

Essay 3: Introducing Culture

You may have discovered that few people believe they possess a culture. This is not true if you have been a minority in a majority culture. The majority feels they are culture free, while others have strange customs. Even those in a minority believe that their ways of behaving and their expectations of proper behavior are “correct,” rather than “expected” by those who share their culture.

A team that has no diversity of cultures will believe that the ways of behaving by others outside their culture, if these behaviors differ from theirs, are “wrong.” Their own cultural expectations are invisible to them. A consultant coming in to help their organization become more successful will find their insularity nearly insurmountable.

I have come into universities tasked with assisting them to develop a more responsive budgeting system and left with them realizing that the culture of the academic area was so different from that of the finance area that no new budget system was going to be helpful until they had worked through the impasse that their culture wars had created.

When assisting a team with cultural understanding, my first step has been to help them grasp how quickly a culture forms, especially around a leader and how very simple behaviors become expected and “proper.” To begin, I auction off a dollar.

I form the team into at least three groups of four or more people. The auction is called a “Dutch auction.” Howard Raiffa taught game theory in my master’s program and told us to bring our pennies. We learned that such an auction was used to sell tulip bulbs in Holland. In these auctions the auctioneer starts higher than the expected value and works down. The first person to bid wins the lot. For one dollar I started at three dollars and worked down one penny at a time.

I would randomly form teams into, let us say for example, three groups by counting 1, 2, 3, 1, 2, 3... just going around the table. I gave the groups ten minutes to prepare a bid within their group. I told them that I had change for any bid they might make, my pockets jingling with pennies. I told them the rules of a Dutch auction and that I would start at three dollars and work down penny by penny. I then started the ten minutes. There would be much quiet buzzing as the groups discussed what they would bid. At the end of ten minutes, I called time.

I began the auction: “\$3.00, \$2.99, 2.98...” At \$2.39 the group closest to the front of the room bid. The dollar was theirs, for \$2.39. Yes, it was a perfectly ordinary dollar, fairly new, but, still, ordinary.

I asked the other groups what they were planning to bid: \$1.57 and \$0.21. I asked the winning group to explain their strategy. They admitted that they only wanted to win. They did not care about losing a little money. They had decided that winning was important.

I asked the \$1.57 group for their strategy. They said that they had calculated a bid that perfectly balanced a winning strategy with the least loss. They attempted to explain their calculations but got lost. This is, of course, natural, since their “rational idea” was nonsense.

I asked the \$0.21 group for their strategy. They said that they had decided that the auction was stupid. They were going to bid as little as possible, knowing they would probably lose but thought it would be great if they actually won a dollar for twenty-one cents.

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I then asked the \$0.21 group whether it would be okay if I moved Joe from the \$2.39 group into their group. They weren't sure. They wondered if someone who wanted to win so badly that they would lose money on a dumb auction would fit in their group.

I then asked them to reflect on the exercise and tell me what they had observed. The first comments when I do this exercise tend to be further justifications of each group's strategy. Then someone would put together the idea that the topic of the workshop was cultures along with what they observed and say, "I think we just created three cultures in ten minutes."

I have found it harder for them to also realize that acceptance of a member from another group would require an initiation ceremony, where the new member would have to "cast off" old beliefs and "be initiated" into new ones.

I would then ask them how the culture was created. For the most part, they couldn't remember. "We were just trying to come up with ideas and this strategy came out." If I asked whether someone had first suggested the strategy, they might remember the person who seemed to take a leadership role. I find it interesting that people often cannot recall being influenced by someone else. The person isn't always viewed as a leader, but a group at a loss for a direction will follow anyone who points and says, "Onward," no matter how quietly they say it.

I remember "leadership discovery" as a lesson in the analysis of the 1968 Columbia student protests. Mark Rudd was called a leader of the strike, but the chain of events points to little on his part that could be called pre-meditated leadership early in the strike. There was a group of people looking for a leader. He pointed his finger, and magically the group was ready to follow. He seemed temporarily baffled but, as they say, rose to the occasion. (See Hilton Obenzinger's description of Mr. Rudd at that time for an insider's view.)

The lessons from the exercise are important. Culture is a social phenomenon based on acceptance within a group. Cultures can be formed nearly instantly in any social situation. People prefer acceptance to rejection. Cultures are not value neutral. A "win at all costs" culture forced the winning group to lose \$1.39, a loss of 139% on their "winning" proceeds. Beliefs are value neutral; actions based on those beliefs may not be.

Leadership in a random group of people may appear to arise spontaneously but don't be fooled. There is much one can learn from a con artist. While greed is often a successful angle, acceptance works nearly as well. In China a pretty, young woman asked whether I would hold her phone and take her picture. I happily complied. She then said, in imperfect English, that she was a student on vacation and was hoping to investigate a "Tea Museum" nearby. Would I like to accompany her? I was happy to do so. Her mistake was to find her way through the twisting alleys of Shanghai to the "museum" too quickly. That put me on my guard, but I found that for a bit of cash I could spend a couple of hours with a lovely girl, while an accomplice made a rather silly presentation about tea. I then got her email address when we took photos with our phones, saying we should share them. We later had dinner together and are still friends. I got a short story out of it and have learned much about her culture as she has moved through several more reputable careers, gotten married, and had a child. Still, I really was taken in initially because of "greed" (of sorts) and a need to be accepted.

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After the initial dollar auction, I put people together in small groups, usually of Americans and a “counter American.” I ask them to teach each other about their cultures, especially their perceptions of the other culture. There is an old series of State Department training films that demonstrate cultural knowledge. In one, a Peace Corps volunteer (actor) asks the village school master (actor) to tell him what he needs at the school by supposing he is writing a letter to the country’s minister of education, explaining the needs of the school. The counter-American school master replies, “Oh, I would never write a letter to the Minister of Education.” Each film, like this one, lasts under three minutes. You watch it three times. The first time the viewer often says, “I don’t see anything strange.” The second time you just feel there is something wrong, “Huh?” The third time you may realize that counterfactuals in this culture, like the “pretending” suggested by the Peace Corp volunteer (actor), are not normally part of common discourse. One doesn’t “pretend.” Americans, especially the college educated, use counterfactuals frequently.

Lacking these films, I try to get team members to teach each other about their perceptions of the others’ cultures and what they think other people miss.

Still, perhaps I should have watched the films a fourth time. I find that nearly forty years later, I missed something back when I first watched the films. I felt at the time that the Peace Corps worker hadn’t grasped the “simplicity” of the culture of the counter-American. I hadn’t accepted that Western culture with its reliance on worlds constructed of words was not more sophisticated, but more out of touch with the real hardness of the world. Why, I now wonder, have I tried so hard to be *mindful*? I can barely succeed with an exercise of mindfulness in the shower so that I am more aware of where I have washed, while the rest of the time, I’m writing counterfactuals in my head, constructing fantasy worlds in which I win the fair maiden, writing speeches for the next person on my appointment book, and throwing a wall of words around me, protecting me from the world. Was the counter-American simple, or was he merely more in touch with the immediacy of the world around him? The lesson was not about the other culture, but about my own!

There is usually not enough time in a workshop to get deeply into another culture or deeply aware of our own. The films help when they are available. Calling the team together after the Americans and counter-Americans talk privately to discuss what they have learned helps a bit more. Common topics are the ways that various cultures show respect for other individuals, as well as disrespect. Another important topic is the value placed on individualism versus group responsibility within various cultures.

The most important lesson, however, is that most people don’t know their own culture until they see it through the eyes of someone outside theirs. My greatest victory was to have an American student realize that his noisy, hand-first-in-the-air, manner was only a cultural tendency. When he looked deep down, he didn’t want to behave like that. He wanted to be more like his Korean classmate who cared more about what might be best for the group.

An effective team is multi-cultural with an understanding of the ways respect is given and denied and the advantages of seeing situations through the eyes of several cultural lenses. The finance culture is different than the student affairs culture. A great team is one where the student affairs person begins his request to the team for project financing saying, “Nate isn’t

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going to like this, but I need..." He is showing his understanding of and respect for the culture of my group and my position. How can I refuse him? Yes, my identity requires that I guard the money, but I can be disarmed.