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Who Are the Fish Out of Water?

Fish Out of Water are people who are different because they do not know or meet the cultural expectations of their environments effectively. Many of these outsiders are simply people who don't know how to code switch. Others get targeted because they belong to groups that are unacceptable to the dominant culture; they are the outsiders who are pushed to the margins or who choose to walk there to avoid predators. In any organization or pond there are people on the margins, who may be invisible and voiceless to those who have greater influence in the environment.

ARE YOU A FISH OUT OF WATER?

Have you ever been someplace you thought you were supposed to be and wondered, "What am I doing here?" It could have been a social function or a conference, your job, or a family gathering . . . any place where you just didn't fit. You might have felt either completely invisible or hyper-visible.

No one paid any attention to you, or everyone wondered who let you in. This may be one of the patterns in your life, or it may have only occurred a couple of times.

When it happens, the emotional impact is the same: surprise and sometimes shock after realizing, no matter how warm the welcome, you just don't fit. Some people don't fit in at a couple of places; some people don't seem to fit anywhere. People who don't fit in are unable to make a contribution, because their discomfort, appearance, style, or background keeps them from being welcomed.

Children who are *Fish Out of Water* are often perceived by adults as needing to be fixed. They are labeled antisocial, odd, and different or viewed as snobbish and aloof. They may be Internet Introverts or Highly Sensitive. Emos, Geeks, and Nerds are also Fish Out of Water. While most people have had an experience, once or twice in their lifetimes, where they felt like a Fish Out of Water, some people feel like that every day. Others are quite comfortable with who they are but are perceived as undesirably different, or they belong to groups that are marginalized in a particular community, so they are treated as Fish Out of Water.

People without the temperament or social skills to respond adequately to aggressive communication styles and those who are introverts often get labeled as Fish Out of Water because they don't fit the norms of their extroverted worlds. They may not be the only introverts in the environment, but because the culture is shaped for the extroverts, they feel alone and isolated. Cain suggests that extroversion is an enormously appealing personality style but has become an oppressive standard to which most people feel they must conform. "We get harassed by strangers, hounded by competitors, and asked intrusive questions. We are the ones that take a dig, mull it over and spend days developing comebacks" (Cain, 2013, pp. 44–45).

It is unreasonable to expect all fish to fit everywhere, but, while there is a pond for every Fish Out of Water, every Fish won't fit into every pond. Unfortunately, Fish who are different get targeted. They become the victims of both

Aaron's Story

Aaron is a Fish Out of Water. He is a quiet boy being raised by his grandmother. Although he attends school with many children of color, he stands out in his clean but simple clothing and his restrained politeness. Aaron is deferential with all the adults he encounters; he rarely volunteers but is always responsive in the classroom. His teacher notices that he eats by himself in the cafeteria and usually arrives and leaves school alone. He doesn't seem to be clumsy but often is picking up his books from the hallway floor after bumping into someone or stumbling against a locker. When asked, Aaron said, "I don't feel safe in school. I try to stay out of the way but people pick on me. I didn't stumble; someone pushed me."

macro- and micro-aggressions. They get targeted because of the way they dress, the way they talk, the way they think, or the way they relate to people. Fish Out of Water are the people on the edges of the bell curve: They are too smart, too dumb, too fast, too slow, too fat, too tall, too short, too large, or too small. Fish Out of Water can be extremely attractive or very unattractive. Some school resource professionals use the term FLK—funny looking kid—for those who are marginalized and targeted as Fish Out of Water.

Fish Out of Water may be funny talkers or different thinkers. Their cognitive style may be abstract and random, while their organization's culture is concrete and sequential. They can be in the wrong-size pond or be a targeted species or just one of a few of their kind, for the pond they are in. Visionaries, without social skills, are Fish Out of Water. Paradigm Shifters, without patience, are Fish Out of Water. Truth Tellers, who can't keep quiet, are Fish Out of Water. Shadow Dwellers—people who are unseen and unheard by those in power—are Fish Out of Water.

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SOME FISH OUT OF WATER KNOW THEY NEED TO LEAVE

One of the most gratifying aspects of our work is helping people who don't fit in understand why they are so

miserable and helping them to leave places that don't work for them. An organization may request we work with one of their managers who brings a wealth of experience to the position, has excellent skills and does good work, but doesn't quite fit the cultural norms. We will help them to identify the unwritten rules of the organization and to recognize how important they are. We'll talk about what they need to do to fit in. It could be dress, style of presentation, or taking the time to socialize with the other managers. It is usually nothing directly related to the work but always something that affects the way the other workers perceive them.

With new understanding and renewed commitment, the client will work for a few weeks or months to change the way they engage with their colleagues. At the point when the internal conflict becomes too great a sacrifice for them, they decide to leave. While leaving is never the goal of these interventions, it often is best for the individual and the organization. The person leaving has additional skills for discerning whether an organization's culture is suitable for them. The organization can better describe its culture and the characteristics of the people who will be most successful in that environment.

It is possible for people to thrive in oppressive or uncomfortable organizational climates, if they have skills that help them to adapt to the culture of the

Shari's Story

Shari worked for one of the largest publishing houses in the United States. "She is the best editor I have ever known," said her boss. But she didn't fit in the publishing company. Shari is an unreformed, unapologetic, unreconstructed hippie. She is over sixty, and she still wears Birkenstocks, tie-dye T-shirts, and her hair in two long braids. She absolutely refused to change anything about how she looked, so thirty years ago she walked away from a promising career because she didn't fit in. She was conscious of her incompetence in that organizational culture. Fortunately, she was able to create a professional life that has worked for her outside of a corporate structure. But it is as clear to us now as it was to us then, Shari is a Fish Out of Water.

organization they are in. Swimming in toxic waters is not an ideal situation but may be a necessary survival strategy for Fish Out of Water. In the worst cases, they should be encouraged to leave for safer ponds.

SOME FISH OUT OF WATER DON'T KNOW THEY DON'T FIT IN

Everyone feels out of place at some time in his or her life, and most people have a pond—or two—where they are welcomed and the ecosystem suits them. They leave their ponds occasionally because they want to—they just need a break. For the most part, the pond, the people in it, and the work they do there, feels pretty comfortable.

Are You in the Right Pond?

You know you belong because it feels right; you are affirmed by the people around you. Your internal radar tells you it's right. How's it feeling?

Many Fish Out of Water are not that fortunate. They haven't learned to respond appropriately to the cultural expectations of their environment. This unconscious cultural incompetence results in unpleasant surprises. They don't fit in, and they feel stuck. They don't fit in, and they don't know why. Or worse, they don't fit in and don't even realize they don't fit. They get poor performance appraisals. They get passed over for promotion. They get complaints filed against them, or people just work around them. They don't get invited out to lunch or to other social functions. Meetings get held, and they are not included; decisions get made, and they are not consulted. They are Fish Out of Water and don't even know it.

Children who are Fish Out of Water may have learned to deny or dismiss the cues that let them know something is wrong. They may not complain, but like Aaron, they know that they don't fit in. Some are comfortable sitting on the edges of their groups; others long to belong. "Maslow had it wrong," says social neuroscientist Matthew Lieberman. "Being socially connected and cared for is paramount. Without social support, infants will never survive to become adults who can provide for themselves. . . . Love and belonging might seem like a convenience we can live without, but our biology is built to thirst for connection . . . our need for connection is bedrock." (Lieberman, 2013, p. 43) Whether or not they complain, whether or not they know there is a problem, Fish Out of Water are people who are different because they do not know the cultural expectations of their environments or cannot respond to those expectations effectively. These people get targeted because they are different; they are the outsiders because of the groups to which they belong, or they are outsiders because they are too different from the members of their group. Being an outsider is heart-breakingly painful to many people because of the intense human need for social connection (Lieberman, 2013, p. 48). What helps people to stay connected and at the same time may target or marginalize others is cultural codes.

LEARNING TO PLAY THE GAME

Code switching is a sociolinguistic term that refers to shifting one's language and style of discourse to match the social expectations. Most people are familiar with the code switching required of someone who speaks more than one language. Fewer people are conscious of the code switching that occurs throughout the day as people shift their styles when talking to social peers or superiors. Code switching also occurs when shifting from a formal to a more casual conversation. In addition to these commonly learned styles of code switching, subtler code switching demands are

made of people as they move from one organizational culture to another.

People learn to code switch early in life. Children who easily change their mode of engagement as they seek favors from a sibling or a parent give evidence to this phenomenon. Their style matches the mode and expectations of the person with whom they engage. By the time they complete elementary school, most children have learned to authentically represent themselves while

adjusting to the demands or subtler requirements of different teachers.

The people whom we call Fish Out of Water are the ones who are unaware of the need to code switch and the people—children and adults—who do not code switch effectively. They may use the same codes all the time. Consequently, there are places where their behavior and language is appropriate and, unfortunately, many places where they just do not fit in. Another way to understand code switching and the process of decoding or learning the codes of a culture is to think of the social interaction within a group as a game.

Whenever you play a game, you must learn the rules. The basic rules remain the same wherever and with whomever you play. Rules differ as you move from one player to another or to different social contexts.

Charla's Story

Charla is a brilliant student who is taking advanced placement courses in physics, English, and history. She is a competitive swimmer who starts training in the wee hours of the morning. She is also from a working-class African American community. She is tolerated but not fully accepted by her swimming teammates, who are mostly White and high income. She also has a hard time with other Black students, since there are not many in her classes or on the swim team. She is challenged by everyone for being too different. Because she is a talented painter as well, Charla finds solace with her art, but she is lonely. . . . Artist, scientist, athlete, Charla has learned the codes of several different environments but has not found an environment where she feels comfortable. She is a Fish Out of Water because, even though she excels, she hasn't found a place where she is comfortable and accepted.

Basketball involves moving the ball from one end of the court to the other and getting it through the hoop. The rules change with the context: a child playing with an older sibling in the driveway, friends playing against one another at the court in the neighborhood park, college students playing in a tournament, professional ball players at a municipal arena. Whatever the game—even solitaire on the computer—adjustments are made by the players when the context for playing changes.

CIRCUMSTANTIAL AND PERPETUAL FISH OUT OF WATER

Some people are Fish Out of Water in a particular environment; some people are Fish Out of Water all the time. People who don't fit into social groups, schools, organizations, or their families can develop adaptive skills so that they can survive in a pond that is not of their choosing. Knowing how to code switch will be helpful to these Fish Out of Water; however, they may always feel out of place until they find the right pond. When an environment is not committed to being both diverse and inclusive, Fish Out of Water rarely thrive.

Some groups in American society have been historically marginalized. Immigrants, minority ethnic groups, women, the differently abled, members of the LGBTQi communities, poor people, and youth have throughout history been the targets of discrimination, injustice, and marginalization by the dominant culture. From a historical perspective, members of these groups are perpetual Fish Out of Water. Within these groups are people who know how to code switch and are successful within and outside of their native groups. Others in these groups are frustrated and struggling, invisible, voiceless, on the margins, or outside looking into a culture that is toxic for them.

There are also people who are perceived as odd, who may or may not belong to the groups that have been historically marginalized. They are Fish Out of Water and are productive, functional, and satisfied; their ecosystem works for them. There are others—people who are different and who are unconscious of their differentness or unwilling or unable to do differently. There are very few places where these people fit in. Among them, some want help, others don't. This book addresses the issues of the odd, dysfunctional, or dissatisfied Fish Out of Water—circumstantial or perpetual—who want help, and the people who teach, supervise, and worry about them.

GOING DEEPER

Reflect

- Tell a story about being a Fish Out of Water or being with one.

Assess

Are You a Fish Out of Water?

Focusing on a particular environment, answer the following questions. After you have answered these questions, discuss your responses with someone you trust, who knows you well.

1. Can you swim wherever you want to in your pond?
2. Do you think you are different from others in your group? How are you different?
3. Do people make comments about how different you are?
4. Do you choose to be different? Why do you make those choices?

5. Do you know if you fit in?
6. Do you look like the people around you? How do you differ?
7. Do you speak or behave like the people in your environment? How do you differ?
8. Do you wonder what the rules are to be successful in your environment? How do you know?
9. Do you stay close to the margins? Why?
10. Do you know how to influence the insiders?
11. Do you know who the predators are in your environment?
12. Can you protect yourself from predators?
13. Can you engage with both the outsiders and insiders effectively?
14. Do you know and understand the cultural expectations of your environment?
15. Are you thriving in your environment? What would keep you from struggling or surviving?
16. Do you feel offended, constrained, or restricted by the organization's norms?
17. Do you feel voiceless, invisible, or powerless in your environment?
18. Do people have problems with you because you are different? What kind of problems do people have with you?
19. Do these differences make a difference?
20. Is there another environment (or pond) where you do fit? How does it differ from the one you focused on?

Discuss

Using a pond or tank as the metaphor, draw yourself in the environment of your organization:

- Describe the nature of diversity.
- Illustrate how well people fit in the environment.
- Identify dangerous areas, support places, obstacles, and opportunities.
- Depict toxic or marginalizing practices, policies, or personnel.
- Draw yourself.

