# Cultural Cognition

## Idea In Short

Two smart colleagues read the same report and reach opposite conclusions about risk. Neither is careless, and neither lacks the facts. Research on cultural cognition suggests that people tend to form beliefs about risks and related facts that fit the values of the groups they belong to. The effect appears in debates about technology, safety, and science, and it shows up in meetings about strategy and change. For leaders, the idea explains why more data does not always settle a dispute and why messaging that ignores identity often fails. This article explains the theory, reviews key findings, and offers practical ways to communicate and decide in a divided room.

A logistics company proposes automating its largest warehouse. The operations team sees a safety gain, and the long-tenured floor staff see a threat to a way of working they take pride in. Both groups read the same pilot data. One finds it reassuring, and the other finds holes in the method. The argument continues for weeks, and nobody learns anything.

## The core idea

Cultural cognition is a theory about how values shape factual beliefs. A summary of the research describes it as the hypothesized tendency to perceive risks and related facts in relation to personal values, and it notes that the program aims to understand how values shape political conflict over facts such as whether climate change exists or whether gun control reduces crime.1

The theory descends from the cultural theory of risk developed by anthropologist Mary Douglas and political scientist Aaron Wildavsky. They argued that what a society fears reflects how it wants to organize itself.

For leaders, the key point is that disagreement about facts can be a disagreement about identity. When a fact seems to threaten the way of life of a group, members have a motive

to doubt it.

## Identity-protective cognition

Researchers led by Dan Kahan tested this idea in studies of risk perception. A paper on the white male effect proposes that individuals selectively credit and dismiss evidence in ways that protect their cultural identity, a process they call identity-protective cognition, and it finds that cultural worldviews interact with gender and race in risk perception.2

A later article describes the broader hypothesis as a tendency of individuals to form risk perceptions that are congenial to their values, and it presents correlational and experimental evidence that the same pattern extends to judgments about who counts as a credible expert.3

Notice how this differs from simple bias. The person is not lying. Group loyalty works quietly, shaping which sources seem credible, which examples come to mind, and which flaws seem serious.

## More data, more polarization

Many leaders assume that the cure for disagreement is more information. The research suggests caution. A working paper by Kahan and colleagues on climate risk perception reports that science literacy and numeracy were associated with greater cultural polarization: respondents predisposed by their values to dismiss climate change evidence became more dismissive, and those predisposed to credit it became more concerned.4

The paper weighs several explanations for public disagreement about risk, including bounded rationality and cultural cognition, and it favors cultural cognition as an account of persistent conflict.

Skilled people have more tools for building arguments that defend their group's view. In a meeting, the most analytical members may therefore be the most entrenched, and their numerical skill may support their position and not challenge it.

## Two theories of risk

A philosophy paper that compares the debate describes two main accounts. One is bounded rationality, according to which non-experts' thinking about risk is dominated by fast heuristics that lead to predictable biases. The other is cultural cognition, and the authors suggest that cultural cognition seems to be at play in a majority of the cases where risk regulation is politically salient.5

The two accounts lead to different advice. If heuristics are the problem, give people better decision aids. If group values are the problem, address the meanings that the decision carries for each group.

In practice, leaders often face a mix. Training in statistics can help with the first problem and does little for the second.

## Framing that respects values

Kahan and colleagues also tested ways to reduce polarization. A study on geoengineering found that groups with opposing cultural values, who formed conflicting assessments of the risks of climate change, became less polarized over the scientific evidence when they learned that geoengineering is among the responses to it.6

The lesson for managers is that the meaning of a proposal can matter as much as its content. When a solution fits a group's values, members find it easier to accept the underlying facts.

Use this in change work. Present the automation plan as a way to protect workers' safety and craft, if that is true, and involve respected floor staff in designing it. The facts do not change, and the identity threat shrinks.

## Practical steps for leaders

First, diagnose the values at stake. Ask each side what it fears losing if the proposal goes ahead. Answers such as "our autonomy," "our reputation," or "our fairness" reveal the identity in play.

Second, separate fact from meaning. State clearly which parts of the debate are factual and can be tested, and which are about values and call for negotiation. Test facts with sources

that both sides trust, and discuss values openly.

Third, choose messengers carefully. People accept information more readily from those who share their commitments. Ask respected members of each group to review the evidence and speak to their peers.

## Checking your own thinking

Leaders are not exempt. You have group loyalties, and they shape what you notice. A habit of asking, "What evidence would change my mind?" helps. If you cannot name any, treat that as a warning.

Invite a person from outside your usual circle to review a major decision. Ask the reviewer to look for ways in which your values may have colored the assessment.

Finally, notice your reactions to sources. If you accept a study quickly because it supports your view and attack another on weak grounds, you may be protecting identity and not assessing evidence.

## Designing meetings for divided groups

Meeting design can lower identity threat. Start with shared goals that every side accepts, such as safety, customer trust, or fair pay. Agreement on goals gives people a base from which to examine facts without feeling attacked.

Ask each group to state the strongest version of the other side's concern before arguing its own. The step is simple, and it shows respect. It also reveals when two groups care about the same thing and differ only on the means.

Finally, agree in advance on what evidence would count. If both sides help choose the test, they find it harder to dismiss the result later. Record the agreement, and return to it when results arrive. A shared test also gives the group something concrete to learn from, and it moves the discussion from who is right to what the evidence shows.

## A hypothetical example

Imagine a hypothetical hospital network that plans to adopt a new scheduling system. Nurses doubt the pilot results, and administrators accept them. A review finds that nurses read the system as a threat to their professional control of patient care.

Leaders respond by changing the framing and the process. They include nurse leaders on the design team, give units authority to adjust schedules within safety rules, and report results using measures that nurses helped choose. Acceptance rises, and complaints fall. The case is invented, but it shows how addressing the value at stake can resolve a dispute that data alone could not.

## Cautions

Do not use cultural cognition to dismiss others. Saying "they are just protecting their identity" ignores that the same applies to you, and it ends the conversation.

Avoid manipulating values to win. Framing that fits a group's values is honest when the facts are true and the benefits are real. If you reshape a message to hide a downside, you damage trust.

Finally, remember that the evidence has limits. The theory is a hypothesis with substantial support, and scholars debate its scope. Use it as a lens for questions, and keep checking it against what you see in your own setting.

- 1Cultural cognition of risk
- 2Culture and identity-protective cognition
- 3Cultural cognition of scientific consensus
- 4The tragedy of the risk-perception commons
- 5Risk perception and democratic regulation, Ateliers de l'ethique
- 6Geoengineering and the science communication environment

## Summary

Cultural cognition research shows that values and group identity shape how people perceive risk and judge evidence, which means disagreement is often about identity and not about

intelligence or information. Leaders can respond by separating facts from the identity they threaten, framing options in ways that respect different values, using messengers people trust, and watching for their own motivated reading of evidence. Greater skill with numbers can even harden positions, so more data alone rarely works. Before your next contested decision, ask what each side fears losing, and rewrite the proposal so it protects that value without changing the facts.