

Two Kinds of Cultures; Two Ways of Thinking

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In the reduced level of understanding created by diversity, a transcultural leader or manager must be able to shift back and forth from a mindset which says that communicating means saying something to someone else that will further a relationship out of which appropriate actions will come, to a one which sees communicating as a collaborative effort between people to create meaning and action together. The first mindset is more representative of a higher context, or what we choose to call a "more tightly woven" (MTW) culture where the participants share a larger context of understanding whenever they speak to each other. Most of the new entrants to the workforce today are coming from MTW cultural groups, (women, Latin and Asian immigrants, etc.) than the American workplace has been accustomed to.

The second mindset is normal in lower context, or "more loosely knit" (MLK) cultures or organizations where assumptions must be constantly checked and agreements hammered out. Since an organization with many cultures de facto becomes more loosely knit, the transcultural leader or manager, however MTW or MLK her or his native background may be, must know how to operate out of both mindsets to communicate well. She or he must also know how to help others make similar mind shifts. In effect it means that she or he must be able to move back and forth between the columns below.

The MTW Mindset	The MLK Mindset
<p data-bbox="201 909 707 1010">MEANING IS CONTAINED IN AND COMMUNICATED BY WORDS (SYMBOLS, ACTIONS, ETC)</p> <ol data-bbox="142 1025 772 1850" style="list-style-type: none">1. If the words (symbols, actions, etc.) are the same, then the message is the same for both the speaker and the hearer.2. It's the work of the hearer to listen correctly to the speaker's message and understand its nuances.3. Hearers misunderstand or speakers choose the wrong way to express what they mean—this is usually how communication fails.4. Feedback is of little importance. Assent, or at least, harmony is.5. One-way communication is normally all that's needed.6. The speaker concentrates time and effort mostly on creating the correct message.7. Differences usually imply that someone, either speaker or hearer, has made a mistake.8. People can be blamed for failing to speak or hear correctly. Not getting the message can bring shame on both speakers and listener.9. Credibility comes from the authority of the speaker.	<p data-bbox="876 909 1394 972">MEANING IS CREATED HERE AND NOW BY PEOPLE</p> <ol data-bbox="810 987 1487 1834" style="list-style-type: none">1. Words and listening are conditioned by each person's cultural background and experience. Even within the same culture no two people are exactly the same; thus, they don't listen the same way and perceive the same things.2. Two people must cooperate by exchanging how they listen, in order to create understanding and commitments that are as congruent as possible.3. Misunderstanding occurs when the speaker and hearer do not work effectively toward congruent listening.4. Congruence, understanding, and agreement cannot occur without feedback. Conflict is a stage on the way to agreement.5. Two-way exchanges are required for all but perhaps the simplest messages.6. Time and effort are distributed between preparing and choosing the initial message, obtaining feedback, and forming further messages.7. Each according to their culture and background will formulate the same issue in different ways.8. People can create meaning best when they disclose what they listen to and when they listen actively to each other.9. Credibility and reliability come from the quality of collaboration between communicators.

MISMATCHED CONTEXTS

How do we pass between these mindsets? Two imaginary pictures might help. First, imagine a computer. If you type in the right commands and press the return key, you invariably get the result you are looking for, except in the rare situation where there has been a malfunction. When you don't get the

results you expect, when people behave out of context, you assume that something is wrong with them. This is how it feels when a communicator from a MTW culture has a breakdown with someone from a MLK one. Next, imagine playing paddleball on the beach. The fun comes from seeing how long you can keep the ball in the air by hitting it back and forth. The game is frustrating and you soon quit if one partner rarely hits the ball back. This breakdown occurs when a communicator from a MLK background encounters someone from a more tightly woven MTW context.

Here are some examples of the breakdowns that occur when people with mismatched contexts communicate:

- A **Japanese** (MTW) manager gives an order to US American workers (MLK) and is annoyed to find it disputed and resented. The manager begins to distrust the subordinates and their motivation.
- A **Swedish** (MLK) manager makes a request of her Turkish (MTW) subordinates and finds that they carry it out so literally, “without thinking,” that the desired results are not achieved. The manager accuses them of malicious obedience.
- A **Filipino** seaman (MTW) is being disciplined by his Norwegian first officer (MLK). The seaman remains silent as the first officer pushes for an explanation or apology. The first officer thinks the seaman does not get the message, doesn't care about the situation, or is guilty of even more than originally suspected. To make matters worse, the Norwegian first officer publically belabors the point and raises his voice with the Filipino seaman who doesn't appear to get the message, admit fault, or apologize. Resentment builds up in the subordinate. He stops communicating and becomes ineffective at his job for the rest of the voyage.
- A **Canadian** consultant (MLK) while being gently criticized by her Indonesian client (MIW) argues in her own defense. The client sees the consultant as rude and unteachable and, therefore, incompetent.
- A young British data processing trainer (MLK) is working with a group of Sri Lankan trainees (MTW). Because the trainees ask no questions, the trainer assumes they have grasped all that she has said.
- A newly arrived **Swiss** manufacturing manager (MLK) consults his Pakistani assembly line workers (MTW) about the steps he should take to install a quality inspecting system. They are embarrassed for him because it seems that he does not know how to do his job. They are reluctant to make suggestions. He sees them as unthinking and uncooperative.

The transcultural leader may have to employ both MTW and MLK communication skills to create congruent messages and objectives. Congruence means not only that two people settle on the same meaning or direction, but also that they are confident that this has actually taken place. This shows up as a certain degree of comfort with themselves and each other, some assurance that they are on the same wavelength.