



You Say Tomaydo, I Say Tohmahtoh

Why You Can't Improve Diversity Without Culturally Fluent Leaders

By Kori S. Carew

I once showed my mother-in-law some plates that I adored, and she noted that the plates were “different.” This delighted me—that the plates were different was exactly what attracted me to them. Noting my reaction, she clarified, “When I say *different*, I mean I don’t like it.” Our difference in communication styles—my mother-in-law’s indirect, Midwestern style of communication, contrasted with my direct communication—meant that I mistakenly took her words literally.

Effective communication skills are a necessary component of personal relationships *and* great leadership. Communicating well, which encompasses the ability to relay organizational vision and strategy in a way that connects, creates energy, and allows for championship, enables great leaders to understand people. As a result, they connect with people effectively. To understand others, great leaders must pay attention to gender and cultural differences.

Our profession struggles with engaging and advancing talent from among underrepresented groups, and a great leader’s ability to manage and communicate across cultures will benefit everyone, especially women and minority attorneys. Most of us filter our communication skills and strategies through a limited lens that often does not translate across cultures and differences. Frankly, an inclusion strategy that doesn’t teach firm leaders competencies in cultural fluency is flawed.

Culture is a pattern of behaviors and interactions that a group shares: norms, values, and mores learned and passed down through generations—the lens through which we see and understand the world. *Cultural intelligence* or *fluency* is the ability to adapt effectively and work well across cultures, allowing us to value cultural differences and behave in respectful ways, rather than merely understanding cultural sensitivities intel-

lectually. Cultural dimensions provide a framework to understand values and behaviors shared by a group. Our cultural expectations depend on where our experiences fall within these dimensions, which have spectrums.

Direct Versus Indirect Communication. In direct communication cultures, people use language with precision to convey the words’ *explicit* meanings. Priority is placed on literal truthfulness and efficiency above sensibilities. Direct communication cultures do not use many common reference points, instead relying on simple, clear, and explicit communication. Indirect communication cultures, in contrast, rely on common understanding, *implicit* messages, nuances, and the ability to hear and understand both the stated and implied messages. In such cultures, bad news is often delivered indirectly. American culture is often viewed as on the direct end of the spectrum but with differences throughout the country—hence my miscommunication with my mother-in-law. Consider how many legal organizations treat women who communicate directly when they lead teams and give negative feedback.

High Hierarchy Versus Low Hierarchy. In high-hierarchy cultures, people are *deferential* to individuals of authority or older individuals, while low-hierarchy cultures are more egalitarian and emphasize individual importance. In the workplace, individuals from high-hierarchy cultures are often reluctant to speak in meetings unless invited to; law firms, in contrast, tend to reward *assertiveness*, which can lead to tension between firms and their employees from high-hierarchy cultures. For example, I was raised to address my elders by their titles. When I started a new position at a firm that prided itself on its informality, I was told to call everyone by their first names, and it made me deeply uncomfortable. To succeed in my career, I decided to adapt to this aspect of the culture, although I continue to use titles in my personal life when speaking to those older than I am.

Collectivism Versus Individualism. Individualistic cultures believe that people have immense *personal* power to succeed and the autonomy to make their own decisions. Collectivist cultures, instead, believe that priority should be placed on the *community* first and *family* second before the individual’s needs. A person’s decisions



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in collectivist cultures are determined by obligations to the wider group. Individualistic cultures, which emphasize personal responsibility and self-determination, can seem selfish to collectivist cultures, which emphasize duty, cooperation, and collaboration. Individualistic cultures relish competition much more than collectivist cultures; as a result, employees from a collectivist culture may appear unambitious for relying on collaboration and consensus in making decisions.

These differences have an incredible effect in workplaces where competition, self-promotion, or personal achievement is highly valued. We see this spectrum show up in gender differences. Women's unwillingness to self-advocate comes from (1) understanding the cultural norms that women be more nurturing and less self-promoting than men, and violating them has repercussions; and (2) discomfort with behaving inconsistently with an internalized, group-focused, rather than individual-focused, value.

High Context Versus Low Context. High-context cultures rely on *nuance* and common understandings; low-context cultures rely on stated words. High-context cultures tend to be more homogenous in race, have a strong sense of tradition, and have a consistent culture throughout generations. They rely on tradition and unspoken understandings that prioritize relationships, face-to-face communications, and loyalty, and they have fewer rules and structures. Conversely, low-context cultures rely on *rules* to help newcomers understand expectations. A low-context speaker may offend a high-context listener by being explicit about what the listener already understands and risks being interpreted as condescending. We see this in gender differences and cross-gender communication and leadership.

Expressive Versus Nonexpressive. Cultures differ in how they express emotion and use body language. In expressive cultures, communication is infused with "*drama*," gestures, and vivid metaphors. In other cultures, public displays of emotion are frowned upon, leaders are expected to be *contained*, and body movement while speaking is minimal. American culture is typically more emotionally expressive than some cultures (*e.g.*, Japanese culture)

but less expressive than others (*e.g.*, some Latin American and most African cultures). Imagine a female litigator described as hysterical because she was expressive, and imagine the effect on her career.

Cultural Humility. Cultural differences manifest in explainable—but often unresolved—miscommunications and failed leadership actions. Learning to understand and interpret cultural and gender differences is essential for effective communication. While the terms *cultural intelligence* and cultural fluency are commonly used, I will leave you with one term as an invitation—*cultural humility*. I invite you into cultural humility as you grow in your skill of communicating, leading, and managing across differences while always leaving space to learn more. 