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Crucible: Transformative events that shape leaders

As a female American executive in South Korea, Linda Myers expected to open doors. Instead, she felt shut out

When Linda Myers accepted a human resources position at SK Telecom in South Korea, she thought it was the opportunity she'd long been working toward. Not only would she break ground as one of the first American female executives at a Korean company, she would also lead an initiative to make the organization more global. For someone who'd spent years consulting on expatriate transitions, this seemed like a dream job.

But as soon as Myers arrived in Seoul, she began to question her decision. Although she'd been in new cultural situations before, this one seemed more difficult to navigate. Without an official orientation or detailed guidance from her superiors, she struggled to understand the organization. She felt more isolated than she had expected: There were only a few other Westerners on staff and just five other women at the VP level. Her straightforward American style was at odds with the polite formality of her Korean peers. And she eventually realized that she and her new employer had different ideas about what her role would be.

Over the next two years, exhilaration gave way to exhaustion. Rather than changing SK's culture, Myers felt marginalized--and then she was out of a job.

**A Golden Opportunity**

Myers had never heard of SK when a recruiter e-mailed her, in July 2007. "Dear Mr. Myers," the e-mail began.

"They assumed I was a man," she recalls. It was an innocent mistake, but it foreshadowed the misunderstandings to come.

At the time, Myers was a partner at WorldWise, a boutique consulting firm in Washington, DC, that helps multinationals such as Hewlett-Packard and ExxonMobil develop cross-cultural training programs. She loved the travel the position required--she'd spend a couple of months in, say, Ecuador or the Czech Republic--and a permanent foreign assignment seemed like a logical next step.

Myers's stints abroad had started early. At age 11, she'd spent time in Norway with the nonprofit Children's International Summer Villages. A junior year in London through a Goucher College program preceded a series of jobs involving extensive international travel. By the time she was 40, she had lived in, worked on, or traveled to all seven continents--even Antarctica.

One of these jobs had been with the China Human Resources Group, which facilitates joint ventures between U.S.-based multinationals and Chinese companies. When China was first opening up to international **business**, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Myers prepped executives to work as expats there. She saw the job with SK as her chance to be an expat in Asia's fourth-largest economy, then growing by 5% per year. Like other Korean conglomerates (such as LG, Samsung, and Hyundai) SK Holdings--SK Telecom's parent, which has other subsidiaries in gas, construction, life sciences, and hospitality--was trying to become a more globally minded organization. To Myers, who had been the director of change management at Wyeth Pharmaceuticals before joining WorldWise, it seemed like a perfect fit.

The recruiter's initial e-mail marked the start of a six-month interview process, including trips to New York and Santa Clara, California. Follow-up e-mail communications stretched through the fall.

"I was working with a young man who spoke enough English to be the liaison for his boss, who spoke a little bit less English," Myers recalls. That was to be expected in negotiations with a Korean company for a job in Korea, but the two-language game of telephone sometimes led to confusion.

Still, she pressed ahead. In October, SK Telecom formally offered her a job. During a preliminary trip to Seoul in December, she was introduced as the new hire--even though, to her mind, she had not yet accepted the position. Feeling that this was her best opportunity to work abroad, she decided to take the leap.

**Struggling to Fit In**

On the ground in Seoul, Myers quickly realized just how far she was from her native Baltimore. One early shock was the homogeneity of not only her office but also the city: Government estimates indicate that foreigners account for 2.4% of the population. That's compared with just over 18% for Singapore and 27% for New York and London, according to the Migration Policy Institute.

Another surprise was her inability to communicate effectively. Myers had always considered herself to be skilled on this front: Born to deaf parents, by the age of three she was taking phone calls and translating between spoken English and American Sign Language. But her lack of Korean turned out to be a vexing problem. She recalls having to ask for an interpreter at her first meetings at SK. And even with an assistant and colleagues who spoke English, she found it difficult to get the information she needed. "Asking questions was the only way I knew to learn," she explains. "But it was not always productive." As she saw it, even diplomatic inquiries could be construed as confrontational and critical.

She was also unprepared for the company's rigid hierarchy. A spokesman for SK notes that "SK is recognized as one of the first Korean companies to abolish hierarchic management, [and] even at companies that have not, communication among employees is open and vibrant." But as Myers saw it, "there were basically four levels: VP, director, manager, and worker bee. You only talked to people at your level." Moreover, she was constantly aware of being female. Aside from secretaries, she was almost always the only woman in the room.

After the years Myers spent advising expats, perhaps she should have anticipated these challenges, but they were nonetheless difficult to handle.

Outside the office was a different story. She forged friendships in the expat community, soaked up local culture (sometimes literally, as with the Boryeong Mud Festival), and relished quiet time in her 33rd-floor apartment overlooking the Han River, downtown Seoul, and the peaks of Mount Bukhansan. Still, it was not easy to shake off the troubles at work.

Dae Ryun Chang, a professor at Yonsei School of **Business** in Seoul, says that Myers's situation was not uncommon, noting that while big Korean conglomerates have wanted to recruit Western staff, there seems to be a disconnect in attitudes about work practices, particularly performance criteria, which in Korea "span not just formal key indices but informal and political ones."

In spite of these challenges, Myers advanced at SK. Four months after her arrival, she moved on to be head of Global Talent at SK Holdings. But leadership shake-ups changed the tenor of this role. Myers felt increasingly left out of key meetings and conversations, in part because language was still a problem, even though, according to SK, she by then had a mostly bilingual team, including three non-Koreans.

Although Myers saw her role as that of a change agent, she struggled to implement new practices and policies. "At the lower and middle levels, I think that people were very excited, very eager for change," she explains. "But at the top, most of the leadership was nervous."

Kim Tran, an SK Telecom employee originally from Vietnam, offers a more critical assessment: "She could have done certain things differently, but the result would have been the same. They didn't implement anything that she did--and she had some great ideas."

The SK spokesman disputed these characterizations. "We understand that living and working in Korea may have been challenging for [Ms. Myers] personally, but efforts were made on our side to ensure that all reasonably necessary assistance was not neglected."

By early 2009, Myers could tell she was on her way out. "My team leaders would barely speak to me," she says. Finally, her boss called her into his office and explained that although they had extended her contract once, they would not do so again.

In some ways, it was easy to leave SK. But Myers was disappointed not to have had an impact at the company and to be leaving a city she had come to love.

**Hard-Won Wisdom**

Looking back, Myers says her experience drove home several lessons. These were directives she had often given consulting clients, but like much good advice, they were easier to talk about than to implement.

First, learn as much as possible about the obstacles you'll face and acknowledge when they might be too much for you. Before Myers accepted the offer from SK, she asked the Society for Human Resource Management to put her in touch with another American woman who had worked for a Korean firm, but no one in their records fit that description. She realized too late the challenges of being a trailblazer. "There were no other examples," she laughs. "So I was self-taught."

However, her experience prepping clients to work for Western multinationals in China and other countries did not easily translate to her situation in Korea. She now says the reading she did before arriving covered only about a fifth of what she needed to know, and on-the-ground learning was tougher than she had imagined.

Second, understand your mandate. Myers took a job thinking her superiors wanted her to overhaul the culture at SK and stay with the company for the long term. But their ideas about change and how to execute it were completely different from hers, and they intended her stint to be relatively short. Ideally, these are points to iron out with a prospective employer during the interview process--even if it involves difficult questions, issued through a translator.

Third, don't let day-to-day misunderstandings bother you. "At times I felt I was misunderstood or treated unfairly because I was a foreigner." She points to a disagreement with a Korean peer about serving on a working group. Thinking it might have stemmed from a cultural misunderstanding, she consulted a third party. But when the peer heard she had done so, he was furious. "I had caused him great embarrassment," she remembers. After that, she tried to keep in mind that not every communication failure is a cross-cultural issue.

Fourth, take more time than you think you need to introduce new ways of working, even if the changes seem tiny. For example, early on she asked employees to dispense with calling her "Sang Mu Linda," her title at the company, and to use Linda, the norm in a U.S. company, to create a less formal environment. "But by removing the label, I plummeted in their eyes," she recalls. What she regarded as a "participative leadership style" looked wishy-washy to the people at SK.

Myers acknowledges the mistakes she made but does not regret accepting the position. "I knew I was taking a career risk," she says, "but the adventure, the contribution, and just the fact that I was there--as a foreign woman--were important."

She's since returned to consulting and--having struggled to practice what she once preached--now considers herself to be a better adviser. "Those years in Seoul taught me to question my own actions and assumptions," she says. "I realized that my leadership style had been shaped by a particular environment and that my way was not always best."

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Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Understanding Workplace Values Around the World

We know we are living in a global age. Technology has brought the world much closer together. This means that people of different cultures find themselves working together and communicating more and more.

This is exciting and interesting, but it can also be frustrating and fraught with uncertainty. How do you relate to someone of another culture? What do you say, or not say, to start a conversation off right? Are there cultural taboos you need to be aware of?

Building connections with people from around the world is just one dimension of cultural diversity. You also have issues like motivating people, structuring projects, and developing strategy.

What works in one location may or may not work somewhere else. The question is, "How can I come to understand these cultural differences?" Are we relegated to learning from our mistakes or are there generalized guidelines to follow?

Fortunately, a psychologist named Dr Geert Hofstede asked himself this question in the 1970s. What emerged after a decade of research and thousands of interviews is a model of cultural dimensions that has become an internationally recognized standard.

With access to people working for the same organization in over 40 countries of the world, Hofstede collected cultural data and analyzed his findings. He initially identified four distinct cultural dimensions that served to distinguish one culture from another. Later he added a fifth dimension and that is how the model stands today.

He scored each country using a scale of roughly 0 to 100 for each dimension. The higher the score, the more that dimension is exhibited in society.

The Five Dimensions of Culture

Armed with a large database of cultural statistics, Hofstede analyzed the results and found clear patterns of similarity and difference amid the responses along these five dimensions. Interestingly, his research was done on employees of IBM only, which allowed him to attribute the patterns to national differences in culture, largely eliminating the problem of differences in company culture.

The five dimensions are:

**1. Power/Distance (PD)** – This refers to the degree of inequality that exists – and is accepted – among people with and without power. A high PD score indicates that society accepts an unequal distribution of power and people understand "their place" in the system. Low PD means that power is shared and well dispersed. It also means that society members view themselves as equals.

**Application:** According to Hofstede's model, in a high PD country like Malaysia (104), you would probably send reports only to top management and have closed door meetings where only a select few, powerful leaders were in attendance.

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|  | **Characteristics** | **Tips** |
| **High PD** | * Centralized companies. * Strong hierarchies. * Large gaps in compensation, authority, and respect. | * Acknowledge a leader's power. * Be aware that you may need to go to the top for answers |
| **Low PD** | * Flatter organizations. * Supervisors and employees are considered almost as equals. | * Use teamwork * Involve as many people as possible in decision making. |

**2. Individualism (IDV)** – This refers to the strength of the ties people have to others within the community. A high IDV score indicates a loose connection with people. In countries with a high IDV score there is a lack of interpersonal connection and little sharing of responsibility, beyond family and perhaps a few close friends. A society with a low IDV score would have strong group cohesion, and there would be a large amount of loyalty and respect for members of the group. The group itself is also larger and people take more responsibility for each other's well being.

Application: Hofstede's analysis suggests that in the Central American countries of Panama and Guatemala where the IDV scores are very low (11 and 6, respectively), a marketing campaign that emphasized benefits to the community or that tied into a popular political movement would likely be understood and well-received.

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|  | **Characteristics** | **Tips** |
| **High IDV** | * High valuation on people's time and their need for freedom. * An enjoyment of challenges, and an expectation of rewards for hard work. * Respect for privacy. | * Acknowledge accomplishments. * Don't ask for too much personal information. * Encourage debate and expression of own ideas. |
| **Low IDV** | * Emphasis on building skills and becoming masters of something. * Work for intrinsic rewards. * Harmony more important than honesty. | * Show respect for age and wisdom. * Suppress feelings and emotions to work in harmony. * Respect traditions and introduce change slowly. |

**3. Masculinity (MAS)** – This refers to how much a society sticks with, and values, traditional male and female roles. High MAS scores are found in countries where men are expected to be tough, to be the provider, to be assertive and to be strong. If women work outside the home, they have separate professions from men. Low MAS scores do not reverse the gender roles. In a low MAS society, the roles are simply blurred. You see women and men working together equally across many professions. Men are allowed to be sensitive and women can work hard for professional success.

Application: Japan is highly masculine with a score of 95 whereas Sweden has the lowest measured value (5). According to Hofstede's analysis, if you were to open an office in Japan, you might have greater success if you appointed a male employee to lead the team and had a strong male contingent on the team. In Sweden, on the other hand, you would aim for a team that was balanced in terms of skill rather than gender.

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|  | **Characteristics** | **Tips** |
| **High MAS** | * Men are masculine and women are feminine. * There is a well defined distinction between men's work and women's work. | * Be aware that people may expect male and female roles to be distinct. * Advise men to avoid discussing emotions or making emotionally-based decisions or arguments. |
| **Low MAS** | * A woman can do anything a man can do. * Powerful and successful women are admired and respected. | * Avoid an "old boys' club" mentality. * Ensure job design and practices are not discriminatory to either gender. * Treat men and women equally. |

**4. Uncertainty/Avoidance Index (UAI)** – This relates to the degree of anxiety society members feel when in uncertain or unknown situations. High UAI-scoring nations try to avoid ambiguous situations whenever possible. They are governed by rules and order and they seek a collective "truth". Low UAI scores indicate the society enjoys novel events and values differences. There are very few rules and people are encouraged to discover their own truth.

Application: Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions imply that when discussing a project with people in Belgium, whose country scored a 94 on the UAI scale, you should investigate the various options and then present a limited number of choices, but have very detailed information available on your contingency and risk plans. (Note that there will be cultural differences between French and Dutch speakers in Belgium!)

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|  | **Characteristics** | **Tips** |
| **High UAI** | * Very formal business conduct with lots of rules and policies. * Need and expect structure. * Sense of nervousness spurns high levels of emotion and expression. * Differences are avoided. | * Be clear and concise about your expectations and parameters. * Plan and prepare, communicate often and early, provide detailed plans and focus on the tactical aspects of a job or project. * Express your emotions through hands gestures and raised voices. |
| **Low UAI** | * Informal business attitude. * More concern with long term strategy than what is happening on a daily basis. * Accepting of change and risk. | * Do not impose rules or structure unnecessarily. * Minimize your emotional response by being calm and contemplating situations before speaking. * Express curiosity when you discover differences. |

**5. Long Term Orientation (LTO)** – This refers to how much society values long-standing – as opposed to short term – traditions and values. This is the fifth dimension that Hofstede added in the 1990s after finding that Asian countries with a strong link to Confucian philosophy acted differently from western cultures. In countries with a high LTO score, delivering on social obligations and avoiding "loss of face" are considered very important.

Application: According to Hofstede's analysis, people in the United States and United Kingdom have low LTO scores. This suggests that you can pretty much expect anything in this culture in terms of creative expression and novel ideas. The model implies that people in the US and UK don't value tradition as much as many others, and are therefore likely to be willing to help you execute the most innovative plans as long as they get to participate fully. (This may be surprising to people in the UK, with its associations of tradition!)

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|  | **Characteristics** | **Tips** |
| **High LTO** | * Family is the basis of society. * Parents and men have more authority than young people and women. * Strong work ethic. * High value placed on education and training. | * Show respect for traditions. * Do not display extravagance or act frivolously. * Reward perseverance, loyalty, and commitment. * Avoid doing anything that would cause another to "lose face". |
| **Low LTO** | * Promotion of equality. * High creativity, individualism. * Treat others as you would like to be treated. * Self-actualization is sought. | * Expect to live by the same standards and rules you create. * Be respectful of others. * Do not hesitate to introduce necessary changes. |

For a list of scores by dimension per country and more detailed information about Hofstede's research, visit his [website](http://www.geert-hofstede.com). You can also find out more about his research in the books "[Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions and Organizations Across Nations](http://www.amazon.com/Cultures-Consequences-Comparing-Institutions-Organizations/dp/0803973241/)" and "[Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind](http://www.amazon.com/Cultures-Organizations-Software-Mind-Third/dp/0071664181/)."

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**Note:**  
Hofstede's analysis is done by country. While this is valid for many countries, it does not hold in the countries where there are strong subcultures that are based on ethnicity of origin or geography. In Canada, for instance, there is a distinct French Canadian culture that has quite a different set of norms compared to English-speaking Canada. And in Italy, masculinity scores would differ between North and South.

Key Points:

Cultural norms play a large part in the mechanics and interpersonal relationships at work. When you grow up in a culture you take your norms of behavior for granted. You don't have to think about your reactions, preferences, and feelings.

When you step into a foreign culture, suddenly things seem different. You don't know what to do or say. Using Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions as a starting point, you can evaluate your approach, your decisions, and actions based on a general sense of how the society might think and react to you.

Of course, no society is homogenous and there will be deviations from the norms Hofstede found, however, with this as your guide you won't be going in blind. The unknown will be a little less intimidating and you'll get a much-needed boost of confidence and security from studying this cultural model.

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Apply This to Your Life:

* Take some time to review the [scores by country](http://www.geert-hofstede.com/hofstede_dimensions.php) for the various cultural dimensions Hofstede identified. Pay particular attention to the countries from which the people you deal with on a day-by-day basis come.
* In light of these scores, think about some interactions you've had with people in other countries. Does your conversation or association make more sense given this newly found insight?
* Challenge yourself to learn more about one culture in particular. If your work brings you in contact with people from another country, use that country as your point of reference. Apply Hofstede's scores to what you discover and determine the accuracy and relevance for you.
* The next time you are required to work with a person from a different culture, use Hofstede's scores and make notes about your approach, what you should be prepared to discuss, and why you feel the way you do. Afterward, evaluate your performance and do further research and preparation for the next time.
* Above all, make cultural sensitivity a daily part of your life. Learn to value the differences between people and vow to honor and respect the things that make each nation of people unique.