3.3. Cultural communication styles

The following information provides some guidance on various different global communication styles, and the way they can influence interactions with people who have made a complaint.

3.3.1. Globally recognised communication styles

We all rely on our acquired set of norms to develop what we see as appropriate, polite and respectful patterns of communication. Over time we are exposed to a wide variety of styles and patterns of communication that expand our own understanding and ability to interact successfully with others. However, there are times when the logic of someone's communication does not appear clear and the meaning is lost, misinterpreted or simply dismissed. In situations such as these, understanding and appreciating different communication styles can help to reduce or avoid conflict and confusion.

The descriptions below are basic outlines of eight communication styles you may come across when interacting with people from different cultures: linear, circular, direct, indirect, expressive, restrained, intellectual and relational. They form a useful basis for questioning assumptions about people's behaviour and may help you to understand why someone is acting in a certain way. You may even be able to adapt your own behaviour when you receive information in a way that is outside what you or your organisation are used to dealing with.

Linear

Information is provided in a straight line, almost like an outline. A leads to B which leads to C – all getting to 'the point'. It is frustrating for these communicators to be 'diverted' from what they consider to be the point when they are speaking or listening. It is up to the speaker to provide information clearly and concisely. This is a dominant style for most native English speakers.

Circular

Information is provided in a roundabout way, telling stories and restating things in many different ways – sometimes getting to the same point that a linear person might. However, some circular communicators leave 'the point' unstated. This can be a much longer process than linear conversations. It can be up to the listener to analyse and reach 'the point' based on the details provided and the context. This is an important style for some Africans, Arabic speakers, Indians and many Latin Americans.

Direct

Information is provided through unambiguous statements with a strong focus on speaking rather than writing. It is up to the speaker to state explicitly what they mean. People who use this style might make statements like: 'I tell it like it is!' French, Russian, Dutch and many other Northern Europeans, plus Israelis, favour direct communication. This is also a dominant style for most native English speakers.

Indirect

Information is provided through suggestion, implication and non-verbal behaviour. Active listening is required to follow and understand the various strands of communication. It is possible that messages will be sent through a third party. This style allows a person to avoid

confronting another person or causing them to lose face. Responsibility lies with the listener to analyse information and reach conclusions based on the context and communication methods other than spoken words. Often the words used are not meant to be taken literally. Most Asian societies prefer this style in disagreement or conflict.

Expressive

Important issues are discussed with feeling and emotion, a loud tone, use of hands and other gestures. All of these methods convey the speaker's personal stake in the outcome, their passion. It is important for more restrained communicators not to misinterpret this passion as threatening or aggressive. It is also important to remember that expressive communicators are seeking empathy and understanding, so if you make explicit statements about 'calming down' they may very well become more expressive in an attempt to show you how important the issue is. Provide empathy – by showing (rather than just stating) your understanding of their feelings rather than shutting them down. This style is common in most of the Mediterranean area as well as being used by Arabic speakers, African Americans, some Africans, Indians and others.

Restrained

Important issues are discussed with calmness and 'objectivity', conveying the speaker's ability to weigh all the factors impersonally. These speakers feel that it is important to be composed and that – if it is important – it should not be tainted by personal bias. This style can be interpreted by more expressive communicators as coldness and lack of caring. Most Northern Europeans favour this style. It also dominates professional settings in the English-speaking world.

Intellectual

Any disagreement is stated directly – with the assumption that only the idea, not the relationship, is being attacked. People who use this style might make statements like: 'We're just arguing – don't take it personally!' These speakers may argue for fun and in order to get to know and build trust in others. This style is found in some European countries, such as Russia and France, as well as Israel.

Relational

Disagreements are handled in a subtle and non-confrontational manner. In a debate or disagreement, it is important to tread softly. If relational people cannot find some common ground on an issue that is difficult or important for them, they will 'agree to disagree' or use indirect language in their disagreement. People who use this style might make statements like: 'If you don't like my idea you obviously don't like me.' This style is often the source of communication where 'yes' seems to mean 'no' and requires open-ended questions rather than closed ones. When relational communicators apparently answer with a direct 'yes', they may very well follow up with a more indirect or circular 'no'. If you fail to recognise this communication pattern you may judge them as dishonest or manipulative, when in their mind they were being very clear that their answer was 'no'. Indians and some East Asians use this style to prevent loss of face. Aboriginal English often favours relational communication, especially with non-Aboriginal people or authority figures.

3.3.2. Interpreting courtesy

Courteous behaviour is highly culturally dependent and implies a shared set of communication styles and other shared cognitive and behavioural patterns. Discourteous behaviour can mean breaking simple etiquette rules, such as shaking hands or not, through to more serious infringements – such as speaking the name of the dead. When interacting with people who are culturally different from you, even if they speak your language, remember that you may have to be more explicit in your behavioural and communication expectations of them. It may not be enough to say, 'You must be courteous and respectful'. You may have to provide a list of behavioural expectations for what you mean by these terms.

Interpreting hierarchy

People who come from more hierarchical backgrounds than what is normal in Australia and New Zealand (most countries in the world are more hierarchical) may make false assumptions about you and your organisation based on what you see as normal behaviour. For example, if you encourage people to call you by your first name they may assume you have befriended them – as only friends use first names in many societies. This may mean they expect you to behave as a friend, supporting their claim 'no matter what' or advocating for them throughout the complaints process. In other cases, people may themselves be quite high in rank or status in their own community and expect to be treated differently to others during their complaints process. When you do not do this, they may say you have been rude or disrespectful of them. There are many other situations in which the person's understanding of the role of hierarchy in organising the world leads them to misinterpret you, your organisation or the complaints process.

You will not change your policies or procedures in these cases, but – to help some people understand your actions and how your process works – you may have to provide more explicit information about your own behaviour, expectations and possible outcomes. You cannot assume that your own unwritten etiquette rules and behaviours will be universally understood, even by those who speak your language fluently.

Interpreting honesty

Direct and intellectual communicators, such as most English-speakers, use the term 'honesty' to mean telling the truth, 'saying it like it is' or being transparent in their actions and communication. The listener has little responsibility but to pay attention. For more indirect or relational communicators, 'honesty' involves a very different set of actions – often in order to save face for themselves, their listener or others. They tend to rely on the listener to interpret the entire context of the communication and rely much less on words. Culturally appropriate listening skills require not only paying attention but also analysing, interpreting and questioning the entire context of the communication in order to find the speaker's meaning.

Interpreting respect

Respectful behaviour is very different across different cultural contexts. For intellectual communicators, engaging in argument is a form of respect – as it shows esteem for people's ideas and ability to communicate. For more relational communicators, agreeing with others is a form of respect – as it shows a willingness to set aside your own ideas for them. Expressive communicators will feel highly disrespected if you ask them to 'calm down' or if

you remain restrained instead of showing them that you understand them and their point of view (understanding is not agreeing). Of course, for restrained communicators, respectful behaviour is the opposite – they expect calmness and an even tone.

As with courtesy, when interacting with people who are culturally different from you even if they speak your language, remember that you may have to be more explicit in your behavioural and communication expectations of them. It may not be enough to say, 'You must be courteous and respectful'. You may have to provide a list of behavioural expectations.

3.3.3. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

The terms 'Indigenous', 'Aboriginal' and 'Torres Strait Islander' are commonly used now, but it is important to note that these names are the legacy of colonisation and are terms imposed on a range of people with diverse cultures and languages.

The term 'Indigenous' is usually used when referring to both First Nations people of Australia – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This term is generally used by the Commonwealth Government as they have a charter of providing services and programs to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at the national level. The term 'Aboriginal' refers specifically to the Aboriginal people of mainland Australia and does not necessarily include Australia's other Indigenous population – Torres Strait Islanders.

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are opposed to the term 'Indigenous' being used as it generalises both cultures. It is important to remember that while both are First Nations of Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are very different – with their own unique histories, beliefs and values. It is respectful to give each their identity.

When referring to both cultures, it is appropriate to use the term 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander'. In other circumstances – for example, in states and territories where Aboriginal people are the original inhabitants – use Aboriginal. The first letters of Aboriginal, Elder, Torres Strait Islander and Indigenous are always capitalised. Not doing so is similar to misspelling a person's name or another country's inhabitants.

Respect and sensitivity

Like all genuinely mutual and productive relationships, engagements with Aboriginal people and communities need to be based on respect. You need to offer and earn respect, particularly in dealings with community Elders and leaders. Elders and community leaders not only hold key community knowledge but they also have a great deal of influence over when, how and if a community will work with those from outside. This is also true for other representatives of the local community. An Elder or leader may not necessarily be an older person. They may also be a younger person who is well respected within their community and holds significant community knowledge. Many Aboriginal people acknowledge Elders and leaders as Aunty or Uncle, even if that person is not blood-related or kin, as this is a sign of respect. The same courtesies accorded to dignitaries should be applied to Elders.

Managing expectations

Numerous policies and programs have been developed by government promising Aboriginal people many things that have often not been delivered. For this reason, managing expectations is important. Be honest and upfront. Providing feedback is also critical.

You need to explain what your organisation can do, and make sure that people clearly understand any processes and limitations you may have when providing assistance and advice. Aboriginal people would rather you be honest and tell them if you cannot help them, or if it is not within your organisation's capacity to help them. Alternatively, if you cannot provide them with the advice they need immediately, explain to them that you need to research the problem or seek advice from your supervisor and you will contact them with the information. Make sure that you do this, even if it is not good news.

Credibility

It is not wise to say to an Aboriginal person 'I will look into it for you' as in most Aboriginal communities this means you are a 'looking glass man/woman' – meaning you will look into the problem like you do into a mirror, but do nothing about it. Remember that the 'grapevine' or the 'bush telegraph' is very effective and efficient – and you can be certain the whole community will know in a very short time what you did or didn't do. Providing feedback, even if it may not be what people want to hear, is critical to an organisation's or individual's credibility.

Language

Since colonisation, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have experienced prejudice, discrimination and misunderstanding and their interests, rights and concerns have often been dismissed or ignored.

For example, after European colonisation, Aboriginal people were forbidden from speaking their traditional languages, and English was used to communicate with and describe Aboriginal people. Given the beliefs and perspectives of the colonists at that time, the terminology that was developed was often inaccurate and discriminatory towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Having an understanding of how to use appropriate terminology and language, and understanding some of the ways in which many Aboriginal people use language differently to non-Aboriginal people, is fundamental to effective communication and to developing strong relationships with Aboriginal community members.

Inappropriate terminology

As the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians continues to evolve, the language that is considered appropriate also changes. There are a number of terms which, while still in common use, are out of step with what many Aboriginal people believe is appropriate or offensive. It is important to understand that opinions on what is appropriate will vary between different locations and between individuals. If you are not sure about using a particular term, ask the local Aboriginal community to identify what term they believe is the most accurate and respectful.

Aboriginal English

Aboriginal English is the name given to the various kinds of English spoken by Aboriginal people throughout Australia. Technically, the language varieties are dialects of English. They have much in common with other varieties of Australian English, but there are distinctive features of accent, grammar, words and meanings, as well as language use. Aboriginal English often shows continuities with the traditional Aboriginal languages. In many subtle ways Aboriginal English is a powerful vehicle for the expression of Aboriginal identity.

Part three

Swearing

It is common for some Aboriginal people to use swear words in their regular vocabulary and in general conversation. Swearing is not considered to be as offensive as it is in non-Aboriginal culture. If this happens, try not to take any offence. This does not include a person swearing directly at you in a derogatory, threatening or offensive manner – this behaviour should not be tolerated by anyone.

Non-verbal communication

Aboriginal English makes considerable use of non-verbal signs. These are an integral part of the communication process and should not be ignored.

Differences between Aboriginal non-verbal features and those of other cultures provide additional scope for misinterpretations. This is especially so for people of Anglo-Celtic descent who usually downplay non-verbal communication. Non-verbal communication includes hand and facial gestures, eye contact and silence. If there are concerns about misinterpreting non-verbal communication, clarify by rephrasing the question or repeating the non-verbal response back by using verbal language. For example, if you are asking a person how many children they have and they hold up three fingers, clarify by asking back 'So you have got three children, right?'

Be sensitive to the use of non-verbal communication cues, which are a part of Aboriginal communication patterns. The use of silence does not mean Aboriginal people do not understand – they may be listening, remaining noncommittal or waiting for community support. During discussions, Aboriginal people may delay expressing a firm opinion – preferring to listen to other people's opinions first before offering their own. Remember that language issues are extremely sensitive because so many Aboriginal languages have been lost and many of those that survive are endangered.

Communication tips

- Be sensitive to the use of non-verbal communication cues, which are a natural part of Aboriginal communication patterns.
- The use of silence does not mean Aboriginal people do not understand. They may be listening, remaining noncommittal or waiting for community support.
- Use indirect eye contact – which is a sign of respect in Aboriginal culture.
- Time delays (sometimes lengthy) before communities provide requested information – or a less direct communication style – are common in Aboriginal communities.
- To be direct may be seen as confrontational.
- During discussions, Aboriginal people may delay expressing a firm opinion even though they may hold one. Instead, they may listen to others before offering their own view.
- If their view conflicts with others, they will often tend to understate it.
- The question 'why?' is virtually absent from the language of remote Aboriginal communities. Instead, observation is used as a learning device.