



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 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 person needs a genuine desire to learn about other cultures. No one can require 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. Globally, countries grow daily in ethnic, cultural, and human diversity, so now is a good time for learning how to move toward “cultural pluralism.” Often called

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



integration or multi-culturalism, cultural pluralism reflects individuals who are highly adaptive to more than one culture. 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 suggests that understanding your own traditions, patterns and personal biases is a critical first step in reaching culturally diverse audiences. It allows you to appreciate different customs and to build and strengthen relationships with people from other backgrounds. First, consider a definition of diversity.

Diversity

Though most often associated with race and ethnicity, diversity may refer to differences in a broader sense. “Diverse” simply means different, varied, mixed, and distinct. Even family members who share lifelong relationships are diverse in physical and intellectual characteristics and beliefs. Family members do not dwell on these differences because they have a vested interest in each other.

Is it possible to develop similar relationships with other people? Research and experience show that better knowledge of one another leads to greater unity in human groups.

Cultural Patterns

What is culture? You view the world through the lens of your culture, and it lets you know how to act based on what you see around you. Culture is part of human identity. Humans seem to function best around others of similar identities. All humans belong to a culture, whether a work culture, a religious faith culture, an educational culture, a socio-economic culture, or even a culture related to a special interest or hobby. 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. Human cultural patterns are shaped by five questions related to value orientations:

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 clarifies why humans have cultural biases, which in turn 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.

Consider difference and similarity across cultures. See if you can identify your own cultural pattern in the lists below. Each cultural pattern is divided into five orientations: human nature, humans and nature, time orientation, activity orientation, and social orientation. Each of those categories can be divided into three sets of cultural tendencies.

Human Nature

Basically evil:

- Humans are intrinsically evil — an idea from Puritan ancestry.

Mixture of good/evil:

- Evil is part of the world and cannot be eliminated — requires a dual approach to human nature.

Basically good:

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

Humans and Nature

Subordinate:

- Powerful forces outside human control — must accept and yield to.

Harmony:

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

Master of Nature:

- Direct to human 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 are key.

Doing:

- Activity and action, accomplishments measured — a dominant approach in the United States.
- No time to “sit and talk” — life in constant motion.

Social Orientation

Authoritarian (Linear):

- “Born to lead” — others must follow, with the perception that this is the “norm.”

Collective:

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

Individual:

- U.S. Constitution — values individual autonomy.
- 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 logical aspects), and by regional, social, educational, and ethnic backgrounds. 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, 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 cultural pattern orientations? Be clear about what constitutes a culture.

Think of:

- Family systems/structures
- Ways of knowing
- Legacies/heritage
- Ethnicities
- Belief systems
- Regionalisms
- Folkways and morés
- 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

Your personal attitude toward difference influences your interactions with others. You must understand your personal biases before you can develop positive cross-cultural interactions.

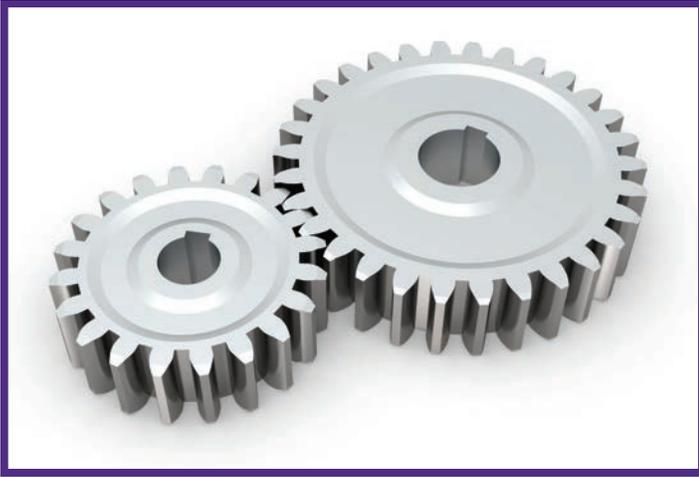
The diversity researcher Myrna Marofsky developed the "Tolerance Scale," to help people understand their own attitudes toward difference. Which statement most closely describes your attitude about difference?

- **Appreciation:** You value 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.

This scale is not intended as a basis for judging others. Rather it is to help you recognize that all humans have biases. To move others, as facilitators, toward understanding barriers to building relationships, it is best to recognize 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 is when one ethnic or economic culture dominates another with its symbols, value systems, and cultural patterns. Hegemony is 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 have come to live 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 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.

Cohesion: Communities that act collectively in decision-making processes have better health

outcomes, stronger local government, lower crime rates, and stronger family units.

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 of one another, communication does not take place. The opportunity to build a relationship may pass as well. You don't have to give up anything you hold dear to learn about the origins of thought or the cultural background of others. Learning about others enhances your ability to interact with a wider range of people. If you have an educational message, a wider audience means more will benefit 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.

Reviewers

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References used for this lesson are included with the leader's guide for this fact sheet, MF3216, Know Yourself, Understand Others, Improve Your Relationships, Leader's Guide.

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