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# Data vs. Dialog Orientation

By Lothar Katz

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*Last week, Markus Bauer sent an online meeting invitation to his colleagues in Stuttgart, Germany, and Bordeaux, France. In his email, he explained the purpose of the meeting, showed a detailed agenda, and included a spreadsheet with a data analysis that would serve as a basis for decision making in the meeting. Markus asked everyone to review the data, work through the analysis, and come prepared to present comments and recommendations during the meeting. He also stressed the importance of the decision and asked to be notified of any conflicts.*

Good meeting preparation? Well, let's see how the actual online meeting went:

*Soon after the meeting started, Markus learned from one of the French attendees that two of her colleagues were unable to attend. He also had to find that three of the five French participants had not even opened the spreadsheet he sent a week before. It was obvious that the decision would have to be postponed.*

This meeting apparently did not go as planned. What did Markus do wrong / what would you do differently? When I ask MBA students for their take, I usually get comments such as "Markus should have ...

- ... sent an Outlook invitation or otherwise asked participants to confirm their attendance."
  - ... followed up with a reminder the day before the online meeting."
  - ... set up a pre-meeting in order to review the spreadsheet data upfront."
  - ... involved the colleagues' managers."
- (etc.)

Sure, all of these measures can be helpful. Remote team collaboration is always a challenge. Increasing the clarity of the communication and involving relevant stakeholders never hurt. However, one more aspect likely plays an important role in our particular example: the invitees' orientation towards data versus dialogue.

Strongly data-oriented people look for 'solid' information that is supported by 'hard' data. They place high value on facts and figures, tending to discard others' opinions unless those can be validated as factual. Preferring communication to be structured and documented, they generally favor sending e-mails and using web logs.

On the other end of the spectrum are individuals with a strong dialog orientation, who primarily leverage personal networks in order to obtain information from those they know and respect. These people prefer to discuss data rather than analyze them. They tend to mistrust charts and figures unless a trusted person communicates and validates those. For similar reasons, they value face-to-face communication and phone conversations more than emails and other written documents.

We all know members of both of these “camps.” As is common when working across countries and cultures, though, national preferences and practices overlap individual ones here. Data-versus-dialog orientations can be pronouncedly different across cultures and strongly influence individual values. Compare the U.S. with Mexico, for example: where a U.S.-American most likely googles a piece of information he or she needs, a Mexican might grab the phone and call his good friend José, whom he trusts to be knowledgeable and competent. After all, who knows whether whatever he would find on Google is trustworthy?

Similar differences in attitudes exist across all Anglosaxon-versus-Latin cultures, to varying degrees. Your native language is English (or, for that matter, German)? Your culture likely encourages you to focus on facts and records. You speak Spanish, French, or Italian? Talking things over may matter a great deal more in your culture, as is also the case in Greece, Turkey, most of the Middle East and Africa, and other places. Some Asian cultures, among them China and Japan, are harder to place here as they exhibit characteristics of both: they encourage a combination of thorough data analysis with extensive discussion, which can be time consuming.

What all of this has to do with Markus’ meeting, you ask? Well, some or all of his French colleagues may have assumed that what he sent with his invitation wasn’t that important. After all: if it *was* critical, wouldn’t he have *called*?

Ever made a similar mistake of not considering your target audience?

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