Understanding the Cultural Orientations Approach:
An Overview of the Development and Updates to the COA

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Originally conceived as a synthesis of key cultural variables that have been recognized by thought leaders in the field of cross-cultural management and communication, the Cultural Orientations Model (COM) has anchored the translation of theory into practice for over 20 years. Along with the Cultural Orientations Indicator® (COI) and the Cultural Navigator®, the synthesis has evolved and become foundational to a comprehensive methodology: the Cultural Orientations Approach (COA). This article describes the development of this approach and explains the nature of its various components, specifically the definition of culture, the four key cultural skills, the COM, the COI, and the Cultural Navigator®. The article also explains the rationale behind the updates to the COM and COI, including the significant change from ten to three dimensions of culture.

Changing the structure of the Cultural Orientations Model (COM), and by extension, the Cultural Orientations Indicator® (COI), from ten to three dimensions was more than a mere cosmetic adjustment. This change marked a milestone in the evolution of a widely recognized model of culture to a distinctive methodology. These structural changes were essential to creating an internally consistent and inherently practical approach to challenges at distinct levels of human organization, or culture. This article is written for practitioners who work with the Cultural Orientations Approach (COA) as external or internal consultants. It is meant to refresh their awareness of this distinctive perspective on culture and the practical applications that it enables. With the recent structural changes, practitioners can unlock significant benefits and value.

Each section of this article briefly summarizes foundational elements of the COA. Section 1 recounts the history focused specifically on the COM and COI. As they form the core around which the other elements were established, they are the starting point for the evolution to the COA. Section 2 explains the rationale for the structural changes and reorganization related to the adjustment from ten to three dimensions. This change completes an entire developmental trajectory. Section 3 outlines specific implications and recommendations for practitioners, providing a practical guide for using the new COM and COI to their full potential.

Section 1: The Building Blocks of the Cultural Orientations Approach (COA)

The Cultural Orientations Model (COM) is the basic building block of the Cultural Orientations Approach (COA). Originally, the COM served as a summary of key empirical and theoretical contributions in the field of cross-cultural communications. These contributors were specifically known from the "cultural

dimensions" school of thought.[1] The COM synthesized the contributions of notables such as Hofstede, Hall, Trompenaars/Hampden-Turner, Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck, Rhinesmith, and others across ten dimensions of culture for the initial purpose of raising the awareness of managers and leaders about salient value differences[2] in non-judgmental terms.

For this purpose, we modified some of the terminology from the original sources. For example, Hofstede's uncertainty avoidance scale became the flexibility/order continuum and was assigned to the cultural dimension of structure. In the assignment and labeling of dimensions, continua, and orientations, we sought to balance the source language with more intuitive labeling. The COM's main function was to introduce a valid, neutral, non-judgmental vocabulary for cultural differences. This non-judgmental understanding of differences became the essential gateway to a methodology for developing *cultural competence*,[3] a cycle of continuous learning and development that encompasses an open attitude, self-awareness, other-awareness, cultural knowledge, and cultural skills.

Personalizing the COM

The development of the Cultural Orientations Indicator® (COI) launched a structured way to develop *cultural* self- and other-awareness. The abstract aspects of difference, as recognized by the COM, suddenly became personal through an individualized assessment and report. This personalization allowed individual variations to be recognized in a field that is focused on describing and identifying central group characteristics.

We made two deliberate choices that, when leveraged well, can add differentiating value to the work of practitioners. These choices were 1) to measure preference, *not* behavior, and 2) to restrict validity of the COI to work and management contexts.

Measuring Preference, Not Behavior

Focusing on preference over behavior paved the way to deliver true cultural self-awareness by contrasting preferences with normative patterns of behavior (norms). Initially, we were able to compare individual preferences with national norms. This capability opened a window to the cultural underpinning of an individual's subjective *experience,* rather than behavioral categorization of "cultural propriety or deviance." This may seem like a subtle difference, but it is in fact a cornerstone of the emerging methodology.

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[1]See *Cross-Cultural Management Textbook* for a summary and discussion, specifically Chapter 1, "Comparing Cultures" by Jerome Dumetz.
[2]A value orientation is broadly defined by Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck as "*a general and organized principle concerning basic human problems which profoundly and pervasively influences man's behavior*." For a comprehensive summary of how this perspective was converted into the COM, please refer to Chapter 2 (pages 44-52) in *Doing Business Internationally*.
[3]We define *cultural competence* as "the ability to reduce risks and maximize the opportunities inherent in cultural differences and similarities." (*Cultural Orientations Guide*)

In this methodology, we distinguish between behavioral expression (also "display" or "performance") and subjectively felt experience. For example, an individual can learn to express instrumental behavior deemed appropriate in cultures with a dominant instrumental norm. However, if the preference of the individual is strongly expressive, the individual is likely to have a negative experience in this cultural context, may not be able to sustain instrumental behavior for prolonged periods of time (particularly under stress), and will most certainly expend a significant amount of energy and effort to maintain the instrumental performance or display. This aspect of the COI unlocks tremendous developmental value, particularly in coaching, expatriate transitions, and management challenges where cultural change objectives needs to be realized.

Anchoring this perspective reflects our deliberate attempt to develop a methodology that, in contrast to the prevailing positivism, is rooted in an interactionist and social constructionist view of culture. Positivist approaches treat cultural characteristics as objective, reified, and "factual." They ascribe properties of culture as natural phenomena verified by empirical science. This school of thought leads to descriptions such as "Belgians are modest," "U.S. Americans are individualists," or "Japanese avoid conflict." Such statements attribute characteristics to groups and treat them as fact, in some cases on the basis of impressive empirical research.

However, ever since Berger and Luckman's influential work on the social construction of reality was published, serious approaches to culture have had to account for the mechanism and dynamics of "social construction." In this school of thought, individuals and groups are seen as forming and negotiating notions and ideas of each other and the nature of perceived reality in the course of their interactions. These become habituated into reciprocal roles, relationships, and interactions, and are institutionalized when introduced and maintained by newcomers to the group. Thus, the meaning of reality and what people believe reality to be are socially constructed. They are contingent on and embedded in these social/cultural interactions, processes, and contexts. Therefore, cultures and the attributes and characteristics we ascribe to them are not objective "fact." Rather, they are inter-subjective agreements.

In discussions of social constructionist approaches, Goffmann's work particularly should not be ignored. Its "dramaturgical" perspective creates a compelling lens for understanding the symbolic and contextual nature of human interaction. It is our strong conviction that this theoretical footing is of immanently practical value. When we can demonstrate, document, and analyze the mechanisms of social construction, we can also unlock powerful sources of cultural change.

As a structured gateway into the world of subjective and inter-subjective experiences, perceptions, and expectations, the COI helps us to discover and explore the processes and dynamics of social construction. It allows for a highly differentiated treatment of the complex and dynamic phenomenon of culture. Of course, this differentiated perspective is not always wanted or required when the COI is introduced or applied. However, attention to the above aspects creates the foundation for a significant contribution among the various cultural methodologies, with unique theoretical implications as well as practical applications.

Applying the COI to Work Contexts

Restricting the validity of the COI to work and management contexts recognizes another seemingly subtle aspect of culture: that it is inherently situational and dependent on context. This was clearly recognized and described by Hall (1977), and it is one of the most important aspects that differentiates the construct of culture from that of personality. By broadly assigning validity to a work or management domain of human interactions, we allow for the variability in learned behavior (i.e., culture) across situational domains. Therefore, the individual COI user can reconcile his or her experiences and behavioral display choices at work with those at home, with friends, or within other contexts of interaction. While "work" may still be a rather broad domain, this feature of the COI responds to the justified critique of the reductionism leveled at the "dimension-oriented" school of cross-cultural thought, which tends to categorizes culture on scales of either/or (e.g., instrumental *versus* expressive, private *versus* public) The COI is solidly based on the assumption that both aspects of the continuum are present in a given culture, but that there is a situation-driven, normative *dominance* of one over the other.

This distinction is particularly significant when expanding the conventional focus on national culture to six levels of cultural analysis (national/societal, social identity group, organization, function, team, and individual/interpersonal). The COM and COI, in conjunction with the Cultural Navigator®, represent a powerful suite of tools anchored by a differentiating perspective on culture. These tools have the potential to unlock hidden value at key intersections of culture and performance.

To reinforce this distinctive perspective on culture and to create compatibility with the notions of emotional intelligence and groundbreaking insights from the field of neuroscience, we introduced additional elements: 1) the definition of culture, and 2) the four key cultural skills.

The Definition of Culture

In general, definitions encapsulate a specific perspective on a topic. This is particularly critical to topics that are as broad and ambiguous as culture. We define culture as "the complex pattern of ideas, emotions, and observable manifestations (behaviors and artifacts) that tend to be expected, reinforced, and rewarded by and within a particular group." This definition is often abbreviated as "what is expected, reinforced, and rewarded by and within a group." If Hofstede's definition recognizes culture as the "collective programming of the mind," our definition enables the understanding of the specific code that this program is written in, namely the complex, situational conditioning of patterns between behavior, thought, and emotion.

The distinction between ideas (or beliefs), behavior, and emotions is critical to the coherence of our overall approach to culture. It names three distinct variables that are necessary to the production (or creation) and reproduction of culture. In doing so, this distinction recognizes the complex, subjective reality of culture and the sometimes tenuous connection to behavioral expression. Culture thus becomes important to shaping experiential reality as well as behavioral norms. From this perspective, cultural gaps may exist in both internalized and/or externalized forms. This point is of more than just

theoretical interest because it allows for a diagnostic perspective through which change, adaptation, and transformation processes can be unlocked.

The Four Key Cultural Skills

However, the usefulness of a perspective or approach to culture is ultimately determined by how well it enables constructive change and helps individuals, teams, and organizations to accomplish desired outcomes. For this reason, we crystallized the skills of cultural due diligence, style-switching, cultural dialogue, and cultural mentoring. With this skill set, a variety of cultural challenges can be addressed. For example, when working with clients and COI users, the first task often is to identify the specific mix of skills required to address a challenge at hand. Learning, development, and change strategies can then be effectively anchored in this diagnosis.

The elements above are the basic ingredients of the COA (see Figure 1 for a summary). With this comprehensive foundation in place, the restructuring of the COM and COI represents the latest stage in this evolution away from a simple summary towards the distinctive perspective and methodology.

Figure 1: Elements of the Cultural Orientations Approach (COA)
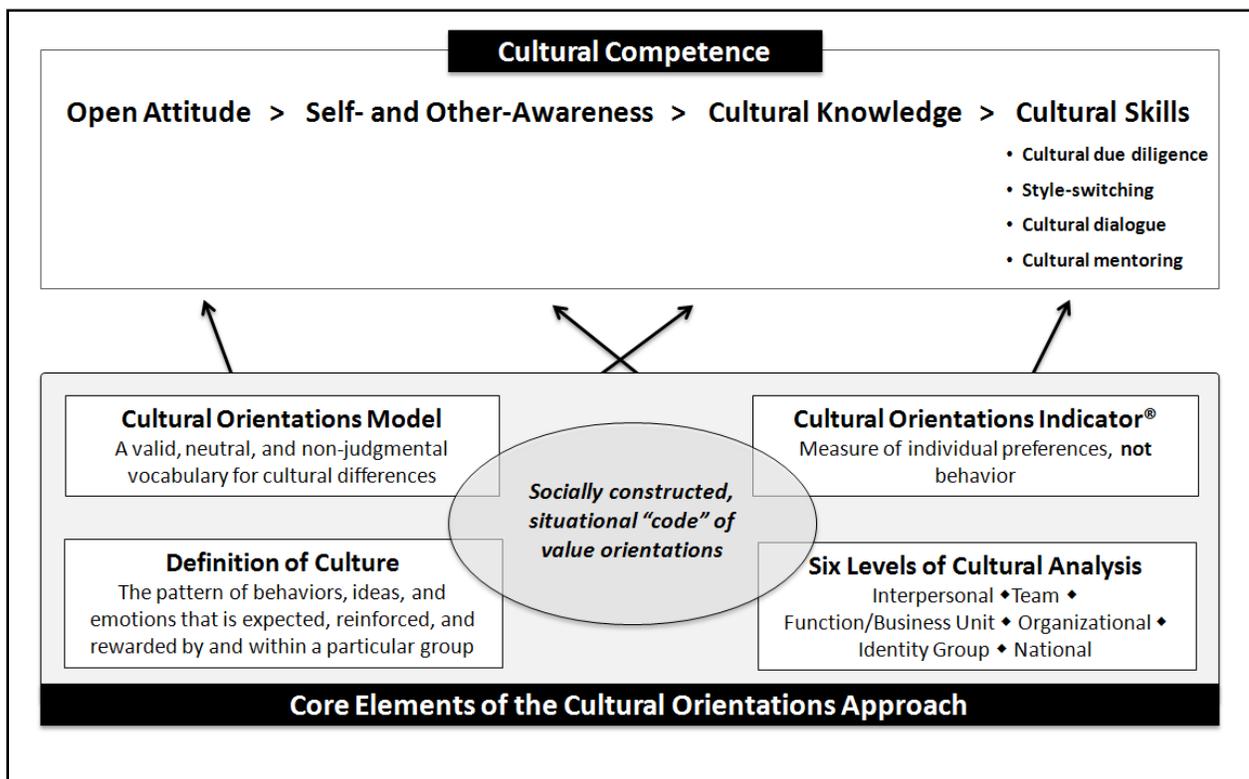
Section 2: The Structure of the Model and Indicator

The structural improvements address a number of issues that emerged as critical next steps in the development of the Cultural Orientations Approach (COA). They respond to client and practitioner feedback, address issues highlighted by the latest rounds of Cultural Orientations Indicator® (COI) validation, and align the Cultural Orientations Model (COM) and COI more closely to key tenants of the emergent methodology.

From Ten to Three Dimensions

While clients and practitioners generally appreciated the comprehensiveness of the COM and COI, they could also be overwhelmed by its complexity. Ten dimensions, 17 continua, and 36 orientations were difficult to convey, remember, and confidently apply within a relatively short period of time. Just a few years ago, companies and individuals were able to devote more extended periods of time to learning. Today's trend towards short bursts of learning and immediate relevance increased pressure to resolve the dilemma of wanting to retain the quality of the COM and COI while making the results readily understandable and applicable.

In addition, factor analyses conducted as part of the various rounds of COI validations have also revealed that the COI scales map over three or four distinct factors/dimensions (depending on the threshold values chosen). While the original ten dimensions were developed as a result of the original intent to summarize the distinct contribution of thought leaders, the development of the COI predicated an independent dataset and interpretive framework that can be considered as "informed by" but no longer "congruent with" the original sources. We see this divergence as a positive development because the original contributions have distinct empirical foundations that are difficult to compare. For example, Hofstede's and Tompenaars' contributions are based on significant quantitative analysis, while Hall's contribution is based on a qualitative, ethnographic methodology.

Given the above practical and statistical concerns, we felt justified in reorganizing the original ten dimensions into three dimensions and thus reinterpreting and reframing the 17 continua. In deciding on the nature of the new dimensions and their designations, we were guided by the desire to align with key aspects of our definition of culture and application areas. In the assignment of continua to dimensions, we were guided by both construct validity and factor analysis.

The Nature of the Three Dimensions

When discussing the impact and challenges of culture with individuals, three types of gaps frequently surface: 1) behavioral gaps (gaps of display/expression), 2) cognitive gaps (gaps in how we think and make sense), and 3) gaps in how we experience ourselves in the world.

Behavioral gaps manifest in interactions among individuals from different cultural backgrounds. This encompasses, but is not limited to, traditional differences in communication behaviors. However, these gaps also include other variables that impact interaction. We call the dimension that addresses

behavioral gaps the "Interaction Style" dimension. The Interaction Style cultural continua consist of a cluster of variables that describe behavior, specifically how we use time, handle conflict, adhere to etiquette, protocol, and convention, apply rules and standards of fairness, balance tasks and relationships, and display emotions.

Cognitive gaps are more difficult to observe directly. They encompass different ways of rationalization or processing information. This includes such complex processes as reasoning, interpreting, analyzing, connecting, and transmitting and creating meaning. We call the dimension that addresses cognitive gaps the "Thinking Style" dimension. The Thinking Style cultural continua consist of a cluster of variables that shape how we process, read, and create meaning, as well as how we perceive, reason, and reference.

Gaps in how we experience ourselves in the world are neither behavioral nor cognitive/rational. The operative word is "experience" because they relate to differences in a basic, deeper way of being in and relating to the world. In a sense, it is meta-rational and directly connected to core orientations. We call the dimension that addresses these gaps the "Sense of Self" dimension. The Sense of Self cultural continua consist of a cluster of deep, primary variables that shape our sense of agency, social identity, boundaries, basic motivation, distribution of power and privilege, and tolerance of uncertainty. It is not surprising that, in this dimension, the contributions of Hofstede and Trompenaars predominate.

There is both conceptual elegance and practical application in these new dimensions. Conceptually, the dimensions align broadly with the key components of our definition of culture that distinguishes between behaviors (norms), beliefs, and emotions (values). Figure 2 illustrates this alignment.

Figure 2: Alignment of the Definition of Culture and the Structure of the COI
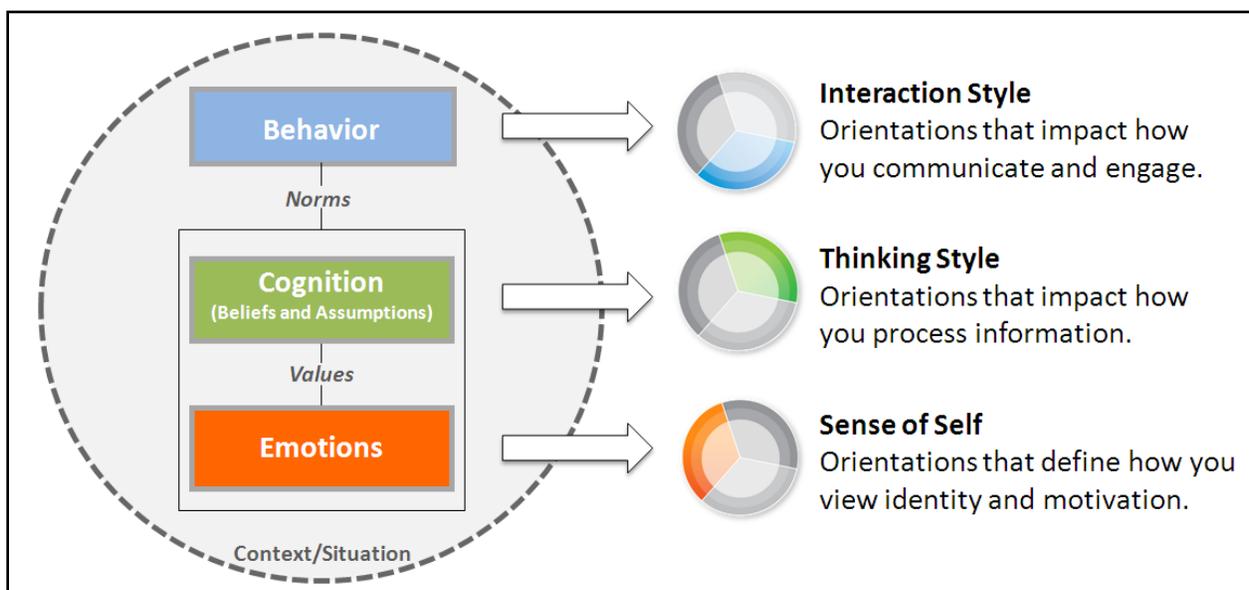
Practically, this structure allows for useful differentiations. When building awareness for cultural differences through training or coaching, each dimension represents a meaningful cluster of scales that can be more easily mastered and retained. Pilot testing supports the theory that the careful sequencing of these dimensions, together with skillful facilitation, enables us to retain the comprehensiveness of the COI while making its meaning more accessible and relevant.

When applying the COM and COI for cultural due diligence, it is significant to ascertain whether key differences exist primarily at behavioral, cognitive, or deeper values levels. It is relatively easier to style-switch across the behavioral level than at the cognitive or values level. Cultural dialogue and cultural mentoring are more intensive if gaps are mostly at the cognitive or values level. The relative distribution of gaps (and similarities) across these dimensions can therefore inform relevant change and adaptation strategies that are delivered via coaching, training, or other types of team and organizational intervention.

Assigning Continua to Dimensions

The decision to assign specific continua to one of the three dimensions required careful consideration of each construct in conjunction with the factor analysis. Some discretion was necessary to decide on the final assignment and reinterpretation of continua. Table 1 depicts the final assignments with a brief rationale/redefinition that indicates why and how the respective continuum was assigned to a given dimension.

Table 1: Final Continua and Definitions

Dimension	Continua	Rationale/Redefinition
Interaction Style	Fluid/Fixed	How we *use time* (how much we rely on time to structure our interactions)
	Being/Doing	How we *balance relationship and tasks*
	Indirect/Direct	How we *handle conflict,* disagreements, and discord
	Instrumental/Expressive	How we *display emotions*
	Informal/Formal	How we *adhere to etiquette, protocol, and convention*
	Particularistic/Universalistic	How we *apply rules and standards of fairness*
Thinking Style	Multi-Focus/Single-Focus	How we *process information* (in a parallel or sequential way)
	Low Context/High Context	How we *derive* (de-code) and *package* (encode) *meaning*

	Past/Future	How we *reference* (in terms of the past/ historical context or in terms of the future)
	Inductive/Deductive	How we *reason* (from the general to the specific or from the specific to the general)
	Linear/Systemic	How we *perceive* (as the "big picture" or as individual components)
Sense of Self	Control/Constraint	How we experience our *agency* in the natural and social world (namely, locus of control)
	Private/Public	How we relate to *physical and psychological boundaries*
	Hierarchy/Equality	How we perceive and experience social stratification (the differential distribution of *privilege and power*)
	Collective/Individualistic	How we identify as members of a given group (our core sense of *identity*)
	Cooperative/Competitive	How we are motivated (to attain *achievements* or to seek and maintain *balance*)
	Flexibility/Order	How we respond to the inevitable *uncertainty* and ambiguity of life

Consistency in the Structure of the Continua

The two continua of *Control-Harmony-Constraint* and *Past-Present-Future* created concern among practitioners and end-users alike due to their inconsistency with the other two-orientation continua. While there was theoretical validity in recognizing harmony and present as distinct orientations, they are now recognized within the definitions for mild orientations along the new continua of control-constraint and past-future.

Section 3: Implications for Practitioners

The change from ten to three dimensions, the re-framing of continua, and the consistent structure throughout mark a milestone in the evolution of the Cultural Orientations Approach (COA) as a distinctive methodology. We hope that both the theoretical and practical perspectives that underpin our tools can help practitioners to deliver added value to their clients.

We realize that unlocking the practical value of these changes requires deliberate attention to the subtleties and comprehensiveness of the approach. It also requires changes to the habitual ways of

introducing culture and connecting it to the reframed continua of the Cultural Orientations Model (COM) and Cultural Orientations Indicator® (COI). We recommend that practitioners spend time to focus on the following:

1. Integrate this specific cultural perspective into their repertoire

The updates enable practitioners to apply a consistent perspective in their engagements. Maintaining consistency helps clients to focus on a complex and unfamiliar phenomenon and to unlock the desired improvements that they seek to make. This perspective is based on the premises that:

- Distinguishing between behaviors (norms), beliefs, and emotions (values) will be essential to effectively developing awareness and skills.
- Recognizing the alignment of our definition of culture (linkage between "behaviors (norms), beliefs, and emotions (values) that are expected, reinforced and rewarded") with the new cultural dimensions of Interaction Style, Thinking Style, and Sense of Self enables a systematic way of analyzing culture at any of the six levels of culture.
- The continua and orientations of the COM provide a descriptive set of vocabulary.
- The COI identifies "preferences" (i.e., an individual's inclination or liking) that can be contrasted to "norms." Contrasting preference with norms can explain and predict subjective *experience* of cultural gaps and similarities.
- Focusing on experience is a more meaningful anchor for cultural interventions and adaptations than behavioral propriety or "fit."

2. Frame and address intercultural challenges of clients first <u>within</u> and then <u>between</u> the three dimensions

Challenges tend to fall clearly within one of the three dimensions. For example, a manager with a direct orientation will need to develop specific techniques for effective conflict handling with people from more indirect cultures. This challenge exists in the dimension of interaction (Interaction Style). The acquisition and integration of these techniques into the behavioral repertoire of the client will need to be practiced through interaction exercises, such as role play, observation, and feedback (such as the debriefing of video recording or action-reflection with a coach), much in the same way someone acquires practical skills. When addressing behavioral challenges, the goal is to help clients build new behavioral habits.

In order to influence and establish credibility more effectively, a presenter may need to acquire the ability to translate his or her inductive approach to problems into a dominant deductive norm. This challenge exists in the dimension of thinking (Thinking Style). Unlike the previous example, the goal is to help clients develop new mental habits. These are less directly observed and require different methodologies. Here, immersion in different thinking styles combined with specific exercises and assignments can develop an appreciation for different thinking styles and refine the ability to switch effectively among them.

To bridge differences of Sense of Self (for example, if a collectivist needs to adapt to a more individualistic culture, where independence is valued), a leader needs a deeper level of change at the level of core cultural values. Style-switching tends to be more difficult at these levels, as variability can deeply threaten an individual's or group's sense of ethics and identity. Within this dimension, the primary role of the practitioner may be to raise awareness and work towards non-judgmental acceptance.

After discussing and framing challenges within a given dimension, the practitioner can discuss the relationship between the three dimensions. For example, the practitioner can explore how a deep Sense of Self variable of collectivism shows up in the Interaction Style of the individual. Alternatively, he or she can explore how a strong order orientation impacts Thinking Style. By exploring the relationships between dimensions, the practitioner may expose root connections that can pave the way to effective adaptation strategies, sustainable style-switching, effective cultural dialogue, and/or successful cultural mentoring.

Summary and Conclusion

The Cultural Orientations Approach (COA) has evolved significantly from its beginning as a ten-dimension model conceived as a synthesis of key cultural variables. Grounded in a comprehensive definition of culture, the recognition of six levels of cultural analysis, and the Cultural Orientations Model (COM) and Cultural Orientations Indicator® (COI), the COA is a sound and practical approach to developing cultural competence and its associated skill set. Enabled and facilitated by certified practitioners, the COA is an integral element of equipping leaders, teams, and entire organizations with the ability to reduce the risks and maximize opportunities related to cultural differences and similarities.

Changing the structure from ten to three dimensions improves the ability of practitioners and users to interpret results and develop culturally competent strategies. While this change preserves the comprehensiveness of the model, it also re-interprets and reframes the meaning of and relationships among the 17 continua. Distinguishing between 1) Interaction Style, 2) Thinking Style, and 3) Sense of Self enables a three-part discovery of the subjective and experiential nature of cultural gaps (and similarities) that is consistent with cognitive, behavioral, and core/emotional aspects of cultural conditioning.

In many other essential ways, the COI has not deviated from its original intent. The COI:

- Measures preferences, **not** behavior
- Is focused on work-related situations, **not** generalized across other situations/context (unlike personality profiles)
- Does **not** indicate levels of ability or cultural competence
- Is meant to be used for developing self- and other-awareness and cultural due diligence (it is **not** suitable or recommended for selection)
- Predicts subjective experience, **not** "fit" or success

Practitioners can significantly boost their effectiveness and deliver differentiating value by 1) integrating the underlying perspective on culture, and 2) uncovering intercultural challenges of clients first <u>within</u> and then <u>between</u> the dimensions of Interaction Style, Thinking Style, and Sense of Self when helping clients conduct and apply cultural due diligence, style-switching, cultural dialogue, and/or cultural mentoring.

The Cultural Orientations Approach is well positioned to address the changing nature of cultural challenges associated with the globalization. Without doubt, future developments and the growing worldwide community of practitioners will build upon this foundation and take it to new and exciting applications.

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