Kluwer Mediation Blog

WYSI[N]WYG

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In the early days of personal computing, the development of the "graphical user interface" was accompanied by the acronym, WYSIWYG: "What you see is what you get". While frustrated computer users know that this was never entirely true, or might only have been true for the computer boffins who designed the interface, the idea was nevertheless an important one: what was there on the surface was what you had to deal with – folder and files and trash cans were all there on the virtual "desktop".

Shift frames from computing to interpersonal communication, and consider this as a metaphor for at least one cultural style of communication. "WYSIWYG" as a computing acronym might unintentionally have captured a low-context cultural style of communication in which the content and message were contained in the communication, in the words used, and not hidden in [social and linguistic] codes. The other side of this, and the other broadly framed mode of communication – the high context mode – is one in which not everything that is conveyed is in fact communicated expressly; what is communicated is as much what is understood as is what is articulated. This mode is "What you see is NOT what you get."

I return to this daily well-trodden field of communication in the weeks following the hugely successful and stimulating International Commercial Mediation Competition hosted by the ICC in Paris. Again, students from 65 universities, from over 40 countries participated in over 200 mediation sessions, culminating in the final between Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich (ironically, represented by an Australian and an Irishman) and Monash University. The mediation lingua franca of the competition tends to be a model of mediation that has become pretty much universal, in terms of the key procedural components of the mediator's facilitative role, the use of private caucus sessions, and the progression from opening statements to interest exploration and negotiation of outcomes; and in the normative elements of confidentiality and party autonomy. But, in the same way that English – the linguistic lingua franca of the competition – appeared arrayed in a rich diversity of accents, intonations and local coloration, so too, I think, does the broadly agreed and common process of mediation tend to conceal as much as it reveals for many of those engaged in it.

Having observed these mock mediations for the past six years, and having worked with a team from Asia – and, I suppose, as an Asian-born, Western educated, and again Asia-resident mediation practitioner and academic – what still interests and puzzles me is what is not said in mediation, and in communication in general. Over the last couple of years at least, the judging

criteria have been refined, and the judges informed about not only the standard elements of mediation advocacy and negotiation practice but also about the likely variations in practice when observing, say, teams from the US, Poland, Kenya, India, Singapore, Jamaica or Italy. The enduring difficulty, I suspect, is still that criteria we have are clear on what it is that mediators and judges are to observe and look out for; but how – and this is a genuine question – do we account for the things that are not said, the messages that are not contained in the medium of the communication overtly conveyed across the table?

If we return to the essentials of the high- and low-context communication styles for a moment, the difference is succinctly stated by Kevin Avruch:

"A high-context communicational style (or individual message, for that matter) is one in which most of the information, or meaning, is 'in the person' or the physical context in which communication takes place; relatively little is in the explicit or coded message itself. By contrast, a low-context style or message is one wherein most of the information or meaning is to be found explicitly in the coded message. In high-context communication, language use is expressive; in low-context communication, it is instrumental. High-context styles are rich paralinguistically (in kinesics, gestures, and so on); low-context styles are paralinguistically impoverished. In low-contrast interactions what you hear is what you get; there is a directness – often a rather assertive one – to communication. In high-contrast interactions, what is in the explicit communication is rarely the entire story; much is implied and indirect and is to be found … in the receiver and the setting." (*Culture and Conflict Resolution*, [Wash. DC, US Inst for Peace Press, 1998; p. 64]).

The practical and perceptual issue is that that the values of "Western" mediation – such as the neutrality of the mediator, the confidentiality of the process, the importance of the participation and autonomy of the disputants, the norm-creating function of mediation, and the reliance on a broadly problem-solving methodology – are themselves all culturally-grounded values (see I Macduff, "Contradiction and Conflict – High- and Low-Context Communication in Mediation" in in Teh Hwee-Hwee & Joel Lee (eds), in *An Asian Perspective on Mediation* (Academy Publishing, Singapore, 2009). While we may agree on those processes and norms – in the same way that we might agree to speak English in a meeting – what is said is not always what is meant, and what is meant is not always what is said.

There are, I think, two issues that are worth watching for, whether we're in the role of mediators observing the communications of disputants or as judges watching contestants ostensibly playing by the same rules:

First, as briefly outlined here, the medium is not always the message: what is said is not always what is really being said, and those with whom we communicate or observe in communication might hope or expect that we will understand or infer more than is overtly articulated; and

Second, one embedded element of the high- and low-context difference involves openness to contradiction: high- and low-context societies will differ in their willingness to permit the apparent disruption of social norms and coherence. As David Augsberger notes: "Individualistic (low-context) cultures prefer directness, specificity, frankness in stating demands, confrontation, and open self-disclosure. Collectivistic (high-context) cultures tend toward indirect, ambiguous, cautious, nonconfrontational, and subtle ways of working through communication and relational tangles." [David W. Augsburger, *Conflict Mediation Across Cultures: Pathways and Patterns*, (Louisville, KY; Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992),p. 28.]

One brief example comes from conversations with an Asian and Western team at the competition, concerning the parties' willingness to "correct" the mediator if she or he is seen to be wrong: perhaps predictably, the Western participants would readily do so; but for the Asian participants, this direct challenge – as it was seen – to the authority of the mediator was unthinkable. What is **not** said here – by the Asian team – is any expression of dissent.

The practical reality then is that people do rely on different systems of thought which shape understandings of causation, connections, logic, and the role of individual agency; with profound implications for modes of expression, degree of directness or indirectness in communication; and a tendency towards instrumental or expressive approaches to communication. All of this may be present **at** the table; but the challenge for observers and communication partners alike is to know that not everything is actually **on** the table.

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