

Culture can be defined as the operating system through which we make sense of and interact with the world. Culture influences our behaviors and perceptions as we go about our day-to-day business. A very strong culture can foster ethnocentrism—an assumption that one's own norms are or should be shared by everyone. This is a recipe for conflict.

There are many dimensions along which cultures can vary, such as tolerance for risk and how to handle conflict. Communication is another obvious one. Israelis, for instance, are generally direct and straightforward in communicating, whereas Mexicans tend to be indirect in giving feedback, especially on sensitive issues. Of course, individuals may hew to their cultures to a greater or lesser extent. Some Mexicans are very direct, and some Israelis are far from straightforward. In some contexts, the various dimensions can serve as a framework for interpreting and for setting behaviors. For example, INSEAD professor Erin Meyer advises that when adapting to a new culture, people should strive to behave according to the midpoint of the local range on a given cultural dimension.

But in a very specific context like a negotiation, knowledge of local culture is of limited value because your counterpart may not represent its norms. Imagine you are preparing to negotiate with an Angolan executive, and you have read widely about Angolan cultural norms in preparation. Unbeknownst to you, however, your counterpart was born in Angola of foreign parents, educated in a British school there, traveled to France to continue her studies, married an Indian partner, converted to Islam, worked in sales for a U.S. company and then in procurement for a Japanese corporation, and has been living in China for the past 11 years. This executive is unlikely to be prototypical of her national culture, and thus you should be careful when using your research to make assumptions about her behavior.