

Tips for Successful Cross Cultural Communication

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In today's global business environment, more and more of us are required to understand people who come from countries and cultures different from our own. While there is no short and easy way to learn about a given culture in any depth, there are some general principles that lead to success in communicating and conducting business with people of backgrounds unlike our own.

Getting Started with Cross Cultural Communication

Here are some important points to understand:

Direct experience is the best way to begin to learn any culture. Just as the best way to learn a new language is to become immersed in that language, so too is it most helpful to learn another culture by jumping right in. This may not always be practical, but radio stations, music, trips to religious organizations or other clubs that cater to members of a specific group - all of these things can be helpful ways to begin.

Differences can feel like a threat at first. No one likes to feel like a stranger, and feeling unable to communicate or to decipher aspects of behaviour that don't fit with our own habitual experiences can make any of us feel alone. This is a natural part of human experience, but even so, it is important to keep these feelings in perspective and remember that differences are less important than commonalities.

We tend to overlook similarities and notice just the differences when we first begin to interact with members of another culture. And then, when we apply the standards of interpretation that we would use in our own cultures to the behaviour of those in the unfamiliar culture, we will draw mistaken conclusions. We all share 98% of the same DNA, and we are all far more alike than we are different, but that's easy to forget in

the beginning.

Stereotyping due to overgeneralization is a common occurrence, especially among those who only interact with another culture infrequently. When we are faced with uncertainty, the human mind naturally seeks to create some order or system from what we observe. This is especially true when we may feel vulnerable due to uncertainty. So the mind creates its own set of rules or generalizations - which may be based on some surface realities and patterns - but which fail to account for real experience and individual variation. What's more, since we may feel threatened, the human mind can presume negative motives or draw negative inferences from the generalizations we create/observe, which then forms the basis of prejudice.

There is always more variation within groups than there is between them. What does that mean? That means that no matter how much we may perceive groups A and B as different, the amount of difference between those groups is dwarfed by the amount of variation within each group. In other words, both groups have shy people and daring people, honest and dishonest, bellicose and accommodating types, etc. Therefore each group is much more like a mixed stew of types of people, and the patterns within each group are more alike than different. It's just that culture and history shape the customs and rituals through which those various aspects of human

nature are expressed. Think of it this way: both Apple and Microsoft operating systems allow you to accomplish work with a word processing system. The work is the same, but the language, the coding, through which that basic work is accomplished or expressed is different. This is why cross cultural communication can work - we just have to go back and examine aspects of our own "operating systems" and understand the "systems" of others to be able to communicate between the two "platforms."

For precisely the reason described above, our own cultural identities are not apparent to us until we begin to interact with others from different backgrounds.

Finally, cultures are always changing, especially as they interact with each other. Even from within, cultures move and flow and change through time, even when they think they don't. But the pace of change is accelerated when cultures that reinforce different styles of communication, and which accent different binding customs and values, interact with each other. The result is often disorienting (to say the least), but the result is inevitably that both cultures change in the process. Individuals who begin to bridge these gaps are like pioneers, blazing paths and creating plausible options for hybrid identities for others to copy and test in the future.

Potential Hot Spots in Cross Cultural Communication

This is not meant to be an exhaustive list, but when working with other people, or travelling abroad for work or pleasure, it may pay to ask some experts about the following communication styles of the area you plan to visit. A little research at the outset can save off a host of misunderstandings:

Opening & Closing Conversations:

Different cultures may have different customs around who addresses whom when and how, and who has the right, or even the duty, to speak first, and what is the proper way to conclude a conversation. Think about it: no matter where you are, some ways of commencing a conversation or concluding one will be considered as rude, even disrespectful. These are artificial customs, to a certain degree, and there is probably no universally right or wrong way to go about these things, short of behaviours that all cultures would likely consider to be vulgar or abusive. This topic includes modes of address, salutations, levels of deference to age or social position, acceptable ways to conclude gracefully and so on. Obviously, and to the dismay of many of us in the West, this will also cover gender differences.

Taking Turns During Conversations:

In some cultures, it is more appropriate to take turns in an interactive way, and in others, it is more important to listen thoroughly and without comment, without immediate response, lest a response be taken as a challenge or a humiliation, particularly depending on the context of the conversation, the audience, and the levels of personal knowledge/relationship between the two people interacting. For example, a Western couple or pair of executives may feel perfectly comfortable interacting in a give and take way in a public market, but if that public market is in a part of the world where such a public display of give and take is considered to be in bad taste, then they may be giving offense without ever realizing it.

Interrupting:

The same issues arise over the issue of interrupting. In some cultures, interruption, vocal, emotional expression, etc. are considered to be the default conversational style, particularly among those considered to be equals, or among men. Many people of Northern European or American extract might mistake this kind of conversation for argument and hostility, but that would not be the case.

Use of Silence:

In some forms of communication, silence is to be expected before a response, as a sign of thoughtfulness and deference to the original speaker, yet at other times, silence may be experienced as a sign of hostility. In the West, twenty seconds of silence during a meeting is an extraordinarily long time, and people will feel uncomfortable with that. Someone invariably will break in to end the uncomfortable silence. But the same customs around silence are not universal.

Appropriate Topics of Conversation:

In some places, it is considered vulgar to speak openly about money, for example, let alone about the kinds of intimate family issues that commonly form the basis of afternoon television "talk" shows in the West. Travellers or business people should learn the customs that surround the making of deals, the transaction of commerce, and the degree to which details are specified in advance and enumerated in writing across cultures (not all places are as prone to hire lawyers and create detailed contracts as we are in the West).

Use of Humour:

In the West, we often try to build immediate rapport through humour, but of course, this is not universally seen to be appropriate in all contexts. The use of laughter can be experienced as a sign of disrespect by some, and so it is important to understand that this is another area where misunderstandings can be very likely to occur.

Knowing How Much to Say:

In some places, less is definitely more, whereas in other places, it is

more valued to wrap a rather small point up in a longer preamble, followed by an extended wrap-up. For Westerners, this can be maddening, as we tend to value speaking directly and to the point. Then again, there are clearly circumstances where Westerners say too much and lose their ability to communicate well, depending on the context. Of course, patterns around presumed areas of deference based on age and social standing can influence how much is appropriate to say, depending on the culture.

Sequencing elements during conversation:

At what point during a conversation - or an extended conversation or negotiation - is it appropriate to touch upon more sensitive issues? Or how soon in a conversation is it appropriate simply to ask for directions? Since all cultures develop customs through which sensitive issues can be addressed in a way that connotes respect to all involved, and since those systems all can differ, it is important to understand the influence that sequence has on effectiveness. For us in the West, think about the process of asking, or being asked out on a date (a very Western process and one whose customs can be very fluid indeed). The right question, asked in the right way, but asked too soon or too late, according to custom, can connote very different things to the listener, and highly influence subsequent behavior. Sequencing and timing do matter.

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