

1.2.3: Common Cultural Characteristics

Learning Objectives

1. Understand the concept of common cultural characteristics and list several examples of such characteristics in your life.

While we may be members of many different cultures, we tend to adhere to some more than others. Perhaps you have become friendly with several of your fellow students as you've pursued your studies in college. As you take many of the same classes and share many experiences on campus, you begin to have more and more in common, in effect forming a small group culture of your own. A similar cultural formation process may happen in the workplace, where coworkers spend many hours each week sharing work experiences and getting to know each other socially in the process.

Groups come together, form cultures, and grow apart across time. How does one become a member of a community, and how do you know when you are full member? What aspects of culture do we have in common and how do they relate to business communication? Researchers who have studied cultures around the world have identified certain characteristics that define a culture. These characteristics are expressed in different ways, but they tend to be present in nearly all cultures. Let's examine them.

Rites of Initiation

Cultures tend to have a ritual for becoming a new member. A newcomer starts out as a nonentity, a stranger, an unaffiliated person with no connection or even possibly awareness of the community. Newcomers who stay around and learn about the culture become members. Most cultures have a rite of initiation that marks the passage of the individual within the community; some of these rituals may be so informal as to be hardly noticed (e.g., the first time a coworker asks you to join the group to eat lunch together), while others may be highly formalized (e.g., the ordination of clergy in a religion). The nonmember becomes a member, the new member becomes a full member, and individuals rise in terms of responsibility and influence.

Business communities are communities first, because without communication interaction, no business will occur. Even if sales and stock are processed by servers that link database platforms to flow, individuals are still involved in the maintenance, repair, and development of the system. Where there is communication, there is culture, and every business has several cultures.

Across the course of your life, you have no doubt passed several rites of initiation but may not have taken notice of them. Did you earn a driver's license, register to vote, or acquire the permission to purchase alcohol? In North American culture, these three common markers indicate the passing from a previous stage of life to a new one, with new rights and responsibilities. As a child, you were not allowed to have a driver's license. At age fourteen to eighteen, depending on your state and location (rural versus urban), you were allowed to drive a tractor, use farm equipment, operate a motor vehicle during daylight hours, or have full access to public roads. With the privilege of driving comes responsibility. It is your responsibility to learn what the signs and signals mean and to obey traffic laws for the common safety. In order for stop signs to work, we all have to agree on the behavior associated with them and observe that behavior.

Sometimes people choose to ignore a stop sign, or accidentally miss one, and it places the public in danger. Law enforcement officials reinforce that common safety as representatives of the culture, empowered by the people themselves based on a common agreement of what a stop sign means and what a driver is supposed to do when approaching one. Some people may argue that law enforcement serves some while it prosecutes others. This point of debate may deserve some consideration, but across cultures, there are rules, signs, and symbols that we share.

Rites of initiation mark the transition of the role or status of the individual within the group. Your first day on the job may have been a challenge as you learned your way around the physical space, but the true challenge was to learn how the group members communicate with each other. If you graduate from college with a Master of Business Administration (MBA) degree, you will already have passed a series of tests, learned terms and theories, and possess a symbol of accomplishment in your diploma, but that only grants you the opportunity to look for a job—to seek access to a new culture.

In every business, there are groups, power struggles, and unspoken ways that members earn their way from the role of a "newbie" to that of a full member. The newbie may get the tough account, the office without a window, or the cubicle next to the bathroom, denoting low status. As the new member learns to navigate through the community—establishing a track record and being promoted—he passes the rite of initiation and acquires new rights and responsibilities.

Over time, the person comes to be an important part of the business, a “keeper of the flame.” The “flame” may not exist in physical space or time, but it does exist in the minds of those members in the community who have invested time and effort in the business. It is not a flame to be trusted to a new person, as it can only be earned with time. Along the way, there may be personality conflicts and power struggles over resources and perceived scarcity (e.g., there is only one promotion and everyone wants it). All these challenges are to be expected in any culture.

Common History and Traditions

Think for a moment about the history of a business like Ford Motor Company—what are your associations with Henry Ford, the assembly line manufacturing system, or the Model T? Or the early days of McDonald’s? Do you have an emotional response to mental images of the “golden arches” logo, Ronald McDonald, or the Big Mac sandwich? Traditions form as the organization grows and expands, and stories are told and retold to educate new members on how business should be conducted. The history of every culture, of every corporation, influences the present. There are times when the phrase “we’ve tried that before” can become stumbling block for members of the organization as it grows and adapts to new market forces. There may be struggles between members who have weathered many storms and new members, who come armed with new educational perspectives, technological tools, or experiences that may contribute to growth.

Common Values and Principles

Cultures all hold values and principles that are commonly shared and communicated from older members to younger (or newer) ones. Time and length of commitment are associated with an awareness of these values and principles, so that new members, whether they are socialized at home, in school, or at work, may not have a thorough understanding of their importance. For example, time (fast customer service) and cleanliness are two cornerstone values of the McDonald’s corporation. A new employee may take these for granted, while a seasoned professional who inspects restaurants may see the continued need to reinforce these core values. Without reinforcement, norms may gradually change, and if this were the case it could fundamentally change the customer experience associated with McDonald’s.

Common Purpose and Sense of Mission

Cultures share a common sense of purpose and mission. Why are we here and whom do we serve? These are fundamental questions of the human condition that philosophers and theologians all over the world have pondered for centuries. In business, the answers to these questions often address purpose and mission, and they can be found in mission and vision statements of almost every organization. Individual members will be expected to acknowledge and share the mission and vision, actualize them, or make them real through action. Without action, the mission and vision statements are simply an arrangement of words. As a guide to individual and group behavioral norms, they can serve as a powerful motivator and a call to action.

Common Symbols, Boundaries, Status, Language, and Rituals

Most of us learn early in life what a stop sign represents, but do we know what military stripes represent on a sleeve, or a ten-year service pin on a lapel, or a corner office with two windows? Cultures have common symbols that mark them as a group; the knowledge of what a symbol stands for helps to reinforce who is a group member and who is not. You may have a brand on your arm from your fraternity, or wear a college ring—symbols that represent groups you affiliate with temporarily, while you are a student. They may or may not continue to hold meaning to you when your college experience is over. Cultural symbols include dress, such as the Western business suit and tie, the Scottish kilt, or the Islamic headscarf. Symbols also include slogans or sayings, such as “you’re in good hands” or “you deserve a break today.” The slogan may serve a marketing purpose but may also embrace a mission or purpose within the culture. Family crests and clan tartan patterns serve as symbols of affiliation. Symbols can also be used to communicate rank and status within the group.

Space is another common cultural characteristic; it may be a nonverbal symbol that represents status and power. In most of the world’s cultures, a person occupying superior status is entitled to a physically elevated position—a throne, a dais, a podium from which to address subordinates. Subordinates may be expected to bow, curtsy, or lower their eyes as a sign of respect. In business, the corner office may offer the best view with the most space. Movement from a cubicle to a private office may also be a symbol of transition within an organization, involving increased responsibility as well as power. Parking spaces, the kind of vehicle you drive, and the transportation allowance you have may also serve to communicate symbolic meaning within an organization.

The office serves our discussion on the second point concerning boundaries. Would you sit on your boss’s desk or sit in his chair with your feet up on the desk in his presence? Most people indicate they would not, because doing so would communicate a lack of

respect, violate normative space expectations, and invite retaliation. Still, subtle challenges to authority may arise in the workplace. A less than flattering photograph of the boss at the office party posted to the recreational room bulletin board communicates more than a lack of respect for authority. By placing the image anonymously in a public place, the prankster clearly communicates a challenge, even if it is a juvenile one. Movement from the cubicle to the broom closet may be the result for someone who is found responsible for the prank. Again, there are no words used to communicate meaning, only symbols, but those symbols represent significant issues.

Communities have their own vocabulary and way in which they communicate. Consider the person who uses a sewing machine to create a dress and the accountant behind the desk; both are professionals and both have specialized jargon used in their field. If they were to change places, the lack of skills would present an obstacle, but the lack of understanding of terms, how they are used, and what they mean would also severely limit their effectiveness. Those terms and how they are used are learned over time and through interaction. While a textbook can help, it cannot demonstrate use in live interactions. Cultures are dynamic systems that reflect the communication process itself.

Cultures celebrate heroes, denigrate villains, and have specific ways of completing jobs and tasks. In business and industry, the emphasis may be on effectiveness and efficiency, but the practice can often be “because that is the way we have always done it.” Rituals serve to guide our performance and behavior and may be limited to small groups or celebrated across the entire company. A pink Cadillac has a special meaning for a Mary Kay cosmetics representative. How that car is received is ritualistic, recognizing current success while honoring past performances across the company.

Rituals can serve to bind a group together, or to constrain it. Institutions tend to formalize processes and then have a hard time adapting to new circumstances. While the core values or mission statement may hold true, the method of doing things that worked in the past may not be as successful as it once was. Adaptation and change can be difficult for individuals and companies, and yet all communities, cultures, and communication contexts are dynamic, or always changing. As much as we might like things to stay the same, they will always change—and we will change with (and be changed by) them.

Key Takeaway

All cultures have characteristics such as initiations, traditions, history, values and principles, purpose, symbols, and boundaries.

Exercises

1. Compile a list or group of pictures of symbols that characterize some of the cultural groups you belong to. Share and discuss your list with your classmates.
2. Compile a list of pictures or symbols that your group or community finds offensive. Share and compare with classmates.

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