

Exercise 2.10

Service with a Smile

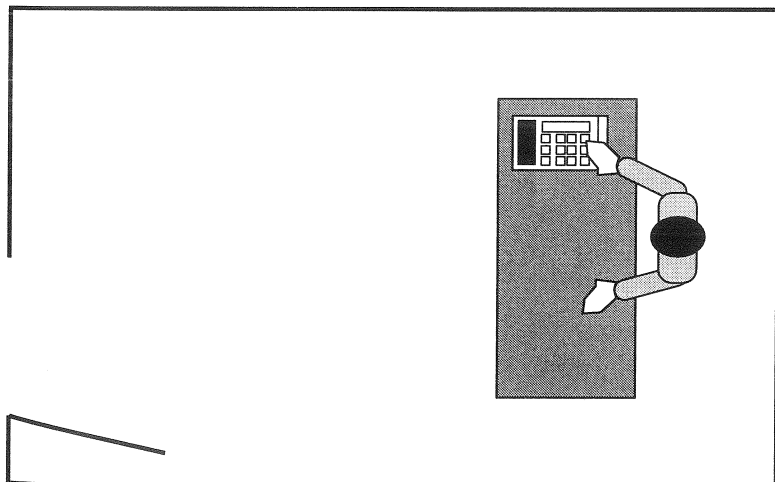
This exercise is a brief introduction to the third building block of culture, the concept of time. The two poles of this dimension, monochronic and polychronic, will be defined in the exercise which immediately follows this one.

Below you will find a picture of a shopkeeper standing behind the counter in his shop. Imagine that there are six patrons in this shop, all ready to be checked out. How should these six people arrange themselves vis-à-vis each other? Using circles to represent the patrons, draw in your answer.

Long delays no longer mattered. The threat of passing time was an idea alien to them. So what if it passed, it was a gift, like life and energy and speech, to be spent lavishly on those around them.

—Mary Cole

Dirtroads: Footloose in Africa

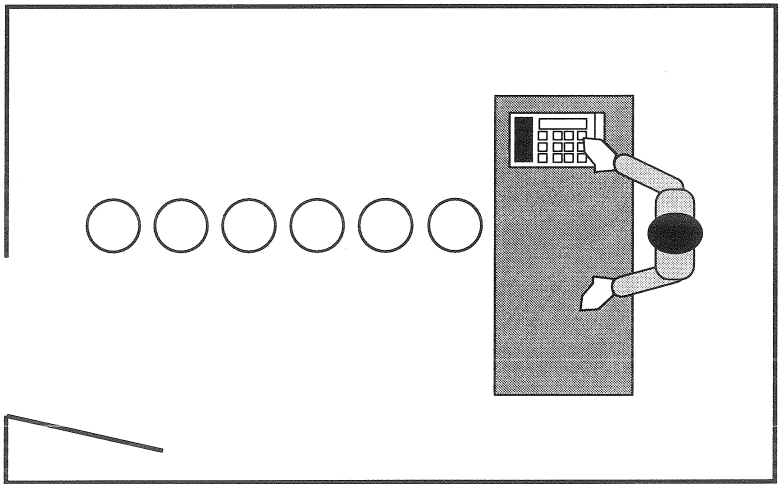


Now turn to the next page to see how respondents from a monochronic and a polychronic culture answered this question.

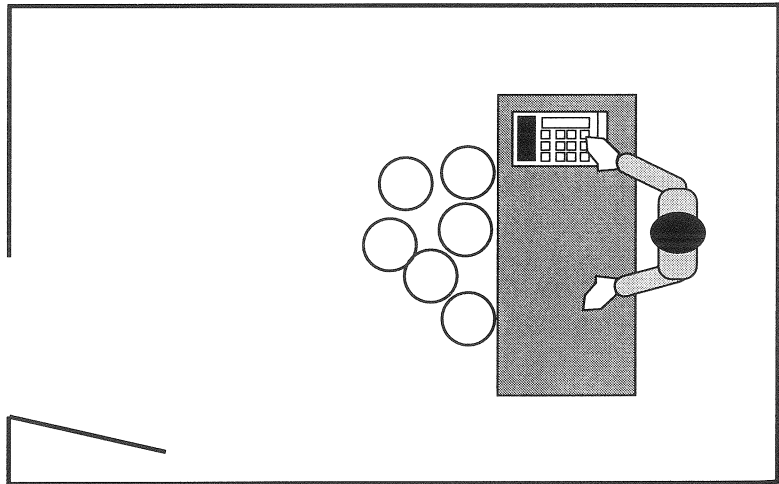
Discussion

Standing in a line is more characteristic of monochronic cultures, where people expect to be waited on one at a time and in order of arrival. In polychronic cultures, people expect to be waited on en masse and often do not stand in a neat line.

Drawing from Monochronic Respondents



Drawing from Polychronic Respondents



Monochronic–Polychronic

Another of the ways in which cultures differ is in how people conceive of and handle time and how their concept of time affects their interactions with each other.¹ The two poles of this building block, *monochronic* and *polychronic* time, are defined below.

Monochronic: Time is a commodity; it is quantifiable and there is a limited amount of it. Therefore, it is necessary to use time wisely and not waste it. There is a premium on efficiency, hence a sense of urgency in many matters. Time is the given and people are the variable; the needs of people are adjusted to suit the demands of time (schedules, deadlines, etc.). It is considered most efficient to do one thing at a time or wait on one person at a time. As far as possible, you shouldn't let circumstances, unforeseen events, interfere with your plans. Interruptions are a nuisance.

Polychronic: Time is limitless and not quantifiable. There is always more time, and people are never too busy. Time is the servant and tool of people and is adjusted to suit the needs of people. Schedules and deadlines often get changed. People may have to do several things simultaneously, as required by circumstances. It's not necessary to finish one thing before starting another, nor to finish your business with one person before starting in with another. You always have to take circumstances into account and make adjustments. Strictly speaking, there's no such thing as an interruption.

Danish punctuality would result in hypertension in Greece.

—Max Messmer
Staffing Europe

¹ The exercises in this building block owe a great debt to the groundbreaking work of Edward T. Hall. See Recommended Reading.

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Once again, bear in mind that no culture is going to be exclusively monochronic or polychronic, that all cultures will have elements of both poles. But cultures do tend to be *more* one way than the other. Because of personal differences (see exercise 1.3), individuals within a given culture, of course, can be anywhere along the continuum and may very well be at one spot in one set of circumstances and somewhere else in another set. As a general rule, however, you should expect to find most individuals on the same side of the dichotomy as their culture as a whole.

The next exercise asks you to take the definitions of *monochronic* and *polychronic* presented above and apply them to specific examples of behavior. Below you will find a list of twelve items, each of which is more representative of one pole of this dimension than the other. Read each item and put an *M* next to those behaviors more consistent with monochronic time and a *P* next to those more consistent with polychronic.

- ___ 1. Time is money.
- ___ 2. To be late is rude.
- ___ 3. The focus is on the task, getting the job done.
- ___ 4. Having to wait is normal.
- ___ 5. Interruptions are life.
- ___ 6. Plans are fixed, once they are agreed upon.
- ___ 7. The focus is on the person, establishing a relationship.
- ___ 8. Everything depends on the circumstances.
- ___ 9. People follow an internal clock.
- ___ 10. Plans are always changing.
- ___ 11. Having to wait is an insult.
- ___ 12. People are sometimes too busy.

Suggested Answers

- M 1. In polychronic cultures, time is merely time.
- M 2. The concept of being late implies schedules and an imposition of structure upon time, which are characteristic of monochronic cultures.
- M 3. Monochronic cultures are organized around tasks.
- P 4. It is understood that people can't always control events to the extent that they or the other party will always be on time.
- P 5. Events often overlap.
- M 6. Monochronic cultures try not to take circumstances into account.
- P 7. People come first in polychronic cultures.
- P 8. You can't structure life, as hard as you may try.
- P 9. Polychronic types try to follow their feelings rather than the dictates of some external structure.
- P 10. Life is like that; you can never know what's going to happen, and depending on what happens, plans may have to change.
- M 11. Being on time is an important value, so being late (making someone wait) is frowned upon.
- M 12. People may not have enough time (but in polychronic cultures there is always enough time).

Exercise 2.12

Choices

An Australian man once visited the island and asked me when the stores were open, since it was afternoon and he hadn't seen a store open yet. Taken aback at what seemed a stupid question, I told him the obvious truth, "They're open when their doors are open." When I walked away I realized it was a question I would have asked myself when I first arrived on Fiji.

—Peace Corps Volunteer
Fiji

This exercise introduces additional aspects of the monochronic/polychronic building block and reviews some of those from exercise 2.11. It also asks you to think about your own tendencies regarding time. Below you will find ten sets of paired statements, *a* and *b*. Read each pair and circle letter *a* or *b*, whichever best describes the way you feel or the action you would take vis-à-vis that item. Please choose one even if you think the two alternatives are not mutually exclusive, in other words, that both are true or possible. For many of the examples, you might also be tempted to say, "It depends on the situation," which indeed it does. But choose anyway, without thinking too much!

- 1a. People should stand in line so they can be waited on one at a time.
- 1b. There's no need to stand in line, since people will be waited on as they are ready for service.
- 2a. Interruptions can usually not be avoided and are often quite beneficial.
- 2b. Interruptions should be avoided wherever possible; they are inefficient.
- 3a. It's more efficient if you do one thing at a time.
- 3b. You can get just as much done working on two or three things at the same time.
- 4a. It's more important to complete the transaction (if a meeting has gone beyond the scheduled time).
- 4b. It's more important to stick to the schedule (and continue the meeting at another time).

- ___ 5a. Unanticipated events are hard to accommodate and should be avoided when possible.
- ___ 5b. Unexpected things happen all the time; that's life.
- ___ 6a. You shouldn't take a telephone call or acknowledge a visitor when you are meeting with another person.
- ___ 6b. It would be rude not to take a phone call or to ignore a visitor who drops by.
- ___ 7a. You shouldn't take deadlines too seriously; anything can happen. What's a deadline between friends?
- ___ 7b. Deadlines are like a promise; many other things depend on them, so they should not be treated lightly.
- ___ 8a. It's important, in a meeting or a conversation, not to become distracted or digress. You should stick to the agenda.
- ___ 8b. Digressions and distractions are inevitable. An agenda is just a piece of paper.
- ___ 9a. You're never too busy to see someone; he or she would never understand if turned away.
- ___ 9b. Sometimes you're just too busy to see people; they will understand.
- ___ 10a. Personal talk is part of the job.
- ___ 10b. Personal talk should be saved for after hours or during lunch.

Now that you have circled your choices, read all the pairs again and decide which are more consistent with monochronic time (put an *M* in the blank) and which with polychronic (put a *P*). Then check your answers. How many of your circled choices turned out to be monochronic and how many polychronic?

This exercise isn't scientific, of course, and doesn't "prove" anything about you. For one thing, all the items, as noted earlier, are taken out of context; you might very well select one alternative in one set of circumstances and the opposite in an-

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other. Moreover, the choices you made for any given item may have more to do with some other aspect of your personality than your monochronic or polychronic tendencies. Even so, you have no doubt been given some food for thought and also been exposed to additional contexts in which this important concept operates and additional circumstances under which it might influence people's behavior.

Suggested Answers

Remember that an item marked *M* or *P* means only that the particular behavior tends to be *more* characteristic of Monochronic people or Polychronic people but is by no means exclusive to members of that category.

- 1a. *M*
- 1b. *P*
- 2a. *P*
- 2b. *M*
- 3a. *M*
- 3b. *P*
- 4a. *P*
- 4b. *M*
- 5a. *M*
- 5b. *P*
- 6a. *M*
- 6b. *P*
- 7a. *P*
- 7b. *M*
- 8a. *M*
- 8b. *P*
- 9a. *P*
- 9b. *M*
- 10a. *P*
- 10b. *M*

Exercise 2.13

What Would You Do?

A firm may say, "Yes, your shipment will be ready on Tuesday." You arrive on Tuesday to pick it up but find it is not ready. No one is upset or embarrassed.... Time commitments [in Mexico] are considered desirable objectives but not binding promises.

—Eva Kras
Management in Two Cultures

Now that you are familiar with the monochronic/polychronic dichotomy, the time has come to begin applying what you have learned. In this exercise, you will be presented with two situations where differences concerning this aspect of culture have caused an incident. These may be situations you have been in or can imagine being in. Regardless, a successful resolution of each incident requires putting into practice what you know about the monochronic/polychronic dichotomy. Read each incident and jot down in the space below it what you would do or say if you were faced with this situation.

1. Efficiency

You live in a polychronic culture. One of your colleagues is an immigrant from a monochronic culture and he is having problems adjusting to what he calls "unprofessionalism" in the workplace. He complains about how inefficient people are: they don't come to meetings on time; they come very late to appointments with him or they make him wait a long time when he has an appointment with them; when he is meeting with someone, that person will take telephone calls or talk to people who drop by and interrupt the conversation. "This is not the way to do business," he told you yesterday. Apparently he has complained to other people in your office as well, for just today some of them have come to you to complain about *him*. You are his closest friend in the office. What should you do?

2. Caregiver

Yours is a monochronic culture. A nurse in an elderly-care home where you are the nursing supervisor comes from a more polychronic society, and her work habits are beginning to bother a lot of people, including several physicians and numerous residents. The latter complain that she is always late for her tasks, whether it's bathing them, helping them to the toilet, or taking them down to the dining room at mealtime. They say she's too friendly, by which they mean she spends too much time chatting with people (who nevertheless appreciate it a lot), and this puts her behind schedule. Physicians and other nurses complain that she's late to meetings and often reports late to work, which means someone on the shift before hers has to stay on until she arrives. Everyone likes this woman—she's outgoing and very compassionate—but she can be exasperating when it comes to managing her time. What's your next move?

Discussion

Each of these incidents raises the same basic issue: What does a person on one side of the monochronic/polychronic divide do when working with a person or in a culture that is on the other side? What adjustments in his or her behavior and attitudes might be expected and appreciated by members of the other culture? People in these situations do not *have* to make these adjustments, of course, but they should at least understand the consequences of not doing so.

1. Efficiency

Your task here is to advise a monochronic person how to get along in a polychronic workplace. The first thing he needs to understand, of course, is that time is simply looked at differently in polychronic cultures and that ignoring people, not schedules, is the greater sin. Next, you might gently remind him that whatever he may think of such norms, he himself is now being judged by polychronic, not monochronic, standards. At the very least, this should sober him a bit.

Next you might encourage him to try to behave in those very ways he currently finds so frustrating. He himself should try coming later to meetings, which means he will arrive when everyone else does (and get a lot done back at his desk during the half hour he would have spent angrily waiting alone in the meeting room); he should feel free to take phone calls or chat with passersby when he is meeting with people, for they will expect and understand such behavior; and he too can feel free to make people wait for him if he has some business to attend to at an appointed hour.

The hardest thing, of course, will be getting him to believe that other people think all these behaviors are actually efficient. You may never get him to that point, but you might jolt him out of his certainty by asking him how efficient it is to insist on being monochronic in a polychronic world!

2. Caregiver

Our polychronic nurse doesn't realize she's polychronic, of course, much less that her polychronic behaviors are neither expected nor appreciated in the culture she has ended up in. Your first step, then, is to describe the monochronic worldview to her so that she has an opportunity to put her behavior in context. This doesn't mean she will become monochronic on the spot, but it does mean she will begin to understand better how she is perceived by the residents and staff.

You'll need to explain that meetings and appointments start on time (and that in this culture on time means at the hour given, not twenty minutes later), that things are somewhat driven by the clock, and that she will be evaluated in part on her promptness. You need not pull your punches here, for it is not fair to this woman to protect her from the consequences of her actions. She doesn't have to like the monochronic worldview, but she certainly needs to know about it and to understand the consequences of not modifying her behavior accordingly.

If she wants to spend more time with the residents, invite her to do so when she is off duty or when she has free time during the day.