Tailor Your Presentation to Fit the Culture

Erin Meyer, October 29, 2014

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Fourteen years ago I moved from Chicago to Paris. The first time I ran a training session in France, I prepared thoroughly, considering how to give the most persuasive presentation possible. I practiced my points, and anticipated questions that might arise.

The day of the session, my actions were guided by the lessons I had learned from many successful years of training in the U.S. I started by getting right to the point, introducing strategies, practical examples, and next steps.

But the group did not seem to be responding as usual, and soon the first hand came up. "How did you get to these conclusions?" You are giving us your tools and recommended actions, but I haven't heard enough about how you got here. How many people did you poll? What questions did you ask?" Then another jumped in: "Please explain what methodology you used for analyzing your data and how that led you to come to these findings".

The interruptions seemed out of place, even arrogant. Why, I wondered, did they feel the need to challenge my credibility?   The material was practical, actionable and interesting.   Their questions on the other hand — if I were to spend the necessary time answering them — were so conceptual they were sure to send the group into a deep slumber. So I assured them that the methodology behind the recommendations was sound, and was based on careful research, which I would be happy to discuss with them during a break. I then moved back to my conclusions, tools and practical examples. Let's just say things got worse from there.

The stonewall I had run into was "principles-first reasoning" (sometimes referred to as deductive reasoning), which derives conclusions or facts from general principles or concepts. People from principles-first cultures, such as France, Spain, Germany, and Russia (to name just a few) most often seek to understand the "why" behind proposals or requests before they move to action.

But as an American, I had been immersed throughout my life in "applications-first reasoning" (sometimes referred to as inductive reasoning), in which general conclusions are reached based on a pattern of factual observations from the real world. Application-first cultures tend to focus less on the "why" and more on the "how." Later, as I began to understand the differences between one culture and another in how to influence other people, I heard many examples of the way the typical American presentation style is viewed from a European perspective.

Jens Hupert, a German living in the United States for many years, explained his opposite experience during an interview. "In the U.S., when giving a talk to my American colleagues, I would start my presentation by laying the foundation for my conclusions, just like I had learned in Germany; setting the parameters; outlining my data and my

methodology; and explaining my argument." Jens was taken aback when his American boss told him, "In your next presentation, get right to the point. You lost their attention before you got to the important part." In Hupert's mind, "You cannot come to a conclusion without first defining the parameters."

Most people are capable of practicing both principles-first and applications-first reasoning, but your habitual pattern of reasoning is heavily influenced by the kind of thinking emphasized in your culture's education structure.

Different cultures have different systems for learning, in part because of the philosophers who influenced the approach to intellectual life in general. Although <u>Aristotle</u>, a Greek, is credited with articulating the applications-first thinking, it was British thinkers, including <u>Roger Bacon</u> in the 13th century and <u>Francis Bacon</u> in the 16th century, who popularized these methodologies. General conclusions are reached based on a pattern of actual observations in the real world.

For example, if you travel to my hometown in Minnesota in January, and you observe every visit that the temperature is considerably below zero, you will conclude that Minnesota winters are cold. You observe data from the real world, and you draw broader conclusions based on these empirical observations. Francis Bacon was British, but later, Americans with their pioneer mentality came to be even more applications-first than the British.

By contrast, philosophy on the European continent has been largely driven by principles-first approaches. In the 17th century, Frenchman <u>René Descartes</u> spelled out a method of principles-first reasoning in which the scientist first formulates a hypothesis and then seeks evidence to prove or disprove it.

For example, you may start with the general principle like "all men are mortal." Then move to "Justin Bieber is a man." And that leads you to conclude that "<u>Justin Bieber</u> will eventually die." One starts with the general principle, and from that moves to a practical conclusion. In the 19th century, the German <u>Friedrich Hegel</u> introduced the dialectic model of deduction, which reigns supreme in schools in Latin and Germanic countries. The Hegelian dialectic begins with a thesis, or foundational argument; this is opposed by an antithesis, or conflicting argument; and the two are then reconciled in a synthesis.

No matter which type of country you were raised in, and which cultures you are working with, it helps a lot to be able to adapt your style according to your audience. Here are a few tips to guide your preparation when working internationally:

When working with applications-first people:

- **Presentations:** Make your arguments effectively by getting right to the point. Stick to concrete examples, tools and next steps. Spend relatively little time building up the theory or concept behind your arguments. You'll need less time for conceptual debate.
- **Persuading others:** Provide practical examples of how it worked elsewhere.
- **Providing Instructions:** Focus on the how more than the why.

When working with principles-first people:

- **Presentations:** Make your argument effectively by explaining and validating the concept underlying your reasoning before coming to conclusions and examples. Leave enough time for challenge and debate of the underlying concepts. Training sessions may take longer.
- **Persuading others:** Provide background principles and welcome debate.
- **Providing Instructions:** Explain why, not just how.

These days, I give a lot of presentations to groups across Europe and the Americas. I do my best to adapt to my audience, instead of thinking that the whole world thinks like me.

If I'm presenting to a group of New Yorkers, I'll only spend a moment talking about what research is behind the tool. But if I'm in Moscow, I'll carefully set the stage, laying out the parameters for my arguments, and engaging in debate before arriving at conclusions. If I fail to do this, they are likely to think "What does this woman think. . . . that we are stupid ? That we will just swallow anything?"

When you hope to engage, when you hope to inform and persuade and convince, *what* you say is important, but *how* you say it, how you *structure* your message, can make all the difference — to the Americans, to the French, to everyone.