



Dancing between Cultures: Culturally Intelligent Coaching for Missions and Ministry
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Harmony and Conflict in Autonomy and Community Cultures

Janice, a Canadian ministry leader, had spent her childhood in Nigeria. Now as an adult, she was leading a pastoral team in her home country. The team, all Canadian, interacted in lively fashion with most issues. When Janice would bring a new idea or proposal to the table, generally a big idea meant to benefit the whole church, discussion of the pros and cons would ensue. Team members would share how they expected the proposal might impact their ministry and their own team, either negatively or positively. Frank criticism or affirmation was a routine part of meetings. Support for proposals, even when passed, was not necessarily unanimously implemented.

Janice began to shut down within team meetings, gradually becoming less and less animated and articulate. Team members finally noticed the change in behavior, but were not sure what was going on with Janice. Relationships became strained, and Janice resigned. A coach could have helped this team talk through their underlying expectations for team meetings and values about harmony and conflict.

Conflict styles and how they impact coaching goals and issues is a whole book in itself. But values about conflict and harmony are culturally related and will come up, both in the coaching relationship itself and in the issues clients bring to coaching. When relationships are expected to be long-term or lifelong, harmony and getting along with others in the group is a high priority. When individuals can move in and out of groups at will according to their own needs and are expected to have their own opinions independent of their current group, conflict and disagreement become an ordinary part of life. Janice, who grew up in a Community culture, did not expect and was not comfortable with the routine disagreements and conflicts that are often part of life in an Autonomy culture team or organization. She interpreted them to be much more

serious than they were to other members and concluded that the team did not support or believe in her.

In community cultures, conflicts are often dealt with through intermediaries. A biblical example can be found in 2 Samuel 14 when King David's military commander Joab sent the wise woman of Tekoa to mediate with King David on behalf of David's rebellious son Absalom. Likewise, conflict may be addressed through indirect messages that are clear to those within the culture while often unclear to those outside of the group (for added explanation, see chapter on Direct/Indirect communication).

Conversely, autonomy cultures deal with conflict "up front" by "speaking the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:5). Autonomy culture Christians will be expected to follow the biblical model in Matthew, chapter eighteen, which involves going directly to the person who has offended you and confronting them in love.

If you are an autonomy coach coaching a community client, expect your client to be utterly loyal to his/her group, even when they may be describing what you feel is an outrageous situation. Anne, a leadership coach working in South Asia, writes:

Since loyalty to group members is a key value, avoid saying anything that could be interpreted as criticism of a group member, a family member, team leader, or team member.¹

In other words, let your coachee take the lead in interpreting the behavior of those in their group. Anne goes on to suggest:

Value the need for maintaining dignity and harmony when coaching a client through difficult relationship issues. Strategies to resolve conflict would likely not include confronting unless done through a third party. Avoidance of a difficult situation rather than attempting to resolve the issue is common in a community culture."²

Your client's solutions may center on "working around" and making sure that others in the group do not lose face. Ask your client how conflict is handled in their community or team. Ask who they can go to for advice or to mediate. Ask what your coachee's goal is regarding

¹ Anne, Personal Communication, Permission granted on September 17, 2015.

² Anne, Personal Communication, Permission granted on September 17, 2015.

resolution. Your coachee may likely be willing to live with more a difficult situation longer than you are. Remember it is your coachee's perspective and not yours that counts

When working with community value clients, you should also expect that the client will place high value on harmony with you as the coach. This means they may be less likely to tell you that they are dissatisfied and more likely to try to match with what they assume are your goals and opinions. Watch for indirect communication. Be willing to use a mediator for any problems within the coaching relationship.

If you are a community coach coaching an autonomy client, your client may likely verbalize pointed comments about people in their group with whom they are in conflict. Remember that in their culture it is much more acceptable to confront differences directly, and working differences out in blunt fashion will not necessarily lead to disaster. But once your client is done venting, do ask what is appropriate in their context. What is a way to talk about this disagreement that would work best with their boss? What approach might be most effective with their husband? For more on this technique, see the chapter titled "Walk around the Castle".

Expect autonomy value clients to express freely any dissatisfaction with some aspect of the coaching or coaching relationship. This is often an invitation to problem solving, which they will tend to approach directly.