

Ten Tips for Cross Cultural Communication

Here are some simple tips to help you improve your cross-cultural communication skills:

Slow Down: Even when English is the common language in a cross-cultural situation, this does not mean you should speak at normal speed. Slow down, speak clearly and ensure your pronunciation is intelligible.

Separate Questions: Try not to ask double questions such as, "Do you want to carry on or shall we stop here?" In a cross cultural situation only the first or second question may have been comprehended. Let your listener answer one question at a time.

Avoid Negative Questions: Many cross cultural communication misunderstandings have been caused by the use of negative questions and answers. In English we answer 'yes' if the answer is affirmative and 'no' if it is negative. In other cultures a 'yes' or 'no' may only be indicating whether the questioner is right or wrong. For example, the response to "Are you not coming?" may be 'yes', meaning 'Yes, I am not coming.'

Take Turns: Cross cultural communication is enhanced through taking turns to talk, making a point and then listening to the response.

Write it Down: If you are unsure whether something has been understood write it down and check. This can be useful when using large figures. For example, a billion in the USA is 1,000,000,000 while in the UK it is 1,000,000,000,000.

Be Supportive: Effective cross-cultural communication is in essence about being comfortable. Encouraging those with weak English skills gives them confidence, support and trust in you.

Check Meanings: When communicating across cultures never assume the other party has understood. Be an active listener. Summarize what has been said in order to verify it. This is a very effective way of ensuring accurate cross-cultural communication has taken place.

Avoid Slang: Even the most well educated foreigner will not have a complete knowledge of slang, idioms and sayings. The danger is that the words will be understood but the meaning missed.

Watch the humour: In many cultures business is taken very seriously. Professionalism and protocol are constantly observed. Many cultures will not appreciate the use of humour and jokes in the business context. When using humour think whether it will be understood in the other culture. For example, British sarcasm usually has a negative effect abroad.

Maintain Etiquette: Many cultures have certain etiquette when communicating. It is quite beneficial to undertake some cross cultural awareness training or at least do some research on the target culture.

DIVERSITY



CULTURE:

The values, behaviours, practices, and assumptions learned from membership in a particular group.

ETHNOCENTRISM:

An attitude whereby individuals judge other cultures or newcomers by standards that applies to one's own culture.

DISCRIMINATION:

The act of treating individuals differently based on gender, race, age, culture, religion, or other characteristics.

RACISM:

Any action or attitude, deliberate or unintentional, that separates an individual or group based on skin colour, race, country of origin, culture or religion.

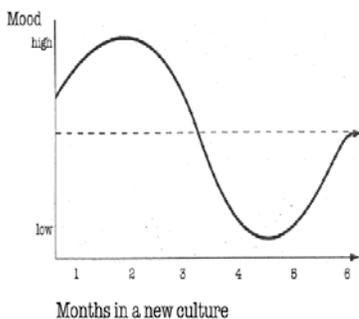
PREJUDICE:

Unreasonable feelings, opinions, or attitudes, especially of a hostile nature, regarding a racial, religious, or national group, formed beforehand or without knowledge, thought, or reason.

STEREOTYPE:

Ideas or beliefs that a person holds about a group based on an oversimplification of some observed or imagined trait, behaviour or appearance. It is often untrue or partly true.

Stages in the Settlement Process



Honeymoon: Characterized by a feeling of elation and admiration about the new culture. Many things in the new culture are interesting and exciting.

Initial culture shock: Newcomer has to deal with many unfamiliar issues in the new environment. Learning a new language may make it harder. At this stage, newcomers may complain about their new environment.

First Adjustment: Newcomer has increased their language skills and has learned more about the new country. Everyday activities are easier to do. Newcomers may know people who can help with their problems.

Mental Isolation: If a newcomer has been away from family and friends, they may feel a deep sense of loneliness, isolation and frustration. Many will not be reunited with their loved ones. Many issues such as unemployment, language, financial worries make the situation complicated. Some stay in the stage longer than others.

Acceptance and Integration: Newcomer feels more comfortable. There is an acceptance and identification with the new culture. They start to re-adjust their personal values and outlook on life in order to be part of, and fit into, the host culture.



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Common Causes of Misunderstandings

The following are common areas where misunderstandings can result from cultural differences:

Conventions of Courtesy: Each culture has conventions for courtesy. People who don't use the formulas may be perceived to be rude. People who don't use the conventions may feel rejected. Other conventions establish "correct" tempo and tone of voice. The context also contributes to communication. Do not leap to conclusions about the character, motivation, or integrity of an individual based on one interaction.

Sequence: How people arrange information differ from culture to culture and often within the same culture, due to generation, education, and acculturation.

Phrasing: Culture often affects how and when business subjects are discussed. Regional differences can also affect communication protocols. Business and pleasure don't always mix.

Objectivity: The facts need to be logical, precise, and orderly. Trust has a significant effect on intercultural communication and dominating the conversation damages communication.

Specificity: Starting with specifics is often used by the majority culture – other cultures, however, may begin with generalities. *The whole as a sum of its parts:* The majority culture tends to break down information into parts, while many other cultures tend to deal with the whole picture.

Assertiveness: In some cultures assertiveness is appropriate; in others it is seen as aggressive or rude.

Candor: In some cultures courtesy, sensitivity, loyalty, and "saving face" are more important than candor or "straight talk."

Simplicity: Using big words may not impress - it may fail to communicate.

Accents: Accents influence people's perceptions but are not a good way to measure other people.

Telephone: The telephone should not replace personal contact (nor should e-mail) nor does it transmit non-verbal cues.

Walking on eggshells: The feeling of "walking on eggshells" or "wearing masks" often occurs with people different from ourselves; it does not, however, help. Feedback is one of the most important communication tools we have. Inappropriate comments often result from discomfort or ignorance. Different people have different sensitivities but everyone is sensitive to stereotypes. Defensiveness can interfere with communication so it is important to include minorities in discussions. Discussing differences is a legitimate way to decrease tension and defensiveness. Listening is a vital part of communication.

Hot buttons/Jokes: Conflict or misunderstandings result from words. Swearing is usually inappropriate in work settings. Avoid "hot buttons" – when in doubt, ask or avoid using the word. Respond appropriately to "hot buttons" being pushed in a dialog.

White Privilege: I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented. When I am told about our national heritage or about "civilization," I am shown that people of my colour made it what it is. I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race. I can go into a music shop and count on finding the music of my race represented, into a supermarket and find the staple foods, which fit with my cultural traditions, into a hairdresser's shop and find someone who can cut my hair. Whether I use checks, credit cards, or cash, I can count on my skin colour not to work against the appearance of financial reliability. I can swear, or dress in second hand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty, or the illiteracy of my race. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race. I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group. I can be pretty sure that if I ask to talk to "the person in charge," I will be facing a person of my race. I can easily buy posters, postcards, picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys, and children's magazines featuring people of my race. I can go home from most meetings of organizations I belong to feeling somewhat tied in, rather than isolated, out-of-place, out numbered, unheard, held at a distance, or feared. I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having coworkers on the job suspect that I got it because of race. I can choose public accommodation without fearing that people of my race cannot get in or will be mistreated in the places I have chosen. I can choose blemish cover or bandages in flesh colour and have them more or less match my skin. If my day, week, or year is going badly, I need not ask of each negative episode or situation whether it has racial overtones.

Diversity Myths to Debunk

Diversity is a problem: No, it is an opportunity. Seizing the opportunity to understand diversity will take you into a new and better realm of doing business.

Diversity is our Human Resources department's responsibility: Wrong. We all (employees, supervisors, managers) play a significant role. As I partner with my clients, we define and address these roles together.

Diversity is just about race and gender: No, it is much broader than that. It used to be called cultural diversity but the conversation has become more inclusive.

Diversity is about minorities and women in the workplace: No, diversity is about your internal (employees) and external (prospective clients) customers. The approach you take to the diversity in your employee and customer ranks can make or break your company. Multicultural marketing, a relatively recent development in the diversity field, focuses on evaluating your customer base and addressing all your customers' needs.

Diversity is exclusive: No, it is inclusive. In other words, diversity is about all of us. Diversity is not about getting "them" into your corporate culture (assimilation). Diversity is about creating a culture where each individual can thrive and contribute to the organization (integration and multiculturalism).

Diversity is another fad: Consider your workforce today and compare it to five and ten years ago. Then try to imagine it five and ten years into the future. Do the same analyses for your customer base. Have you seen the demographic projections for the future? The changes we see happening now will continue for the foreseeable future.

Diversity is another version of Equal Employment Opportunity/Affirmative Action: No, it is very different from EEO/AA. Diversity is quality focused, productivity driven, and voluntary.

