

# Countering Cultural Polarities

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## Abstract

Culture can be understood as a pattern of dilemma resolution developed within a group shaping assumptions upon which group decisions are based. As such it is a critical part of the structure of social systems. Cultural dynamics leave groups prone to 'schismogenesis,' a process by which values are polarised. Practitioners working in the field of systems dynamics are likely to experience polarisation of values when working with groups, limiting their effectiveness to contribute to group decisions. Polarisation can be reduced by communication that breaks out of the 'Problem/Solution' frame typically applied in conflict situations, and by charting opposing values. Story-telling is a further means of sharing insights into systemic structure while avoiding polarisation of values.

## The Need to Understand Culture

Systems dynamics operates to widen the perspective of people making decisions. Without a systems perspective decision makers often react to events that they frame as problems. But events that are problems to one person may not be problems to another. Rather than looking solely at events, systems thinking encourages people to place events within a context of behaviour over time, and to uncover the underlying structure that is determining the behaviour of the system (Richmond, 1997).

Culture is a factor that exerts a tremendous influence on the behaviour of any social system. When people encounter conflict they consider problematic, there is a good chance they are experiencing the dynamics of a culture (Johnson, 1992). Understanding these dynamics gives us insight into the nature of many of the conflicts that obstruct teams and organisations, and indicate how the forces creating conflict can be managed to generate greater organisational health. In this paper we will be examining the nature of cultural dynamics and, in particular, how cultural forces frequently lead to polarisation. We will also consider techniques that enable us to avoid such polarisation.

## Cultural Dynamics

Culture is often defined as 'the way we do things around here' (Bower, 1966). That is, culture can be understood as the shared assumptions that govern the way a group operates. These assumptions shape all aspects of how the group functions, so the groups assumptions will be represented in artifacts: the systems the group designs and the language its members use (Schein, 1985). These artifacts are shaped by cultural assumptions, and they act to reinforce the assumptions. New members take often take on cultural assumptions that are expressed tacitly in the groups systems, language and decisions, rather than taught explicitly as the way to behave. How do these assumptions form?

Within anthropology a key concept used to explain the formation of culture is 'complementarity' (Bateson, 1972). Any group faces some predictable dilemmas that need to be resolved. For example, when actions by one member endanger the group as a whole, the group must decide whether priority needs to be given to the rights of the individual or to the needs of the community as a whole. In other words, the group must decide whether it values individualism more than community, or community more than individualism.

What determines which value will be given priority? All manner of factors shape the initial conditions bearing on the group's decision: historical factors, personality of group members, demands of the situation and so forth. In many 'ancient' communities the threat to the group as a whole was the most pressing issue, and value was given to community over individualism. Many 'modern' societies have been formed by individuals seeking opportunity to live without oppressive dictates of an autocratic system of governance, and in these societies value has been given to individualism over community.

Once a group has made an initial decision and given that the decision brings a desirable outcome, a precedent has been set for future occasions when the same dilemma arises (Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars, 1993). The more that a group relies on one value over its opposite, the more that this preferred value drops below the level of consciousness. The group no longer has to think about how to resolve the dilemma, the value has been established as an unconscious assumption of how the group handles such situations. And, as has been mentioned above, these values are built into the groups artifacts. In the USA, for instance, its founders felt a tremendous need to resolve dilemmas in favour of individualism, a value that has been built into its Constitution and legal system, not to mention its sports and arts activities.

While groups thus develop a preference for either individualism or community, these values are complementary. While they are opposites, they are nevertheless interdependent, so that actions favouring one value create a need for actions favouring the other. So while, on the one hand, groups naturally form a preference for one value, healthy groups find that they need to maintain a balance between pairs of interdependent yet opposing values. This balance requires groups to maintain on-going movement between values as needed. This movement is sometimes referred to as the 'circularity of values' (Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars, 1993).

Many pairs of complementary values exist, providing a basis for understanding the nature of decisions made by social groups. Groups must, for example decide whether to: impose *universal standards* to all members, or to *make exceptions for particular individuals*; to deal with complex situations through a process of *analysis* which breaks the issues up into smaller pieces, or through a process of *integration* which views the issues as a whole; to award status on the basis of *achievement*, or *ascribe* status on some other basis, such as age or experience.

Researchers Collins and Porras (1994) examined what made some organisations 'visionary organisations' with a reputation for excellence amongst business executives and a record of success over an extended period. They found that the distinguishing feature of the visionary organisations they examined was an ability to achieve balance between key sets of interdependent opposite values, such as stability and change.

So cultures can be understood as patterns of dilemma resolution within groups. These patterns may be evident at various levels. There may be a characteristic pattern for resolving dilemmas for the organisation as a whole--that is, an organisational culture. Within organisations various groups develop patterns that distinguish them from other

groups in the same organisation--they constitute subcultures. Subcultures have been noted to form around functions (Pascale, 1990; Hampden-Turner, 1990b) and around occupational groupings (Schein, 1996). There are also discernable patterns of dilemma resolution in larger social groups, so that industries can be said to have their own cultures (Ramsey and Ramsey, 1996) and nations or societies form 'macrocultures' in which organisations operate (Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars, 1993).

### **Schismogenesis**

While the circularity of values is desirable, the dynamics of culture often prevent it from happening. Unconscious reliance on values leads to over-emphasis of that value that is ultimately damaging to the group. Too much individualism destroys the social bonds of the community. And too much communitarianism leads to a trampling of the rights and freedoms of individuals. Unfortunately--and paradoxically--the growing need for the neglected value does not necessarily lead to a shift of emphasis within the group. Sometimes, due to a process termed 'schismogenesis,' (Bateson, 1972) the growing need for the opposite can lead to a breakdown of circularity, and further overemphasis of the culturally-accepted value, to the detriment of the group.

Schismogenesis is a term coined by Bateson (1972) to describe what often occurs when people holding polarised values meet. The term means the 'splitting apart of values,' Tannen (1990) uses the term when describing what often happens in conversation when someone who prefers to be direct meets someone who prefers to be indirect. Direct communication is purposeful and clear. Indirect communication hints at the message without saying it clearly. When the sender correctly receives an indirect message there is a sense of 'togetherness' those involved share—they understand one another where others may not. Communication between two people who prefer directness, or between two people who prefer indirectness is likely to be straightforward. What happens, though, when an indirect person and a direct person interact?

To a person who values indirectness, directness appears blunt, rude and crass. When someone communicates directly an indirect person may respond by becoming more indirect, hoping to indicate to the other person how communication could be carried out with more finesse. The direct person, finding the growing indirectness confusing and disorienting responds by becoming even more direct. Because these people are making the choice to be direct or indirect at a skilled level, below the level of consciousness (Argyris, 1990) while both are irritated by the nature of their interaction, neither are likely to be aware of its cause. Indeed, in situations like this there is a strong tendency to blame the other party to the interaction for the irritation (Senge, 1990).

In the same way, conflict arises within groups where people unconsciously adopt different values in resolving a dilemma. Perhaps a group of executives within an organisation has well established procedures and standards for handling situations to do with employees. A case arises involving a highly valued employee whose situation does not directly fit within the existing procedures, and who will be disadvantaged and aggrieved if the procedures are applied. Some in the group will be unconsciously assuming that applying procedures is the proper way to act, and that an exception would create a precedent that the organisation cannot afford. It may be, however, that others in the group sense that they have been over-emphasising procedures so that the organisation is becoming mechanistic and impersonal. They believe they need to

advocate for an exception to be made in this particular case. Such a situation is set up for the schismogenetic process.

The more that one group 'crusades' for a change to the neglected value, the more likely it is that they will mobilise others in the group who feel they must act as 'tradition-bearers' for the defining values of the culture (Johnson, 1992). This response is exacerbated by the tendency of people to take polarised positions where they see only the upside of their own position and the downside of those advocating opposite values. Even where they may see an upside to the opposing view or dangers in their own they may feel they cannot admit these without weakening their own argument (Tannen, 1998). In situations like this, groups are blocked from achieving a healthy circularity of values, and instead become mired in values-based conflict (Ramsey, 1997).

### **Systems Dynamics and Schismogenesis**

What relevance do these cultural processes have on those working in the discipline of systems dynamics? They can have a great deal in two ways: understanding cultural dynamics provides insight into the systemic structure of group functioning (Ramsey, 1997); and, systems dynamicists often operate as advocates crusading for the adoption of neglected values and face values-based conflict as a result. It is this second issue that we will examine in more depth here.

Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (1993; 1997) have concluded that the macrocultures of Western nations in general, and English-speaking nations in particular, are characterised by decisions that value universal standards over particular relationships; individualism over community; analysis over integration; and achievement over ascription. This research accords with Ackoff's (1997) description of the rise of mechanistic thinking in Western nations since the Renaissance.

The predominance of these values in Western nations provides the context for current concern for systems thinking and for learning organisations. The 'learning disabilities' described by Senge (1990) represent the consequence of over-reliance on values of individualism, analysis, achievement and application of universal standards. Likewise, Senge's five disciplines address neglected. Team learning and shared vision address the need for community within organisations. The discipline of mental models acknowledges that, rather than imagine that there is a universally correct way of seeing the world, people understand the reality around them on the basis of their particular set of assumptions. The disciplines of shared vision and team learning also encourage people to ascribe status to others on the basis of their membership of a learning community, rather than solely according to their achievement of individualistic performance objectives. Finally, the discipline of systems thinking addresses the need to take an integrated, holistic view of the world rather than one that is analytical and linear.

While systems dynamics is a method by which we can gain an integrated view of complex situations it uses tools that have a basis in engineering—a discipline generally associated with 'left-brain' analytical thought (Hampden-Turner, 1990b). An interface developed for a computer model will typically resemble the control panel of a machine even though it may be designed to enable users to explore 'soft' social values.

The blend of analytical and integrative thinking represented in systems dynamics allows practitioners to experience schismogenetic conflict from two different poles. Some will find their work too integrative when their unconscious preference is for

more mechanistic, cause-and-effect thinking. They will assume that it is of greater value to put aside consideration of variables not directly related to decisions at hand. Paradoxically, others will find that systems dynamics feels too analytical and mechanistic. This concern could arise out of an assumption that complex situations—particularly those involving social systems—are just too unpredictable for systems dynamics to deliver what it seems to be promising. Or they may assume that it is too technically challenging for people in general, and them in particular, to understand and use.

Thus, the cultural processes can result in rejection of insights from systems dynamics based on unconsciously held values, despite the contribution these insights may make to the quality of decisions.

### **Countering Polarisation**

What can be done to avoid polarisation or to find ways out of impasses created by unconsciously held assumptions? Avoiding polarisation depends in large part on the way that people communicate value-based positions.

Any value taken to extreme will produce undesirable consequences. And the reason that people hold values is that they also produce desirable consequences. When thinking about a set of opposite values, therefore, four sets of possible consequences can be envisioned: an ‘upside’ and a ‘downside’ for each of the two values (Johnson, 1992).

When we desire to bring about a change it is because we are aware that people are experiencing the downside of their current position, and believe that a shift to the opposite value will generate some upside consequences. This is typically the way people frame their descriptions of a group’s situation. A practitioner encouraging a systems view of an issue might say “I think you have a problem” and then describe the downside consequences of a group’s analytically based attempts to resolve the issue. The practitioner might then carry on to describe the upside consequences of a shift to more integrative thinking. The practitioner is here viewing the needed change with what might be called a ‘Problem/Solution’ frame.

While this appears to be a reasonable approach it does not take into account the unconsciously held values of the group. While the practitioner may frame the shift from an analytical to an integrative approach as a move from a downside to an upside, the client group may be primarily aware of the upside of the value they currently hold, and the potential downside of the opposite value. So, due to their desire for the upside they know and their fear of the opposite downside people will resist the ‘Problem/Solution’ framing of their situation. How else can practitioners communicate the need for an opposite value?

A tenet of effective communication is to ‘seek first to understand’ (Covey, 1989). In this instance, practitioners need to seek to understand the way client groups are likely to frame their situations. What values led them to the situation they are in? In particular, what upside do they see to the values they hold, and what might they fear from a shift to neglected values? Johnson (1992) recommends that when communicating about values-based conflicts we should begin by talking about these positions. This is challenging to practitioners who may, like the majority of people, have a well-established habit of applying the ‘Problem/Solution’ frame when talking about change.

Where a group is already stuck in a values-based conflict, the challenge is to help the group become consciously aware of the values that are generating the impasse. This

can be done by charting the values and plotting the positions that are creating the difficulties. Approaches to charting values-based conflict have been suggested by Hampden-Turner (1990) and Johnson (1992) who also emphasises the importance of surfacing the emotions associated with the values.

Story-telling is a further technique that systems dynamics practitioners can incorporate into their work to counter polarisation, particularly amongst those who may feel systems dynamics is too technically demanding. Stories can act as an introduction to pattern-recognition, a skill that is basic to understanding systems. Throughout history people have communicated insights they have into complex patterns of behaviour. Rather than directly or explicitly outlining these patterns using techniques of systems diagramming, most often they would be outlined indirectly and tacitly as the plots of stories (Ramsey, 1997b; 1998). Stories can thus act as a vehicle for describing the way common systemic structures operate.

### **Conclusion**

Practitioners working in the field of systems dynamics are naturally concerned with bringing about change and improving the quality of decision making within groups. This concern naturally leads them into values based conflicts. Understanding the dynamics of cultural processes, particularly the tendency groups have for schismogenesis, is the basis for more effective interventions.

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