

In-Groups and Out-Groups. An important aspect of ethnocentrism is the creation of in-groups and out-groups. When we become ethnocentric there must be a “we” and a “they.” We are the good people, of course, and everyone who is in our group is good. Hence, “in-groups” are good, and it naturally follows that other people compose “out-groups” and “they” are the bad people. All cultures are ethnocentric (including subcultures) and thus identify people in their culture as the in-group and people in all other cultures (and subcultures) as the out-group. This, of course, provides the basis for dislike, hate, discrimination, conflict, and even war between cultural groups. In the presence of too much ethnocentrism, friendly competition between people of different organizational cultures can evolve into hatred and sabotage of each group by the other. So a major function of managers in organizations is controlling the ethnocentric (as well as egocentric) tendencies of the various subgroups (and individuals) within the organization. Since it exists in all cultures (is pancultural), it is reasonable to conclude that ethnocentrism is a naturally occurring phenomenon in human societies. The key to dealing with it is understanding its various levels.

Levels of Ethnocentrism. There are five levels of ethnocentrism. From the least to the most extreme, they are equality, sensitivity, indifference, avoidance, and disparagement.

Equality is the lowest level of ethnocentrism. People and groups at this level treat others as equals (do to others as you would have them do to you). While they may notice diversity between themselves and others, they see the other peoples’ customs and ways of thinking and behaving to be equal to their own. Cooperation is likely under these circumstances, as is effective communication and problem solving. In political terms, these people treat each other as “allies.” It is a “we” relationship.

Sensitivity is the second lowest level of ethnocentrism. People at this level see others as culturally diverse and recognize that this may be problematic. However, they want to better understand where the others are “coming from” and decrease the differences between themselves and the others if possible. They are willing to compromise with the others if the others are willing to compromise as well. If the people from the other culture are also sensitive, the likelihood of successful communication between the two groups is good. They may be able to cooperate, compromise, and successfully work together. They may be able to convert “they” orientations to “we” orientations, at least on a temporary basis.

Indifference is the so-called moderate level of ethnocentrism. People at the indifferent level don’t much care about people from other cultures; they prefer to communicate only with people like themselves. They reject diversity and embrace homophily. These people will not go out of their way to cause trouble for people who are different from themselves. But if contact with diverse people is forced upon them (by the other people or by circumstances), they may react very negatively. Organizations undergoing change that requires cultural adaptation may have serious problems with people at this level. These

are not people who should be sent on temporary (or permanent) assignments to other cultures, particularly highly divergent cultures. Nor should they be assigned to work under a person from a distinctly different subculture. If they are, any problems that occur are likely to be attributed by these people to the failings of the culture or subculture of the people they are forced to interact with. Extremely negative emotional outcomes are to be expected on the part of these people when forced to interact as an equal with people from cultures other than their own. They can be civil with people from other cultures, however, if they are only expected to do that and have no additional contact.

Avoidance is the second highest level of ethnocentrism. People at this level actively avoid and limit communication with people from other cultures to the maximum extent possible. They are especially averse to intimate contact with such people. In organizations, they will avoid accepting any appointment that would require them to communicate with such individuals. They will actively resist hiring, retaining, or promoting diverse people if put in a position where they must participate in such decisions. They will not normally go out of their way to attack people from other cultures, but will do so if they feel their own cultural orientations are being challenged.

Disparagement is the highest level of ethnocentrism. People at this level have no value for, nor do they respect, the cultures of other people. They are actively hostile to such people. They belittle them and see them as inferior beings. Most cultures have terms for people who are considered inferior to others (mud people, untouchables, pagans, infidels, etc.). That is what people from other cultures are to these people. They reject communication with these people except to disparage them in every imaginable way. People at this level may be referred to as “bigots”; however, they see themselves as defenders of their culture. They are often willing to take extreme measures to do so.

Highly ethnocentric groups see themselves as virtuous and superior, their values as universally correct, and their customs as original and centrally human. In contrast, they see members of other groups to be contemptible, immoral, inferior, and weak. They feel it is their responsibility to try to change those people and make them like themselves if at all possible. Most major religions have subgroups that are highly ethnocentric. Not all members of the religious group have these highly ethnocentric orientations, but their most extreme, fundamentalist factions frequently do. Fortunately, very few organizational cultures reach such extremes. While it is entirely possible that you will find individual people working in organizations who are at the disparagement level of ethnocentrism, it is unlikely you will find it necessary to work as a subordinate in such an environment. If you do, do your best to find other employment!

Becoming Highly or Lowly Ethnocentric. Ethnocentrism exists on a continuum of high to low. Therefore, everyone is ethnocentric to some degree. Being at either end of the continuum can be disadvantageous (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997). There has been considerable dispute about how people come to be ethnocentric. Is it one of the genetically based orientations, or is it something that we learn? Since there is such high variability in ethnocentrism across

people in any given culture, some have assumed that this must be a genetically based trait. More recent research, however, has failed to confirm that belief. This research determined that ethnocentrism and homophobia (another trait generally considered to be antisocial) were highly correlated with each other ($r = .57$). However, neither were found to be associated with any dimension of temperament (Wrench & McCroskey, 2003). While this does not rule out the possibility that these two traits could be associated with some brain system(s) other than the ones controlling temperament, it does indicate that they are, at least, not associated with the genetic factors which have been seen to be highly instrumental in forming the foundations for many personality traits and communication traits. Hence, at this point, it appears that a view commonly expressed by people who regularly have to deal with problems associated with ethnocentrism is correct: “People have to be taught to hate, they aren’t born that way.” This learning may begin early in life when parents, and others in a child’s culture, work to overcome a child’s egocentrism by teaching them they are part of a group and not the be-all, end-all person in the world. Such efforts to open the child to others in their environment may provide the foundation of learning, or overlearning, to value members of their in-group and favor them over members of all other groups—the essence of ethnocentrism.

Positive Aspects of Ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism provides the foundation for the existence of a culture or a subculture. It helps people who make up cultures and subcultures develop a sense of collective identity and group pride. It helps maintain the integrity of the culture or subculture in the face of external threats from people from other cultures (who also believe their culture to be the best one). Some people suggest that if there were no ethnocentrism, there would be no culture.

Ethnocentrism gives the people in an organization an identity and helps make them more homogeneous and cohesive. It promotes positive and effective communication among people within the organization. It results in people being more willing to follow the formal and informal practices of the organization since the people in the organizational culture consider these practices to be the correct ones and the best ones for all normal people to follow. When conflict occurs with people from other organizational cultures (or subcultures), blame can be placed on the other group and that reduces potential conflict within the home group. Ethnocentrism provides the foundation for pride in one’s organization.

Clearly, ethnocentrism is the first line of defense for any organizational culture or any organizational subculture. Without it, an organization or a unit within it is open to rapid and extreme changes and is subject to losing its very existence. For this reason, people who lead subcultural groups within a larger organizational culture sometimes resort to very militant communication in the ethnocentric defense of their subculture. They recognize that, in the absence of high ethnocentrism among the members of the subculture, it may be seen as weak and unimportant to others in the larger culture. If too few people think a subculture is worth preserving, it will not be preserved.

Negative Aspects of Ethnocentrism. Like many other things, ethnocentrism in moderation can be positive, as we indicated in the previous section. However, if taken too far, ethnocentrism can become a very negative orientation for both individuals and organizations. It is particularly dangerous for either to have strongly ethnocentric beliefs and not recognize that they do. It is usually very easy to see ethnocentrism in others, but it is usually difficult to recognize it in oneself or one's organization. After all, our view of the world is the correct one, isn't it? Some of the people who complain the loudest about being mistreated by some other cultural or subcultural group are also among the most ethnocentric people you will find. However, they will deny their own ethnocentrism loudly while decrying this very evil in other people and organizations around them.

There are four potentially serious problems for communication in organizations, which emanate from ethnocentrism that is too high: culture shock, stereotyping, prejudice, and excessive cohesiveness. We will consider each of these in turn.

Culture Shock. Although culture shock has been experienced by people for centuries, it was not fully identified and described until 1960 (Oberg, 1960). Culture shock is something almost everyone experiences when they move into a new cultural environment. Whether the move is from one continent to another, or just from home to a nearby college, some degree of trauma is likely to be experienced. Given the mobility of society today, this means that almost everyone will experience the trauma of culture shock at some time in their lives, and many will experience it several times. If you have never experienced it, when you do, "shock" will not seem too strong a word to describe it. At the extreme, culture shock has been found to result in complete mental breakdown, and even suicide. The greater the actual difference between the old and new culture (or subculture), the greater the shock. Similarly, the higher one's ethnocentrism, the greater the shock.

Although we don't always realize it, we become acculturated to work in our first job. We develop a concept of work based on that experience. Each time we take a new job, we have to revise that concept to fit the new organization's culture. When we take a new job in another organization, initially we take the old culture with us. If the new culture is not very different from the old one, or if we have very low ethnocentrism, we may adapt to the new position quickly. If the new culture is very different, or if, because we are highly ethnocentric we perceive the new culture to be very different, we are likely to experience severe culture shock and all that goes with it.

Highly ethnocentric organizations are not likely to recognize that new employees are experiencing culture shock. They see their culture as very open and accepting—and normal. Any problems in adaptation by new employees are seen as weaknesses or personality defects in the new people. More sensitive organizations develop programs to help new employees make the transition to the new culture. These programs socialize the new people to fit within the organization's culture. Over time, then, both the organization and the new

employees adapt to each other, and the new people are assimilated within the organizational culture.

Stereotyping is the process of forming generalizations about people based on their membership in a culture or subculture. Many stereotypes are fully accurate, others are partly but not fully correct, and still others are completely inaccurate (Lee, Jussim, & McCauley, 1995). Such generalizations serve as a means of organizing our experiences with others. We need them so we may better predict how people will respond to our communication efforts. It is important that we be able to recognize that individuals often differ substantially in important ways from other members of their own culture. Ethnocentrism interferes with this recognition. As a result, highly ethnocentric people are willing to generalize their stereotypes to people for whom the stereotype clearly (to less ethnocentric observers) does not apply. The more ethnocentric an organization's culture, the more absolute will be the stereotypes in the collective consciousness of its members. Even if an individual employee recognizes the falsity of the stereotype (her sister works for the stereotyped company), they may feel strong pressure to remain silent.

Prejudice refers to “a priori judgments” based on inadequate stereotypes. The term “a priori judgments” references judgments made in advance of the time when they are employed. By “inadequate stereotypes” we mean the basis for the stereotype is insufficient or inaccurate information.

While “prejudice” suggests a negative judgment, that is not always the case. There are instances where the prejudgment is positive, even though it was based on insufficient or inaccurate information. However, this is the exception rather than the rule—and much more likely to occur within one's home culture than in intercultural encounters. Like stereotyping, the root cause of prejudice is ethnocentrism. And since virtually all of us are ethnocentric, at least to some degree, it is likely that we have some negative stereotypes of people from other cultures or subcultures, and it is likely that we have some prejudices about some groups of people and their culturally based behaviors—including communication behaviors. And, of course, it is highly likely that people from other cultures and subcultures have negative views of us for the same reasons.

Excessive cohesiveness may at first appear to be an oxymoron. We want our work groups to be cohesive. Cohesiveness is good. It enables people to work together. All true, but as is usually the case, it is possible to have too much of a good thing. Groups that share a highly ethnocentric organizational culture greatly exaggerate the “in-group”/“out-group” distinction we discussed earlier. Their own cohesion is highly valued, while members of other groups—even within the same organization—can be seen as enemies. Extremely high cohesiveness increases stereotyping and prejudice against out-group members and leads to a decline in decision-making quality. In the “worst case scenario,” it can lead to what is called “groupthink.” We will consider this phenomenon in more detail in Chapter 13.

Organizations exist within cultures, and cultures exist within organizations. To fully understand how an organization works (much less why), we

must make ourselves aware of both of these powerful influences. As peons in an organization, nothing may be as we see it initially. Consequently, we need to exercise great caution in drawing any conclusions, good or bad, about what is going on in our new cultural world. We must take time to get more information, be aware of our own ethnocentrism as well as that present in the organizational culture, and remain open to changing any conclusions we may draw.

STUDY GUIDE

1. Define “culture” and “organizational culture.”
2. Relate culture to communication.
3. Explain subculture, intracultural, intercultural, cross cultural, international, inter-ethnic, interracial, pancultural, and diversity.
4. Distinguish between biological sex and gender.
5. Explain the concept of “ethnocentrism.”
6. Distinguish between in-groups and out-groups.
7. List and explain the five levels of ethnocentrism.
8. List and explain the positive aspects of ethnocentrism.
9. List and explain the negative aspects of ethnocentrism.

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Communication and Change

Why is it that when someone in an organization says the “c” word, people immediately start hyperventilating? The word *change* always seems to invoke feelings of anxiety, hostility, and frustration. Probably the primary reason people have such feelings when the word *change* is mentioned is that they have been through many changes that were total disasters. This chapter reviews why people generally resist change and then discusses factors that assist in promoting or preventing change.

WHY PEOPLE RESIST CHANGE IN ORGANIZATIONS

People resist change for numerous reasons. Probably the most significant reason is that they are fearful that their position or status in the organization might change—for the worse. This is not to suggest that people are always opposed to change, for some changes would enhance their position in the organization. However, many persons are satisfied with their position, or at least secure in it, and do not want to play with fire. The possibility of making things significantly better is not worth the risk of making them significantly worse. For example, take a manager who has been supervising a unit for eight years. She has the routine down in terms of who does what, when reports are due, how to do things, and she is competent at what she does. Any change within the system might impact her role and ultimately change her position so that she would have to start all over and learn a new role. With all that effort, she would only get back to where she was before the change. Is it any wonder she would be resistant?

In conjunction with this, many employees fear change because it might require their workload to be increased or altered so they would have to do something they disliked. Many, many employees are satisfied with a routine job with routine functions and do not want to change the routine. Whether you are a teacher or a factory worker, you may have routines that you have established and feel comfortable with things the way they are. Granted, some routines can be boring, but most people would rather have a boring routine than have to learn a new job or have their workload increased.

People also resist change because they have had past experiences with change processes that have been failures. Changes can fail for a multitude of reasons. If most people are not in favor of the change, it will be undermined. If the organization does not have the resources for funding the change, it probably will fail.

Employees also fear that a change might alter their economic status in a negative fashion. One of the first questions people will ask in organizations when approached about a change is, “How will this change impact my salary?” If the change will impact a person’s salary or company benefits in a negative way, then he or she will be highly resistant to the new idea. Even if the change is going to improve her or his economic status, he or she wants to know “how much improvement, when, and what do I have to do for the improvement?”

People also resist change because they are fearful that it will create chaos. In other words, the system will be disorganized and dysfunctional for an indeterminate amount of time. We know of a system that discontinued the graduate school in favor of centralizing graduate processing functions in various departments and units. It took several years before personnel knew how to transfer students from one unit to the next, new forms had to be created, new rules and policies had to be created, and of course new personnel had to be hired, and some older personnel were moved or their jobs were changed. This type of a major change can cause incredible amounts of chaos, which makes the process so unpleasant that the next time someone mentions a change of such magnitude, many in the system will say, “Hell no, the last time we did something like this, it was a mess for years.”

Suchan (2006) argued that changes in an organization often fail “because external consultants, who are often academics, and internal organizational development specialists see changing communication practices as merely introducing new skills rather than altering the way workers habitually think and talk about communication” (p. 5). Such changes also might meet resistance from stakeholders, i.e., employees (Lewis, 2007), particularly if the change means that the employee must readjust the way he or she balances his or her work and life outside of the organization (Cowan & Hoffman, 2007). For example, a change in work schedules might make it harder for an employee to pick up children from school—something he or she might have already worked out in the old schedule.

In conclusion, people resist change because they have had past experiences that have not been positive, fear an economic decrease or workload increase, and, most of all, are afraid of all the chaos that can accompany a change. The primary argument given by most persons against change goes something like this: “It will cause confusion, more work, and a lot of chaos, so why do it?” The majority of the workforce is generally reluctant to accept a change unless it is a clearly desirable change for the majority of the personnel. How then do we get a change or new idea successfully diffused throughout a system?

Everett Rogers, along with a number of coauthors, published several in-depth, comprehensive reviews of research and theory related to the diffusion

of innovations in societies and organizations. This chapter draws heavily on the Rogers influence; it reviews the types of persons involved in the change process and their impact on diffusion and change.

Before we review the types of persons involved in the diffusion process, we need to define what we mean by an innovation or change. We use the definition posited by Rogers (1995): “An innovation is an idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption. It matters little, so far as human behavior is concerned, whether or not an idea is ‘objectively’ new as measured by the lapse of time since its first use or discovery. . . . If the idea seems new to the individual, it is an innovation” (p. 11). We use the words *innovation* and *change* interchangeably. Rogers suggests that he does “not find it fruitful to make much of the distinction. The communication patterns for change and innovation in organizations are rather similar” (Rogers & Agarwala-Rogers, 1976, p. 153).

Regardless of the innovation being anticipated, persons within both the formal and the informal communication networks must support the change. It is clear to most that if they are going to introduce a change and want a chance for success, their immediate manager (a person who is clearly part of the organization’s formal structure) must support the change. The persons in the informal network (those not clearly found on the organization’s hierarchical chart but who may have the potential to be influential) are an integral and necessary component of any successful change process. The next section reviews roles of people in the informal network who might influence the success of an innovation’s diffusion.

INFORMAL COMMUNICATION NETWORK ROLES

All of the roles discussed are representations of individual communication roles that various employees might hold in the informal communication network system in an organization. Each role affects the diffusion of a new idea in some manner. The influence of each role on change is discussed.

A *bridge* is “an individual who links two or more cliques in a system from his or her position as a member of one of the cliques” (Rogers, 1995, p. 297). In other words, this is an individual who belongs to one primary group but communicates with other groups or individuals from her or his position as a member of a primary group (see Figure 12.1). This person is highly interconnected within the system. For example, a teacher might belong to the Washington Elementary School group as her or his primary group but have strong ties with other people in other schools in the district.

Bridges are important persons in the change process because of their close-knit relationship with their primary group and their influence and strong communication links with other groups. Hence, in the process of change, the bridge has the potential to be highly influential in both groups. This is an individual who should be sought out to assist with introducing a change or diffusion of an innovation. If a bridge can be influenced to accept a change, then he or she might persuade the primary group and possibly influence other groups in a positive manner about the change.