

Last week, we focused on one fundamental aspect of communication, human psychology. As we learned last week, our ideas of self are both shaped by what we hear from others and what we internalize. These feelings about ourselves influence our future interactions.

This week, we will focus on another central element of communication, culture. Culture is elusive to many of us, because we are so steeped in it that it becomes an invisible force in our lives. This week, we hope to remove some of those veils, and better understand how culture influences how we communicate. In paying attention to culture, we can improve as communicators. In your forum this week, you will be asked to define culture based on what you've learned in Bevan and Sole.

Culture is central to communication, as it provides us with a framework for making sense of reality. Culture teaches us how to be normal and polite. It teaches us what to pay attention to and what to ignore. It shows us how to speak with others, how close we stand to them, or how loudly we speak, just to name a few dimensions.

Fundamental to culture, our values, beliefs, and traditions. Having a firm sense of values, specifically, can help you understand culture better. Once you understand values, you can see how they are conveyed and reinforced in our thoughts and actions. Values are fundamental principles that govern our activities and choices, including how we communicate. Here we see the core value of one's business.

Americans also typically value things like fairness, freedom, individualism, respect, and achievement. All of these are abstract ideas that dominate our choices and ways of thinking about life. They influence both how we communicate and the focus of our communication.

Let's take the day in a life of a person and see how these values can be illustrated through one's thoughts, choices, and behaviors. As I tell this person's story, we will see various values that are evident in her narrative.

This is Tasha. She's 34 years old, a single mom living in the Indianapolis, Indiana. She lives in a modest two bedroom apartment because that is what she can afford without living with family members. She aspires to one day own her own home.

Each day, Tasha gets up at 6:30 AM because she cares for her family, and she has to provide for them. She wakes up her three children who share a bedroom. After they've showered, she pours them a bowl of their favorite cereal, Cheerios. She has compromised with this cereal, because it is something that can be prepared quickly, and she values her personal time in the morning. This also avoids the more sugar laden choices that they would probably prefer, such as Lucky Charms or Cap'n Crunch.

The children are both wearing name brand shoes. And she paid extra to ensure they would be accepted by their peers. Running out the door at 7:30 AM, she is on her way to drop off the kids at school. She asked her children if they would like to have their own bedroom. Yes, they scream. The children explain how they will decorate their own rooms. She thinks to herself that she hopes to have them in a new home by March. She knows the other neighborhood will be much safer as well. She imagines her dream home.

A lot is riding on her promotion. In addition to the money, Tasha knows it will allow her to be creative and plan marketing campaigns. And she will have access to funding to take classes. There'll be tough competition. She knows the hiring process will be fair. She has a chance, she thinks. She drops off the kids and tells them she loves them.

You can see in just this brief set of interactions values are part of daily lives, and deeply integrated into how you think, the choices you make, and even what you talk about. Think through your day, and analyze every thought, every interaction, and every choice.

If we were to look into Tasha's beliefs, which are based on values, here are some of the things that she likely believes. First, hard work pays off in promotions and other opportunities. The underlying value here is meritocracy. She'd likely also believe that it's important for her children to think in, to fit in with this peer group. This represents the value of communalism, or status and materialism. Finally, she likely believes that it's important to sacrifice her time and energy for her children's happiness. And the underlying value here is family.

As you approach the discussion forums this week and think about culture, think about the values that inform your thoughts and decisions, and how communication has helped shape these values. OK, everyone, we hope this helps you better understand culture.