



EXPAND YOUR BORDERS

DISCOVER TEN CULTURAL CLUSTERS

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CQ INSIGHTS SERIES

When cultural intelligence (CQ) is increased, diverse perspectives create better solutions. The CQ Insights Series examines the specific knowledge, skills, and behaviors involved in developing cultural intelligence (CQ). The series includes resources devoted to the four capabilities of cultural intelligence (CQ Drive, CQ Knowledge, CQ Strategy, CQ Action) and other specific applications for improving and applying CQ. This is the first book in the CQ Insights Series and it's focused on improving CQ Knowledge.

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ABOUT THE CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE CENTER

We help individuals, corporations, and organizations reach their global potential by helping them assess and develop their cultural intelligence (CQ). Visit www.culturalQ.com for more information.

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INTRODUCTION

My colleagues and I have spent the last several years asking the question, “What’s the difference between those who are culturally intelligent and those who aren’t?” Cultural intelligence, or CQ, is defined as the capability to be effective across different cultural contexts—including national, ethnic, generational, organizational, and other contexts.¹ (See Appendix A for a quick overview of cultural intelligence).

One of our key findings is that the culturally intelligent have a good grasp of overarching patterns that exist across various cultures around the world. It’s not that the culturally intelligent are walking encyclopedias who can spout off random facts about any culture on the planet. That’s impossible. But they have a macro understanding of cultural similarities and differences, something we identify as CQ Knowledge—one of the four capabilities of cultural intelligence. CQ Knowledge is the degree to which you understand how culture influences how people think and behave; it’s also your level of familiarity with how cultures are similar and different. While this kind of understanding alone doesn’t make you culturally intelligent, it is a vital part of becoming more effective across different cultural contexts.

Ten Cultural Clusters

One way to improve your CQ Knowledge is to learn the key characteristics of ten global cultural clusters, which are large cultural groupings that share some core patterns of thinking and behavior. The countries and groupings of people within each cluster typically share a common history, and they often share similar geography, language, religion, or cultural values.

Grouping people in these cultural clusters is an idea that emerged from the work of Simcha Ronen and Oded Shenkar², who were interested in discovering if you could map the most significant cultural groupings found across the contemporary world. Later, a group of academics drew on Ronen & Shenkar’s work to conduct the GLOBE leadership project, the largest study done to date looking at leadership across cultures.³

These ten clusters are by no means an exact or exhaustive grouping of the thousands of cultures that exist across the world, but they provide a helpful starting point for those of us who travel widely—but not necessarily deeply—into various multicultural contexts. In the next several pages, I’m going to take you on a whirlwind tour through each of these ten clusters and give you a few snapshots of each one. We’re only going to stop briefly at each place. But this kind of quick overview can help enrich your global perspective and cultural intelligence.

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As we look at these ten clusters, remember that the countries listed in each are just a sampling of the ones other researchers have included in these groupings. In addition, I've assigned an icon to each cluster that we'll use to loosely describe key characteristics of many people living in that cluster.

Caution!

How does a cultural cluster evolve? It's usually the result of a combination of factors, including geography, language, religion, and history. Each cluster is a loose, but connected group that shares some general similarities. Within each of the ten clusters, plenty of differences exist. I'll point out some of the outliers and differences as we travel through these clusters. Remember, these aren't perfect classifications, but I've used the groupings created by other researchers who have spent extensive time identifying and examining these ten clusters (e.g. Ronen and Shenkar, GLOBE study, etc.).

Don't get too caught up in whether a country fits perfectly within the cluster where it's categorized. Instead, look for the broad, overarching patterns within each cluster that will give you a reference point for comparing one cultural perspective with another. You'll often meet people in these ten clusters who are a combination of multiple backgrounds. In Canada, for example, an individual may have origins in the Anglo, Sub-Saharan African and Southern Asian clusters. Or in Turkey, someone might easily share aspects of the Arab, Southern Asian, and European clusters. The ten clusters are simply a place to begin comparing one predominant worldview with another. As you develop a deeper understanding of the clusters' similarities and differences, you'll find yourself more adept at handling all kinds of intercultural situations.

As we look at each cluster, I'll offer you some practical tips for interacting effectively with its people. All of the usual cautions about not stereotyping apply here. It's dangerous to assume that all Norwegians like fish or that all Koreans prefer hierarchical leaders, but it's even more dangerous to assume that you can categorize more than seven billion people into ten general clusters. And it's never appropriate to describe an entire cultural group with negative, judgmental descriptions, such as “___ people are all lazy and corrupt.”

So why even talk about clusters, and overall patterns and norms for people from various cultures? Because there's value in something that cross-cultural psychologists Joyce Osland and Allan Bird describe as “sophisticated stereotypes”—broad comparative differences based on empirical intercultural research. For example, research demonstrates that the majority of people in India prefer a more directive style to leadership, while the majority of people in Sweden don't. But you'll meet Indians working in Silicon Valley (and Delhi!) who are an anomaly to those norms. The same is true for the Swedes you meet.

Sophisticated stereotypes, such as those that stem from understanding the ten cultural clusters, are most helpful when they are:

- Used to compare various cultures rather than to understand the behavior of a singular culture
- Consciously held
- Descriptive not evaluative
- Used as a best first-guess prior to having direct information about specific people
- Modified based upon further observations and experience⁴

Sophisticated stereotypes based on the ten cultural clusters are just one part of building your CQ Knowledge. It's also helpful to learn about cultural differences that exist within generations, organizations, a country's various regions, and more. This book, however, is focused on building your CQ Knowledge by understanding the general characteristics of these ten global cultural clusters.

What To Expect

For each cluster, we're going to look at:

- An icon or cultural artifact that symbolizes the cluster in some small way
- Examples of countries included in the cluster
- An overview of the history and background of the cluster
- The cultural value dimensions that are most relevant to understanding the cluster
- Key differences within the cluster
- A few do's and taboos to consider when interacting with individuals from the cluster

In the past, I've typically shied away from providing general information about cultures, and talking about things like "do's and taboos" for different cultures. I always thought it was overly simplistic to talk about how to exchange business cards or use chopsticks. But the truth is, we don't

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experience cultures as theoretical constructs. We experience them through real-life interactions, where we often feel uncomfortable or wonder if we've inadvertently offended someone. If looked at with a culturally intelligent approach, understanding the general characteristics of these clusters can trigger deeper reflection and learning. And it can be a significant tool that will help you adapt to various cultures wherever you go.

The icons that I've chosen for each cluster are designed to provide a starting point for remembering a predominant characteristic of each general culture. It's not necessarily the most important characteristic of the cluster. And the icons stem from different categories—some are businesses, others are customs, and others are more conceptual. These are symbols that I've found useful while working with groups to provide a cursory introduction to the cluster. Don't over-analyze the icons. They're meant to trigger reflection and discussion as you think further about the cluster.

Since we can't possibly master the values and norms of every distinct culture in the world, and because there's diversity within all cultures, these ten cultural clusters provide a general foundation for developing your CQ Knowledge. Getting to know these ten clusters can give you a macro perspective of some of the most important cultural groupings spread across the world. Just be sure to hold them loosely and realize there will be all kinds of exceptions to the overall norms.

It's time to begin. Sit down, buckle up, and let's go around the world together.



3. GERMANIC

EXAMPLES: Austria, Belgium, Germany, Netherlands, German-Switzerland, etc.

ICON: Quiet Hours

There's a longstanding law in Germany that says, "A homeowner should enjoy his/her property in such a way as to not have a detrimental effect on his/her neighbors." This law, commonly referred to as "quiet hours," plays out differently in various states across Germany, but, typically, it means that everyone needs to remain quiet from 8 p.m. to 6 a.m. daily, all day Sunday, and on holidays. And in many German states, quiet hours also include 1-3 p.m. every weekday afternoon. During quiet hours in Germany, you may not mow the lawn, drop glass bottles in a recycling bin, rev your car engine, blast loud music, or run the washing machine if you live in an apartment building. This isn't one of those crazy laws that never get applied. It's widely expected that people will follow these rules, and German judges review numerous violations of quiet hours in their courts each month.

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One time I was checking into a hotel in Austria, and the person at the front desk asked me what time I would like my room cleaned the next morning. I looked at her, a little confused. “I have to give you a time?”

I had several meetings the next day, but I didn’t have the exact times confirmed yet, so I told the desk clerk, “Anytime in the morning is fine. If I’m working in my room, they can just work around me, or I’ll step out for a few minutes.” She insisted they needed an exact time so I said, “Okay, let’s say 9 a.m.”

The next morning, I ended up working in my room because some of my meetings had been rescheduled. Late in the day, my room still hadn’t been cleaned, so I went to the front desk to ask about it. The same woman was there and she said, “That’s because you weren’t out of your room at 9:00.” I said, “Okay. Well can someone clean it now?” She responded, “No, the cleaning staff leaves at noon. What time would you like it cleaned tomorrow?” And the cycle started all over again.

From my North American perspective, the customer is always right. But from the Germanic perspective, I was staying in their hotel and they have rules and procedures. If I want to stay there, I agree to respect the way they run their hotel, and I either abide by their rules or I suffer the consequences. To be clear, I’ve stayed in many hotels across the Germanic world where they clean my room much like they would in hotels located in other places, so I’m not suggesting this hotel policy was typical. But the idea that there are rules and policies to regulate life is a very Germanic characteristic. This is why I view the “quiet hours” rule in Germany as emblematic of the next cluster on our journey around the world—Germanic Europe.

Overview

The Germanic cluster has a long, rich heritage. If you don’t understand and appreciate some of the values and history behind the norms and rules you encounter, you can falsely interpret German behavior as being legalistic, distant, and even untrusting.

Germanic Europe dates all the way back to Charles the Great’s reign in the 8th Century. Some historians say you can find a distinctive German culture as far back as 5400 B.C. When Tacitus, the Roman writer, published *Germania* around 100 A.D., he described the Germanic cultural tribe as a group of people who possess a love of freedom and fighting.

It was during Charlemagne’s reign that the Germanic cluster began to emerge as a united empire stretching across Western Europe. The Habsburg Dynasty, which originated in Switzerland, dominated Austria’s history from the 13th century to the beginning of the 20th century. The Habsburgs were very successful in enlarging their territories, which they accomplished primarily through strategic marriages to key leaders of other areas. After the marriage, the Habsburgs would take over the region, adding it to their empire.

The historical development of The Netherlands followed a different course from that of the other Germanic nations. Conquered by a Spanish

line of the Habsburgs, The Netherlands evolved with distinctive differences from Austria and Germany. But, like Germany and Austria, The Netherlands was also part of what eventually became known as the Holy Empire of the German Nation.

Germanic culture is resistant to quick change. Even while Eastern Germany was under Communist rule for forty years, the people and institutions throughout the country retained the long-standing Germanic values. While different generations and circumstances have influenced how values and customs have been expressed, the orderliness, straight-forward approach, and loyalty found in Germanic culture have characterized the people here for many centuries. Germanic Europe is a relatively tight culture that is slow to change.

The Germanic cluster is comparatively small in size, but it has a huge economic footprint in the world, and the countries in this cluster have deep economic ties with each another. Germany is only behind China and the U.S. as the world's biggest exporter. The Swiss are famous for their wildly successful banking industry, and The Netherlands, an incredibly small country, is a formidable economic power in its own right, and it has been for centuries. From the late 16th century, the Dutch Empire was a major force in the world, largely as a result of their success in shipping and trading. Even today, Rotterdam is the largest European port, and the third largest in the world—only Shanghai and Singapore are bigger.

The cluster's economic strength is primarily the result of its expertise in foreign trade, and production of high-quality, innovative products; there are relatively few natural resources within its own borders. Rigorous thinking, insistence on quality control, and tenacity all contribute to the financial fortitude that has typically characterized these cultures. The financial strength of the cluster makes Germanic people all the more confident in their way of life being a proven, effective way to live.¹

Another key factor in understanding the Germanic cluster is recognizing the influence of its cultural leaders: Germany is historically a land of poets, novelists, musicians, and philosophers. For centuries, Germany was the cultural center of Europe, with Goethe, Beethoven, Wagner, and the Grimm Brothers serving as instantly recognizable contributors to not only German culture but to civilization as a whole.

Though Germany is now the industrial heart of Central Europe, the arts continue to permeate German life. Most primary schools and high schools require students to learn a musical instrument, and study humanities and poetry alongside their rigorous classes in math and science.

Cultural Value Dimensions

The cultural values in the Germanic cluster run strong and deep. The long history of the cluster, combined with the people's confidence in their approach to life, makes the Germanic way of life very distinctive—though you'll always meet individuals who are exceptions.

Cultural Value Definitions

INDIVIDUALISM-COLLECTIVISM

Individualism: Individual goals and rights are more important than personal relationships.

Collectivism: Personal relationships and benefiting the group are more important than individual goals.

POWER DISTANCE

Low Power Distance: Status differences are of little importance; empowered decision-making is expected across all levels.

High Power Distance: Status differences should shape social interactions; those with authority should make decisions.

UNCERTAINTY AVOIDANCE

Low Uncertainty Avoidance: Focus on flexibility and adaptability; tolerant of unstructured and unpredictable situations.

High Uncertainty Avoidance: Focus on planning and reliability; uncomfortable with unstructured or unpredictable situations.

COOPERATIVE-COMPETITIVE

Cooperative: Emphasis on cooperation and nurturing behavior; high value placed on relationships and family.

Competitive: Emphasis on assertive behavior and competition; high value placed on work, task accomplishment, and achievement.

TIME ORIENTATION

Short-Term: Values immediate outcomes more than long-term benefits (success now).

Long-Term: Values long-term planning; willing to sacrifice short-term outcomes for long-term benefits (success later).

Germanic

Individualist

Low
Power
Distance

Moderate
Uncertainty
Avoidance

Competitive

Moderate
Time

CONTEXT

Low Context: Values direct communication; emphasis on explicit words.

High Context: Values indirect communication; emphasis on harmonic relationships and implicit understanding.

Low
Context

BEING-DOING

Being: Social commitments and task completion are equally important; diffuse boundaries between personal and work activities.

Doing: Task completion takes precedence over social commitments; clear separation of personal and work activities.

Doing

See Appendix B for comparison with other clusters.

All of the cultural value dimensions have relevance for understanding the Germanic cluster, but the following are particularly significant when it comes to interacting with cultural intelligence with people from the countries in this cluster.

Individualist

While not as Individualist as the Anglo cluster, Germanic Europe is certainly more Individualist than Collectivist. The abundance of rules and regulations are meant to protect the rights of the individual. And in the workplace, companies are expected to have explicit policies for how individual employees can voice complaints and concerns. Companies must also provide flexibility for individuals to pursue community and civic interests that go beyond their work responsibilities.²

Power Distance

Even though rules and procedures are important, the cluster is quite Low Power Distance. The culture frowns upon making big distinctions in status between people functioning at different levels.

Think for a moment about German Chancellor Angela Merkel. Merkel and her husband live in a modest flat in Berlin. There's very little pomp and circumstance around their public appearances. And Merkel's husband, a quiet chemistry professor, often flies budget airlines to join his wife on holidays. This reflects the Low Power Distance of the Germanic culture.

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Uncertainty Avoidance

Uncertainty Avoidance is the cultural dimension that most uniquely characterizes the Germanic cluster, particularly as you compare it with other Western cultures such as those found in the Nordic or Anglo clusters. Rules and policies are created to help reduce the chance that things will get out of control. Germanics tend to buy many different kinds of insurance to avoid risk at all cost. Order is highly valued. The typical German home is very neat and tidy, and the various government districts across the country have numerous rules about how homes and yards must be maintained.

The Germans are masters of security and careful planning. By having rules about things like quiet hours, they guarantee that everyone can be assured some quiet rest and peacefulness at set times everyday. This is the preferred way of life in the Germanic culture—predictable and structured.

Competitive and Doing

The Germanic cluster scores high on the Competitive index. People here are very focused on results and winning. Punctuality is king; following schedules is one more way to reduce uncertainty. There's a good reason why Germans and Swiss make clocks and watches! The contrast of German train schedules with French or Italian train schedules couldn't be more obvious. The orientation toward Doing is also very high in the cluster. There tends to be a higher commitment to tasks and to staying focused on the task at hand than to attending to one's well-being and quality of life.

Low Context

Communication is very Low Context and direct among the Germanic people. There's a German saying, "Da muss man mal Deutsch sprechen," which translates, "Sometimes one has to talk German"—meaning sometimes you need to stop beating around the bush and openly voice an opinion. You can expect most Germanic people to be clear, explicit, and blunt. The Moderate Uncertainty Avoidance combined with the direct approach to communication across these countries may also explain why social interactions tend to be more formal until you get to know someone better. There's definitely a protocol to how relationships evolve.

Key Differences

Austria, Switzerland, and Germany are neighboring countries where German is a predominant language. However, understand that Austrians dislike being called Germans! And there are significant regions within Switzerland that fit more closely with the Latin European cluster, given their strong French and Italian influences.

The biggest outlier in this cluster is The Netherlands. The Netherlands shares a border with Germany, but it's sometimes grouped with the Nordic cluster because of both its location and its strong ties to the fishing and shipping industries. And Holland is much more loose in its acceptance

of different norms and values than the other Germanic countries. Also, The Netherlands is a very Cooperative culture as compared to the more Competitive orientation of the Germanic cluster as a whole. Finally, Dutch (albeit a language of German origin), not German, is the predominant language of The Netherlands.

Despite these differences, most cross-cultural experts agree that The Netherlands fits best with the Germanic cluster. Again, for the time being, we're more interested in general, over-arching patterns found around the world than a deep analysis of specific national cultures.



Do's and Taboos

- In contrast to many cultures around the world, Germanic people thrive on a good debate, and even a hearty discussion of politics and faith. So if you're up for it, dive into a meaningful discussion about this with people you meet. And keep in mind that you're often respected more when you disagree, assuming there's substance to your point of view.
- Don't disparage academics. While there's an anti-intellectualism that often permeates the business and professional world in many contexts, the Germanic cluster holds academic research and intellectual inquiry in high regard. They love to see a CEO have a PhD. And many Germanic universities require two doctorates before one can teach at a university.
- The laws about quiet hours probably won't affect you if you're simply a tourist. But do be conscious of your volume, particularly later in the evening.
- When you're meeting someone, expect intense eye contact and a firm hand shake with a slight nod of the head—that's a typical Germanic greeting.
- Remember that not everyone in this cluster will fit these descriptions! Look for and expect some exceptions as you meet people in the Germanic region.