



Know Yourself, Understand Others, Improve Your Relationships

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Introduction

Have you ever heard these statements? “They’re not like us.” “They don’t have our values.” “We invited them, but they’re not interested, so they don’t come.” “They just don’t care about doing better.” You may recognize these comparisons as judgment statements. Why are such statements made? Is there a lack of understanding? Do you recognize fear in any of the statements? Perhaps people fear what they do not understand. Do people interact with those they fear or do not understand? How do people break down the barriers of fear, misunderstanding, and judgment? If “they” are “not like us,” do we take the time and/or the steps to learn more about others? Hopefully, the answer is “yes.” Read on for better understanding of why people may fear others who are different, what may impede quality communication, and what challenges people face in building relationships with those from differing backgrounds or origins.

First of all, a genuine desire to learn about other cultures has to be innate. No one can demand, require, or force you to be interested in interacting with someone from different origins than your own. But what if you wanted to reach out to someone from a different culture with educational materials or a business prospect, for example? With rapid population changes in the United States — indeed, around the world — it has become increasingly important to break down the cultural barriers that impede interpersonal communications and trusting relationships.

Avoiding people who are different is not practical in education, service, business arenas, or community life. People who are isolated and have no friends or associates cannot exchange obligations or share expectations with

Avoiding people who are different could be easier, but it is not practical in education, service, business arenas, or in human development.

others (Coleman, 1994). Globally, countries grow daily in ethnic, cultural, and human diversity, so now may be timely for learning some steps for moving toward “cultural pluralism.” Often called integration or multi-culturalism,

cultural pluralism reflects individuals who are highly adaptive to more than one culture (Valdivia, C., Jeanetta, S., Flores, L. Y. Morales, A., and D. Martinez, 2012). A well-integrated community, with many distinctive populations, is marked by people who interact with one another without judgment and are more likely to appreciate human differences or diversity.



Research and best practice suggest some preliminary actions for reaching families, audiences, or individuals not living in “mainstream” U. S. cultures. Primarily, there must be an understanding of your own traditions, patterns, and personal biases. This is a beginning step toward comprehension of differing customs and paves the way for building relationships with others who do not come from your background or traditions. Understanding yourself and others leads to building and strengthening relationships (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005). First, consider a definition of diversity.

Diversity

Often times, when one speaks of diversity, there are connotations of race, ethnicity, and people of other cultural backgrounds. That is not always true. The definition of diverse is simply: variety, different, varied, mixed, and distinct. Notice your own family, which whom you have had a life-long relationship. You will find many things that make you different from one another. You will see physical, intellectual, belief, and many other differences. But do you dwell on those differences? It’s likely that you do not, because you have a vested interest in one another. Is it

possible to develop similar relationships with other people? That is not definite, but research and experience show that better knowledge of one another leads to greater unity in human groups (Shapiro interview, 2001).

Cultural Patterns

What is culture? Your culture is the lens through which you see the world, and it lets you know how to act within that realm by what is modeled around you. Culture is part of human identity. Humans seem to function best around others of similar identities. All humans belong to a culture. It could be a work culture, a culture of religious faith, an educational culture, a culture of socio-economic status, or even a culture of scooter riders. The point is, there are many cultures other than those of ethnicities or creeds. Persons can belong to many cultures and practice more than one cultural pattern. There are five questions in cultural patterns:

1. What is the character of human nature?
2. What is the relationship of humankind to nature?
3. What is the orientation toward time?
4. What is the value placed on activity?
5. What is the relationship of people to each other?

Understanding cultural patterns teaches why humans have cultural biases. Understanding cultural patterns lays a foundation for learning that another culture is not wrong, somehow lesser, or better if it is divergent from your own background or experience. Let's explore difference and similarity across cultures. See if you can identify your own cultural pattern. Each of the cultural patterns is divided, basically, into five categories: human nature, humans and nature, time orientation, activity orientation, and social orientation (Adapted from Ting-Toomey, 1999).

Human Nature

Basically evil:

- Humans are intrinsically evil — from Puritan ancestry

Mixture of good/evil:

- Is part of the world and cannot be eliminated — needs dual approach

Basically good:

- “People are good, but society makes them evil”

Humans and Nature

Subordinate:

- Powerful forces outside control — must accept and yield to

Harmony:

- Part of life — all things connect — not a hostile force

Master of Nature:

- Direct to our advantage, dominate — “Tame it”
- Structuring of markets and buyer influence

Time Orientation

Past:

- History, traditions and religion are important
- Value ancestral wisdom — “Look to the past to guide the future”

Present:

- Future is vague — “Real” exists here and now — situation-bound

Future:

- U. S. Dominant, goal-bound
- Focus on “What is going to happen?” — control the future

Activity Orientation

Being:

- People, events, and ideas “flow” — “Simple act of conversation”

Being-in-becoming:

- Development, growth, spiritual life and emotional vitality

Doing:

- Activity and action, Accomplishments measured — U. S. Dominant
- No time to “sit and talk” — life in constant motion

Social

Authoritarian (Linear):

- “Born to lead” — Others must follow — perception that this is the “norm”

Collective:

- Group most important — can be passive — “Don't draw attention to oneself”

Individual:

- U.S. Constitution — Autonomous
- Control over one's destiny — “All else “violates the will of God”

Clear communication among humans can be affected or influenced by differing cultural patterns, by semantics (meaning of words as they relate to sense, reference, implication, and/or logical aspects), and by regional, social, educational and/or ethnic background. Can you think of a word from your childhood that now has a different meaning for you as an adult? Do you define certain words differently than a work colleague or a friend? Other influences on communications include geographical locations, gender, native language, discipline (job), and family. Can you readily identify your own cultural patterns? Can your cultural patterns prevent you from reaching out to others from different backgrounds or cultures? Do your cultural patterns affect communication with those from other cultures? Be clear about what constitutes a culture.

Think of:

- Family Systems/Structures
- Ways of Knowing
- Legacies/ Heritage
- Ethnicities
- Belief Systems
- Regionalisms
- Folkways and Mores
- Socio-economic placements
- Historical Allegiances

Communication and Building Relationships

“The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.” This sentiment comes from the 19th Century Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw. Have you ever spoken to another person and walked away thinking that he or she understood what you said only to discover the opposite was true? If the person with whom you spoke did not understand what you said, no communication took place. The challenges of clear and understandable communication escalate when the communicators come from different backgrounds — socially, culturally, and linguistically. Understanding how we hear one another, will improve communication. Also, communication improves as relationships strengthen.

Relationships

Daniel Goleman calls it “amae,” which is a Japanese word for peoples’ attunement with one another. The stronger your human relationships, the more open and attentive you are likely to be with one another. As you build interpersonal relationships with others, whether they are “like” you or not, the notion of difference fades. Or, you may notice more difference, but the understanding of that distinction moves you toward acceptance or appreciation.

Personal Bias

Much material has been written on personal attitudes toward difference (Marofsky, 2008). To move toward cross-cultural interactions, you must have an understanding of personal biases. Marofsky developed the “Tolerance Scale” in which humans come to understand their own attitudes toward difference.

- **Appreciation:** Values the difference of others and believe that difference enhances your own life.
- **Acceptance:** Difference does not really matter to you. You tend to look for commonalities and try to ignore difference.
- **Tolerance:** You don’t feel completely comfortable with difference. You will treat those you view as different with respect, but you would rather not have them as associates.
- **Avoidance:** Difference clearly makes you

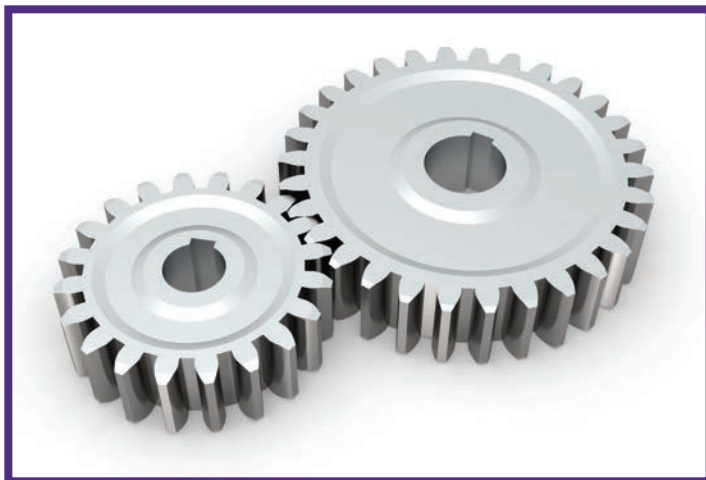
uncomfortable. You try to avoid and do not want to work with those who are different.

- **Repulsion:** Difference is not seen as “normal.” Working or coming in contact with those are different causes you a lot of discomfort.

These points are not to describe a “right” or “wrong” in being. Rather, it is to promote the notion that all humans have biases. In order to move others, as facilitators, toward understanding barriers to building relationships, it is best to recognize personal reasons for obstacles to trusting and experiencing satisfying interactions.

What are the advantages of building relationships with those who are different from you?

Working toward cultural pluralism or integration does not require one party to give up identity or a belief system. That would be more like forced assimilation. Hegemony, (Flora & Flora, 2012) is when one ethnic or economic culture dominates another, which also would be the opposite of pluralism or integration. Multi-cultural pluralistic communities have people who work in tandem with one another. Think of the parts of a gear. Two rotating cogwheels have teeth that enmesh to transmit motion. The gears do not melt into one another. They work in concert to move forward. They may be different, but they work together toward the common goal of forward movement.



If humans interacted in such harmony, a community would be at an advantage. Multi-cultural pluralistic communities are marked by social cohesion, which is a product of adept cross-cultural communication.

Cultural Pluralism: People from other countries are here to stay in the United States. In order for communities to prosper and become resilient, the questions are no longer about marginalizing individuals and families outside the “mainstream.” It puts extra strain on resources. The more you know about people from other cultures, the more you understand that how much is common to the human race.

Integration: Becoming a pluralist community assures

stronger wealth-building and sustainability. Integration becomes a key concept in building human, social, cultural, and economic capital (Flora & Flora, 2012; Valdivia & Jeanetta, 2013).

Cohesion: Communities that act collectively in decision-making processes have better health outcomes, stronger local government, lower crime rates, and stronger family units (Putnam, 2000a; Glaeser, 2001).

What does this mean?

Whether you work in education, business, human service, or in your families, you all benefit from clear and comprehensible communication. At any time during interpersonal interaction or in building relationships, if you do not understand one another, or if there is judgment on one another, communication does not take place. The opportunity to build a relationship may pass as well. Learning about the origins of thought or the cultural background of others does not ask you to give up anything that you hold dear. Learning about others enhances your ability to interact with a wider range of people. If you have an educational message, a wider audience avails you of more who have benefited from your clearer communication. Development, growth, spiritual life, and emotional vitality are affected through clearer communication as well.

How can you reach out to others?

- Volunteer your time.
- Be deliberate about learning from others.
- Put a human face on those you don't understand or fear.
- Be empiricists — find out for yourselves if what you hear is true.
- Remember that difference is just difference.
- Observe *mindful* value comparisons.

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