

## Introduction:

For this activity, you will learn how to define and identify features of low and high power distance through a case study and will reflect on your own relation to authority.

As a reminder, **power distance** is about a society's attitude toward authority and inequality-- how a group deals with people's different levels of status and their access to power. It is particularly manifest in workplace relations.

People in societies with **high power distance** accept hierarchy and hold that inequalities in power and status are natural. Those with power tend to emphasize it, hold it close, and distinguish themselves from those without it. Authority is reinforced through external signs such as titles, and authorities are expected to be distant from subordinates. Those with power, however, are also expected to accept great responsibility and to look after those beneath them. Subordinates are not expected to take initiative and are closely supervised.

People in societies with **low power distance** view inequalities in power and status as largely artificial and tend to emphasize equal rights and power sharing. Those with power, therefore, tend to minimize the differences between themselves and subordinates so as to be approachable and to delegate and share power to some degree. Subordinates are rewarded for taking initiative and do not like close supervision.

(Based on concepts developed by Geert Hofstede and adapted in Storti, C. (1997). *Culture matters: The Peace Corps cross-cultural workbook*.)

## Participant Instructions:

1. Your leader will divide you into groups. In your group, read through the case study below, then discuss the following questions. You may want to refer to the definitions above.

*Sudha, Emma, Wang, and Ahmed are working on a six-week team research project that requires collecting samples in local river sediment to study mineral content. They will have to send off the samples to a research lab for chemical analysis by the end of week 2 to ensure there's time for writing up their findings. The team has agreed that each member will collect two samples from specific spots around the county. They also agreed that Wang would be team leader.*

*Toward the end of Week 1, Sudha and Ahmed are both quarantined for COVID-19 for two weeks and can't contribute to sample collection. Messages are flying on the team chat, as Wang's phone shows:*



## 2. Discuss:

- Based on the group phone chat, which team members lean toward the **high power distance** pole? What words or actions in the chat suggest this leaning?
- Which of the examples below demonstrate a **low power distance** perspective? Why?
  - When Emma refers to the professor by her first name
  - When Emma suggests they consult the professor for a solution
  - When Sudha shares that she is quarantined
  - When Sudha proposes a solution that identifies possible actions for each team member
- In terms of power distance, which team member do you identify with most? Why?
- Which team member do you think would be most challenging for you to work with? Why?



### 3. Large group debrief:

- In the case study, who did your group determine comes from the perspective of high power distance? Low power distance?
- In terms of power distance, where are you on the continuum? Do you always operate with the same perspective in every situation? Explain.
- Where do you think you developed your understanding of power distance?
- How might different understandings of power distance lead to conflict? Provide examples if you can think of any.
- What are some things you can do when there are different understandings of power distance in your group or team?
- What did you learn through today's activity, and how will you apply it?