

Tolerance for Ambiguity

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we'll discuss one of the elements of worldview that can help us gain a better understanding of culture and avoid miscommunication and conflict. The areas of focus include:

1. Ambiguity
 - a. Low Tolerance
 - b. High Tolerance
2. Ambiguity in Conflict

1. Ambiguity

Ambiguity is one of the elements of worldview, and it's simply a word for uncertainty. This could be uncertainty about how to proceed with something, about what is true or proper, or uncertainty about the future.

On an individual level, a **tolerance for ambiguity** refers to how comfortable you are as a person with this type of uncertainty.

But in this case, we will be using the term to discuss how comfortable a culture is when functioning in an ambiguous situation.

All cultures do tend to take a worldview position on the degree of specificity or detail they need to feel comfortable in a situation, plan, or agreement. This is certainly a broad assumption, and these positions are not absolute; they don't apply to everyone in the culture.

But in general, cultures take one of two positions on ambiguity:

- High tolerance
- Low tolerance



TERMS TO KNOW

Ambiguity

Uncertainty in a given situation about what is true, right, proper, etc.

Tolerance for Ambiguity

The degree to which an individual, influenced by cultural norms, feels confident functioning in an ambiguous situation.

1a. Low Tolerance

In a culture with a low tolerance for ambiguity, there would be a need to know the rules, the specific details, and procedures in most situations; there could be a lot of rules and laws, perhaps regulations that are governing things.

There would also be a need to avoid risk. Cultures with a low tolerance for ambiguity are also going to be low-risk. They have their own rules and laws, and things don't change.

You may find that cultures like this tend to be cultures that have been around a long time and don't have diverse populations in terms of opinion.

They have strong traditions, and in order to handle some uncertainty about the future, they may take a more fatalistic view regarding destiny.

1b. High Tolerance

In a culture that has a high tolerance for ambiguity, there will be general principles, or guidelines, rather than rigid rules and regulations.

There may be more diversity of opinion among the population, and there would also be an embracing of risk or innovation.

This view would be typical of a culture that was younger, and had more people coming into it, such as immigrant populations bringing new ideas.

2. Ambiguity in Conflict

When cultures with different tolerances for ambiguity are interacting, there's a chance of miscommunication or even conflict.

IN CONTEXT

If someone from the United States was doing business in a culture where there was a need for more specific facts, details, and rules, the business person would need to allow time for that. Most times, we want to rush things through and get things done to move ahead.

Perhaps someone provided guidelines or the resources needed to do something for a sense of autonomy to move ahead. That might involve too much ambiguity, or a bit of uncertainty, for someone from a different culture.

An individual coming from a culture with a high tolerance for ambiguity must understand that more exact procedures, rules, and time to review those rules would be important from the point of view of the person coming from the other culture, in this case, the United States. It is important to understand that perhaps doing something entirely new would involve some risk. Changing from the old ways of doing things may not be easy to do immediately and may take time.

An individual coming from a culture with a low tolerance for ambiguity must understand that the business person wants to push ideas through quickly. That's what is considered comfortable in that culture. The guidelines and resources are the way this person provides a sense of autonomy.

The ability to be open and understanding of these differences between cultures can do a lot to guide the process of communicating, in addition to navigating your way through any kind of a business transaction.

This is true in the conflict resolution process as well. Our United States mediation model is built around giving a sense of equality and autonomy to the parties who are involved, allowing them to come up with their own guidelines and solutions.

➦ **EXAMPLE** If someone involved in the process has a lower tolerance for ambiguity, they may not be comfortable with that part of the process, and may need to have an understanding of more direct procedures or rules in terms of how to proceed. They may also need an answer to the question of who has the power to decide how and when an agreement is reached, and what rules and procedures need to be followed.

These factors need to be clearly outlined for people coming from cultures that may be less comfortable in a situation where there's a lot of ambiguity.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that cultures do take a worldview position on **ambiguity**, or uncertainty in a given situation; their tolerance for ambiguity can be either low or high. You now understand that while this is a general concept that certainly doesn't apply to everyone within a culture, tolerance for **ambiguity could be at play in a conflict situation** involving people from different cultures, and thus an understanding of it is very helpful. Good luck!

Source: Adapted from Sophia tutorial by Marlene Johnson.



TERMS TO KNOW

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Tolerance for Ambiguity

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