Culture and Conflict: Understanding and Managing Conflict Situations Abroad

Study Abroad Pre-Departure Conference
• Overview
  • Define conflict
  • Conflict styles
  • Conflict management techniques
• Stereotypes and generalizations
  • Stereotypes
    • Assuming that everyone from the culture is the same
    • Drawing conclusions based on encounters with a small number of people, inadequate data, flawed reasoning, personal opinions
    • Makes a judgment
    • Often expressed with terms such as “all” and “always”
  • Generalizations
    • Drawing conclusions based on adequate research and information (large numbers, reliable sources, sound methodology)
    • Often expressed with terms such as “many,” “some,” “often,” or “in general”
    • Useful to predict and identify patterns, leading to deeper awareness, enhanced curiosity and improved intercultural relationships
• Principles of communication
  • Every individual is product of their own culture
  • All communication is culture bound
  • There are numerous communication and conflict styles
• Styles of communication
  • **Direct**
    • Say what you mean and mean what you say
    • Say what you think
    • Words are the primary carriers of meaning
  • **Indirect**
    • People don’t always say what they mean or mean exactly what they say
    • People are more likely to suggest or imply than to come out and say what they think
    • Less is verbally expressed
Source: Storti, C. Figuring Foreigners Out, 1999
• Styles of communication
  • Emotionally restrained
    • Tend to contain or hide more intense verbal and nonverbal expressions of emotion
    • Even tone and calm, quiet speech used to convey intellectual investment in topic(s)
    • Emotions are controlled by keeping them in
    • Concern that displaying emotion will hurt others
    • Tend to think that maintaining emotional composure is the mature way of handling conflict
    • Value harmony and “saving face”
    • Negative response to request to express feeling(s)

  • Emotionally expressive
    • Tend to display feelings overtly through animated facial expressions, body movement, gestures, tears, laughing
    • Emotions are controlled by getting them out
    • Concerned that hiding emotion will hurt others
    • Value affectionate involvement in communicating with others
    • Tend toward intense gesturing or variation in vocal patters such as tone or volume
    • Negative response to requests to restrain display(s)
Emotionally Restrained

European American
Native American
Canada
UK
Sweden
Norway
Sweden
Denmark
Netherlands
Germany

Mexico
Costa Rica
Peru
China
Japan
Korea
Thailand
Australia
New Zealand

Emotionally Expressive

African American
France
Greece
Italy
Spain
Brazil
Cuba
Puerto Rico

Israel
Egypt
Saudi Arabia
Lebanon
India
Pakistan
Sub-Saharan Africa

Source: Hanner, M. R.. Intercultural Conflict Style Inventory, 2003
• Our communication style preferences influence our conflict style preferences

• Like communication, conflict styles are culture bound
• Conflict styles are…
  • Based on the situation
  • Based on the issue
  • Based on the individual
  • Based on personal values
  • Based on the relationship

• Conflict styles are also…
  • Culturally-grounded
  • Patterned
  • Learned
Intercultural Conflict Style Inventory
• **Discussion Style**
  • **Behaviors**
    • Speaks directly
    • Speaks in terms of facts and logic
    • Minimal use of body language and facial expressions
  • **Values**
    • Efficiency (getting straight to the point)
    • Transparency
    • Accuracy
  • **Self-Perceived Strengths**
    • Confronts problem directly
    • Remains calm
  • **Weaknesses Perceived by Other Styles**
    • Difficulty reading into a situation
    • Appears unfeeling
  • **Escalates**
    • Overt displays of emotion
    • Appearing unconcerned with facts and logic
    • Not speaking directly to the content of the conflict
  • **De-escalates**
    • Minimize displays of emotion
    • Speak in terms of facts and logic
    • Address the content directly
• Discussion Style
  • North American
    • e.g., United States (European American), Canada
  • Northern and Central Europe (e.g., UK, Sweden, Denmark, Germany)
  • Asia Pacific (e.g., Australia, New Zealand)

“Honesty is the best policy”
U.S. American proverb
• Engagement Style
  • Behaviors
    • Speaks directly
    • Speaks in terms of feelings, desires, etc.
    • Uses body language and facial expressions
  • Values
    • Sincerity/authenticity
    • Transparency
    • Shared affect (i.e., sharing the same emotional experience)
• Self-Perceived Strengths
  • Not afraid of confrontation/honesty
  • Expresses opinions
  • Shows feeling
• Weaknesses Perceived by Other Styles
  • Dominating and rude
  • Cannot separate reason from emotion
• Escalates
  • Saying “calm down,” etc.
  • Not speaking directly to the issue: both content and feeling
• De-escalates
  • Acknowledge validity of feelings
  • Show emotion through voice, gesture, etc.
  • Allow to vent without interruption
• Engagement Style
  • North American
    • e.g., United States (African American)
  • Mediterranean
    • e.g., France, Greece, Italy, Spain
  • Caribbean
    • e.g., Cuba, Puerto Rico
  • Russia
  • Israel

“What is nearest the heart is nearest the mouth”

Irish proverb
Accommodation Style

- Behaviors
  - Speaks “around” the conflict
  - Minimal modulation of voice pitch and tone
  - May seek third-party intermediaries

- Values
  - Harmony
  - Relationships
  - Compromise

Self-Perceived Strengths

- Ability to read into conflict
- Sensitive to feelings of other party
- Able to control emotions

Weaknesses Perceived by Other Styles

- Difficulty in voicing opinion/pushover
- Uncommitted and dishonest
- “Passive aggressive”

Escalates

- Overt displays of emotion
- Directly critical remarks
- Anything that could embarrass someone

De-escalates

- Minimize displays of emotion
- Try reading between the lines
- Show patience and active listening
- Say “perhaps,” etc. – even if you’re certain
- Find points of agreement
Accommodation Style

- North American
  - e.g., Native American
- Central America
  - e.g., Mexico, Costa Rica
- East and Southeast Asia
  - e.g., China, Japan, Thailand, Malaysia

“The first to raise their voice loses the argument”

Chinese proverb
Dynamic Style

- **Behaviors**
  - Uses ambiguous language, stories, third party intermediaries
  - Repeats statements
  - Uses nonverbal body language: facial expressions, rolling eyes, pursed lips, folded arms, crying, sighing, etc.
- **Values**
  - Harmony
  - Relationships
- **Self-Perceived Strengths**
  - Involves an outside and impartial party
  - Skilled at observing changes in nonverbal behavior
  - Comfortable with emotions
- **Weaknesses Perceived by Other Parties**
  - Gets other people involved unnecessarily
  - Appears unreasonable and devious
  - Appears “too emotional”
- **Escalates**
  - Saying “calm down,” etc.
  - Not giving room for options (e.g., by demanding specific answers)
  - Focusing on “logic” and “the facts” instead of the relationship
- **De-escalates**
  - Think about the bigger picture (the relationship)
  - Use third party intermediaries
  - Show emotion through nonverbal means (voice inflection, facial expressions, body language)
  - Give options: “You don’t have to say right now…”
  - Notice language that is repeated, and repeat it back to show you’ve heard
• Dynamic Style
  • Middle East
    • e.g., Kuwait, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon
  • Indian Sub-Continent
  • Sub-Saharan Africa

“It is good to know the truth, but it is better to speak of palm trees”

Arab proverb
**Case studies**
- What are the conflict style preferences of parties involved?
- What cultural differences might be involved in this scenario?
- What could have been done differently to avoid this misunderstanding?
- What would be the best course of action for one or both parties involved?

### Conflict Styles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discussion Conflict Style</th>
<th>Engagement Conflict Style</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-Perceived Strengths:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Self-Perceived Strengths:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confronts problems</td>
<td>Provides detailed explanations, instructions &amp; information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elaborates arguments</td>
<td>Expresses opinions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintains Calm Atmosphere</td>
<td>Shows feeling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Weaknesses as Perceived by Other Styles:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Weaknesses as Perceived by Other Styles:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty in reading “between the lines”</td>
<td>Appears unconcerned with the views &amp; feelings of others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appears logical but unfeeling</td>
<td>Appears Dominating &amp; rude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appears uncomfortable with emotional arguments</td>
<td>Appears uncomfortable with viewpoints that are separated from emotion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<th>Accommodation Conflict Style</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Self-Perceived Strengths:</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Considers alternative meanings to ambiguous messages</td>
<td>Uses third parties to gather information and resolve conflicts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Able to control emotional outburst</td>
<td>Skilled at observing changes in nonverbal behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensitive to feelings of the other party</td>
<td>Comfortable with strong emotional displays</td>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Difficulty in voicing own opinion</td>
<td>Rarely “gets to the point”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appears uncommitted &amp; dishonest</td>
<td>Appears unreasonable and devious</td>
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<td>Difficulty in providing elaborated explanations</td>
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</table>
• Conflict management
  • Starts with good communication
  • Acknowledge differences (remember the principles of communication)
  • Is the responsibility of all involved
  • The more one knows about styles the more effective the management
• The cycle of experiential learning
  • Experience
  • Reflect
  • Analyze
  • Experiment
Happy Study Abroad!
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