

# High and Low Power Distance

*by Sophia Tutorial*



## WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we'll discuss the different cultural worldviews regarding power. In particular, we'll focus on:

1. Types of Power Distance
  - a. High Power Distance
  - b. Low Power Distance
2. Power Distance in Conflict

## 1. Types of Power Distance

Cultures vary in how they view power and authority and how they perceive that it should be distributed within society.

This relates to power distance, or the size of the gap between people in a society in terms of how power and rights are distributed in that particular culture.

There are two types of power distance:

- High power distance
- Low power distance

Cultures can fall anywhere between these two distances; some are more in the middle, some are more toward one of the extremes. There's a spectrum in terms of where different cultures can fall.

### 1a. High Power Distance

**High power distance** refers to a cultural worldview that some people are due more respect, power, and rights based on status or some other characteristic.

Typically in a high power distance culture, authority is concentrated among a few people rather than equally distributed throughout society. Thus, people in a culture like this would be less likely to question authority in the workplace or elsewhere.

People in these types of cultures are given rights, respect, and authority based on their perceived status. But this status is, or can be, contextually dependent in many cases.

➦ **EXAMPLE** Someone could gain status through wealth or education; however, this person might be a member of a discriminated-against minority in that particular culture, where a member of the majority would still consider them a lower status. These two status markers are at interplay, and the result will determine how rights and authority are distributed to this individual.



#### TERM TO KNOW

### High Power Distance

A cultural worldview which holds that some individuals are due greater respect, consideration, power, and/or rights due to a unique status or characteristic.

#### 1b. Low Power Distance

In contrast, cultures that are **low power distance** hold a worldview that all people are entitled to equal rights, power, authority, and respect regardless of status or any other characteristic.

When we look at the differences here between high power and low power distance in terms of culture, we may determine that the United States falls closer to the low-power distance end of the spectrum.

However, in the United States, you can see situations similar to the above example about status markers in a high power distance culture. There still is an interplay that can take place in some contexts and settings in a culture that is more low power distance.



#### TERM TO KNOW

### Low Power Distance

A cultural worldview which holds that all individuals, regardless of status or characteristics are entitled to equal respect, consideration power and/or rights.

---

## 2. Power Distance in Conflict

When someone from a low power distance culture is interacting with someone from a high power distance culture, there can sometimes be miscommunication or even conflict.

### IN CONTEXT

Raj is a manager in a low power distance culture. He is managing a team that comes from a culture that's more high power distance. Raj believes in being a team player and getting input from people on the team when moving ahead on a project or making decisions. This is because communication in low power distance cultures is more horizontal.

Now Raj is working with people from a high power distance culture where the chain of communication is more vertical or hierarchical. When managing in a culture like that, someone will typically make a decision without involving their subordinates. If Raj decides to involve his subordinates with the intention of being a team player, he could lose respect in terms of his ability to be an authority figure.

Remember that we're talking about a broad general perspective, and how it applies to cultures. Not

everybody in a particular culture is going to behave or perceive things exactly the same way, so we need to be careful of stereotyping.

As a mediator in the conflict resolution process, you may encounter a situation in which one of the parties is from a high power distance culture and the other is from a low power distance culture.

It's important to address the party that comes from a more high power distance culture in a more formal manner. Don't ignore status if it's important to that person.

➦ **EXAMPLE** If the person introduces themselves using a last name, you may want to be more formal and use your last name, and not immediately move onto a first-name basis, the way we might typically do here in parts of the United States.

In terms of the party from the low power distance culture, you need to make sure that you reassure them that everyone in this process is seen as equals; in the conflict resolution process, people are given equal opportunities to speak and to be heard.



#### BIG IDEA

There are two ways of looking at power and authority: low power distance and high power distance. These are different cultural views, and cultures can fall anywhere on this spectrum. When people from two different viewpoints interact, there can sometimes be miscommunication or conflict.



#### HINT

It's also important to be aware of what your own cultural viewpoint is, and how you view power and authority, especially if you're walking into a situation with someone from another culture who has a different view.



#### SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that there are two **types of power distance**, or the size of the gap between people in a culture in terms of how authority and rights are distributed: high power distance and low power distance. You now understand that **power distance can play a role in conflict** when a person from a high power distance culture is interacting with a person from a low power distance culture. As a mediator in the conflict resolution process, you want to make sure that you respect both worldviews and adapt your interactions with the parties accordingly. Good luck!

Source: Adapted from Sophia tutorial by Marlene Johnson.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### High Power Distance

A cultural worldview which holds that some individuals are due greater respect, consideration, power, and/or rights due to a unique status or characteristic.

##### Low Power Distance

A cultural worldview which holds that all individuals, regardless of status or characteristics are entitled to equal respect, consideration power and/or rights.

