Ask to Determine if Style is an Issue
1. Do the parties seem to be focused on realizing similar goals, but are speaking in different ways and unable to "hear" each other?
2. Do the parties seem to communicate better in some situations than in others—socially vs. in meetings, face-to-face vs. in person?
3. Does one party become impatient while the other is speaking?
4. Does one party feel that the other is not "getting it" or not listening?
5. Is one party offended by the disrespect which which s/he is treated by the other?
6. Is there resentment around domination in meetings or conversations?

11. COMMUNICATION
Definitions
High Context: meaning is implicit in many things—who is present, time of day, location, symbols such as who speaks/sits first or drinks/doesn't drink their tea

Low Context: meaning is explicit in the words that are used; though body language may contradict, others may be held to their word

Media: the mode of communication that is used—telephone, email, fax, a business trip

Based on the work of Edward T. Hall and others

Questions to Ask to Determine if Context is an Issue
1. Does one party seem insulted or perturbed that another of equal or higher rank is not present?

2. Does one party seem to value consistency in the sense of saying the same thing no matter who is present, and the other value a situational approach of saying one thing to one person and a different thing to another?
3. Have there been accusations of "lying," "two-faced," "childishness," or "naïveté?"
4. Does one party seem to miss messages that the other feels have been loud and clear?
5. Does one party seem to attach responsibility to the words that are used, while the other focuses on the meaning of the exchange?
6. Do the parties vary in their feelings about how well they need to know each other in order to have good communication?

12. TRUST
Definitions
Protective: my "inner circle" is composed of family and lifelong, proven close friends; there may be a high wall to cross to get to know me, and once you're "in" you're "in"
Open: : my friendships and partnerships tend to be task- or activity-oriented; initial openness and friendliness, though inside is a clear "individual" whose space/boundaries one shouldn't cross

Based on the work of John Condon, Francis Fukuyama and others

Questions to Ask to Determine if Trust is an Issue
1. Does one party believe that relationships can be "built," while the other party believes that they "happen?"
2. Does one party seem to work with his/her friends and family, while many of the other party's frequent contacts seem to be those that s/he works with?
3. Does one party express surprise at the level of personal disclosure/intimate honesty of the other party?
4. Do you notice that the parties treat people differently based on whether they know them well or not?

13. HOLDING OF BELIEFS
Definitions
Tight: belief that there is one correct way to proceed, a clear right or wrong, a universal system of ethics and morals that does not vary by situation
Flexible: belief that there are many "right" ways to do something, and that the situation plays a heavy role in determining what is best or most appropriate

Based on the work of William Rokeach, Asma Abdullah

Questions to Ask to Determine if Holding of Beliefs is an Issue
1. Does one party seem to feel the issue is open to discussion, while the other party does not?
2. Does one party seem offended or affronted that the topic would even be held open for discussion?
3. Do either of the parties talk about "right," "wrong," ethics or morals, or about something being sacred?

14. CONTROL ORIENTATION
Definitions
Fate: belief that many things in life are predetermined; that there are natural limits beyond which one can't go
Effort: belief that a person can do anything if one's mind is set and the effort put in

Based on the work of Craig Storti and others

Questions to Ask to Determine if Control Orientation is an Issue
1. Do the parties have different beliefs about whether nature can be harnessed and controlled?
2. Are there different beliefs about luck – we make our own or it just happens?
3. Is one party willing to concede that the fates are against the plan, while the other feels that more effort is necessary?
4. Does one party feel that it may be better to take one step and gauge reaction, as things are so complex, and the other party believes that it is better to have a comprehensive up-front plan?
5. Does one party value a proactive, can-do approach and the other party values waiting for direction and a more stoic approach?
6. Does either party say things such as "it wasn't meant to be," or "God willing," while the other party seems to assume that anything is possible if you work hard enough?

15. SPIRITUALITY
Definitions
Holism: everything is interrelated and religion is part of life and work
Compartmentalization: religion has no place at work and is not explicitly referenced in many areas of life

Based on the work of Asma Abdullah

Questions to Ask to Determine if Spirituality is an Issue
1. Does one party seem much more disciplined or serious than the other?

2. Does either party talk about God, spirituality, life force, or use other spiritual terminology in conversation?
3. Do differences in religious tradition, practices or belief seem to cause judgment, frustration or awkwardness?

16. ORIENTATION TO TIME
Definitions

Monochronic: there is a limited amount of time available, and it should be used wisely/not wasted; efficiency and a sense of urgency are valued; plans are important; interruptions are a nuisance

Polychronic: time is limitless, there is always more; time is a tool and should be adjusted to suit the needs of the people; schedules and deadlines are fluid; circumstances take precedence

Simultaneous: multitasking; important to realize that this approach may be monochronic and efficient, not polychronic

Sequential: doing one thing at a time—waiting on or speaking to one person, and, when finished, the next

Past: focus is on heritage and tradition; experience and "the ways things have always been done"

Present: focus is on the here and now

Future: focus is on how things can be improved for next time

Efficiency: value is placed on meeting deadlines and schedules and in being on time

Caregiver: value is placed on friendliness and consideration for others; better to be late and treat people humanely than to act like a machine

Based on the work of Edward T. Hall and others

Questions to Ask to Determine if Time Orientation is an Issue
1. Do the parties seem to disagree about things such as "time is money," or "people follow an internal clock?"
2. Are there issues around waiting, deadlines, schedules and plans?
3. Do the parties seem to equate "professionalism" or "dignity and humanity" to issues of time?
4. Does one party focus on the agreement that was made, while the other focuses on how circumstances have changed?
5. Is there a desire to have someone's "full attention," but differing definitions of what that might mean—time together in a one-to-one meeting vs. social time in a group?