



## MULTICULTURAL: BRAINSTORMING

### SELF INITIATION VS AUTHORIZED ENTRÉE

Brainstorming serves the cultural and communication style of CWM and African Americans (“verbal, visible, assertive, self-initiating”) very well. African Americans are especially adept at “getting to the hole” first, perhaps owing to the influence of jazz in the culture. If they don’t speak at such meetings it has more to do with caution and politics -- the risk factor in speaking up-- than ability. CWM finish a strong second in their ability to engage in the spontaneous free flow of ideas. They are first, however, when it comes to making sure their voices are heard within the meeting. The reasons for this have to do as much with entitlements and position as it does with cultural style. Other groups fall behind African Americans and CWM with regard to spontaneous self assertion. CWW who are put off by the competition for the floor and the fight for individual recognition are sometimes reluctant to enter the fray. For others the pace and structure of the meeting inhibits their active participation. The African American cultural pattern is to take the floor. CWM and CWW assume the floor is there to be taken. Asians wait to be given the floor.

In hierarchical, “know your place” cultures people don’t speak until they are authorized to do so. The first person authorized to speak at work is the person in charge of the meeting who then authorizes others to speak at his or her discretion or with respect to order set by the agenda.

Consequently, what inhibits the active participation of members of these cultural groups has to do with more than just developing the requisite skill set to wait for the holes and jump in. For one, there is the issue of etiquette. Asians, East Asians, especially, say, “It feels like people are criticizing and interrupting each other”. There is also the importance of making sure the ideas that you propose are thought through beforehand and right. East Asians have a “think before you speak” cultural style, not a “think as you speak,” style, as CWM and other groups have. In East Asian culture, what is valued is the right opinion, not simply your own opinion. As one Japanese engineer said, “In Japan, what is written down is 100 times more important than what is said. For people to take what you say seriously it has to be officially ratified and confirmed.” That is why Asians view U.S. brainstorming meetings in which ideas are simply thrown out as “shooting from the hip” or “bull shitting.”



There is also the issue of hierarchy. When the boss is in the room others speak at his or her discretion. Others may have their own opinion, but it is the boss that has the right (authorized!) opinion. Because people from hierarchical cultures are often reluctant to speak when their boss is present, it often becomes a strategic move on the part of bosses to absent themselves, knowing full well the inhibiting, sometimes intimidating, effect they can have on others. Our Head of Operations for Latin America, Ilya Adler, suggests, "If you want to get creative input from Hispanics at a meeting, an important and effective strategic move would be to try to get the boss out of the room." Within our own training we are also alert to the inhibiting effect a boss' presence may have even within a group of CWM. Most of the time, as we watch who participates, we see almost everyone speaking up in that group. If the CWM senior level person is doing most of the talking we sometimes talk to him at the break and suggest that he back down and let others speak or take the lead. They generally have no problems with the request being made or complying with it. In one Hispanic male group, the highest ranking Hispanic in the company participated, despite his dominant position. He dealt with the hierarchical issue --the power distance between himself and others in the group-- by taking on the role of facilitator. He used his position to make sure that the voice of each person in the group was heard and became part of the larger group agenda. Yet, when it came time for the group to report out to the larger group, the other Hispanic men, in respect of his position, stepped aside to let him represent their individual issues, despite his urging, in respect of the process, to have each group member speak for himself. These same cultural issues impact performance evaluations in which employees are expected to offer their own opinions, even to the point of disagreeing with the boss's assessment of the situation. The cultural assumptions that CWM make are that individuals will value and present their own views of the situation, treat them on a par with everyone else, including the boss, and freely assert them throughout this process. The likelihood is slim that first and even second generation Hispanics, Asians, and members of other hierarchical cultures will do that. The view there is, "The boss is my report card."



## OTHER CULTURAL UNDERPINNINGS

### ORIGINALITY/PERFECTIONISM

CWM are encouraged early on -an outgrowth of self reliance and self-determination-- to see themselves as authors of their own lives and the primary source of creative thought and action.

They, as parents, might say, to their children at the beach, "Hey, kids, here's a pail and shovel, go build something." And even if the first products of their kids are "half baked", they still give credit and encouragement for "trying", and to the extent that it applies, for "ownership" and "originality". For Asians, there is no such thing as partial credit for things that are less than perfect. Quite the contrary! People find flaws even in things that are very well done. For example, in the film, *The Joy Luck Club*, the mother of newly crowned chess champion Waverly Jong, said to her, "How come you win by losing so many pieces?" Waverly protested, "But Mom, that's not how the game is played." Her mother replied, "Next time you win, losing fewer pieces." Because of perfectionism, there is also no public display of things that are "half baked" or incomplete. For Asians, there is a right way and a wrong way and anything less than completely "right" is completely "wrong". Our Asian colleague gave an example of this pattern that he got from a professor/observer of a classroom in Japan. A Japanese student was making a clay horse which was perfect in every detail except the tail. His Japanese teacher crushed the entire horse and asked the student to start over from the beginning. The message being communicated was nothing less than perfect is acceptable. A U.S. mainstream teacher would have said, "So far, a great job! Now all you need to do is a little more work on the tail."

### SOLUTIONS

Brainstorming, as presently conducted within U.S. mainstream companies favors the cultural style of some groups (African Americans, CWM) more than others. So what can we do to create greater parity in the workplace for groups that do not do well within this kind of process. A necessary but longer term solution would be to develop skill sets and change attitudes and values over spontaneous self assertion that would enable everyone to participate in brainstorming on a more equal basis. A faster turnaround can be gotten by changing the pattern of the meeting to make it more accessible to groups or individuals with different cultural styles. In that regard some organizations have started to



use a “structured round robin” where individuals are given notice before the meeting what the topic is to enable them to prepare ahead of time, and, in alternating fashion, report on the topic when the time comes for them to present. This also works well with the “think before you speak” cultural orientation of East Asians (vs. Anglo “think as you speak”) during brainstorming at meetings.<sup>14</sup> Another way still would be to find ways to enable individuals to contribute outside of the meeting and treat that on a par with those contributions that occur inside the meeting. These are additive rather than mutually exclusive alternatives. For example, a second generation, Japanese American from a mixed marriage (father is Anglo, mother Japanese) was rated low in “creativity” in her performance evaluation because of her (non-active) participation in brainstorming meetings. The way she did contribute to what went on at the meeting was, later on at home, organizing in detail everything that people said, adding her own thoughts, and then presenting the complete report to her boss the next day at work. It was very well received by her boss. By showing a more deliberate version of what went on at the meeting, she provided the boss with a clearer picture of what happened than he was able to recall. She was also able to create a sense of logic, sequence and continuity that the meeting itself did not have. It also served as a blueprint for follow up. The problem for the employee was that the company had no performance evaluation category to cover that kind of contribution. The category “creativity” was reserved for active participation in brainstorming meetings. Yet her contribution was also seen as valuable. What the company did was to create a new category --they called it “innovation” -- that recognized her “outside of meeting” contribution at a level that was consistent with what others achieved through active participation in the meeting itself.

<sup>14</sup> Kim, H. S. October 2002. We Talk, Therefore We Think? A Cultural Analysis of the Effect of Talking on Thinking. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* Vol. 83, No. 4, :828-842.