
Strategy Execution within Indian Culture Map

Metis Centre of Excc

Authors:
Sneha Ravi
Dilip Kumar

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I. Introduction

After years of oppression by colonial powers followed by the slow movement towards growth, India has begun to immerge out of the shadows to spread its wings and carve a space for itself in the fastest growing economies of the world. Home to the world's largest youth population which comprises 28% of its population, India is now facing a tide of opportunities like never before. Thriving in this new environment is the newly created middle class and the working population, it has given rise to. The enthusiasm is evident, as barriers in every domain is brought down to make way for newer ones.

India has been described as a 'melting pot' by our late Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru due to its ability to be homogenous in spite of being a heterogeneous society. India has over its long existence successfully integrated ideas and cultures that have come to it. This has been ingrained into our culture and India continues to be a sponge bed for new ideas from around the world.

With the economy becoming more open, western culture of working has been widely adopted in the work environments in India. However, Indians continue to face a contradiction in the culture that they have grown up with and the work culture at their respective organizations. It is this dichotomy that has been studied and explained through this project.

II. Objective

To study and analyse the key cultural traits that impact organizational effectiveness in the Indian context. To use these cultural traits to build a strategy execution framework that would help organizations in optimizing processes to better suit their employees and increase the overall efficiency of the organization.

III. Cultural Map

Geert Hofstede defined culture as the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes people of one group from the other. [1] Based on an extensive research Hofstede and his research team came up with the cultural dimensions that primarily define the culture of a particular region. Each of the cultural dimension along with a brief explanation is quoted below:

1. Power Distance Index

This dimension expresses the degree to which the less powerful members of a society accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. [1]

2. Individualism versus Collectivism

The high side of this dimension, called individualism, can be defined as a preference for a loosely-knit social framework in which individuals are expected to take care of only themselves and their immediate families. Its opposite, collectivism, represents a preference for a tightly-knit framework in society in which individuals can expect their relatives or members of a particular in-group to look after them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty. [1]

3. Masculinity versus Femininity

The Masculinity side of this dimension represents a preference in society for achievement, heroism, assertiveness and material rewards for success. Society at large is more competitive. Its opposite, femininity, stands for a preference for cooperation, modesty, caring for the weak and quality of life. Society at large is more consensus-oriented. [1]

4. Uncertainty Avoidance Index(UAI)

The Uncertainty Avoidance dimension expresses the degree to which the members of a society feel uncomfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity. Countries exhibiting strong UAI maintain rigid codes of belief and behaviour and are intolerant of unorthodox behaviour and ideas. Weak UAI societies maintain a more relaxed attitude in which practice counts more than principles. [1]

5. Long Term Orientation versus Short Term Normative Orientation (LTO)

Societies who score low on this dimension, for example, prefer to maintain time-honoured traditions and norms while viewing societal change with suspicion. Those with a culture which scores high, on the other hand, take a more pragmatic approach: they encourage thrift and efforts in modern education as a way to prepare for the future. [1]

6. Indulgence versus Restraint (IND)

Indulgence stands for a society that allows relatively free gratification of basic and natural human drives related to enjoying life and having fun. Restraint stands for a society that suppresses gratification of needs and regulates it by means of strict social norms. [1]

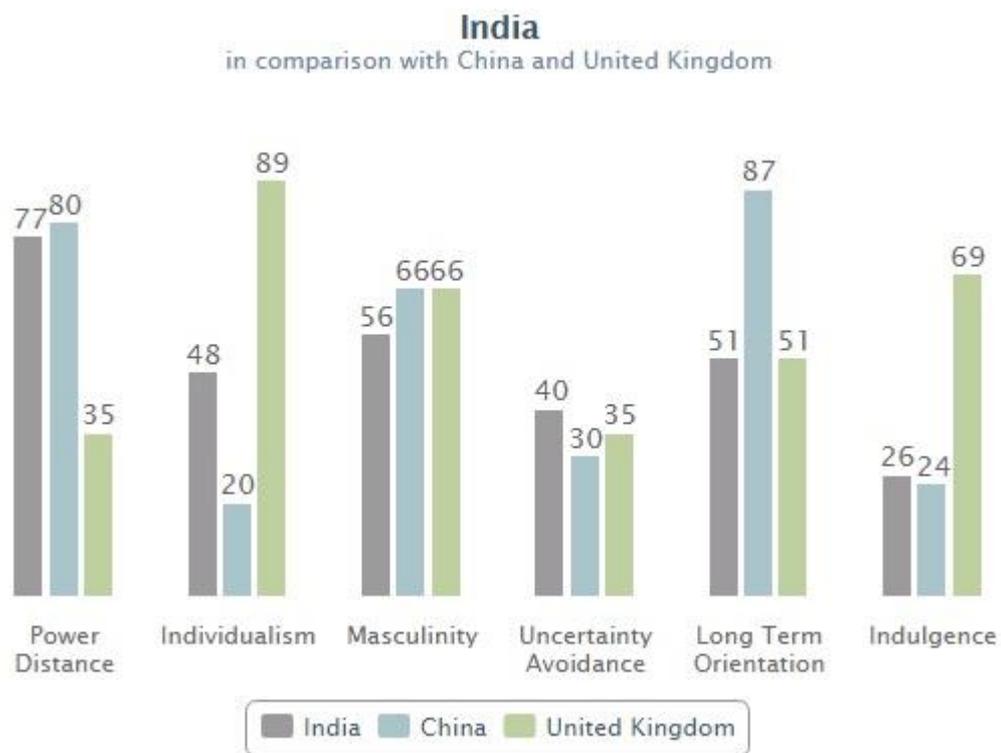


Fig 1: Comparison of India on the Geert-Hofstede cultural dimensions with China and UK [1]

Another notable contribution in the area of culture is from Erin Meyer, who studied the cultural differences among different countries. Each of the cultural aspect listed by Erin Meyer is quoted below along with a brief explanation:

7. Communicating

Communicating scale by measuring the degree to which they are high-context or low-context. In low-context cultures, good communication is precise, simple, explicit, and clear.

In high-context cultures, silence in itself may pass specific meanings, and an effective communicator is able to read the silence in order to manage the interaction effectively. [2]

8. Evaluating

This scale measures a preference for frank versus diplomatic negative feedback. Evaluating is often confused with Communicating, but many countries have different positions on the two scales. The French, for example, are high-context (implicit) communicators relative to Americans, yet they are more direct in their criticism. Spaniards and Mexicans are both high-context cultures, but the Spanish are much more frank when providing negative feedback. [2]

9. Persuading

The ways in which you persuade others, and the kinds of arguments you find convincing, are deeply rooted in your culture's philosophical, religious, and educational assumptions and attitudes. The traditional way to compare countries along this scale is to assess how they balance holistic and specific thought patterns. Typically, a western executive will break an argument down into a sequence of distinct components (specific thinking), while Asian managers tend to show how each component fits with all the others (holistic thinking). Beyond that, people from southern European and Germanic cultures tend to find deductive arguments (what I refer to as principles-first arguments) most persuasive, whereas American and British managers are more likely influenced by inductive logic (what I call applications-first logic). [2]

10. Deciding

This scale measures the degree to which a culture is consensus-minded. We often assume that the most egalitarian cultures will also be the most democratic, while the most hierarchical ones will allow the boss to make unilateral decisions. This isn't always the case. Germans are more hierarchical than Americans, but more likely than their U.S. colleagues to build group agreement before making decisions. The Japanese are both strongly hierarchical and strongly consensual. [2]

11. Trusting

Cognitive trust (from the head) can be contrasted with affective trust (from the heart). In task-based cultures, trust is built cognitively through work. If we collaborate well, prove ourselves reliable, and respect each other's contributions, we come to trust each other. In a relationship-based society, trust is a result of weaving a strong affective connection. If we spend time laughing and relaxing together, get to know each other at a personal level, and feel a mutual liking, and then come to trust each other. [2]

12. Disagreeing

Everyone believes a little open disagreement is healthy, right? The recent American business literature certainly confirms this viewpoint. But different cultures actually have very different ideas about how productive confrontation is for a team or organization. This scale measures tolerance for open disagreement, and views on whether it is likely to improve or destroy collegial relationships. [2]

13. Scheduling

All businesses follow agendas and timetables, but in some cultures people strictly adhere to the schedule, while in other cultures, people treat it as a suggestion. This scale assesses how

much value is placed on operating in a structured, linear fashion versus being flexible and reactive. [2]

IV. Strongest Influencers

After the initial study on findings of Geert Hofstede and Erin Meyer, the aforementioned cultural traits were used in designing the basic structure of the questionnaire for the in depth interviews and online survey conducted as part of the primary research of this project. Based on the learnings derived from in depth interviews and online survey assessment, the following characteristics of the Indian work culture stand out and came across as the most influential factors. Understanding gained about each of these cultural traits is explained below:

1. Power Distance

One of the factors that Indians have in common, is the way we are taught to respect people who are elder than us. Age in most cases also corresponds to a powerful position in a family. Traditionally the oldest male member takes on the role of the Head of the Family. This aspect of accepting the power of a higher position comes naturally to Indians.

However, in the work environment we are constantly exposed to newer ways of working. With increasing globalization, western ways of working have and are widely being adopted by employers. This is especially visible in start-ups and MNCs that have to constantly interact with westerners either in the form of clients or fellow employees. The signs of this influence is seen in the way lower rung employees address their superiors. Employees are encouraged to call everyone by their first name irrespective of their position. Except the people occupying top most positions in an organization, everyone is made to share the same office space and work in similar looking cubicles.

A common thread that ran across all CEOs who were interviewed as part of this project was that, they strove to keep the power distance low. Everybody was free to approach them and that they were just a knock away. The CEO cabins were also made completely of glass which made him as a person more visible and approachable. On being probed further on whether employees actually were comfortable walking in, they said that, it depended very much on the individuals themselves. With the confidence of the lot, being comfortable with walking in. The CEO's cabins in some cases, were in fact more used for meetings rather than as the CEO's seat of work. CEOs also make an effort to constantly interact with each of their employees in case of smaller organizations.

On being asked, "How comfortable they were in approaching a senior from their organization?" to 252 working individuals, 37.7% said that they were moderately comfortable, 37.3% said that they were highly comfortable and 16.7% said that they were extremely comfortable. With only 8.3% saying they were not comfortable. This shows that the push towards greater approachability on the side of the higher management has caught on.

What is the level of comfort you have in approaching senior level managers in your organization?

252 responses

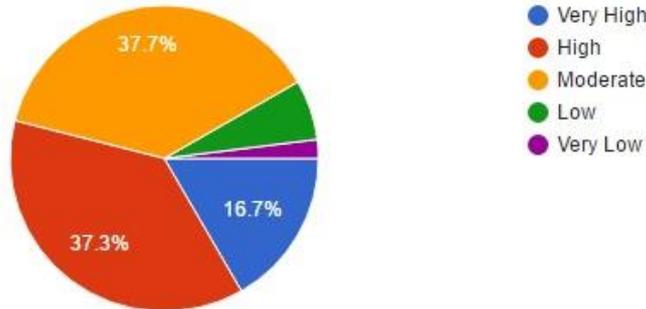


Fig 2: Comfort level of working individuals in approaching seniors in their organization

In spite of the increase in the approachability, there is subtle manifestation of power distance which comes out, in the way, a superior is always approached before taking a decision. This was strongly seen in the survey response to the question – “Do you approach your boss in the approval of a critical decision?” 65.9% of the 252 respondents said that they would and 32.5% said that it would depend on the situation.

Do you approach your boss for approval of a critical decision?

252 responses

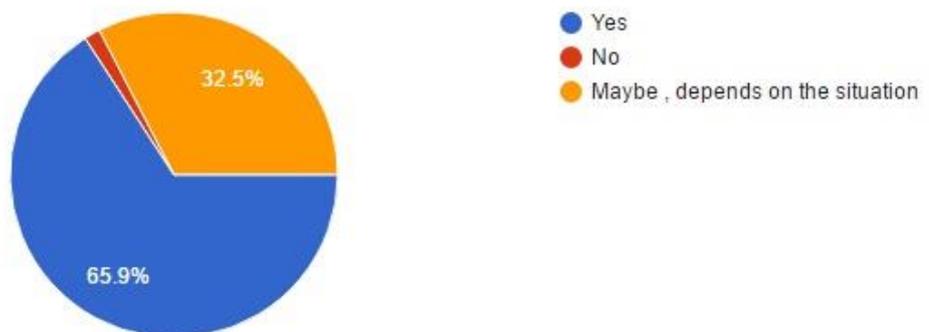


Fig 3: Approaching one’s boss for approval of a critical decision

A project manager when seated with his team, members of same level may reduce the amount of communication with each other in the fear that they are being monitored.

With greater power being vested in the founders and CEOs, one CEO commented about the responsibility that comes along with it in building the organization’s culture – “It is important that

the founders act in accordance with the principles laid down because the founders would be looked up to and their actions emulated. This is then passed down the line.”

2. Decision Making

How much one would strive to achieve consensus, would depend on how much of participation one expects on the decision and its consequent work. On the Geert-Hofstede scale, India scores a 77 on the Power Distance scale and 48 on the Individualism versus Collectivism scale. Through this, one can infer that in spite of the Power Distance being high, Indians fall midway in individualism versus collectivism. They strive to achieve group consensus to a reasonable extent, since it is also a tightly knit society.

Power is vested in one or few individuals, but the awareness that the power is sustained through the support of a larger group of people, below, is that which brings importance to group consensus.

In the interviews conducted, CEOs consistently stressed on the importance of taking the opinions of others and keeping an open mind for suggestions. Even important decisions were taken by having discussions with the core team. In decisions that impacted a large number of people in the organization, arriving at a consensus was given more importance. In cases that there were multiple suggestions or stalemate, the CEO made the final decision. However, when there was no time for consensus or lengthy discussions to arrive at one, the CEO himself took the decision.

That Indians come midway between the consensus and unilateral decision making was also reflected in the research survey in which 89 out of 252 respondents said that they would take a decision “Based on their own intuition, observation and research”, 94 said “By asking others opinions and then taking a call” and 69 said that “By a combination of both”.

How do you take decisions?

252 responses

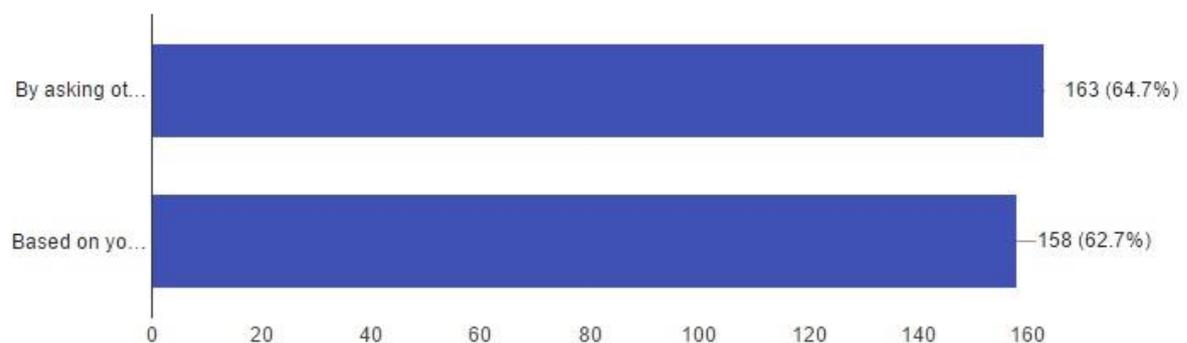


Fig 4: Decision making, 1) by asking others opinions and then taking a call. 2) Based on your own intuition, observation and research

3. Hard versus Soft Work Environment

Goals play a critical role in the functioning and growth of any organization, yet organizations would fail if that was only they thought about. India has a Geert-Hofstede score of 56 on the Masculinity index. This shows that Indians give as much importance to a nurturing work environment as that to achievement of goals.

According to one CEO, being goal oriented might not necessarily make people stressed, as in the case of start-ups, it can become more of a mission than a job. Being growth oriented and passionate and yet to stay humble and respect each other is the expectation of another CEO from his employees. He also further quoted that “For everything that is true in India, the opposite is true.” Individual goals without being aligned with that of the organization does not contribute productively to the organization’s growth. The success of an organization also depends on how well employees collaborate with each other. One way to ensure collaboration is to build a culture that gives equal importance to achievement of a target and respect for the people involved in achieving it.

Indians are emotional and that shows itself in the way, people deal with each other in work environments. Even in the pursuit of aggressive targets, they would take care to avoid conflict and not be brash in their communication. This is observable in the way they deal with not only their employees but also investment partners, customers, supplier etc.

The survey question, asked respondents to tick those options, that they felt their ideal job would have among the following:

- a) Challenging work environment
- b) Friendly and supportive work atmosphere
- c) Opportunities for growth
- d) Work Life balance

In the above options “Challenging work environment” and “Opportunities for growth” characterize Hard work environment and “Friendly and supportive work atmosphere” and “Work Life balance” characterize Soft work environment. 140 responses out of 252 were a combination of Hard and Soft work characteristics. 49 respondents chose purely Hard characteristics and 63 of them chose purely Soft characteristics. This again shows that balance between both extremes needs to be the essence of every organization.

What would your ideal job have?

252 responses

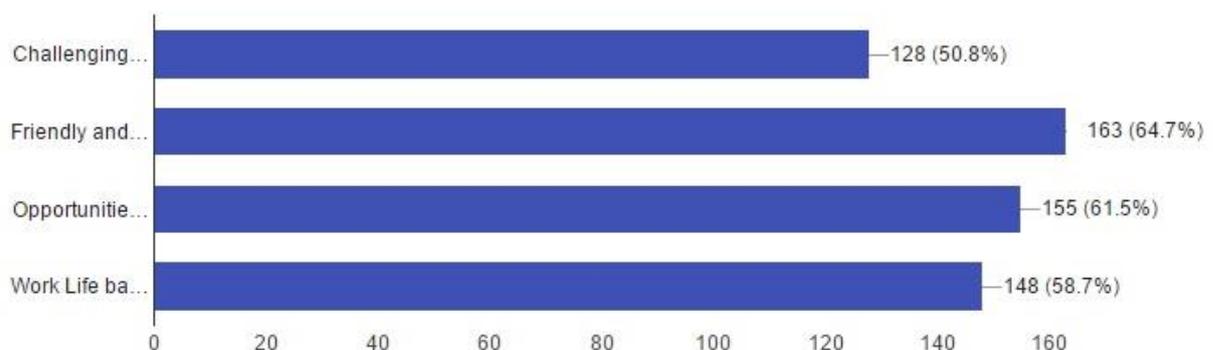


Fig 5: Most preferred ideal job characteristics

4. Evaluation

The importance of a feedback cannot be stressed enough, for that is what fuels growth of an individual and consequently an organization. Nobody would contest the need of a feedback yet the perfect way to do it might escape many.

The majority of CEOs who were interviewed believe that a direct feedback needs to be given so that the person knows where he/she needs to work on. But how this critical feedback is taken by a person would depend on a lot of factors including his own personality type. They also believe that fundamentally people want to perform well. If people are not performing better it is because they do not know that they can do better.

As a society we try to please people and this shows itself even in the way we avoid from saying negative aspects directly. This can go badly when an employee is fired for not meeting expectations and this comes as a shock to him. CEOs aim for regular feedback, so that even in the event of a dismissal, it must not come as a shock to the employee being shown the door.

There have been multiple methods that have been tested by various heads of organizations. Continuous feedback, so that the areas of improvement are communicated in the heat of the work that is done. Some of them sugar coat their feedback so it is not taken badly by the employee. Taking the employees out for a lunch and giving them feedback is one of the ways a CEO gives and takes feedback. With barriers between levels coming down, feedback is now encouraged both ways up the hierarchy.

The survey data for this aspect shows us that 173 of the 252 respondents preferred a direct feedback instead of a diplomatic one.

How do you prefer critical feedback to be communicated?

252 responses

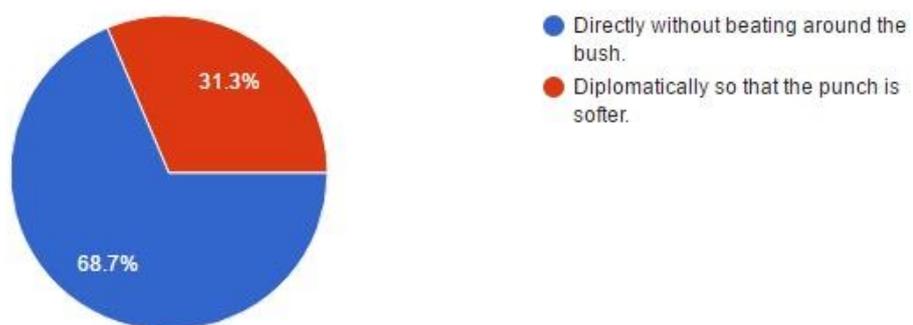


Fig 6: Preference for a Direct versus Diplomatic Feedback

While majority of the respondents said that they would prefer a direct feedback, there lies a 31.3% that says that they would prefer diplomatic feedback. This demands a level of understanding of the person that one is giving the feedback to. It might also be the case that in the endeavour to not offend someone, one may be doing more harm than good.

5. Trust

Whether through heart or through mind, trust forms the essence of any relationship. This also applies to work relationships. The amount of trust, members of a team have on each other, would determine the success of the team as a whole.

When the question of whether trust was built through heart or mind was put to the CEOs, this is what some of them said: Combination of attitude and willingness to work along with technical skills. A person who has the ability to attract and retain better talent than himself. Transparency was an important factor that signalled the reliability of a person. Relationship based trust was more prominent at higher management levels. Since accountability was a major factor in high responsibility roles, there is a tendency to choose people whom one has known for a while, also someone whom one can be direct with. The level of straightforwardness while communicating is dependent on the comfort level people have with each other. Hence finding the right people is key to developing trust. CEOs also pointed to the aspect of “professionalism”. It is being able to do a good job on a bad day.

67 survey answers indicated that they would build trust by “By building relationships in the workplace.” While 100 of them said that it would be through “Through consistent and reliable performance in work.” 85 would go about it by a combination of both the aspects.

How do you build trust in a work environment?

252 responses

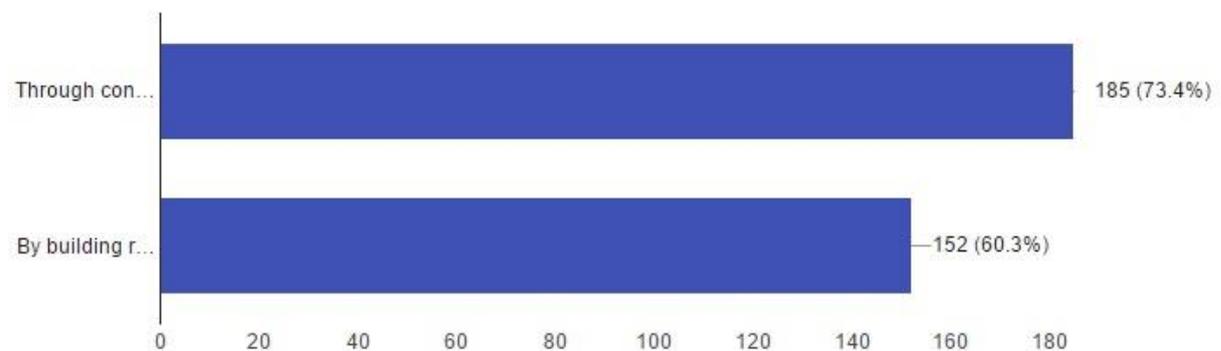


Fig 7: Trust through “By building relationships in the workplace” versus “Through consistent and reliable performance in work”

While the data suggests the response to be in favour of reliable and consistent work performance in building trust, one must not ignore the role relationships play in the equation of trust.

6. Uncertainty Avoidance

On the Geert-Hofstede scale India has a score of 40 on this dimension. Which makes us as a society less rigid. While a part of us follow age old traditions, there is also a part that is open to newer ideas. It has also been said that Indians thrive in uncertain situations. The reason for this is that the cost of a failure is heavier to bear in India than in a more developed nation. Failure is viewed very critically in India. This fear of failure is what pushes Indians to work harder in situations that are uncertain.

Uncertainty also keeps one active and takes away the monotony from work. Some CEOs also make sure that new product development activities is rotated so that, everybody is satisfied with the work they are doing. The insights received through interviews say that in every organization there would be people who would be comfortable with clearly set out path to their goals. At the same time there would also be people who would want complete freedom in achieving their goals. CEOs give enough freedom and flexibility to the core team. It also helps people learn and grow which micromanagement would not give scope to. Employees are also encouraged to seek help at the right time. It has been observed that techies when faced with a problem are hesitant to approach the senior level for help and they do it when the deadlines have come dangerously close. Such situations should be avoided hence constant communication is essential. Delegate but do not abdicate.

In the survey 177 people preferred a flexible environment to a fixed environment where the goals are more important than the way to it.

Which of the following work conditions will you be happier working in?

252 responses

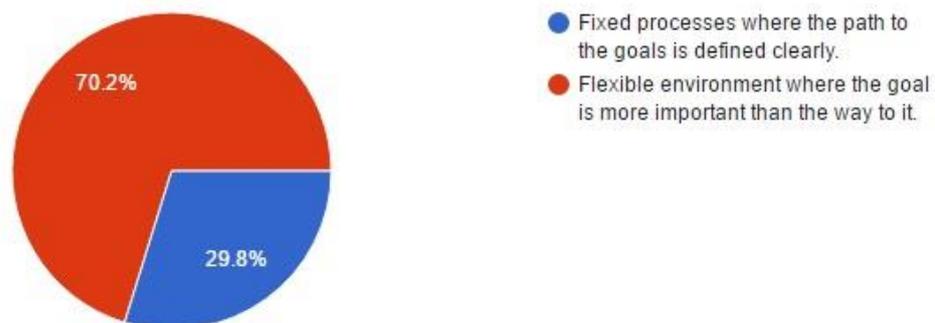


Fig 8: Flexible Process versus Fixed Process

7. Disagreement

The way disagreement is viewed in an organization would either enhance different points of view being voiced or would kill them entirely.

The research findings say that encouragement for healthy disagreement needs to come from the top. Initially in the work life, people are hesitant to voice differing opinions. By promoting an open culture where everybody is free to voice their opinions, more ideas will be born. Disagreement is encouraged so that multiple viewpoints can be considered and discussed. It is common to have disagreements but even in it there is an element of respect that keeps the relationships between all the participants healthy.

When the founder or CEO has to make a decision, he will. In such a case everybody is expected to commit. Disagree but commit. This helps in building reliability into the system.

A striking majority of the survey respondents, that is 226 of them, viewed open disagreements as constructive. While there were 26 of them that thought that it was destructive. Out of the 26 people who viewed it negatively, 21 of them were of less than 10 years of experience. Does this suggest that greater experience makes one more aware of the positive aspects of having open disagreements? Perhaps!

How do you view open disagreements during a meeting?

252 responses

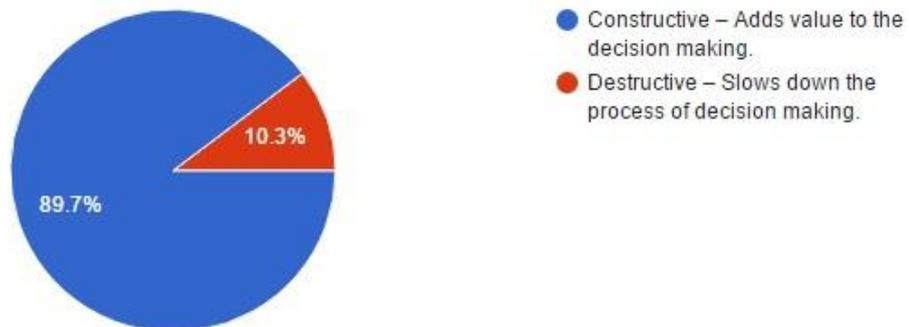


Fig 9: Open disagreements constructive or destructive.

V. Recommendations

- I. While the survey data points to the fact that 54% of the respondents were highly comfortable with approaching seniors in their organization, there was 46% of the respondents who were not that comfortable. 65.9% of the respondents said that they would definitely approach their boss in the approval of a critical decision. Considering the survey data as a good representation of the working population of India, one can infer that there are close to 50% of the working population that is not that comfortable with approaching their seniors. A greater percentage of people approach their boss for a nod on their decisions.
 - To encourage those members who do not easily approach their seniors, a dedicated time slot kept aside where employees can freely approach their seniors for discussion on any issues would help in lessening the imaginary barrier. This would also take away the hesitation arising out of the belief that the boss must be busy and hence approaching their boss might not be appropriate.
 - Often, whenever subordinates face a tough situation, it is a natural instinct to approach a senior to ask for a solution. This approach can take away the learning one would get out of tackling a situation by themselves. In such cases, a boss must ask the subordinate to come up with a set of ways which can be used to solve a given problem. The boss and the subordinate can sit together and discuss the solution, instead of directly being shown the way. This would help a great deal, where in every individual takes greater responsibility and also feels confident in their own abilities to solve a problem.
- II. 89.7% of the respondents believe that a disagreement is constructive, yet only 52.4% of the respondents voice their opinions when they hold a contradictory view. A major reason for this is the fear of being wrong and being judged by others.
 - Saying yes to everything the boss says, might seem the safest way to take, to a subordinate. However, such a culture can be detrimental to the long term growth of an organization. To ensure greater flow of ideas, powerful people must make sure that everybody is given an opportunity to speak. This can be done through regular meetings at the team level. In meetings every individual must be prodded to give

his/her opinion on the discussion at hand. Individuals and their ideas must never be ridiculed. At the same time, good opinions and ideas must be actively applauded and appreciated. This would slowly take away the hesitation from even the most hesitant employees. When more people start voicing their opinions, quieter members would find encouragement in it, and slowly this would begin to become part of the company culture.

- Communicating the agenda of the meeting before hand, would give ample time for the participants to come prepared with better points of discussion. This would also help in saving time, as the participants would be ready with their points of view.
- Avenues to express anonymous feedback should be provided so that sensitive issues can be communicated and addressed.

III. The importance Indians give to a work environment that is supportive and friendly is seen in the survey responses. 64.7% of the members said that their ideal job would have such an atmosphere. This aspect is also seen in the way trust is built. Opportunities for growth comes at a close second. 60.3% of respondents feel that trust is built through relationships or by a combination of reliable work performance and relationship building. 64.7% of the respondents also take decisions by asking others opinions. All this data points to the importance of collaboration and building a supportive work environment.

- Building team spirit and close working environment is a step in the right direction. Team building activities and lunch/dinner outings are perfect avenues to build stronger work networks. This would play a huge role in reducing attrition. It is said that employees do not leave organizations but their bosses. Such situations can be avoided by strengthening the bond between employees.
- Communication between different functions of an organization should also be encouraged so that every function knows the challenges associated with the other's line of work and would help solving problems that require interdepartmental coordination, faster.
- To ensure that every individual in a team works for the common goal and also helps fellow teammates, reward schemes can be devised to reward both the individual performance and the team performance. Individuals will now be motivated to work, both for themselves and the team. A cumulative score can also be used in providing growth opportunities for employees who perform well on both the fronts.

IV. At 70.2%, majority of the respondents prefer a flexible working environment. The 29.8% of the respondents who prefer fixed processes are a chunk that cannot be ignored.

- Identify the people who would prefer flexible and fixed processes. Roles should be assigned keeping this internal alignment of their in mind. People who are comfortable with fixed processes can be directed to roles that have clear processes in place. Roles that require good amount of prior planning with very less possibility of intermediate change. While jobs that require constant adaptation can be entrusted to employees who are more comfortable with flexible situations.
- Clarity in the set goals both at the organizational level and individual level will contribute immensely to a positive work environment. Buy-ins from a participative goal setting will further add to the equation.

V. 68.7% respondents said that they would prefer critical feedback to be given directly. The CEOs on the other hand, spoke of the need to sugar coat feedback. Some of them also spoke about communicating feedback honestly yet in a way that did not sound rude.

- The way feedback is taken depends hugely on the personality of each individual. This is also influenced by the culture each one has been brought up in. There is no one size that fits all. A way that is sure to work is, by enabling performance rather than reviewing performance. Hence feedback sessions should be treated as an avenue to show the way to employees. To point out ways in which things could have been done better. To make sure that performance after every feedback session improves. This can be done by separating the individual from the work and showing better ways to do the same job.
- Since relationships form a major aspect of Indian work environment, managers must also ensure that this bias does not influence the way their subordinates are rated. A feeling of partiality in performance review can demotivate loyal employees which leads to attrition of good talent.

VI. Research Methodology:

Previous studies in the area of culture by Geert Hofstede and Erin Meyer formed the foundation on which the research was built. Primary research consisted of 25 in-depth interviews with CEOs, high and midlevel managers. The duration of all the interviews were in the range of 30 to 90 minutes. To get further perspective from a larger pool of working individuals, an online survey was circulated. The 252 responses of the survey along with insights gained from the in-depth interviews provided the base on which further analysis was conducted. Careful observation and analysis on the data thus gained, provided the insights that have been elaborated in this report.

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