

INTERCULTURAL CONFLICT STYLES

Recognize Culturally Learned Communication Styles

While there are many cross-cultural differences that have been well researched and documented, the one that is most important to understand when having bold, inclusive conversations is how we have learned to communicate and handle conflict.

The **Intercultural Conflict Style Inventory**, developed by Dr. Mitchell Hammer, helps us to distinguish cultural preferences for solving problems and handling conflict. There are four preferred styles: discussion, engagement, accommodation, and dynamic, as shown below in [Figure 4](#).

Discussion style is most preferred by Euro-American, Northern European, and Canadian cultures. It is characterized as direct and emotionally controlled. Engagement style is most commonly found among African Americans, Greeks, some Western Europeans, and some Latino cultures. Engagement style is direct and emotionally expressive.

Those who prefer discussion style will advocate for logical, rational, fact-based arguments with limited emotional expressiveness, while those whose style is either dynamic or engagement-oriented will be comfortable with a strong display of emotion; they may be more apt to tell stories or use metaphors and circular reasoning. Someone who is prone to discussion style will use a more linear approach. Likely to prefer that people speak one at a time, discussion-style leaders may go around the room in a team meeting, asking everyone to speak in turn. Engagement-style leaders, on the other hand, may be more comfortable with over-talking and being interrupted.

How We Express Disagreement	Disagreement by Verbal Direction	Discussion Style	Engagement Style
		North America (e.g., US Canada, European American) Europe (e.g., Great Britain, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Germany) Asia Pacific (e.g., Australia, New Zealand)	North America (e.g., African American) Europe (e.g., Greece, Italy, Spain) Central and Latin America (e.g., Cuba, Puerto Rico) Asia (e.g., Russia) Middle East (e.g., Israel)
	Disagreement by Verbal Indirection	Latin America (e.g., Mexico, Peru) Asia (e.g., China, Japan, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia)	Arab Middle East (e.g., Kuwait, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon) Asia (e.g., Pakistan)
		Accommodation Style	Dynamic Style
		Emotional Restraint	Emotional Expressiveness
How We Express Emotion			

FIGURE 4. INTERCULTURAL CONFLICT STYLES
(based on the Intercultural Conflict Style Model, M.R. Hammer, 2009)

Winters: Intercultural Conflict Styles continuation

I have coached several African American leaders who have received feedback that their passion (translation: display of emotion) needs to be contained. In one situation, the young woman was the highest ranking African American in the company. She was on the fast track. She developed a presentation about a very mundane compliance issue and decided to be creative in how she presented it. Rather than just sharing the facts, she developed a story about the topic using fictional characters.

After the presentation, she was under the impression that it had gone very well. However, a few days later, her manager shared that several of the senior leaders thought she should have just stayed with the facts. Her approach was inappropriate for the topic. At times, they said they thought they were listening to a Baptist preacher. This young woman's father, in fact, was a Baptist preacher and she acknowledged that unconsciously she may have mimicked some of his style. However, she was still hurt and frustrated because she felt even more alienated by her difference.

The Euro-American communication style relies heavily on logic and technical information rather than illusion, metaphor, and more creative and emotional styles of persuasion. Learning to communicate across cultures is a shared responsibility. In this case, if both had known more about culturally learned communication styles, the outcome may have been different.

Direct-communication cultures tend to be okay with voicing their unfiltered opinions and shooting from the hip, as the saying goes. Indirect cultures may be very uncomfortable speaking up without having had some reflection time or speaking before a senior leader has spoken. Disagreeing with one's superior might be considered disrespectful in some Asian cultures, whereas in discussion or engagement cultures, healthy debate is expected. Indirect cultures may not want criticism in public, whereas direct culture may be fine with public constructive feedback.

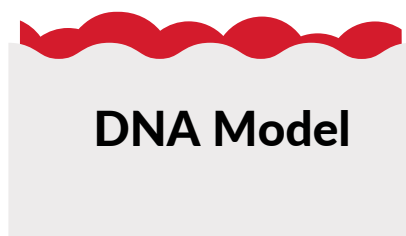
I have heard numerous times from Euro-American leaders that their Asian employees tend not to speak up in meetings. Often their solution is to force everyone to speak via round-robin techniques. This approach may be very uncomfortable for some Asian employees and those from other indirect cultures. When employees are reticent about speaking up in a meeting, discussion- or engagement-style leaders may interpret that they are not conversant on the topic or they are disengaged.

Winters: Intercultural Conflict Styles continuation

Using the concepts of the **DNA Model** outlined **below**, consider alternate interpretations for the behavior. One alternate interpretation is that these employees have a different cultural norm for engaging. The solution might be to expand the number of approaches for soliciting input (e.g., one-on-one or electronic forms of communication) and not making it mandatory that everyone speak during a group meeting.

In a study conducted by Sylvia Ann Hewlett and reported in the Harvard Business Review, employees in a "speak-up" culture are 3.5 times as likely to contribute their full innovative potential."—' However, we should consider alternative interpretations of what "speak up" means from a cultural perspective. It is critical, as part of your readiness for bold, inclusive conversations, to have a basic understanding of culturally learned communication styles.

A cautionary note: I do not want to stereotype different groups. Not all African Americans communicate engagement style; nor do all Asians prefer accommodation style. The explanation of the different styles is meant to help us understand that there are meaningful differences in how cultures communicate based on their norms, values, and beliefs. However, it does not mean that everyone who is a member of that group shares that characteristic. Some cultural groups, such as Native Americans, or Africans, may fall into any of the four styles, depending on factors including their history in terms of mobility and colonization.



Describe: First describe the behaviors and actions you see. Be careful not to let your personal judgments influence what you observe.

Navigate: Navigate your understanding. Be aware that your interpretations are influenced by the behaviors of your culture. What are alternative interpretations?

Adapt: Once you feel you have a pretty good understanding of the behaviors and actions you observed, begin to think of ways to navigate the situation effectively using mutual adaptation skills.