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TWO CULTURALLY DIVERSE WAYS OF THINKING: PERSPECTIVES FOR REFRESHING TRANSCULTURAL LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT PRAXIS WITH COGNITIVE INTEGRITY

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Abstract

This article addresses the challenge of updating intercultural research, theory and practice in order to allow it to benefit from the currently available knowledge stemming from the growing discoveries of neuro-biological sciences. It suggests not that we abandon previous approaches and activities created to foster intercultural learning, but recommends that such elements be re-examined and updated in the light of the new scientific definition of holistic human nature and cognitive integrity. It offers one example of an attempt at updating an exercise involving the concepts of high and low context, common in intercultural theory and discourse. It positions these earlier-recognized diverse dynamics in the context of the framing function of the mind. It then suggests that we not start by automatically learning and practicing new communicative behaviors, supposedly (and often stereotypically) attributed to a specific culture, but rather that we begin our exploration with the awareness of how we automatically frame both our own communication patterns and those of others. Thus, we can use mindful attention to reframe them and choose behaviors as required by the objectives of the communication and the context in which it occurs.

Key words: Mind Frames, Transcultural Leadership, Cognitive Integrity, Contextual awareness, Updating cultural activities

In the reduced level of understanding brought about by the presence and encounter of diverse participants, a transcultural leader or manager must be able to shift back and forth from a mind frame 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 mind frame is more representative of what we used to call, in the terms created by Edward Hall, “a higher context”, or what we choose now to call metaphorically a “more tightly woven” (MTW) culture, where the participants generally share a broad nexus of common assumptions and understandings whenever they speak to each other. While generational affinities seem to be bridging gaps to a greater degree, many of the new entrants to the workforce today are coming from more MTW cultural groups, (women, Latin and Asian immigrants, etc.) than many European and North American workplaces have been accustomed to.

The second mind frame is normal in what we used to commonly call “lower context”, and now I will choose to refer to as “more loosely knit” (MLK) cultures or organizations where assumptions must be constantly checked, and agreements negotiated or hammered out. In the context of globalization and advancing technological communication devices and practices, organizations with many cultures are likely de facto to slowly become more loosely

knit.

What do the more graphic fruit of the loom or of the needle metaphors add to the discussion? Nothing more than a sidestep from a higher level of abstraction? In my opinion, shifts of this kind from the abstract interpretative dimensions of culture to the more iconic presentation of imagery are critically important if we are to escape from stereotypical labels with which we so easily frame ourselves and others. Images are not only references and metaphors, but they connect to our senses and our feelings in a way that hearing abstract terms fail to do. In short, they lead us in the direction of using our cognitive integrity to perceive self, others, and the world and enable a greater sense of connection.

It is an intriguing topic for research as to how cultures developed historically to more or less favor one of these two communications frames. My suspicion in this respect would be that factors in the shift might have involved isolation versus mobility, large scale migration into new mixed contexts where explicitness was required for understanding, e.g., the populations of USA and Canada. The impact of imperialism and colonization, etc., are likely to have led in this direction, and today the march of globalization is a likely contributor to the unraveling of the threads of MTW. I would welcome and encourage further research into this and other cultural features from a historical perspective. There seems all too little historical reflection on the genesis of our mind frames to date.

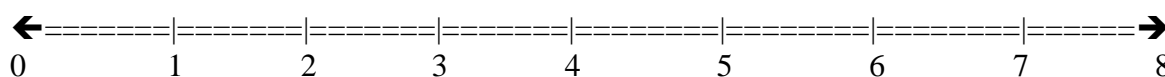
Today's transcultural leader or manager, however MTW or MLK her or his native background or even genetic stamp may be, must know how to operate out of and mediate between both mindsets to communicate well, as well as to create for the organization and its members a climate in which the differences are recognized for what they are and can be respectfully and effectively bridged. She or he must also know how to help others make similar mind frame shifts, understanding their own communication frames and developing awareness to those of others.

In effect, this means that she or he must become adept at moving back and forth between the descriptive mind frame columns I have created below, realizing that these are the potential extremes of a continuum, and, that in this continuum the behaviors of each party are not necessarily purely or precisely defined. Rather, the range of communication behaviors may shift, not only out of cultural proclivities, but as well from the contextual frameworks in which a communication is to take place. Other cultural factors such as age, levels of familiarity, hierarchy, relationship, stress, environment, etc., as well as the nature of and reason for the communication event may determine where and how on the continuum communication behavior will be framed.

Despite the existence of cultural continua, it is important to realize that we will hinder our effectiveness by labelling or stereotyping others or ourselves. This is a device for refining self-awareness and delicate touching of each other/s realities. It is about connectivity of the fabric of mentality and our presence to each other. To extend the cloth metaphor, it is about sewing together a patchwork quilt that will not hide but openly display variety in a way that will protect us from the cold winter blasts of misunderstanding and conflict.

MIND THE MTW–MLK FRAME CONTINUUM

Examine where you and others with whom you are challenged to communicate may perceive that we/they lie along the path between these two ways of framing communication in different cultural and language systems. The scores do not imply higher or lower value but simply mark the closeness or distance of the described communicative behaviors as each partner operates out of his or her own frame wherever it is found on the continuum.



The MTW Mind Frame

MEANING IS CONTAINED IN & COMMUNICATED BY COMMONLY UNDERSTOOD WORDS (SYMBOLS, ACTIONS, ETC.)

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 in common situations.
6. The speaker concentrates time and effort mostly on creating the correct message.
7. Differences in understanding 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.

The MLK Mind Frame

MEANING IS CREATED HERE & NOW, NEGOTIATED BY PEOPLE

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 negotiating agreement.
5. Two-way exchanges are likely to be 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.

THE COST OF MISMATCHED MENTAL FRAMES

How do we pass between these mindsets, shift the frames out of which we operate and with which we see each other? 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 are looking for, when people behave "out of context", your knee-jerk reaction is that something is either wrong with them or that something unseen or unspoken has gone wrong, something that perhaps you as well as they are unaware of. This is most likely to be how it feels when a communicator from a MTW culture has a breakdown with someone from a MLK one. Is likely to cause pain and separation rather than stimulate the curiosity to explore and understand the frames out of which each of the actors behaved.

Next, imagine playing paddleball on the beach with a partner. The fun comes from seeing how long you can keep the ball in the air by hitting it back and forth and improving your skills to do so. The game is frustrating and is likely to end soon if one partner rarely hits the ball back. This breakdown commonly occurs when a communicator from a MLK background encounters someone from a MTW context. We are tempted to stop trying and look for an escape route rather than continue working to create a better human synapse.

Here, taken from my experience, are some international examples of the breakdowns that can occur when people with mismatched contexts communicate. Each of them points to the mental frames they are likely to automatically generate in the mind of one or both of the communicators:

- A **Japanese** (MTW) manager gives a direct order to **US American** workers (MLK) and is annoyed if not shocked to find it disputed and resented. In this frame of mind, the manager may begin 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 may begin at least mentally to accuse 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 for the seaman's behavior. The first officer automatically 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, not getting the expected response, 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 with the officer and becomes ineffective at his job for the rest of the voyage. There may be an automatic inclination to vengeful behavior.

- 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. She is later bewildered by the lack of appropriate response and judges the trainees to be incompetent.
- A newly arrived **German Swiss** manufacturing manager (MLK) consults his **Pakistani** assembly line workers (MTW) about the steps he should take to install a quality inspection 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 jumps to the conclusion that they are unthinking and uncooperative.

The transcultural leader or manager may have to become acquainted with and employ some both MTW and MLK communication behaviors to create congruent messages and objectives and meet each other's expectations of the exchange. 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 in a non-violent and non-invasive way. This shows up as a certain degree of comfort with themselves and each other, some assurance that they are at least partly on the same wavelength as a result of their exchange.

Unfortunately, the road to building a third culture of communication in such situations is a lengthy one and requires awareness, practice and reflection. This is a challenge to how intercultural communication is most often taught, namely through lecture, reading, videos, etc., rather than hands-on in actual exchange between students or collaborators who bear the communication habits that differ on the continuum and require ongoing, surefooted coaching to acquire the skills to habitually bridge the gap.

A one-off class or training program may introduce the topic and explain the dynamics of the communication styles, but such knowledge is rarely activated simply by having been imparted. I often compare this failure to peeling onions in the kitchen. You peel off one layer and though the remaining onion may look a bit smaller, it looks the same. Peeling off another layer leaves the same effect, and so on...and you are crying all the time! Whether done by in-house trainers or hired professionals a single exposure to the issues of cross-cultural communication without follow up coaching and group or team cultural self-maintenance is of minimal value and is quickly forgotten in practice.

Recognition of this need and its value to the company or organization in both collaborative satisfaction and bottom line productivity is hard to come by and even harder to address on an ongoing basis. Leadership must make it a responsibility to have their teams meet together at least monthly not to discuss their work in its technical or mechanical terms, but in sessions exclusively dedicated to examining how they communicate and work together, how they share experiences, and how they resolve conflicts, whether apparent or real. This is the business of getting down to business with each other which supports the more pragmatic and technical discussions of the work at hand.

The intercultural field and its practitioners are experiencing a major, stormy sea change, a blessing in disguise, perhaps, as the dominance of positivism and dualistic thinking are being washed away in the flood of new discoveries of neuroscience and cognitive psychology. Daniel J. Siegel's recent publication of the *Pocket Guide to Interpersonal Neurobiology: An Integrative Handbook of the Mind*¹ is anything but a pocket guide, as it

¹ 2012. W. W. Norton & Company

offers an extremely detailed five hundred plus pages of detailed description of the functioning of the human system as we are now privileged to see it. Perhaps most enlightening is the realization that relationships are real, I want to say “tangible” elements created in the human system, as real as our fingers and toes. Likewise, real, visible and trackable is the function of mind management which enables us to regulate the flow of our energies within ourselves and between us. The intangible and abstract sense accorded to such terms as mind, spirit, self, soul, etc., are now open to biological and even genetic observation.

When it comes to exploring the significance of this for both the academic research into cultural understanding and its day-to-day use in the praxis of consulting and training, two intercultural professionals, David Shaules² and Mai Nguyen-Phuong-Mai³ are forerunners in seeing and applying the neuroscientific advances to how we perceive our thinking and our work in the cultural domain.

The all-too-common failures of diversity and intercultural classes or training programs, whether dealing with the specific issues of communication styles or other cultural elements, is that they fail to recognize this integral nature of human cognitive processes, a finding which is ongoingly reinforced by the research in the aforementioned neuro- and cognitive fields. We need consistent reminders and practice if we are to create and reinforce new neural pathways that allow us to connect more meaningfully with each other.

This has two major implications for those active in intercultural field. First, traditional dimensions and frameworks need both to be put into perspective and relativized in a way that allows us to use them more cautiously as valuable starting points in human conductivity. They can no longer be descriptive labels interpreting others behavior in our own terms, and then framing it in alienating, stereotypical fashion rather than empowering relationship. Of course, it is still necessary to know when and how to “kiss, bow, or shake hands”⁴, but we are now much more aware of the integral cognitive nature of these acts in their performative significance in the shaping of human relationships.

Thus, a second implication emerges, the task for intercultural professionals to create the kind of interactive learning experiences that reflect and use what we know about cognitive integrity today. The door is open for such creativity, and it does not have to occur ex nihilo. Rather a close examination of the tools of our trade can result in modifications and combinations of the items in our consulting and training toolbox. It can enrich them and make them much more effective than they have been.

This short essay, attempted at the outset to refresh and enliven more static and dualistic approaches to high and low context in the light of now unfolding contemporary research. It follows on a core concept articulated as a model in our book *Transcultural Leadership*⁵ a quarter of a century ago. Whether or not you find a successful and useful it is not necessarily the point. Rather, it is offered in the hope that you will engage in the examination of the items in your kit in the fresh focus of cognitive integrity, as well as launch out to create and share fresh perspectives and activities for our work.

² Shaules, Joseph, *The Intercultural Mind: Connecting Culture, Cognition, and Global Living*. 2015. Nicholas Brealey Publishers.

³ Mai Nguyen-Phuong-Mai, *Intercultural Communication: An Interdisciplinary Approach: When Neurons, Genes, and Evolution Joined the Discourse*. 2018 Amsterdam University Press.

⁴ Morrison, Terri and Wayne A. Conaway, *Kiss, Bow, Or Shake Hands: The Bestselling Guide to Doing Business in More Than 60 Countries* 2nd Edition, 2006. Adams Media. A version of this title is expected to be released soon, aimed at legal and courtroom behavior.

⁵ Simons, George, Carmen Vazquez and Philip R. Harris, *Transcultural Leadership: Empowering the Diverse Workforce*. 1993. Routledge.

Dr. George Simons consults, coaches and trains men's issues, intercultural competence, international negotiation and influence skills and global teamwork worldwide. He is an author of: *Working Together*, *Men and Women Partners at Work*, *Questions of Diversity*, *Keeping your Personal Journal*, *Transcultural Leadership*, *Sexual Orientation in the Workplace*, *EuroDiversity*, *Putting Diversity to Work*, and *Seven Ways to Lighten your Life*, in addition to creating and/or editing 70 *diversophy*[®] games, and collaborating in the development of eight *Cultural Detective*[®] instruments.

