

Intercultural Conflict Styles

Discussion Style: Direct & Emotionally Restrained

The *Discussion* style describes an approach to conflict resolution that emphasizes a verbally direct approach for dealing with disagreements and a more emotionally restrained or controlled manner for communicating with one another. The *Discussion* style emphasizes precision in language use and generally follows the maxim, "say what you mean and mean what you say." Further, this style views more intense expressions of emotion as potentially dangerous and generally inhibitory toward "effective" conflict resolution processes. Talking about the disagreement directly to one another is a comfortable approach for this style, yet this "discussion" should be based on objective facts if possible and each person should be cautious in injecting their own personal feelings into the process.

Engagement Style: Direct & Emotionally Expressive Style

The *Engagement* style emphasizes a verbally direct and confrontational approach toward resolving conflict that is accompanied by an emotionally expressive demeanor. This style views the overall sincerity of each person toward resolving disagreements as grounded in the concern that is demonstrated through more intense, verbal and nonverbal expression of emotion. This style is more comfortable than the *Discussion* style with personal confrontation between the parties where disagreements are directly addressed and emotion is "put on the table."

Accommodation Style: Indirect & Emotionally Restrained

The *Accommodation* style emphasizes an indirect approach for dealing with areas of disagreement and a more emotionally restrained or controlled manner for dealing with each party's emotional response to conflict. This style emphasizes ambiguity and circumlocution in language use in order to insure that a conflict does not "get out of control." Maintaining emotional calm and reserve is essential to this style because it enables interpersonal harmony to counter relationally damaging disagreements among the parties. This style views intense expressions of emotion as potentially dangerous and generally inhibitory toward "effective" conflict resolution processes. Indirect speech, use of stories and metaphors, reliance on third party intermediaries, and minimizing the level of conflict present among the parties are all specific *Accommodation* style strategies.

Dynamic Style: Indirect & Emotionally Expressive

The *Dynamic* style involves the use of indirect strategies for dealing with substantive disagreements coupled with more emotionally intense expression. This style may involve such linguistic devices as hyperbole, repetition of one's message, a more "associative" argument structure, ambiguity, stories and metaphors, humor, and use of third party intermediaries. The *Dynamic* style is comfortable with more emotionally confrontational discourse and expression. The credibility of each party is grounded in the degree of emotional expressiveness toward the other party.

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Conflict Styles Across Cultures

Discussion Style

- **North America**
e.g., United States (European American), Canada
- **Europe**
e.g., Great Britain, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Germany
- **Asia Pacific**
e.g., Australia, New Zealand

Engagement Style

- **North America**
e.g., United States (African American)
- **Europe**
e.g., France, Greece, Italy, Spain
- **Central & Latin America**
e.g., Cuba, Puerto Rico
- **Asia**
e.g., Russia
- **Middle East**
e.g., Israel

Accommodation Style

- **North America**
e.g., Native American
- **Latin America**
e.g., Mexico, Costa Rica, Peru
- **Asia**
e.g., China, Japan, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia

Dynamic Style

- **Arab Middle East**
e.g., Kuwait, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon
- **Asia**
e.g., Pakistan

DECODING INDIRECTNESS

Try to decode these indirect statements and explain in direct language what the speaker probably means. Looking at the first statement, "That is a very interesting viewpoint," remember that the person may mean exactly that, but *sometimes* it's an indirect way of saying "I disagree with you." In communicating across cultures, you need to *at least entertain the possibility* that the speaker may mean something other than what he or she has said. The first statement has been rephrased for you.

1. That is a very interesting viewpoint.	<i>I don't agree.</i> <i>We need to talk more about this.</i> <i>You're wrong.</i>
2. This proposal deserves further consideration.	
3. I know very little about this, but...	
4. We understand your proposal very well.	
5. We will try our best.	
6. I heard another story about that project.	
7. Can we move on to the next topic?	

adapted by Janet M. Bennett, Ph.D.

From: Storti, Craig, and Lorette Bennhold-Samaan. Culture Matters. Washington, D.C.; Peace Corps, 1998.

PRACTICING INDIRECTNESS

Try to rephrase these seven direct statements to make them more indirect, writing your suggestions in the blank space below each one. While these statements could be appropriate in some situations, the setting here is a meeting, where allowing people to save face is important. Suggested rephrasing of the first statement is offered as an example.

1. I don't think that's such a good idea	<p><i>Do you think that's a good idea?</i> <i>Are there any other ideas?</i> <i>I like most parts of that idea.</i></p>
2. That's not the point.	
3. I think we should...	
4. What do you think, Mr. Cato? <i>(Calling on people sometimes embarrasses them. How can you find out what Mr. Cato thinks without directly asking him?)</i>	
5. Those figures are not accurate.	
6. You're doing that wrong.	
7. I don't agree.	

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CREATE –A–CONFLICT

Procedure:

1. Each person should briefly describe an actual conflict with which they are familiar where a cultural difference (broadly defined) may have played a part in the conflict.
2. The group should choose one “interesting” conflict.
3. The group should generate four possible responses to the conflict, each one representing one style of conflict resolution.

Incident:

Discussion: *Direct and emotionally restrained*

Engagement: *Direct and emotionally expressive*

Accommodation: *Indirect and emotionally restrained*

Dynamic: *Indirect and emotionally expressive*

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The Unacceptable Comment

We all overhear comments that make us uncomfortable, comments that deeply offend us, or those in our workplace, classroom, or social context. We want to respond...but how?

Naïve Statements:

We Educate

- The speaker has no specific intention to cause harm
- The speaker has no understanding of current language usage
- The speaker is from outside of the culture
- The speaker is not using humor to mask bias, or using bias to evoke humor

Pernicious Statements:

We Legislate

- The speaker has an intention to limit the potential of others
- The speaker intends to defame, abuse, ridicule, or belittle another
- The speaker is using hurtful language deliberately for impact
- The speaker is using humor to mask hostility

Violence

Violence is the destruction of someone's personhood.

Reverend Robert MacAfee Brown

Possible Responses to Unacceptable Comments

DIRECT:

- “This is a Racism Free Zone and your remark is unacceptable.”
- “We don’t talk that way here.”
- “In this organization, we are working to eliminate prejudice, and we don’t appreciate that kind of humor.”

LESS DIRECT:

- “I’m feeling uncomfortable. I don’t think you mean to be insensitive but that kind of joke seems like a stereotype to me, one that hurts people.”
- “Your language hasn’t caught up with your attitude—you need to portray who you really are.”
- When someone uses language inappropriately, (e.g., “girls” for “women”)—the response might be “We’re talking about women, aren’t we?”

COMMUNICATING IN ENGLISH TO NON-NATIVE SPEAKERS

1. Maintain a normal tone of voice, but enunciate each syllable distinctly and evenly, especially the last syllable of each word.
2. Avoid using idioms, metaphors, or humor which do not translate across cultures.
Example: "She really has her act together." "Way to go!" "What's up?"
3. Avoid using your voice tone to communicate meaning. Some cultures do not use voice tone this way and your meaning will not be clear.
Example: Sarcasm (on a rainy day): "Great weather we're having, huh?"
4. Avoid asking questions in the negative.
Example: "You don't want Thursday off, do you?"
5. Use simple vocabulary and uncomplicated grammar. Avoid clauses, phrases, and complex sentences. When in doubt, simplify, and then try again. Never say, "Oh, just forget it!"
6. Avoid adding "tag questions" to sentences.
Example: "I think it's going to rain, don't you?"
7. Ask open-ended questions that cannot be answered "yes" or "no." Especially avoid asking questions such as: "Do you understand?" or "Is that all right?" These questions may elicit a polite "yes," rather than a disagreeable "no," even when "no" is a more accurate response. By reframing the question (e.g., "How should we do this?" instead of "Is that all right?"), the answer may be more useful to the questioner.
8. Avoid repeating your statement over and over again in the same way. Instead, be prepared to rephrase it a different way until the pattern makes sense to the listener.
Example: "Where are you from? What city do you live in? Are you from Tokyo?"
9. Listen carefully for the pronunciation patterns of the speaker. Some sounds in English do not exist in other cultures, such as the "R" or "F" sounds, so non-native speakers may consistently transpose the letter "R" as "L," or the "F" as "H" or "P" sounds. Once you pick up the patterns, understanding the speaker's language will become easier.
10. Use gestures or pantomime to reinforce your words, or in extreme cases, a notepad to spell names, draw maps or illustrate an idea.