

**CROSS AND MULTICULTURAL
UNDERSTANDING**

PBI

KNOWLEDGE INTO ACTION I

SESSION 12

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Potential problem in culture communication

What do we understand by the term “cross-cultural communication”? Certainly, it is connection and communication between different cultures, which suggests a direct contact between people and their communities, as well as indirect forms of communication (including language, speech, writing, electronic communication).

What is the main difference between cross-cultural communication and culture? Culture is a set of forms of human activity, without which it cannot be played, and therefore exist. Culture — a set of “codes” that require a person or that behavior, rendering it thus administrative influence. Therefore, researchers can not arise the question of which of them he should begin, on this basis to further understand then. Speaking about Intercultural communication in the professional dialogue and its problems, we can imagine to ourselves different kinds of interaction forms. But any interaction is associated with different problems and issues. If we look at communication as a process of coding and decoding of messages, it is obvious that there are many points in the process where the communication can break down. In particular, successful communication depends crucially on shared culture.

When you have communication between people of different cultures, even if they share a common language, things can go wrong. In particular, knowledge of a language does not automatically give you the background knowledge that native speakers assume you share. The article deals with the problems of cross cultural communication and the ways that can help to eliminate misunderstanding between people, belonging to different cultures.

Misunderstanding in intercultural communication is a potential problem, which is based on cultural differences. It is necessary to understand the problems that can arise in cross-cultural communication and consciously try to overcome them, to closely monitor the reaction of the interlocutor and, noting inadequate, from our point of view, the reaction is to try to understand what caused it, to correct their behavior, their speech.

Effective communication with people of different cultures is especially challenging. Cultures provide people with ways of thinking-ways of seeing, hearing, and interpreting the world. Thus the same words can mean different things to people from different cultures, even when they talk the “same” language. When the languages are different, and translation has to be used to communicate, the potential for misunderstandings increases. Stella Ting-Toomey describes three ways in which culture interferes with effective cross-cultural understanding. Firstly, it is what she calls “cognitive constraints.” These are the frames of reference or world views that provide a backdrop that all new information is compared to or inserted into. Secondly, there are “behavior constraints.” Each culture has its own rules about proper behavior which affect verbal and nonverbal communication. Whether one looks the other person in the eye or not; whether one says what one means overtly or talks around the issue; how close the people stand to each other when they are talking — all of these and many more are rules of politeness which differ from culture to culture. Ting-Toomey's third factor is “emotional constraints.” Different cultures regulate the display of emotion differently.

Some cultures get very emotional when they are debating an issue. They yell, they cry, they exhibit their anger, fear, frustration, and other

feelings openly. Other cultures try to keep their emotions hidden, exhibiting or sharing only the «rational» or factual aspects of the situation. All of these differences tend to lead to communication problems. If the people involved are not aware of the potential for such problems, they are even more likely to fall victim to them, although it takes more than awareness to overcome these problems and communicate effectively across cultures. Ethan F. Becker suggests a three-part fix for cross-cultural communication problems :

1. Paraphrase. Repeat what others say in your own words to confirm your understanding.
2. Define terms. When it's your turn to speak, invest time in creating common definitions of terms; and it's okay to stop the flow of the meeting to do so. Taking time upfront to define terms and meaning saves time and energy later on. Be patient, and plan for extra time for this.
3. Never assume. Don't take it for granted that everyone uses terms in the same way. Tone of voice may suggest understanding, but that isn't proof that both of you are on the same page. Always double-check.

Also, one is serious problem is miscommunication. Michelle LeBaron think: it is likely to happen, especially when there are significant cultural differences between communicators. Miscommunication may lead to conflict, or aggravate conflict that already exists. We make — whether it is clear to us or not — quite different meaning of the world, our places in it, and our relationships with others. Four variables four variables with miscommunication:

- Time and space;
- Fate and personal responsibility;

- Face and face-saving;
- Nonverbal communication.

Each of the variables discussed in this module time and space, personal responsibility and fate, face and face-saving, and nonverbal communication — are much more complex than it is possible to convey. Each of them influences the course of communications, and can be responsible for conflict or the escalation of conflict when it leads to miscommunication or misinterpretation. A culturally-fluent approach to conflict means working overtime to understand these and other ways communication varies across cultures, and applying these understandings in order to enhance relationships across differences.

There is understanding for cross-cultural communication as a discipline. It is based on studying cultural patterns of interaction in people's behavior. As result of that kind of research we get finished models of communication styles. Dialogue is the one of those styles. Like a constructed national culture or company culture, it has deep tacit assumptions which are critical to maintaining the style. It can help us to frame and reframe it and other communication styles for pragmatic purposes and therefore support the decision making of managers.

But this is only a theory. Practically when people face barriers in communication they are being stressed or frightened. Some of them can demonstrate aggression or other natural reaction. Otherwise, their response can be very diverse. That's because we have to do researches on understanding how dialogue and communication in general cooperate with each other. It is crucial for regular people to train and experiment with their

abilities to communicate. These actions should be based on the scientific knowledge. To summarize the ideas mentioned above, it is necessary to state that communication problems can crop up in non-multicultural environments as well. Yet in multicultural environments, the chance of communication problems is significantly worse. However, if you are prepared, you can avoid costly communication breakdowns and strengthen productivity by using these three simple steps. How can we overcome the problems of cross-cultural communication? To sum up, it can be further noted that the manner of communication and etiquette in different countries have distinctive features, which need to be considered.

The best solution is — involving students in research through their participation in scientific student conferences, participation in the work of the leading teachers of schools, through the organization of competitions and contests, and other educational events.

Seeking Similarity

In any *one-to-one* interaction, appealing to *diversity* is important. In other words, when speaking to just *one* other person, you try to meet 100% of that person's communication *needs*. To the extent that you meet less than 100%, you risk losing that much of the full attention the other person gives to you.

However, if another person enters the interaction, your challenge will be to meet 100% of the needs of *two* people. This is impossible, since each person is diverse. To meet 100% of one's needs, you meet 0% of

the other. Even if you were to balance 50% for each, you would still fall far short of complete satisfaction for both.

The communication dilemma increases with each additional person in the mix. How, then, does a presenter meet the needs of more than one person, especially in a group, where diversity abounds?

To achieve a lasting impression with a message, presenters must appeal to the *similarity*, rather than to the diversity within a group. From a delivery perspective, diversity disappears when the audience is greater than one. It has to disappear if the presenter wishes to treat the group as a *collective*; namely, as “one” person. In this case, the real diversity is in the way each person shares a similarity.

This is why three hundred people from diverse backgrounds can all laugh at the same moment, when something is funny. The group reaction is in unison, as if one person laughed. The emotion of laughter is a shared similarity among all people.

All forms of public expression are meant for the masses. The message is targeted to the common elements within the group. Since these elements or internal *patterns* are invisible, the approach can only be general (similar).

Communicating for Diversity

Effective communication is a manager’s greatest tool in rallying groups toward a common cause. From the annual department address to daily email, careful audience consideration is vital in determining how

accurately audiences receive messages. Even the most engaging statements lose meaning when barriers to effective communication foster misconception and confusion.

While many managers typically hold listeners solely responsible for how they receive or interpret information, true leaders are more cognizant about potential communication barriers. As a result, leaders often question their assumptions about the “right” way to communicate and strive to better understand the ways their subordinates interact with one another.

For many years, scholars have studied barriers to effective communication based in simplified terms, putting culture and gender among the greatest inhibitors. While no individual is bound to set generalizations, specific characteristics can impact personal interaction and business objectives.

Through this article we'll examine:

- Global Communication Barriers
- Gender Communication Barriers
- Tools for Managers to Overcome Barriers

Global Communication Barriers

Managing a diverse workforce spread across the globe presents unique challenges for today's managers. Time difference and the impact of limited technology to remote locations can contribute to an already difficult communication environment, fueling a potential misstep. Despite these obstacles, managers must be sensitive to various cultural values and traditions associated with the employees they manage.

Rodger Axtell, author of “The Do’s and Taboos of Body Language Around the World,” observes many minor communication generalities that, if ignored, can be considered insulting to your workforce. For example, Japanese culture favors consensus decision-making, taking great effort to engage all members before a decision is reached. Conversely, many Latin American cultures value the hierarchical-based decision-making process as a show of authority. Understanding these perspectives can assist a manager in selecting the best approach when delegating tasks.

Local perceptions concerning project management must be considered when collaborating with teams from various cultures. Many Indian workers tend to believe that the level of importance placed upon a task dictates how follow-up will be received. Projects that receive only email inquiries are generally not as critical as those that warrant a phone call. Indian culture also considers “no” to be a harsh refusal and preference is given to more ambiguous responses to invitations. Many Eastern European nations place a higher value on patience and far less on punctuality. Often, they will keep western business partners waiting, but do not openly engage in conflict, as it is deemed rude and a matter best left for private discussion. Many Arabian and Asian cultures place a high value on maintaining dignity through the concept of “save face.” These cultures respect responses of humility and sensitivity, allowing the other to regain equal standing in the wake of conflict or embarrassment.

In many areas where English is not the primary language, certain phrases take on different meanings. For example, a manager following up on a task might say, “Is the report for Project A done,” which would generally

receive a positive response regardless of the true situation. This is because the word “done” does not necessarily indicate finality, but rather indicates “in progress.” Even the word “yes” takes on new meaning in various regions. Marcelle DuPraw (National Institute for Dispute Resolution) and Marya Axner (Leadership Development Consultant) found that the meaning of “yes” varies from maybe, I’ll consider it, to definitely so, with many shades in between.”

Gender Communication Barriers

Cultural differences can be daunting enough to overcome without also making allowances for tendencies in gender communication. While there are no absolutes and individual differences in communication types vary across employees groups, general identified trends can assist managers in elevating simple gaps in communication styles.

Robin Lakoff, author of “Language and a Woman’s Place,” studied differences in how boys and girls are taught and reinforced to communicate throughout their early childhood development. Essentially, Lakoff observed that girls are taught to use passive, empathetic voices and are more encouraged toward active listening. Boys, however, are encouraged toward competition, using forceful, active tones.

Reinforced by local society values, these communication styles can be carried into the workplace, where minor conflicts can lead to frustration and animosity. Observe a group of colleagues tasked with solving a problem. Generally, women ask more questions before initiating work, while men typically exhibit tendencies to immediately resolve issues, thus

discovering necessary details as the work progresses. Some men may see the inquiry from female coworkers as indecisiveness, while women may assume men already have the understanding needed to complete a project. Deborah Such, a nonverbal communication and networking coach, explains subtle differences in the ways men and women communicate. She describes a scenario where a man and woman are conversing. It would not be uncommon for the woman to nod continuously while the man is speaking. "To her," Deborah points out, "she is merely encouraging him to continue speaking; but to him, it is a sign that she agrees with everything he is saying." This scenario illustrates how slight differences in understanding contribute to misunderstanding. To counter this, one must periodically engage the listener for feedback and comprehension.

Leadership challenges can also arise from the differing approaches that men and women take to vie for control during collaboration and team-building activities. Typically, to establish rapport, women seek to build relationships on a personal level, sharing stories and relating to male colleagues as they would male family members. Men generally prefer to jump to the bottom line, envisioning the final goal at hand. In, "Customize Your Career," Roz Usheroff explains, "Women tend to be more collaborative in the workplace, putting relationships first while men routinely challenge and expect to be challenged."

Tools for Managers to Overcome Communication Barriers

The key to bridging communication gaps begins with awareness and understanding. Once identifiable patterns emerge, specific tactics can be

used to mitigate conflict and reinforce effective communication. Some of the following tools are familiar, but certainly merit repeating.

Use Simplified Language (The K.I.S.S. Principal). An HR director at a large firm was tasked with communicating an improved bonus plan to employees across the globe. Being the consummate professional with lofty accreditations, he carefully drafted a message to convey the good news. Unfortunately, his supercilious language was misunderstood, giving employees the impression that the new plan reduced their bonuses.

Use Repetition for a Theme. Think about Dr. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech. Dr. King used repetition to convey a fundamental principal that continues to resonate with audiences over forty years later.

Avoid Using Gender-Specific Metaphors. Typically, men prefer analogies of sports or war to convey emotion into meaning that ultimately may be lost by some female colleagues. Therefore, try to use traditionally gender-neutral examples whenever possible.

Employ the Most Effective Technologies Available. Consider whether using the phone will have more impact than an email. Message boards and web-based posting options allow more reserved team members equal opportunity to contribute to discussions. Also, web-based video conferencing or Pod Casts are a cheaper alternative to travel and can facilitate non-verbal communication, greatly contributing to impact and meaning. Select the right communication tool for the right task, and not necessarily the most efficient one best suited to your work habits.

Seek Outside Training. Engage consulting experts who specialize in diversity training based on region, nationalities, or gender. Provide a documented policy for employees to review, discuss, and adhere to.

Be specific about timelines and due dates for deliverables. Concepts of time vary between cultures. Outline a clear set of deliverables with milestone information so that all stakeholders are aware of your expectations.

Establish ground rules for your team to collaborate. Clearly outline what is and is not acceptable. Is everyone expected to contribute? What tools will be used to do so and how are team members permitted to challenge each other? Restate the goals and continue driving the discussion to that goal.

As time becomes increasingly scarce in a deadline-driven world, effective communication can mean the difference behind success or certain disaster. Careful planning can save the time lost through having to restate expectations, correct misinterpreted directions, or stifle interdepartmental squabbles. As a manager, you are responsible for encouraging collaboration based on mutual respect and understanding. As a leader, you can facilitate that climate through a careful evaluation of your own communication style, making calculated adjustments when needed with the sole purpose of achieving your goals.

Culture Shock

Culture shock is triggered by a sudden, drastic change in environment, so it makes sense that travelers will experience a second wave of culture shock upon returning home. The phases of “reverse culture shock” parallel the phases of “normal” culture shock, though they differ in length and intensity.

Upon returning, you can expect to experience an initial stage of euphoria and excitement. It will be a relief to come back, and invigorating to be surrounded by the comforts of home and people who are thrilled to see you. It won't be long, however, before you realize that both you and your home environment have changed, and the honeymoon phase will come to an end. The symptoms you experience during the crisis phases will parallel those you went through abroad; frustration, dejection, irritability and loneliness are just some of the emotions you may face. Many factors contribute to this most difficult phase of re-entry:

Realities of home: Home may not be what you expected it to be. While experiencing culture shock and homesickness abroad, you will likely idealize and romanticize your home environment. Upon returning, the imperfections and annoyances that you had forgotten about will no longer be invisible, which can be disconcerting.

Reverse homesickness: While abroad, you will have developed a routine, adapted to a new way of living, and formed significant friendships. Leaving this behind will be difficult, especially if you don't know when you will return.

Changes in you and others: Life doesn't stop while you're away, and things at home will be different when you return. The changes in your friends and environment may be subtle, or they may reveal themselves only under certain circumstances. It may be unsettling to witness these unpredictable changes.⁽²⁾ Because the home you left is not quite the home you are returning to, you may find yourself confused and anxious.

"I had a very hard time readjusting to the US. I had changed so much and seen so many things, and I had a hard time relating to others and realizing that they had also changed during the time I was away. I was surprised that my friends didn't really want to spend much time looking at my pictures and listening to my stories."⁽³⁾ -- University of Pennsylvania Student, Study abroad in Russia

Blindness to culture shock: When you travel abroad, locals recognize you as a foreigner. People are understanding of your disorientation and are quick to offer help. At home, on the other hand, you will be expected to be a fully functioning member of society. Because you look like you fit in, people will see no reason to reach out to you, and because reverse culture shock is not a well-recognized phenomenon, they will likely be less sympathetic to your adjustment needs.

"People will assume that, because you come from the same place as they do, you know how everything works. In fact some things may have changed in your absence. Because you look and sound as if you 'belong,' people will be unaware that you are somewhat disoriented."⁽⁴⁾

Recovery and Adjustment

Just as you will have recovered from your initial culture shock, you will begin to settle back into your native culture. Friendships may shift, and you may form new friendships with others who have had experiences similar to yours. Most importantly, you will incorporate the changes that have occurred within you into your daily life at home. You will view the world through a slightly different lens, and will learn to appreciate aspects of your culture you never noticed before traveling abroad.

Coping with Re-entry:

Coping with culture shock abroad will have provided you the tools for dealing with the challenges of readjustment. For this reason and others, your reverse culture shock will be shorter lived than your initial adjustment abroad. That said, there are still some steps you can take to minimize hardship, and to maximize the positive impact of your time overseas:

Before you come home, prepare:

Reverse culture shock doesn't have to catch you by surprise. Plan to experience boredom, isolation, disorientation, and annoyance when you arrive home. You should also gather the contact information of friends you would like to stay in touch with abroad. If you nurture a connection with your host country while you are at home, you will be less likely to compartmentalize or "shoebox" your abroad experience. Along the same lines, you should spend some time reflecting on meaningful aspects of your trip to help integrate your experience abroad into your identity. What did you

learn? How have you changed? Answering these questions will help you process the meaning of your trip as you reintegrate yourself at home.

Talk with people who can relate to you: Keep in touch with people from your program in addition to your hosts; they understand the experiences you went through and may share your difficulties readapting to their homes. Friends who have had other significant experiences abroad are also great resources and are likely to be interested in your trip and easy to relate to.

Stay international: Keep up-to-date with current events in your host country, join an international student organization, study a foreign language, and attend multicultural festivals. Anything you do to maintain your connection with the world at large will solidify the significance of your trip. Also remember that you can maximize your impact as a volunteer by inspiring others once you return home. Writing articles for a local newspaper, creating a photo exhibit, speaking at student events on campus, and organizing fundraisers are just a few of the ways you can increase awareness and galvanize others to help those living in poverty abroad.

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