

## Cultural diversity: an exercise in elaboration

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**Abstract:** This paper explores how I used personal construct theory (PCT) to underpin an intervention I designed and delivered to improve organizational effectiveness. The aim was to help improve the poor relationship between one of the teams in the organization I work for and representatives of their American customer which was adversely affected by cultural misunderstanding.

I used a variety of tools and techniques to help individuals explore their understanding of each other's beliefs, values and language and its impact on the relationship. Delegates embarked on a journey that took them from the generic macro level of cultural stereotypes and perceptions to the micro-level of what these actually meant in their individual relationships.

PCT provides a strong, robust framework for understanding one another's world from within. Because it is based on a strong theoretical base it provides guidelines within which the practitioner can, effectively and efficiently, work.

**Keywords:** PCT, culture, constructivist, team building

### **Introduction**

Schein (1992) states that 'once people have a common system of communication and a language, learning can take place'. The problem is developing that shared understanding -what we need is a solid, robust process which

will help us, jointly, agree on that common system of communication and understanding. I believe personal construct theory (PCT) provides that framework, especially when we are dealing with the facilitation of interaction between multi-cultural teams.

One of the two main contentious areas in learning and development/ organization development (OD) interventions is that of making the intervention transferable into the delegates' 'everyday' life (the other being how you measure success). As Alison Hardingham (1998), has pointed out what has been achieved in training has to cross a wide gulf before it becomes of any real value in the delegates' real world. This gulf is made wider by the differing perceptions that all actors have of their own actions and the action/intention they attribute to other players. Cornelius (1999 ) cites some of the issues and problems associated with 'off the shelf' OD interventions and the assumption that culture is either uniform or understandable from the outside. One of the main dangers is that, by reducing culture to its most visible (or basic) component parts, we end up with an over-simplistic description and, hence, understanding of different cultures.

Schein (1992 ) proposes three levels of culture - these are, at the most visible level, the 'artefacts' of that society (e.g. language, dress, fashion, art, etc.). The next level is that of 'values' (e.g. might is right, go green, etc.) and at the lowest, most complex level are those underlying 'assumptions' which are difficult to state - they 'just are'. Current cultural awareness training currently uses various media to address, mainly, the 'artefact' level with superimposed perception/ 'guesses' as to the meaning attributed to the lower levels based on third-party reports.

Mead (1994) claims that culturally mixed groups can perform better providing certain criteria are met. To achieve cultural synergy, groups must not only respect and value each other's point of view but also be willing to share their own experiences and in turn listen to each other's experiences. PCT can help this occur, as it provides a shared window through which to view each other's world. PCT approaches are based on a strong, well-documented and researched philosophy which provides well-defined, tried and tested guidelines to practitioners. By using PCT it is possible to help people 'walk a mile in the other's shoes', using their language and meaning to make frameworks for interaction and not the language/meaning of the facilitator.

PCT is based on understanding the individual from within the individual's own construct system. Our construct system is, in effect, our mental map of our world. How we then relate to events based on our map dictates how we interact with other people. A construct is the label we apply to describe an event, situation, feeling, etc. Each construct has two elements, or poles, one describing the event and the other describing the opposite (e.g. fails to deliver on time versus does what says will do). Each of our constructs has associated constructs attached to it - a form of stereotyping - so, in the example above, someone who 'does what they say' may also be seen as 'communicating regularly' (as opposed to 'never speaks to me'), being reliable (unreliable), dependable (cannot trust), etc. This then forms a picture of how we perceive the other to be and how to operate in relation to our dealings with them. Thus, it is only by understanding another person's construct system that we can interact with them in a productive manner. PCT offers the framework that can help identify each other's construct systems (or mental maps of the world).

I believe that one of the strengths of PCT is this ability to allow participants to define, and explore, their issues in their own language (and our industry has a specific 'language' of its own), rather than an external consultant coming in with their own interpretation of the issues. Rather than the consultant providing an 'expert' opinion, the participants are themselves the 'experts' and my role was to facilitate their exploration. No other method adopts such a credulous approach: the participants diagnose the problem and write the script not the consultant.

Therefore, only by understanding how others see their own world and the meaning they attribute to events can we effectively interact with them. It has been proposed (Balnaves and Caputi 1993) that, at an organizational level, as well as having our own personal construct system, we also create a corporate set of constructs. These are those unwritten rules, myths and structures that we all abide by within an organization but which are not generally made explicit, especially to those outside. So not only do we have to understand the individual but we also have to understand the organizational drivers within which that individual operates.

## **Background**

I was invited to develop and facilitate a 'relationship building' event between one of the teams in the company I work for (BAE SYSTEMS) and one of their customers. The customer is a division of the United States

Department of Defence (US DoD) called Defence Contractors Management Company (DCMC), which is based in the UK and mainly staffed by Americans.

I have been employed within BAE SYSTEMS as an internal consultant and change agent for the last few years. My main role is to facilitate a change in company culture, helping us move towards becoming a more customer-focused organization in line with our corporate value plan. One of the driving forces behind the desire to change, and improve, is that BAE SYSTEMS believes that one of its key growth areas lies in 'solutions'-type contracts. The UK Government has launched its 'Private Finance Initiative', where industry rather than the Government actually covers the cost of any development and takes the risk that the project will not be successful in the long term. As a result, the Government is not looking just for a product, but for a complete solution to their requirements, or needs. This, in turn, involves industry taking on greater responsibility for all aspects of support. Fundamental to this type of contract is a close, cooperative working relationship between the customer and the whole supply chain.

To this end, as a company, we have developed some tools and techniques specifically aimed at improving our customer relationship. These tools are used to identify who our customers are (stakeholder analysis), their requirements and what we need to do to satisfy those needs, and they take the form of self-assessment criteria, team boards, a 'toolset' of techniques and questionnaire/ survey guides. My role has been to design and deploy training sessions in order to deploy the tools and techniques and train individuals and teams in their use.

The DCMC's role is to act as 'purchasing agents' for the US DoD and as such they are tasked with the provision of aircraft spare parts, warranty repairs and defect investigations for a range of aircraft types. BAE SYSTEMS are the prime (and usually only) contractor for the fulfilment of these orders. The role of BAE SYSTEMS is to receive these orders, place them with various subcontractors for manufacture/repair and then manage the subcontractor. However, historically, BAE SYSTEMS had a poor reputation for the supply of parts to time. Not only was the repair forecast invariably months not weeks (and even then delivery was often late), but also the actual costs were not as accurate as the customer would like. This, compounded by what the customer perceived as inflated/unrealistic minimum order quantities, led to constant erosion in the relationship between the two companies.

From a PCT perspective we anticipate the future based on past experience and we choose from a wide variety of alternatives the course of action which we think is the most appropriate. We are all different and so we all differ in our perception (construction) of events. Based on the outcome of the interaction we will alter, as appropriate, our choice of action the next time we are faced with a similar event. In this instance if the DCMC approach each conversation with BAE SYSTEMS with mistrust, expecting to have an argument and not to be told what is really happening, they will act in a more challenging, aggressive manner than if they have built up mutual respect and openness. This will in turn generate a defensive attitude from BAE SYSTEMS, causing them to hold back on bad news for fear of the outcome. This type of action/reaction obviously reinforces the mindset of both parties and, if not checked, descends into a vicious circle of mistrust and accusations from which neither party can recover easily.

Communications between the two teams was extremely poor and often occurred only after the event, and then only via telephone, e-mail or fax. This led to a 'blame culture' between the two parties where mutual recriminations were the order of the day and each company blamed the other for any and all problems. Ironically, due to the high level of technical competence in the design and manufacture of aircraft, the DCMC's own customer had a high opinion of BAE SYSTEMS. Misunderstandings between DCMC and BAE SYSTEMS and an inability to listen to each other became the norm. To paraphrase Churchill, we were 'two nations divided by a common language'. This was, obviously, having a serious, detrimental impact on both the relationship and our ability to win future business from DCMC. Neither side really understood the other's processes - nor did they appear to want to. The managers of the two areas recognized that things were deteriorating and without some form of intervention the situation could easily slip into total chaos - a situation that would have been in no one's best interests. It was at this stage that I was asked to develop and deploy my intervention.

Coming from a personal construct perspective, I wanted delegates to explore what their perceptions of the relationship between the two companies meant to them both as individuals and as members of a team. This would help them understand not only each other's viewpoint but also what underlying assumption was helping create that particular viewpoint.

One of my own central beliefs is that a lot of training courses fail to make the necessary impact after the event due to a failure to ground the learning in the reality of the participants' everyday working role (Fisher 2000). Therefore, I wanted to ensure that the experiential elements were all aimed at giving participants some useful insights into each other and helping them identify what they could do differently and, more importantly, how they could actually incorporate any learning into their normal work routine. This idea of understanding and relevance was central to the structure of the course. The course itself was designed to move from the generic, national/societal level through corporate understanding down to the individual's own construction of their reality. At each stage participants would be able to explore their own cultural stereotypical thinking, the other nation's cultural perception of them, and help clarify each others (mis)perceptions, thus creating a firm foundation for the next stage of the course.

After speaking to the managers of each of the departments we agreed I would develop a one-day event spread over an afternoon and the following morning, with a social event (bowling) during the evening. This would allow both sides the chance to explore each other's perceptions and constructions of the other in a formal and informal situation. The intention was to make explicit some of the implicit beliefs about both our cultures and our organizations and then to explore the basis for these assumptions and to generate new, more effective, constructs as appropriate. In PCT terms I wanted to loosen existing tight constructs (if you're from BAE SYSTEMS you must be unreliable, deliver late, be unresponsive, not listen, etc.) and then allow participants to create new ways of seeing each other. This would then form new construct systems which could be tightened to become the new reality and which would then promote a more effective, and efficient, way of working.

I wanted delegates to explore the cultural constructs that were driving the relationship without having to spend an undue amount of time explaining any psychological theory and possibly diverting attention away from the team's main issues. Therefore I used what to my mind is the best way of eliciting constructs in a creative, informal, relaxed, safe environment - that of drawing pictures. The technique I used was 'Rich Pictures' which asks delegates to draw pictures, and use key words or phrases, in order to describe their view. Drawings were used to try to move the team away from the restriction (and potential misunderstanding) of pure words and to allow for a greater diversity of images to be generated. This also allows superordinate or non-verbal concepts to be depicted in a slightly easier manner.

The resulting images and words are then used between the groups as a focal point for further discussion and elaboration, thus allowing participants to better understand the other viewpoint, to challenge inaccurate perceptions and, therefore, to help educate each other. These discussions, both during the 'picture' creation and in the group discussion afterwards, allow participants to explore their feelings without being drawn into using emotive or threatening language and/or actions. In order for this to work it was also vital to develop as quickly as practicable a safe environment for free, open discussion and challenging to take place.

### **The event**

The participants consisted of six DCMC representatives, including the manager of the team, and ten BAE SYSTEMS employees, including their team's manager. The agenda is contained in Appendix 1 and took the group through a structured process of identifying each other's perceptions and their view of reality and finally action planning for the fixture. Sometime was also given for formal briefs on both organizations, their aims, objectives and the procedures they had to follow from either a legal or company policy point of view. This helped set some of the decisions, practices, etc., in perspective and helped participants understand some of the legal requirements placed on each team by their respective governments.

The session started with some ground rules about safety, listening, contributing, etc., in order to encourage an open, relaxed atmosphere. The metaphor of a journey was elaborated, with this being described as the first step and participants needing to take ownership of the actions agreed on later and of the team vision that would be generated throughout the event. Participants were encouraged to concentrate on those things they could affect rather than focus on any company procedures which would be difficult to change at that time. The concept that perception is reality was proposed and that it was up to the participants to alter any incorrect perceptions held about them.

In order to facilitate this positive focus, and as part of the general introductions, I asked each person to briefly introduce himself or herself and to say what one thing they wanted from this event and what their worry about the event was. The aim behind this was threefold: first, to allow people to put names to faces; second, to allow

emotive issues to be brought into the open and allow me either to 'park' them or to open them up for brief discussion so that we could get them out of the way and make sure they would not disrupt the event. Last, it helped identify some of the potential subjects I needed to ensure were covered and to help guide the rest of the sessions.

### **Hall's compass model**

The first exercise involved using Hall's compass model (Hall 1995) in order to plot the relative cultural attributes of the US, UK, DCMC and BAE SYSTEMS. Hall's model (see Figure 1) is based on levels of responsiveness and assertiveness being the defining factor in positioning cultures on a 2 x 2 matrix. Each quadrant

of the matrix has certain characteristics, which identify how people could behave in certain conditions, e.g. communication, problem solving, decision taking, etc. This allows individuals an insight into how to relate most effectively with people who display those characteristics and how others perceive them.

I have used this model in other workshops and found it to be an easily accessible and very effective method of identifying cultural differences and generating discussion points based on perceived actions and behaviours. It has the advantage of allowing delegates to plot themselves and others in relation to their perceived use of assertiveness and responsiveness and then relate the impact of their style of behaviour on people who are from a different perspective. There is also a strong link between the four quadrants of the compass model and the individual learning styles of analytic (north), amiable (east), expressive (south) and driver (west) as well as other 2 x 2 models.

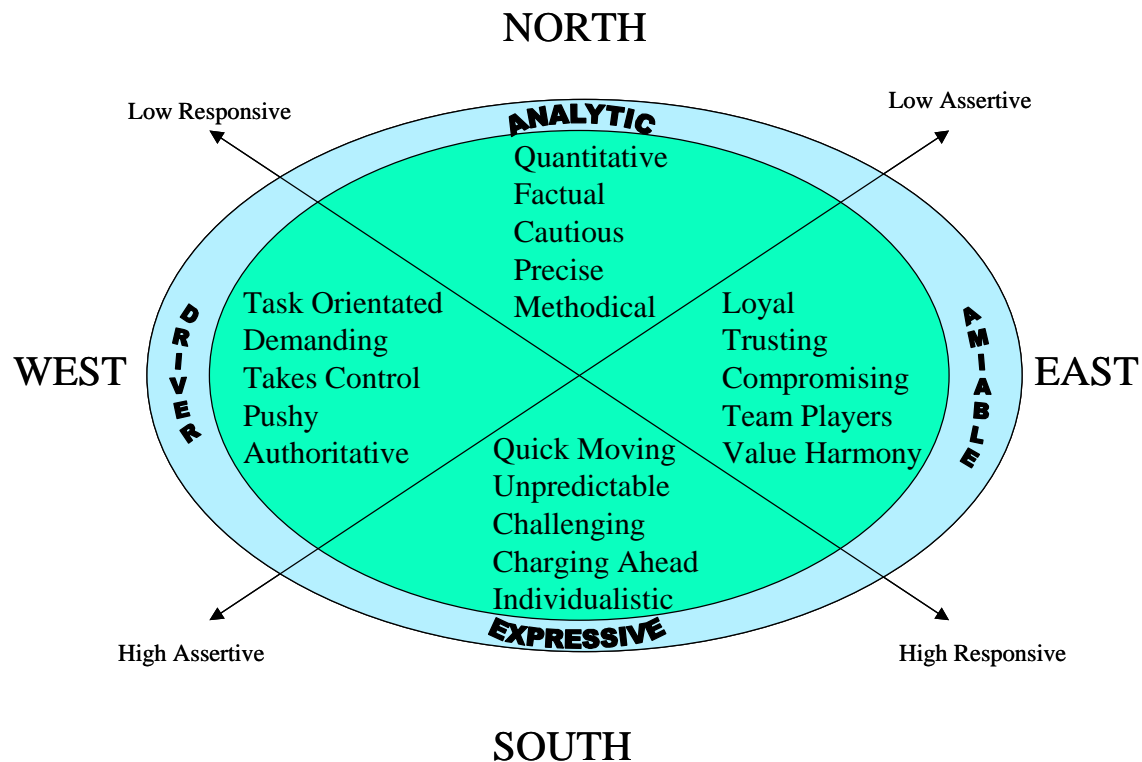


Figure 1 Hall's cultural compass model

To complete this exercise I split the group into two DCMC and two BAE SYSTEMS teams. Each team was then given a series of statements relating to assertiveness (e.g. team 'x' tends to be 'pushy', 'charge ahead', 'quick moving', etc.) or responsiveness (individual 'x' tend to be 'sensitive', 'loyal', 'team players', 'value harmony', etc.) and they were asked to tick those which applied. The resultant scores were transferred on to the compass model, showing the perception of the group's preferred method of working. The positional results are shown in Table 1. While there was some slight difference in the positioning of the four cultures, there was general agreement that BAE SYSEMS and DCMC were seen as operating from diametrically opposite styles. The implications of this difference in operating style highlighted some of the areas of conflict and provided participants with an insight into how to overcome miscommunication. These findings were then used as a discussion point for further elaboration of cultural stereotypes and the optimum means of interaction was discussed.

	<i>BAE SYSTEMS' view</i>			<i>DCMC view</i>	
	<i>Team 1</i>	<i>Team 2</i>		<i>Team 1</i>	<i>Team 2</i>
US	West	West		(South) west	South
UK	(South) west	(South) east		South	East
BAE SYSTEMS	South	East		East	East
DCMC	West	West		West	(South) west

Table 1 Each team's view of their cultural positions

Participants reported later that they felt that this was a good exercise, which helped break down barriers, stimulate discussion, and had generated some representative results.

### **Cultural beliefs**

The next step was to focus in from the generic cultural stereotypes and onto the social stereotypes and look at how the two countries operated within their own environments. One US team was, therefore, asked to draw a Briton at home, the other a Briton at work and the two UK teams were given an American at home and at work respectively. Once completed, these drawings were then explained to the rest of the group and a plenary session again held to discuss the beliefs and their implications for the relationship between the two companies. By combining words and pictures a greater coverage of individual styles and preferences can be achieved, thereby allowing everyone to participate as much as practicable.

### **The relationship**

The four teams, still in their country groups, were then asked to draw a picture describing the relationship between the two companies. On the completion of the pictures, two mixed groups were created. These groups discussed each other's picture and the implications arising from the perception. When the whole group reunited in a plenary session, one of the US team had to explain the UK picture and vice versa. This is based on sound psychological practice and facilitated a greater depth of understanding of the opposite perspective, thus helping a closer working relationship to be generated.

As a further team-building event, we had arranged an evening out at a local bowling alley. The group was split into teams comprising two UK and one US representatives in each team. Small prizes were awarded for highest individual UK/US score, lowest individual score, best and lowest scoring team in the bar after the games had finished. The evening event was also attended by one of the BAE SYSTEMS directors, who also presented the prizes (this helped add weight and show commitment to the DCMC team from the BAE SYSTEMS senior management). The evening helped delegates get to know each other better and fostered a friendly, supportive atmosphere as representatives from different companies were cheering on members of the opposite company.

### **Motivators and demotivators**

The following morning we held a brief re-cap of concerns and the pictures from the previous afternoon to establish whether we were covering everything necessary and to reinforce some of the learning from the previous day. Participants were then divided into two mixed groups and asked to define the motivators and de-motivators impacting on their current working relationship and how to overcome them. The idea behind this was to identify not only where there was conflict but also actually where the relationship was working and how they could build on the positives to overcome some of the problematic areas. The resultant findings were reported back to the whole group and again discussed in open forum.

### **Pluses, minuses and lessons learnt**

The whole group was then asked to review all the work to date, and to add 'postit' notes to pictures and lists together with thoughts, comments and suggestions. This effectively allowed for individual and group reflection over the whole event and assisted delegates in grounding their learning in their own working environment. As part of this process the delegates had to undertake a SWOT (strength, weakness, opportunities, threat) analysis of the work to date. Participants had to identify any relevant common themes and issues and then form themselves into groups in order to compile a short presentation to give to everyone else on an important issue. The presentation had to cover what used to happen, why and what could be done in the future to prevent the issue re-occurring. This session was left to the delegates to organize themselves into groups based on the themes, etc., which were the most important to them.

## **Next steps**

The final session was an action planning event where we discussed, both in open group and in specific work-orientated groupings, what could be done in the fixture to help deliver a better service to the DCMC and hence the US DoD as well as supporting each other. Individuals generated specific action plans aimed specifically at helping them move the relationship forward. The whole team generated both combined and individual action/improvement plans to help them improve current, and future, performance. I ensured that the actions generated were 'SMART' (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Timebound) and ownership was clear, with the most appropriate person was empowered to resolve the action. After the event, I created a booklet containing all the pictures, lists, actions, etc., generated during the event, which was distributed to all delegates and key stakeholders. The idea was that this should act as an aide memoir of the pictures and words generated and not only as a reminder of the agreements reached in the session but also as an understanding of why specific agreements were reached. The book also acts as a visible reminder of the event and its outcome.

## **Conclusion**

A diverse combination of learning styles was used throughout the event, ranging from drawing, brainstorming, group discussion, presentations, facilitated learning events and action planning to try to ensure that everyone not only contributed but also got the most out of the event (personally and professionally).

Creativity was encouraged, as was sharing of thoughts, ideas and values. The structure of the final session allowed delegates to clarify, and define, their own action plans for moving forward individually and in conjunction with their direct interface. One couple who directly interfaced with each other generated two pages of actions and agreements that they both signed.

A safe, relaxed, fun atmosphere was created where delegates felt safe to broach contentious or emotive issues and felt that they would be listened to without criticism. Delegates also reported feeling safe to challenge both their own and the other companies' practices and procedures without fear of reprisal. They could experiment in the creation of new mental maps and try new ways of interacting to establish the optimum.

Two quotations came up during the course of the event which the group liked and which I think exemplify how far the group came together. One came from fairly early and the other towards the end of the event. The first was: 'the definition of a Brit. is someone who thinks 100 miles is a long way and the definition of an American is someone who thinks 100 years is a long time'. The second quote: 'just because our children are naughty doesn't mean we stop loving them', seemed to sum up the change in mutual respect and appreciation which had developed over the course of the exercises.

Because of PCT's unique approach to understanding individuals and how they operate, it allows people to understand how others construe or perceive their own world and that of the other person and hence helps each interact with the other in a more meaningful manner. By helping participants to explore and elaborate their own individual and group world views we begin to open up some of the hidden areas of knowledge and assist in loosening tight stereotypical views and allowing other people to share our view of the world.

At the start of this article I alluded to one of the main problems in OD interventions -that of measurement of success. Would any positive outcome be merely the result of the Hawthorne effect or could I show some correlation between my intervention and an improvement in the relationship between the two teams? It is still too early to have any meaningful quantifiable performance data - although early indications are positive. However, anecdotal feedback from participants and the managers seem to indicate that overall the session was seen as a very useful intervention and that it has contributed to a significant improvement in the relationship between both parties. The two teams no longer operate from a position of mutual mistrust and blame. Both teams now work closely together to resolve each other's problems in a more open, friendly and trusting environment - they are talking and understanding the same language.

## **Appendix 1**

### *Agenda*

Introduction

Workshop aims and objectives

Introduction to the United States Government

Exercise 1 Compass model

Exercise 2 Cultural beliefs

Exercise 3 The relationship

### *Bowling*

Recap on day 1

BAE SYSTEMS organization

Exercise 4 Motivators/demotivators

Exercise 5 Pluses, minuses, lessons learnt

Exercise 6 Next steps

Wash-up, close and lunch

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