

“On Time” or “In Time”?

By Carlene Larsson, VISIONS board member

It never occurred to me that time was a cultural concept, one that could change depending on one's worldview.

I am a middle-class white woman, born and brought up in New Jersey. The only dispute over time was the one my mother and father continually had—he wanted to be 15 minutes early for any event and my mother was always running at least 15 minutes late. There was on time, and then there was late. Period.

So it was a revelation when, in one VISIONS training I attended, there was a discussion of how the concept of time might have originally been affected by climate. If you lived in a northern European clime, where the growing season was short and circumscribed, you had to have your planting done at a certain time or you risked a diminished harvest and potential hunger. Time was linear and well defined. In contrast, in climates where the growing season was much longer, time was more flexible and less urgent. The growing cycle was continuous.

A facilitator at the training told a story that made me realize in a concrete way the impact of cultural senses of time. She described a conference in South Africa where a colleague arrived a day late. The European white male academic responsible for convening the group was upset, but turned to his fellow participants from Africa to ask how they might approach this issue of timeliness. Their response was that they would greet their cohort with open arms, thrilled that he arrived safely. They trusted that he had done his best to get to the conference on time. They recognized that lives are a complex balance of competing obligations. In addition, they understood that transportation can be a problem and oftentimes people are challenged to get to their destination, especially when having to travel distances from rural villages. For me, as someone who has little patience for a participant arriving late and taking up “precious time” to get up to speed, I was aghast. A day late? Greeted with joy? My worldview said, “time is money” and to be late is to be disrespectful of others.

Other participants in the workshop shared their experiences of time in their cultural settings, where things never really get going until a while after the stated time. I wondered, “Why say something starts at 8 pm when it really starts at 9? Why not just say 9 pm?” I was baffled.

Finally there was the concept of being “on time” versus “in time.” This I understood. I had experienced that meeting scheduled for 9 am, but everyone gets their coffee, a doughnut, schmoozes a bit, people dribble in, and you really get down to the business at hand at 9:20 or 9:30. So a person can be in time for the business, but not on time for the meeting. I'd always appreciated the agendas that had made that distinction clear (9-9:30 Coffee; 9:30 Meeting begins). I'd seen that in an absence of an agreement about whether

the group was going to operate “on time” or “in time”, subtle tensions could rumble throughout the meeting.

That was the wedge in my thinking that I needed to see time as a culturally influenced concept, that my father’s view was one way, not *the* way. I started to look at who dictates the operative concept of time in any given situation, in order to better understand that piece of the underlying institutional power dynamic. I started to think about the interrelationship of time and resources—about flextime and the “Mommy Track” and how time influences pay and career advancement.

I also saw how I could incorporate cultural fluency into my life...that if someone was late, I didn’t need to go to anger, impatience and judgment, but could try on that South African model of trust and acceptance. And how, if the stated time of a particular party is 8 pm and I plan to stay an hour, I might decide to arrive at 9pm. I don’t want to miss some of the folks I want to see and be a part of the fun because of my cultural inflexibility about time. In this instance, “in time” works for me. On the other hand, if I have a job interview at 9am, I am going to be there at 9am, “on time.” I’m learning that I can hold on to my concept of time, honor others’ concept of time, and negotiate my needs around time with more confidence. It is freeing to have options.

A co-worker asked me the other day if I could make a 1pm meeting. I replied, “I may not be on time, but I’ll be in time.” She looked at me with surprise, then broke out in a knowing smile and said, “Gotcha.”