



Linear and circular communication

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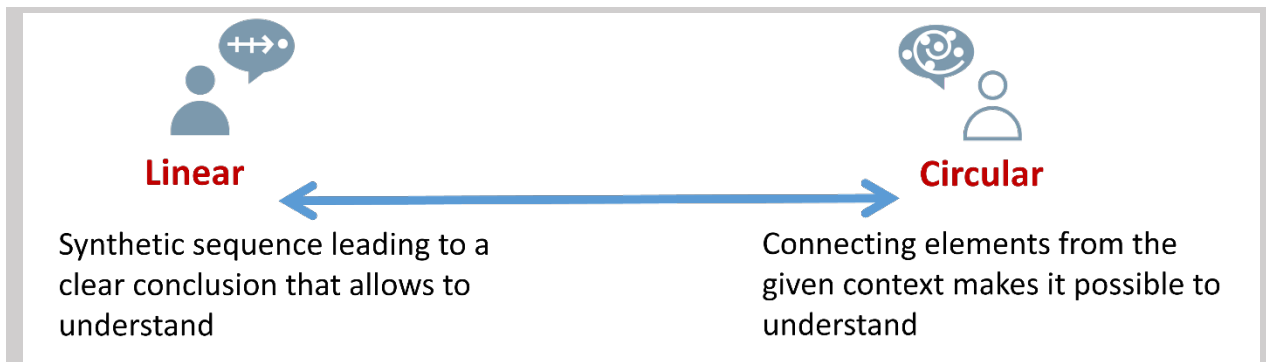


Introduction

Have you ever rolled your eyes in a meeting or during a conversation, wondering when the person talking would finally get to the point? This might mean that your communication style is linear, whereas the other person's is circular!

Do you ever feel like the person you're talking to or who's sent you a message is a bit careless and offhand, even slightly rude? This might mean that your communication style is circular, whereas the other person's is linear!

These two styles of communication, both of which have their strengths and weaknesses, are often the source of misunderstandings and irritations in our interactions. In the workplace, a clash of communication styles can have more serious consequences – such as not hiring a person or even firing them.



To illustrate these issues and put them in context, this document presents the characteristics of each style and provides examples. It also suggests ways you can develop the skills to understand and use both communication styles in order to help you choose the most appropriate one depending on the situation.

The majority of the world's population usually addresses sensitive issues in a circular manner. As a result, professionals working across cultures will likely meet this communication style on a regular basis. They may also practice it themselves. Likewise, colleagues or clients who may communicate in a more circular fashion find themselves dealing with colleagues who mostly express themselves in a linear way. This is a difficult competence to develop.

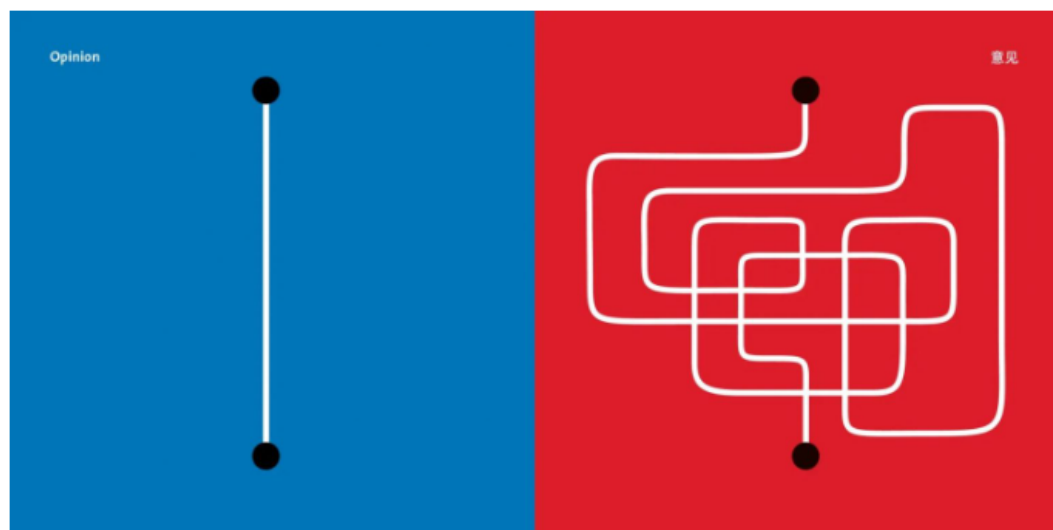
Understanding and mastering both styles is therefore key to effective collaboration across cultures.



Context: the essence of circular and linear communication

Definitions and comparisons

In her book *East meets West*, Yang Liu's pictogram¹ for the workplace is a wonderful illustration of the challenges both communication styles present.



Definition 1

The late Janet Bennett, long-time director of the Intercultural Communication Institute in Portland (Oregon), differentiated the two styles as follows:

Linear communicators give only a short lead before making their point. Their goal is to be concise.

Circular communicators give you context. You get different aspects of the story which you then have to connect in order to understand. They won't give you the main point.

Here are a few more definitions and descriptions:

Definition 2

"**Circular communication** Circular communication is often described as a storytelling style. The speaker may take the listener to the main point but not explicitly verbalise it. They may even jump between story lines or points. The comprehensive communicator addresses many or all points that are related to the topic, usually simultaneously. They may jump between points without verbal transitions.

The linear communicator uses outline style and clear verbal transitions. They usually make the main point first with supporting explanations and details following."

¹ *East meets West*, Yan Liu: 9783836554039, Taschen, 2015
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https://www.cabv-communication.de/culturezone/eng/16fenster/com_style.html

Definition 3

"In attempting to navigate the cultural divide, I've found the theory of communication put forth in the 1994² book. When Cultures Collide, by the linguist Richard Lewis, particularly useful. According to Lewis, there are two kinds of communicators – 'circular' and 'linear' ones. Circular communicators start with lighter topics such as the weather, then slowly get to the point. According to Eleonore Breukel, a trainer in intercultural communication, this seems to be the preferred communication style in most cultures around the world. And it's the way I talk, too. "You are obviously a circular communicator," she told me. But in the Netherlands, people tend to be "linear communicators". This means they jump right to their main point at the beginning of a conversation. Only after that has been discussed do they move on to other topics."

<https://qz.com/1239057/whats-the-best-way-to-communicate-with-people-in-different-cultures>

Definition 4

"Linear: Discussion is conducted in a straight line, almost like an outline, with the connections among the points stated as you move towards an end point, which is stated explicitly. There is a low reliance on context and a strong reliance on words. (Cut to the chase, where the rubber meets the road!)

Circular (contextual): Discussion is conducted in a circular manner, telling stories and developing a context around the main point, which is often unstated because the listener will get the point after I give them all the information. There is a high reliance on context. (Once you have the relevant information, you'll know what I mean.)"

https://www2.pacific.edu/sis/culture/pub/1.5.3 - Communication_styles.htm

Main takeaway

People using a **circular** communication style usually have four main objectives:

- to be thorough
- to establish links
- not to be explicit
- not to offend

People using a **linear** communication style usually have three main objectives:

- to be concise
- to put forward a clear process
- to give an explicit message, either at the beginning or more often at the end

² When Cultures Collide, ISBN: 978-1-4736-8482-9, Hodder & Stoughton, 2018, 4th edition
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Challenges between the styles

Linear communicators may have trouble following the reasoning of a circular communicator and understanding their point because it is not made explicit at the end. They'll start to think about pressing matters on their agenda and may stop listening. They may even think that the other person doesn't really know what they're talking about and isn't making any sense.

For circular communicators, a colleague who expresses themselves in a linear way may come across as careless and offhand, even cold and distant. They can also be seen as arrogant, because a person with a circular style will be prevented from thinking for themselves. For circular communicators, there's something almost disrespectful about linear communication.

Differences in communication style may be personal or cultural; they can also coexist in the same family who come from the same region.

Although research shows that either linear or circular communication tends to predominate in certain parts of the world, this of course does not mean that everyone living in that region communicates in the same way.

Examples

Australia's Cultural Atlas <https://culturalatlas.sbs.com.au> website provides a wealth of interesting information on different cultures.

Although there is no separate section on circular communication, there are many excellent descriptions of how it functions in reference to different countries.

The following examples from the Middle East, Africa, Asia and Latin America are illustrative of this point.

Egypt

"Egyptians are quite expressive and passionate when they converse. They have a tendency to be evocative and verbose by telling stories and using wordplay and jokes. They are generally open and emotive, displaying happiness and gratitude freely."

Colombia

"To avoid conflict or confrontation, they often take a long-winded, roundabout approach to conveying their messages sensitively and tactfully. Verbal and written communication is often extensive, elaborate and verbose. Furthermore, they may be elusive when giving negative answers in order to avoid disappointment or offence."

Mexico

They rarely give direct refusals or deliver delicate information in a blunt way. This is considered impolite. Instead, they tend to take a long-winded, roundabout approach to



conveying their messages sensitively and tactfully to avoid conflict or confrontation. This involves using gentler, more diplomatic expressions to provide a negative answer in a more sensitive way."

Nepal

"They rarely give direct refusals or deliver delicate information in a blunt way. This is considered impolite. Instead, they tend to take a long-winded, roundabout approach to conveying their messages sensitively and tactfully to avoid conflict or confrontation. This involves using gentler, more diplomatic expressions to provide a negative answer in a more sensitive way."

Lebanon

"Lebanese speak eloquently, often using quite verbose, theatrical and intense language. To an Australian, this communication style can feel overly exaggerated or pretentiously imposing, but it is not intended that way..."

The Lebanese commonly try to interrelate subjects or merge discussion with other thoughts they have."

Palestine

"... . This means people can be vague in their response to direct questions and give their opinions in long, elaborate ways."

Iran

"Iranians can take quite a long time to get to their point as they often explain themselves by using the example of a story, poem or traditional saying. Sometimes the 'lesson' embedded in these allegories is not immediately evident to a non-Iranian who is not familiar with the cultural context. It is okay to flag this to Iranians you are close with and ask them to be clearer."



Intercultural skills

For people working in cultural contexts different from what they're used to – diplomats, aid and development workers, staff working for multinationals or in other posts abroad, missionaries and journalists – it is key for them to recognise what communication style predominates in their new location and to learn to understand and practise it, so that they will be able to listen and communicate like local people in any given situation.

This is also true if you work in your own country but with people from very different cultures (household staff, local employees at diplomatic missions or humanitarian and cooperation organisations, migration specialists, police, teachers and medical staff, for example).

Skills for linear communicators to learn

- listen until the end
- listen differently
- listen without thinking that the other person isn't making any sense or wasting one's time
- make connections between the different points the other person is raising
- enter into the conversation by using these points to move the conversation forward
- add context when talking to a circular communicator for their benefit

Skills for circular communicators to learn

- ask for more information if it feels like the other person's response is insufficient
- don't be offended if you don't get the chance to make your own connections between the points
- try to be more concise when talking to someone who is more of a linear communicator

Direct and indirect style, linear and circular style: what's the difference?

Some texts use linear/direct and circular/indirect as synonyms, which can be confusing. It also shows how the difference isn't even clear to some of the authors of these texts. There are similarities, but there are also clear differences. Being clear on the concepts can help you develop the skills you need and expand your range of communication styles.

For example: declining an invitation

You've been invited to dinner by a friend, but you already have plans and will have to decline.

Direct

I won't be able to join you I'm afraid, I'm so sorry.



Indirect

That's really nice of you! I'll do my best to make it.

Linear

Thanks, but we're really busy at work at the moment and I know I won't be free that evening. I'm so sorry.

Circular

Thank you so much, that's such a lovely idea. And the restaurant you suggested is really nice, I haven't been there in ages. I'd love to see your other friends again too. By the way, I bumped into one of them the other day in a bookshop. We were both looking for a good read for the holidays. You know how things are a bit complicated at work at the moment, so I never really know when I'll be able to leave. It's a really busy time of year, and we're short-staffed too. Some people are off sick, and two are away on a training session. Life can be tough, no? What happened to the good old days, when we were young and carefree!



Relevance for working across cultures, in Switzerland and abroad

Professionals working across cultures must:

- be aware of these cultural differences and understand them without judging
- know how to factor this knowledge into their interactions – whether online, by phone or in an email
- understand different communication styles when reading reports, evaluations and exchanges of notes
- be capable of listening to a circular communicator speaking in a group without interrupting them
- take a person's communication style into consideration during recruitment or appraisals
- take a person's communication style into consideration during group meetings
- integrate this awareness into their interactions
- try to understand another person's style of communication, respect it and, ideally, practise it

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