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Forward Thinking

By Paul Gibson



In a recent article published in the Harvard Business Review, Mr. Mansour Javidan presents a study on forward-thinking cultures and how multinational businesses need to deal with cultural differences around the world. In particular, he focused on one aspect: cultural orientation toward the future.

In their study, Mr. Javidan and his team defined the dilemma facing most global organisations or businesses with offices around the world: how to maintain long-term objectives, without sacrificing short-term expedience.¹

The survey was conducted among some 17,000 middle managers from 61 different communities around the world. They were all asked the same questions related to organisational management and leadership. The study revealed that there were approximately 9 key areas in which cultures tend to vary or differ.

One of these was their "orientation towards the future" or as Javidan defines it, "the extent to which a culture encourages and rewards such behavior as delaying gratification, planning, and investing in the future."²

The most important question regarding future orientation was whether or not people should live for the present, (*carpe diem*), or for the future. Then they modified this question by asking each one to give their opinion on whether or not people they work with actually do live for the

present, or if on the contrary, they are more future oriented.

They grouped the survey results by country and then ranked each country from least to greatest forward-thinking cultures. The final result?

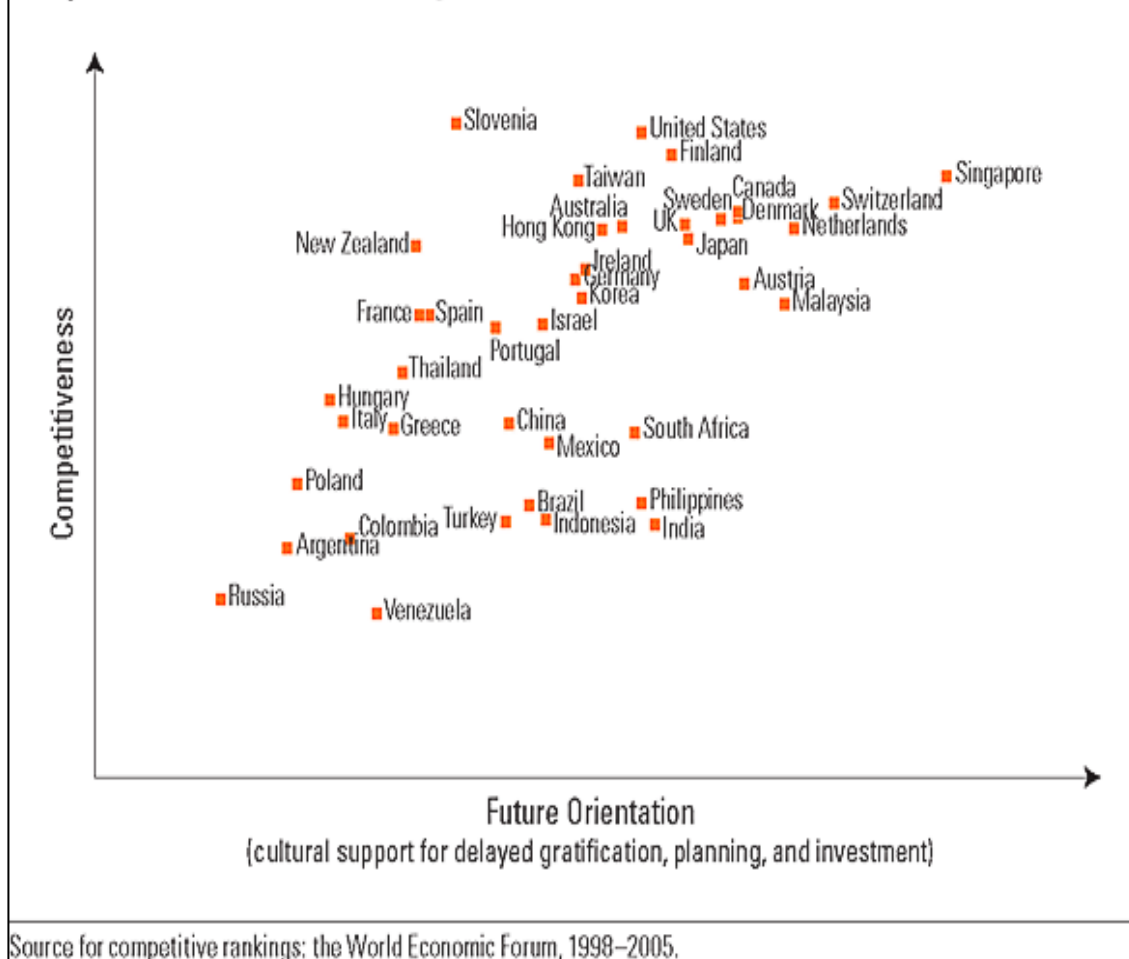
Singapore came out as the most forward-thinking culture, closely followed by Switzerland, the Netherlands, and Denmark. The least forward-thinking cultures were found in Russia, Argentina, Poland and Hungary. Other countries such as Germany, Taiwan and Korea ended up somewhere in between, followed by France & Spain.

More importantly though, Javidan's team discovered a clear and direct relationship between competitiveness and future-orientation (more forward thinking equals more competitiveness). Furthermore, they discovered that the more competitive a country is, the more gross domestic product they produce per capita and the more innovative, happy, and confident they are.

Which leads to an important question: how should executives manage teams in cultures with less future orientation? Mr. Javidan focused on a very specific observation: people have different perceptions on the feasibility of forward thinking. So regardless of whether or not an individual personally values long-term planning, they may see it as useless given the working conditions they are surrounded by. Another important observation was that people can actually be taught forward thinking. Javidan cites an example where a manager can start out by setting short-term goals or deadlines, and gradually lengthen them in time. Each time, the team will develop a more positive control over the outcome or final product that they were lacking before.

Finally, the study concludes by highlighting the fact that managers who know the degree of future orientation of their teams can change their own attitude toward these cultures and focus their workload as a team better. So instead of getting frustrated by slow progress or not meeting deadlines, managers not only become more understanding with their multi-cultural employees, but they also take their team members by the hand and walk them through the project. Nothing like teamwork!

Competitive Countries Have an Eye on the Future



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