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# Differences in Power Distances May Make Harmony on a Multicultural Team More Challenging

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## Abstract

Threats to multicultural team harmony may come from a variety of sources such as immaturity, lack of shared vision, or from a compelling task to unify everyone; but one aspect that tends to slip under the radar screen is difference in power distance. This article shows how characteristics of both high and low power distance in cultures influences team members' concepts of *what* team harmony is and *how* it is created. The creation of a third culture, a *counter-cultural temporary Christian community*, can offer a multicultural team a way to suspend cultural expectations and work together.

## A Brief Background

Before I knew the term *multicultural team* existed, I already had been involved in creating them and actively participating on them. After a team meeting I was often left bewildered by the group dynamics; but for many years I didn't have the theory to help me name the tension in the air, much less deal with it. The teams I have served on are composed of Latin Americans from different countries and missionaries from the United States. What awakened my curiosity has been complaints about team members from certain countries about how "complicated and difficult they are to work with and how disruptive they are to team harmony." Others are consistently criticized for being conceited. I found myself wondering: *Why is that?*

Team leaders proposed a number of reasons why some people seem to have a hard time "blending in and working harmoniously." We speculated that perhaps harmony is better formed on the basis of a shared vision or a compelling task that unites everyone. Or maybe the team member's "task vs. relationship orientation" is a key variable. We conjectured that one's spiritual maturity and experience is the factor that lends itself most to team harmony. We also wondered if team harmony is mainly a question of group chemistry, personalities or even social styles. Regarding cultural differences, we assumed that since most everyone was from Latin America and spoke Spanish, everyone was pretty much the same culturally speaking. Turns out that was an erroneous assumption.

Although there are many factors that contribute to or detract from team harmony, differences in power distance may make harmony on multicultural teams more challenging, precisely because power distance is a deeply held cultural assumption, off the radar screen of most team members, rarely questioned, nevertheless strongly influential in group dynamics.

Why does power distance matter? This article speaks to two reasons why it matters:

1. Power distance values influence a team member's concept of *what* team harmony is and *how* it is created.
2. By virtue of its subtle nature, the influence of power distance may go unacknowledged, leaving a team unprepared to deal with its impact on team harmony.

### **Power Distance**

Now that globalization is in full swing, more and more is being written about multicultural teams with the business industry on the cutting edge of the research (Hofstede and Hofstede 2005; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1998; House et al 2004). This wealth of literature provides rich insights and lessons for those of us working in the church and parachurch environments on teams made up of members from different races and cultures. Few researchers have been as influential as Geert Hofstede, a Dutchman who has been studying culture and its consequences on organizations since the 1960's. Since his framework of cultural dimensions is one of the most widely accepted and well-studied<sup>1</sup>, I will use his definitions and cultural value indexes. Hofstede identified several cultural dimensions<sup>2</sup>. A dimension is a distinctive aspect of culture that can be measured relative to other cultures. Hofstede has statistically verifiable

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<sup>1</sup> While Hofstede's work is well-known, he is not without his critics (see [http://geert-hofstede.international-business-center.com/geert\\_hofstede\\_resources.shtml](http://geert-hofstede.international-business-center.com/geert_hofstede_resources.shtml)). His critics often focus on methodological issues (his use of an attitude-survey questionnaire), the generalizability and representativity of his results for an entire nation, and others assert that his work is obsolete and doesn't take into consideration the cultural homogenization effect of globalization. Nevertheless, since the focus of this article is on a multicultural team's dynamics, I found the *idea* of power-distance to be a helpful way for our team members to name one of the cultural differences at play when we met together.

<sup>2</sup> The four dimensions he developed are: Power distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, Individualism-Collectivism and Masculinity- Femininity. I chose to study the implications of power distances because that dimension seemed to vary the most among members on our multicultural team.

measurements called indexes for more than seventy countries, giving each a score relative to one another.

The dimension of power distance describes issues related to one's relationship to authority and how social inequality is viewed. As Hofstede (2005, 40) notes, inequality exists in every society; some people have more power, more wealth, more physical and intellectual capacities, more status than others. All societies are unequal, but some cultures are more accepting of that inequality than others. The difference between cultures lies in how inequality is viewed and handled and the degree to which those inequalities are accepted.

Power distance is defined as *the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally.* (Hofstede 2005, 46 emphasis in text)

What lends force to Hofstede's research is the fact that the definition of power distance is based not on the most powerful but on the perspective of the least powerful. This suggests that society's level of inequality is endorsed by the followers as much as by the leaders (Hofstede and Hofstede 2005).

### ***Possible Characteristics of Team Members from High Power Distance (HPD) cultures***

Storti (1999, 130) describes the following characteristics:

- In the same way that some people are taller than others, team members from HPC cultures accept as natural and existential inequalities in power and status. It is normal for some to have more power and influence than others.
- Those with power try to distinguish themselves as much as possible, by insisting on the use of titles, position, status symbols and by not sharing or delegating their authority.
- With power and influence comes the responsibility to look after and care for those less fortunate. Those with less power adopt a dependent attitude, expecting to be looked after.
- Subordinates are not expected to take initiative and are closely supervised.

Naylor (2008) in his excellent series of on-line articles filled with principles and illustrations of HPD and LPD cultures notes the following:

- HPD leaders tend to accept and endorse authority, which in worst case scenario, may lead to a “voluntary servitude” on the part of the lower status members and “tyranny” on the part of the higher status members.
- They tend to accept as normal the privileges awarded to someone of a higher status like the use of titles and ranks, advantages, special treatment.
- The lower status members tend to accept a position of less power relative to their perceived superiors.

***Possible Characteristics of Team Members from  
Low Power Distance (LPD) Cultures***

Storti (1999, 131) identifies possible characteristics of LPD cultures:

- They may see inequalities in power and status as man-made and largely artificial; it is not natural, though it may be convenient, that some people have power over others.
- Those with power, therefore, tend to deemphasize it, to minimize the differences between themselves and subordinates and to delegate and share power to the extent possible.
- Subordinates are rewarded for taking initiative and do not like close supervision.
- Naylor (2008) notes in addition that members tend to expect and will often fight for equal treatment, regardless of status, occupation, seniority, wealth or age. Even members who have authority are not offended when other team members approach them and offer their opinions or critiques, they often welcome their input.

It needs to be kept in mind that the contrast between HPD and LPD should be understood as a generality and that no culture is ever 100% high or low power distance culture. Hofstede’s research, however, has demonstrates the tendencies of a given country or regions.

Table 1 indicates the power distance value scores of the members of the multicultural team I am part of and help to lead.

With the discovery of the existence of power distance and the observation that our Latin American team members had a large disparity among themselves, I began to explore how high and low power distance cultures conceived of team harmony and

worked towards creating it. In addition, since each culture has traces of both God’s image as Creator and the stain of sin from the Fall, a Biblical perspective of harmony was vital.

**Table 1 Power Distance Index for Selected Countries.** <sup>3</sup>

<b>Country</b>	<b>Power Distance Index</b>
Guatemala	<b>95</b>
Panama	<b>95</b>
Mexico	<b>81</b>
El Salvador	<b>66</b>
Peru	<b>64</b>
Argentina	<b>49</b>
United States	<b>40</b>
Costa Rica	<b>35</b>

### **Team Harmony**

What is team harmony and how does a team create it? Hofstede posits that culture is like software of the mind, culture causes a certain group of people to think, act and feel in a certain way. He defines culture as “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others” (Hofstede and Hofstede 2005, 4). It would follow that each culture has its own unique definition of what constitutes group harmony and how it is best achieved.

#### ***Team Harmony Among High Power Distance Cultures***

Members of HPD cultures may consider team harmony to consist of “having few desires, following the middle way and being moderate, not having aspirations beyond their rank” (Hofstede and Hofstede 2005, 47). They would expect being led by being told

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<sup>3</sup> Source: <http://www.clearlycultural.com/geert-hofstede-cultural-dimensions/power-distance-index/>

exactly what to do. Team leaders, then, may conceive that the way to bring about team harmony is for everyone to unquestionably accept his or her authority, to follow orders and protocol. Team members may be afraid to express disagreement, preferring a silent type of protest. They would expect an autocratic and persuasive/paternalistic style of being led (House et al, 2005). Team members would expect close supervision and being looked after in exchange for submission and loyalty to the one in charge.

### ***Team Harmony Among Low Power Distance Cultures***

In contrast, those members of LPD cultures might consider team harmony to consist of open, frank discussions, nothing taken personally, an ethos of equality, openness and togetherness (Naylor 2008). Team leaders, then, may conceive that the way to bring about team harmony is to use a consultative style of decision-making or one based on the majority vote, with everyone sharing their opinion. They may accept team members to show independent thought and action, while rewarding initiative.

### ***A Biblical Understanding of Team Harmony***

What might be God's perception of inequality in society (high and low power distances) and indicators of harmony as revealed from Scriptures? Admitting that as a Westerner, my reading of Scripture will be influenced by my cultural background and biases, the following three passages speak of harmony in an effort towards gaining a biblical understanding of team harmony or unity.

#### **Psalm 133 (NLT)**

**<sup>1</sup> How wonderful and pleasant it is  
when brothers [and sisters] live together in harmony!  
<sup>2</sup> For harmony is as precious as the anointing oil  
that was poured over Aaron's head,  
that ran down his beard  
and onto the border of his robe.  
<sup>3</sup> Harmony is as refreshing as the dew from Mount Hermon  
that falls on the mountains of Zion.  
And there the Lord has pronounced his blessing,  
even life everlasting.**

This Psalm draws a picture of how God would have us live life, soothed (as with anointing oil) by harmony with others and refreshed (as like dew) by the peace that

fellowship brings. God raises a standard of harmony (verse 1) and then pronounces his blessing on it (verse 3).

These New Testament passages bring specific instructions as to how to go about creating “team” harmony.

**Romans 12:16 (TNIV) “Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not think you are superior.”**

Interesting enough, the Romans passage speaks to issues of power distance. In the first century, Greco-Romano society was strictly hierarchical; at the top was the elite, educated class who would exercise leadership over the lower classes of laborers and slaves. The Apostle Paul, throughout chapter 12 admonishes the Christians in Rome to not follow the ways of the world, to not think more highly of themselves than they ought, to overlook offenses, and even pay back good for evil. This counsel would have run counter to a high power distance culture where Roman tyranny and forced servitude was the order of the day.

**1 Peter 3:8-9 (NLT) “Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers [and sisters], be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.”**

In the verses prior to 1 Peter 3:8, Peter counsels the wives and husbands how to get along, then Peter addresses his advice to “all of you” (verse 8-9) and he gives specific advice as to *how* harmony could be fostered through demonstrating sympathy, love, compassion and humility to one another and even to those who have harmed or insulted them.

While Scripture teaches us not to think too more highly of ourselves that we ought, paradoxically it also teaches about the necessity of submitting to authority on the governmental level (Romans 12:1-7), within the church structure (Titus 3:1; 1 Peter 2:13), within the family (Ephesians 5:22-24, 6:1) and mutually to one another (Ephesians 5:21).

What exactly might team harmony look like in practical terms? In my reading from the social sciences, I discovered the following description of “rapport” to be closely aligned to Peter’s advice to the church. “Social intelligence” speaks of harmony as having

*rapport* between individuals which entails three main components: (a) mutual attention; (b) shared positive feeling and (c) synchrony (Goldman 2006, 29-30). What one might observe on a harmonious team is that the members are attuned to one another, paying attention and making eye contact. There would be a sense of mutual empathy, a sense of positivity and warmth. If you were observant of the non-verbal communication, you would notice them being in sync or on the “same wavelength”; their conversation would be animated, full of spontaneous expression and responsiveness.

## **Conclusion**

### ***Preparing the Team to Rise to the Challenges of Being Multicultural***

Remember my initial curiosity regarding why some people are considered “complicated and difficult to work with” and others are criticized for being “conceited”? After investigating high-low power distance values, I am able to name and better understand the tension that exists between certain members. What had previously been this blurry, bothersome hindrance to group harmony, upon informed scrutiny, focused into this picture: The members from the LPD countries were complaining (*Why are they so complicated?*) about the HPD members’ need for maintaining a strict adherence to protocol and hierarchical procedures. The members from the LPD countries were criticized for being conceited (*who did they think they were?*) because they disregarded hierarchical structures, were not respectful of rank and were hostile to any sign of inequality or of one “rising above the others.”

Unless otherwise instructed, every team member will interpret what’s happening through their High or Low power distance default grid of understanding. We all tend to misattribute, negatively attribute or judge the intentions and actions of others according to our frame of reference concerning what is right or wrong. This reaction is often very emotional and visceral.

We as team leaders are making strides in grasping the implications of varying degrees of power distance, acknowledging its influence and preparing ways to help the team deal with it. Our plan is to add a new dimension to our team meetings: Cultural studies. Put the existence of high-low power distance on their radar screen. Help them question their own visceral reactions and assumptions. Teach them about the dangers of



misattribution using examples from our own team dynamics. However, it would be wise to remind ourselves that “understanding cultural values doesn’t solve the dilemma of whether we should follow or confront expectations, but it fosters in us a more positive attitude about the motives of people who misunderstand us” (Plueddemann 2009, 94).

### ***Creating a Third Culture***

I readily admit that we have a long way to grow in terms of team harmony. There are many contributing factors such as how well team members align with the team vision/tasks and how well they spur one another one to growth and maturity in Christlikeness. But the hidden dimensions of HPD and LPD must be recognized.

Through the research involved in writing this paper, I did discover one thing we are doing well. When we bring a multicultural team together to accomplish a task, we invest heavily in creating what we call a *counter-cultural temporary Christian community*. We introduce a new set of norms and rules and invite members to abide by them for the duration of our time together. This has created what could be called a “third culture” –a space where people don’t expect that their cultural norms will be followed, where they are open to doing things in new ways. To some degree, this has leveled the playing field between the HPD and LPD members. I have tried to illustrate that “third culture” with Figure 1 showing how the three interconnecting circles of High-Low power distance concepts of team harmony and a biblical perspective can come together to form a “third culture.” Relationships within our *counter-cultural temporary Christian community* seem more horizontal than hierarchical which seems to align with the New Testament teachings noted above. We have explicitly taught the counter-cultural principles of the New Testament recognizing they were addressed to a multicultural team of Jews, Romans and Greeks. Paul introduced a brand new set of rules in Romans 12 as did Peter in 1 Peter 3:8 to a multicultural church of (verses that resonate with LPD cultures) while at the same time both writers acknowledged the God-given role of authority and the importance of submission for the Lord’s sake to every authority instituted among men (1 Peter 2:13) and Romans 13:1-7 (verses that resonate with HPD cultures). The presence of biblical support for both cultural orientations –HPD and LPD—presents us with the opportunity to live within the tension created by this paradox. Team harmony is a little of both HPD (submission to authority) and LPD (equal

treatment for all), and yet neither (do not repay evil with evil, love your enemies).

Remember, in the end, team harmony exists to serve the mission of the team. Harmony is both God's standard of being and doing among His people and it carries with it His blessing (Psalm 133).

Our resolve is to see multiculturalism as God's means of preparing us for life and service in heaven, where people from every nation and people group together will bow before the Almighty God to worship Him.

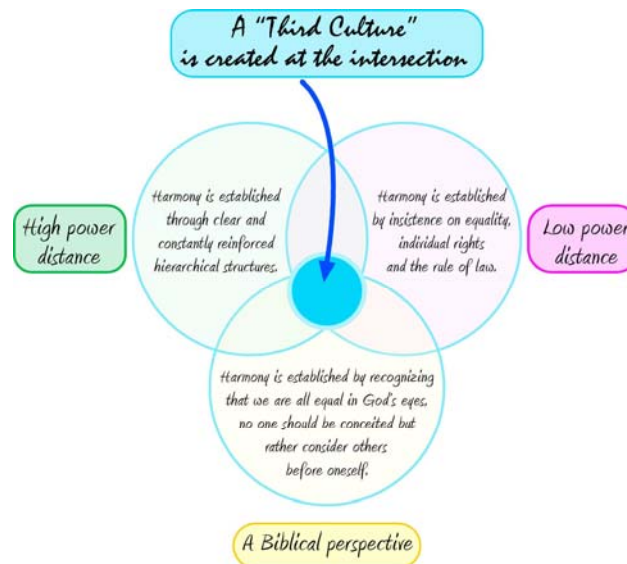


Figure 1. Creation of a Third Culture through the interconnecting circles of High-Low power distance concepts of Team Harmony and a Biblical perspective

## Recommended Reading

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### **About the Author**



Lisa Anderson-Umaña has served as a missionary with Latin America Mission for 28 years living in Mexico, Honduras, El Salvador and Costa Rica and traveling throughout Latin America. She presently resides in Honduras with her husband, Alfredo Umaña and two children. Her work in Christian Camping International entails developing teams of instructors in nine different countries of Latin America dedicated to training camp and church leaders how to be counselors, program directors and Bible study curriculum writers. She graduated from Wheaton College Graduate School in Educational Ministries and is currently working on her PhD Educational Studies from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, near Chicago.