

Communication Styles Case Study

Marcus is a VISTA member from Boston who is serving in a rural ranching community in the West, with a population of fewer than 1,000 people. Part of his assignment is to engage community members and local organizations to help create a family literacy program at an elementary school. Although he is new to the community and the organization where he is serving, he is confident he will be able to successfully complete the activities in his Member Assignment because he has a Master's degree and five years of work experience. Early in his service year, a member of his organization named Sharon is assigned to be his mentor. He is told that he can ask her for any advice or guidance. However, when it comes time to plan a series of evening "design meetings" to gather support and input from the community, he rushes headlong into organizing the meetings, without consulting Sharon.

He sets an agenda and sends it with invitations to ten community members who he thinks would be instrumental in starting the program. To gain commitment he follows up the e-mail with phone calls. Marcus reaches eight of the 10 invitees by phone, all of whom say, "Sure, I can come to the meeting." Encouraged, Marcus decides to live by the mantra, "If you offer food, they will come." He buys chips, sodas, and cookies for the event.

On the night of the meeting, only three people show up. Marcus waits 15 minutes before beginning. "I thought we were going to have more representation here," he apologizes while scanning the room. "I expected at least seven. I'm not sure what happened to the others. Does anyone else know?" Marcus looks to the two men and one woman seated. The woman shrugs. One of the men shifts in his seat, but no one says a word. Marcus decides he needs to move on with the meeting. He tapes up his charts and begins walking through his agenda. The three attendees offer very few comments, even when he asks each in turn for their opinions. "Looks like you've got a pretty good plan," is all one man says the entire evening. However, all three remain the full hour and a half, shake his hand, and thank him politely on their way out. As Marcus cleans up, he attributes the low participation to the poor turnout.

Before the second meeting, Marcus e-mails the meeting notes to the 10 original invitees. In his e-mail he says, "I hope you can make this very important second meeting. We really need your input and involvement. Help ensure that our family literacy programs reflect the needs of this community." Again, he follows up with phone calls and gets eight confirmations of attendance; however, the only person to show up for the second meeting is Sharon, his mentor. After waiting 30 minutes, Marcus balls up his charts and tosses them in the trash. As they walk out together, Sharon suggests they have a debrief meeting the next day over lunch. During his bike ride home, Marcus begins to wonder if he is cut out for VISTA.

- How would you assess what happened in the scenario? Discuss at your table.

Styles of Communication

Degree of Directness



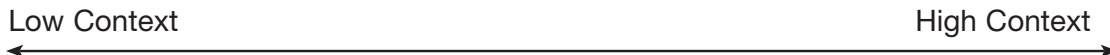
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ People say what they mean and mean what they say. ■ You don't need to read between the lines. ■ It's important to be direct and tell it like it is. ■ Honesty is the best policy. ■ The truth is more important than sparing someone's feelings. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ People are indirect. ■ They imply/ suggest what they mean. ■ Understatement is valued. ■ You need to read between the lines. ■ Telling the truth, if it hurts, should be tempered. |
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1. In regard to "Degree of Directness," I tend to be more _____.

2. How does this communication style relate to the case study?

3. What could Marcus have done to communicate more effectively?

The Role of Context



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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Low context, heterogeneous and individualistic cultures: little is already known. ■ The message must be explicit and spelled out. ■ Words are the primary means of communication. ■ Nonverbal cues are not the key to understanding. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ High context, homogenous and collectivist cultures: much is already known. ■ The spoken word is not the primary means of communicating. ■ Much is implied but little needs to be said. ■ Nonverbal cues and the context are key. ■ What is not said may be the message. |
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1. In regard to "Low or High Context," I tend to prefer communicating in _____ context cultures.

2. How does this communication style relate to the case study?

3. What could Marcus have done to communicate more effectively?

Adapted from *Culture Matters*

Styles of Communication

The Importance of Face

Face is Less Important

Face Is Key

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Face has moderate importance. ■ The facts and expediency are more important than being careful about what you say. ■ Getting/giving information is the overriding goal of the communication exchange. ■ Criticism is straightforward. ■ It's okay to say no, to confront people. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Face is paramount. ■ Saving face/not losing face takes precedence over the "truth". ■ Maintaining harmony is the overriding goal of the communication exchange. ■ Confrontation is avoided. ■ Saying no is difficult. ■ Criticism is handled very delicately. ■ What one says and what one feels often are not the same. |
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1. In regard to "The Importance of Face," I think saving face is _____.

2. How does this communication style relate to the case study?

3. What could Marcus have done to communicate more effectively?

The Task or the Person

The Task

The Person

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The task is separated from the person. ■ Do business first and then have small talk. ■ Establishing rapport and a good personal relationship are not essential to getting the job done. ■ The goal is accomplishing the task. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The task and the person can't be separated. ■ Begin with small talk and then move to business. ■ A personal relationship is a prerequisite to getting the job done. ■ The goal is building the relationship. |
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1. In regard to "The Task or the Person," I think communication focus should be on the _____.

2. How does this communication style relate to the case study?

3. What could Marcus have done to communicate more effectively?

Adapted from *Culture Matters*