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| <b>Abstract</b>               | <p>Knowing how future orientation varies from culture to culture can help leaders shift their attitude from judgmental to understanding and focus their collaborative efforts. A true global leader doesn't blame local teams for failing to immediately live up to their aspirations but rather helps them achieve long-term goals one step at a time.</p> |

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# Harvard Business Review

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## FORETHOUGHT GLOBALIZATION

### Forward-Thinking Cultures

by *Mansour Javidan*

It's hard to manage any organization so that its long-term interests aren't sacrificed to short-term expedience. But there is an added wrinkle for organizations whose operations are globally dispersed: Cultural orientation toward the future varies widely the world over.

My colleagues and I discovered this in the course of our work on the GLOBE project, a study now in its 15th year, that looks at how cultures vary in relation to a set of factors important to organizational management and leadership. By surveying over 17,000 middle managers in 61 societies, we have been able to discern clear differences in nine key areas. One of these is what we call "future orientation," or the extent to which a culture encourages and rewards such behavior as delaying gratification, planning, and investing in the future.

Our straightforward questions asked participants both to express their own values and to describe the environment in which they worked. For example, we presented them with the statement, "More people should live for the present than for the future" and asked for a level of agreement on a seven-point scale. In a separate question, we removed the word "should" and asked them to rank how well the statement described actual behavior in their culture. We found that societies vary greatly in how oriented they actually are to the long term, but in most cultures people's personal values and aspirations are similar and quite future oriented. What's more, most people feel their cultures aren't as forward thinking as they should be.

In our study, Singapore emerged as the most future oriented of cultures, followed by Switzerland, the Netherlands, and Malaysia. The least future oriented were Russia, Argentina, Poland, and Hungary. Squarely in the middle were Germany, Taiwan, Korea, and Ireland. Even more important, however, is our further finding that the greater a society's future orientation, the higher its average GDP per capita and its levels of innovativeness, happiness, confidence, and (as the chart shows) competitiveness.

## Competitive Countries Have an Eye on the Future



Source for competitive rankings: the World Economic Forum, 1998–2005.

What does this mean for an executive attempting to manage or work with teams in cultures that are less future oriented than their own? First, team members will have different perceptions of the feasibility of forward thinking. Even if the indigenous workers personally value long-term planning, they may see it as futile, given prevailing practices and conditions. But second, because of those shared values, it is possible to inspire people to become more future oriented. The key is to start modestly by setting team goals for, say, a three-month horizon and then ensuring they are met. By gradually increasing time horizons, a manager can endow a team with a sense of control over outcomes that formerly may have seemed hopelessly provisional and remote.

Knowing how future orientation varies from culture to culture can help leaders shift their attitude from judgmental to understanding and focus their collaborative efforts. A true global leader doesn't blame local teams for failing to immediately live up to their aspirations but rather helps them achieve long-term goals one step at a time.