

**CROSS AND MULTICULTURAL
UNDERSTANDING**

PBI

KNOWLEDGE INTO ACTION II

SESSION 13

MEIYANTI NURCHAERANI S.S.,M.HUM

UNIVERSITAS ESA UNGGUL

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Improving Intercultural Communication

There are a number of strategies that can be used to better understand and improve intercultural communications. And, while it depends on the situation and what component of culture you are dealing with, the guidelines listed below can be used to help in any cross-cultural situation to make sure your message and intention is clear, and that you understand what others are saying.

Tips for Achieving Successful Intercultural Communications:

1. Do your homework.

If you know ahead of time who you will be speaking with or what country you will be visiting, it makes sense to research cultural norms and standards, and communication methods for that particular place. Do not walk into the situation unprepared if you can avoid it.

2. Ask.

It might be uncomfortable for you and the person you are asking, but by showing your willingness to ask when you don't understand or when you lack the cultural knowledge necessary to avoid cultural faux faux, you are demonstrating your willingness to learn more about a new culture and the prevailing communication norms instead of rushing through unaware.

3. Accept that you'll commit errors.

Even with all the research you're going to do and the questions you're going to ask, you will still make mistakes. Don't take it personally, rather do your best to be self-aware, actively learn from your mistake and apologize if you offend anyone or cross boundaries. Mistakes will always happen, the problem begins when you don't use a mistake as an opportunity to learn to avoid the same issues in the future.

4. Avoid colloquialisms, jokes, and idioms.

Humor is culture oriented and until you have spent significant months or years learning it, jokes should be avoided as it can be easy to offend or belittle, and in professional situations that can spell disaster. Idioms should be avoided for a different reason, and that is that they vary greatly by culture and often aren't translatable. In Colombia, "Hacemos la vaca" means to collect money to buy something together. It has no literal meaning and if you weren't with someone who could explain, you would be very confused as to why people were making a cow.

5. Practice actively listening and observing.

Listening is a highly regarded skill. When communicating with others from another culture, it is incredibly important to actively pay attention and listen to what people are telling you. Listening can help you understand that there isn't

one right way to conduct interactions. Additionally, varying viewpoints or ideas might contradict your own, but you'll still need to listen respectfully.

6. Repeat or confirm what you think was being said.

It can be helpful to repeat or confirm what you believe to have been the objective of the conversation. This process will help you avoid misunderstandings, especially when speaking different languages. Write it out if you have to, but make sure you align everyone's understanding before moving forward.

7. Don't ask yes or no questions.

Instead, use open-ended questions to avoid confusion. With open-ended questions, the person with whom you are interacting must explain or clearly outline their point, making it easier to understand their response and the context surrounding it.

8. Pay attention to nonverbal communication.

Communication is also extremely nonverbal. Pay attention to nonverbal cues such as intonation, eye contact, and posture. Observe how people conduct interactions with others from their same culture and follow their lead. Certain cultures avoid strong eye contact when speaking, so you'll make someone

highly uncomfortable if you are trying to force strong eye contact they are not used to doing the same.

9. Speak slowly and clearly.

This will help you avoid mistakes and seeming nervous. Speaking slowly and clearly is often interpreted as being confident. Additionally, taking time to think before you speak can help you to avoid communication issues and words you might regret later.

10. Take a deep breath and enjoy it!

It can be a challenge to communicate effectively with people from other cultures, and you are bound to find people with whom you can communicate more effectively and more enjoyably than others. Remember, that the whole process is a lifelong lesson in empathy, understanding, and self-awareness which can translate to vastly improved professional and personal interactions and successes beyond just intercultural communications.

Consider the Physical and Human Setting

1. **Sense of Timing** – The circumstances under which you make an announcement or render a decision.

2. **The Physical Setting** – whether you communicate in private or otherwise; the social climate that pervades work relations within the company or a department sets the tone of its communications.
3. **Custom and Past Practice** – the degree to which your communication conforms to, departs from, the expectation of your audience.

Develop Empathy

To develop empathy, you must commit yourself to working through each of these six steps. No skipping steps, or changing the order of the process. It's rather important that you initially follow the process of steps exactly how they are listed below. Then, after a while, when you start feeling comfortable with each step you can begin to adjust and adapt them to each person and situation.

With that said, let's outline the six steps to help you develop empathy.

Step 1: Imagine Yourself in the Other Person's Shoes

The first step to developing empathy is to imagine yourself as the other person. In other words, imagine yourself in their shoes, living their life through their unique experiences.

Every person brings to each experience a unique set of beliefs, values, and perspectives that influence their opinions and ultimately how they view and interpret the world. These beliefs, for instance, influence what they say, what they fear, and subsequently what they avoid doing. They influence who they trust, how they trust, and how they respond to problems and adversity.

Moreover, they bring to each experience emotional baggage that affects their state-of-mind. These emotions change how they see you, how they look at themselves, and ultimately how they deal with events and circumstances.

When we ask the question:

How would I feel if I were in their shoes?

We must take into account all the factors mentioned above to help us get an understanding of their true feelings, intentions, and motives.

It's, therefore, paramount when interacting with another person to take all these factors into consideration. Use them to help shift how you read another person in the context of the situation they find themselves in.

Step 2: Investigate Underlying Feelings

Having put yourself in the other person's shoes, it's time now to dig a little deeper to uncover the person's feelings and underlying intentions.

To do this, you will need to subtly insert some variations of following questions into your conversation.

- *What's on your mind?*
- *How do you feel about that?*
- *Please tell me more about...?*

These questions are gentle probing questions that help you get a sense of their current state-of-mind and how it's affecting them at the present moment.

Developing empathy requires this kind of gentle probing. You need to ask questions that encourage the other person to open up to you — to express their true feelings and intentions. Only in this way can you truly understand who they are and how they feel at this particular moment.

However, questions alone won't reveal all the answers you are seeking. Unless you have a very close relationship or friendship with another person, then they will likely hold things back. They won't divulge their true feelings to protect their self-esteem.

Everyone comes bundled with a set of insecurities that prevent them from being around others as they desire to be. As a result, people will often hold back from expressing their true feelings and intentions to protect themselves from judgment, criticism, embarrassment, and ridicule. You must, therefore,

never solely rely on the answers they give you, but rather challenge yourself to probe deeper. Ask:

- *How does this person feel? Why?*
- *Could they be hiding their true feelings? Why?*
- *What am I hearing the other person say?*
- *What am I seeing the other person do?*

What a person says, how they say things, and what they do must be in-sync. In other words, everything must be aligned to one purpose or intention. If there are inconsistencies regarding what they say and the actions they take, then you will know that there is an imbalance there. And where there's imbalance, the other person is probably holding back their true feelings and intentions.

A person who regularly practices empathy trains themselves to identify these underlying feelings and intentions that are normally protected and hidden from view.

Use the insights you gather here to probe a little further — to encourage the other person to open up to you about their true feelings and experiences.

Step 3: Identify with the Person's Experience

When the other person starts feeling comfortable in your presence, they will be more willing and able to express themselves. In other words, they will become vulnerable, which will help them to express their true feelings and intentions.

When they reach this stage, it's paramount that you take the time to identify with their experiences and the feelings and emotions that accompany those experiences.

You might, of course, not always be able to relate to another person's experiences. However, you can still imagine yourself living through those experiences and the accompanying feelings and emotions. Or, you may possibly have similar experiences that you can relate back to the circumstances they are currently going through.

Either way, it's crucial that you consistently convey to the other person that you understand where they are coming from. But, if for any reason you are having difficulty relating to what they are saying, then it's important to probe a little deeper. Encourage the other person to talk and express how they're feeling and how these circumstances are affecting their state-of-mind, life, and relationships.

Step 4: Verify the Accuracy of What You're Hearing

While interacting with the other person, it's important to keep in mind that people are rarely 100 percent honest and real in social situations.

Don't get me wrong though. This doesn't mean that people are intentionally deceiving you. They are merely protecting their feelings and masking their insecurities. It's akin to putting on a mask that hides our facial expressions. The mask, for instance, has a smiley face, but behind the mask, we are worried and petrified.

Given this, it's essential that you don't take things at face value. Think objectively about what the other person is saying and doing. It's very possible that what you are hearing or observing may just be a fragment of the truth. The person may very well be holding things back. And that's okay. They are just protecting their self-esteem.

Empathy requires being acutely aware and attuned to what the other person is saying and doing. And it also requires being very objective and critically questioning the accuracy of what you are hearing and observing. Only in this way will you truly understand a person's underlying feelings, motives, and intentions. And only in this way are you able to provide them with the support they need to move forward in an empowered way.

Step 5: Offer Your Support

This is where you provide the other person with emotional support.

By this stage, you should have a relatively good understanding of the other person's state-of-mind and what they potentially need in this situation. This, of course, doesn't mean that you have the green light to give the other person unsolicited advice. It instead means to be there for them emotionally, physically, mentally, and maybe even spiritually.

Be gentle, and encourage the other person to find the strength they need to move forward. This strength, of course, comes from within. And the best way to do this is to ask questions that encourage the other person to take the initiative to move past the obstacles and fears that are holding them back.

This is very much a life coaching approach, where the life coach empowers their client through the use of questions. These questions help their client find their own answers to life's problems and circumstances. It's, therefore, not the coach giving them the answers, but rather the coach asking the right kind of questions that help their client to find the answers for themselves.

Step 6: Practice Emotional Detachment

The one drawback to practicing empathy is that it's very easy to get emotionally drawn into the other person's world, where their problems, pain,

and experiences essentially become our problems, pain, and experiences. This can very quickly become overwhelming and interfere with our quality of life and our ability to help others.

Given this, it's important that we detach emotionally from other people's experiences. This, of course, won't be easy, but it's something that we must do to maintain a healthy state-of-mind.

- *I understand this person's pain...*
- *I will not allow their pain to become my pain...*

One way to do this is to assign yourself to play different roles throughout the day. For instance, when you're practicing empathy, you can play the role of a carer who looks after the emotional well-being of those around them.

However, once you have removed yourself from that situation, you immediately switch to another role of being a parent, leader, manager, spouse, or whatever that may be for you. In other words, you become a different person in each role. In this way, one role won't interfere with how you conduct yourself in other roles throughout the day.

Some Ethical considerations

It is imperative that ethical issues are considered during the formulation of the evaluation plan. Ethical considerations during evaluation include:

Informed consent

Informed consent means that the person participating in the evaluation is fully informed about the evaluation being conducted. Participants need to be made aware of the purpose of the project, who or what group is funding it, how the findings will be used, if there are any potential adverse impacts of their participation and who will have access to the findings. The main purpose of informed consent is that the participant is able to make an informed decision as to whether they will participate in the evaluation or not. Additional information should also be provided in the event that the participant becomes distressed in any way during their participation.

Voluntary participation

Voluntary participation means that people participate in the evaluation free from coercion. Participants are free to withdraw their participation at any time without negatively impacting on their involvement in future services or the current program² and relationships with any of the researchers or research bodies involved. It can be challenging to encourage high risk youth to become engaged in a program and it is therefore difficult when participants choose not

to continue in a program. It is the right of participants to leave a program of this nature at any time, therefore no pressure should be placed on those who choose not to continue. Explanations are also not required.

Do no harm

Harm can be both physical and/or psychological and therefore can be in the form of: stress, pain, anxiety, diminishing self-esteem or an invasion of privacy. It is imperative that the evaluation process does not in any way harm (unintended or otherwise) participants.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality means that any identifying information is not made available to, or accessed by anyone but the program coordinator. Confidentiality also ensures such identifying information is excluded from any reports or published documents. Given that there are often small numbers in peer based programs, it is very important to consider how reports are worded to ensure that there is no opportunity for people to be identified even though names are not used.

Anonymity

Anonymity is a stricter form of privacy than confidentiality, as the identity of the participant remains unknown to the research team. This is more difficult to

achieve than confidentiality as participants in the context of social research are usually known to the program coordinator.

Only assess relevant components

Only assess those components that are of relevance to the program/initiative being conducted. High risk populations are sometimes being used as guinea pigs or a captive audience to ask all sorts of questions in evaluations that are of interest to groups conducting the program/initiative but not relevant to the program nor will be to the group who are involved in the program. It is important to keep evaluations as simple as possible and to remain focused on the intention of the evaluation and what the data gathered will be used for.

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