

When American Isn't Individualistic: A Personal Take on Cultural Intelligence

Description

Cultural intelligence is the capability to function effectively across national, ethnic, and organizational cultures. • David Livermore, [Leading with Cultural Intelligence: The New Secret to Success](#)

There's a common idea that culture only refers to the customs or norms of people from different countries. But culture runs deeper, and closer, than many of us realize. One of the most powerful cultural dimensions is the spectrum between **individualism** and **collectivism**. Individualism emphasizes personal goals, autonomy, and individual rights. (Where most U.S. Americans fall) Collectivism, on the other hand, prioritizes group goals, harmony, and the strength of personal relationships. These values shape everything from how we make decisions to how we define success, and they can vary not only between countries, but within them.

As someone born and raised in the United States, I'm often assumed to hold strongly individualistic values. And yet, on this particular spectrum, I score far on the collectivist side. That might sound surprising until I tell you I grew up in rural Kansas.

In my small hometown, community comes first. We help our neighbors. We share a common language with words like *harvest*, *livestock sales*, and *field party*. We show up with casseroles and fill the church when someone is grieving. We pray together, play Friday night football together, and care deeply about our family names. Values like loyalty, harmony, and honoring relationships are the norm and expectations in rural America. In that environment, collectivism isn't foreign, it is foundational to who we are and where we come from. And there is a lot of pride in that.

These are the kinds of nuances that cultural intelligence (CQ) helps us uncover. CQ is the ability to relate and work effectively across cultures- not just national cultures, but generational, regional, organizational, and even familial cultures. It's about understanding and *respecting* that people approach the world differently, **not because they're difficult, but because they've been shaped by different lived experiences.**

The workplace is one of the most complex cultural intersections we navigate. Whether you're leading a global team, managing across departments, or collaborating in a hybrid environment, cultural differences are always at play. We can't afford to make assumptions. But with the right training and intentional coaching, teams can shift from miscommunication to mutual understanding, and from culture clash to leveraging culture strengths.

And while the concept may sound academic, the application is deeply human. CQ invites us to slow down, ask better questions, and examine our own assumptions. It asks us to consider the cultures we come from not just our country of origin, but our region, our upbringing, our industry and how those lenses shape the way we move through the world.

Here are a few reflection questions to consider:

- *In what subtle ways does your upbringing shape how you show up at work?*
- *Where might your personal values be bumping up against someone else's?*
- *How often do you pause to ask, "How might they see this differently?"*
- *What unspoken cultural norms might be influencing your team dynamics?*

Culture is not just about "them." It's also about *us*. And when we get curious, at both the macro and micro levels, we begin to unlock the kind of collaboration and trust that leads to real, sustainable success.

If you're ready to strengthen your team's ability to work across differences, I'd love to support that journey.

Category

1. Career
2. Entrepreneur
3. Leadership

Tags

1. collectivism
2. CQ
3. cultural curiosity
4. individualism
5. leadership
6. mindset
7. perspective taking
8. respect

Date Created

2025/07/06

default watermark