

The Role of Culture in Partnerships

Objectives:

As a result of this presentation, participants will be able to:

- Define culture;
- Discuss individual cultural backgrounds;
- Relate what culture is and how culture informs all that we do;
- Explain how culture affects communication; and
- Explain the role of culture in partnership development.

The Role of Culture in Partnerships

Main Points

- **Culture is learned**
 - We learn our culture through a process called “Enculturation.”
 - Learning culture is largely unconscious, especially when we are young; but as we get older and are trying to learn another culture, it can and does become conscious.
 - When we are young, we learn culture from our parents, siblings, teachers, and later from our friends.
 - Sometimes culture is taught directly, i.e., when parents tell a child to say thank you, or to wash their hands before dinner or after they’ve gone to the bathroom (ideal versus real), or to speak only when spoken to.
 - Culture is also transmitted through observation, i.e., children pay attention to what is going on around them and unconsciously or consciously model themselves after that, or NOT.
 - When in a new job, we take our cues, art of learning the new organizational culture, from our co-workers.

- **Culture is symbolic**

- A symbol is anything (words/utterance, icon or material thing or even a natural phenomena that is given special meaning) to which some group of people have assigned an arbitrary meaning that may well have nothing to do with the thing itself.
- Examples from western culture: Dove = peace; Oak tree = strength; Olive branch = peace
- A large part of our cultural meaning comes from understanding symbols.
- Only people (as opposed to other animals) use symbols, and all cultural groups use symbols.
- Difference between symbols and signs.
- Culture is arbitrary (to a certain extent).

- **Culture is shared**

- Culture is an attribute not of individuals per se but rather of individuals as members of groups.
- The social transmission of culture tends to unify people by providing us with a common experience.
- We learn it through observation/listening/talking and interacting with people.
- Shared cultural beliefs, values, memories, expectations, and ways of thinking often (but not always) override differences in people.
- The commonality of experience in turn tends to generate a common understanding of future events.
- Americans often have difficulty understanding the power of culture because of the value that American culture places on individuality.
- In America, individuality is a shared cultural trait (you're unique, you're special, you can do anything YOU want to do.....).

- **Culture is patterned**
 - Learned patterns of behavior

- **Culture is adaptive and Culture is maladaptive**

- **Culture takes the natural biological urges that all humans have and that we share with all animals and teaches us to express it in cultural ways**
 - i.e., eating (when and what), sex, waste elimination, shelter

 - but also fight/flight impulse (what are culturally appropriate ways to deal with this?)

- **A definition of culture:**

- Culture is a set of rules or standards, that, when acted upon by the members of a society, produces behavior that falls within a range of variance the members consider proper and acceptable.
- Culture consists of abstract values, beliefs, and perceptions of the world that lie behind peoples' behavior and that their behavior reflects. These are shared by members of society, and when acted upon, they produce behavior considered acceptable within that society.
- Culture is what is normal to all that are part of it.
- We don't think about it — but culture is who we are — It provides the basic parameters to our understanding of how things work. We assume that others share our understanding, and when they don't, it can be confusing or even cause conflict.

- **Culture informs all that we do**

- What assumptions do we make about others based on our cultural background?
- Think about Gender/ethnic/education/disciplinary background and how that affects how we think about the world? others?
- How can it affect partnerships?

- **Culture must:**

- Satisfy the basic needs of those who live by its rules.
- Provide for continuity and provide an orderly existence for members of society.
- Strike balance between self interests of individuals and needs of society as a whole.
- Change and adapt to new circumstances.

- **Culture is basic to being part of a community**
 - Through culture people create, remember, and deal with ideas.
 - Sharing culture is basic (and essential) to being part of a community.
 - Everyone knows what is expected (not that we always abide by the expectations) – but we know what the rules are – and we know the consequences of following them, and not following them.

Ethnocentrism

- Definition: a tendency to view ones own culture as superior and to apply ones own cultural values in judging the behavior and beliefs of people raised in other cultures.
- Ethnocentrism is a cultural universal.
 - Meaning that people everywhere think that familiar explanations, opinions and customs are right, true, proper and moral.
 - Think about the statement- Its human nature.”
 - What does that mean?
- Because of ethnocentrism, different behavior is often seen as strange or savage.
- Think about how this can affect partnerships?

Cultural Relativism

- Opposite of ethnocentrism.
- The argument that all cultures should be looked at as unique and not be judged by the standards of another.
- Viewing cultures without judgement.

Naïve Realism

- The belief that humans and societies everywhere see the world in the same way.
 - i.e., beauty is the same for all people everywhere, or all people think about dogs the way that westerners do (!).

Culture and Communication

- Culture provides the lens through which we view the world, the logic by which we order it and the grammar by which it makes sense.
- Culture is central to **what** we see, **how we make sense** of what we see, and **how we express ourselves**.
- As we take on the exciting challenge of working together, cultural values sometimes conflict. We can misunderstand each other, and react in ways that can hinder what are otherwise promising partnerships.
- Oftentimes (most of the time) many of us are unaware that culture is acting upon us, and influencing how we think about the world, and how we respond to particular situations. Sometimes we are not even aware that we have values that are different from others!
- There are many ways in which cultures, as a whole, tend to vary from one another. One of these is differences in communication styles.
- The way people communicate varies widely between and within cultures
 - One aspect of communication styles is language usage.
 - Across cultures, some words and phrases are used in different ways- for example, the meaning of ‘yes’ varies from “maybe I’ll consider it” to “definitely!”, with many shades in between.

- Another major aspect of communication style is the degree given to **non-verbal** communication.
- This includes not only **facial expressions** and **gestures**, but also involved **personal distance**, **eye contact**, **sense of timing**, **handshake**, etc.
- In addition, different norms regarding the appropriate degree of assertiveness (verbal and non-verbal) in communicating can lead to cultural misunderstandings (i.e. what does yelling mean? Anger? Excitement?).

In summary: Culture Drives Communication

- People communicate what is meaningful to them.
- What people say (as well as what they don't say) is culturally driven.
- How they say it is culturally driven.
- We interpret others' communication (and behavior, values, etc.) through our own cultural lens – thus there is lots of opportunity for miscommunication.

Activity:

Your Agency Culture	Your Community Culture	Similarities/ Differences

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