

**CROSS AND MULTICULTURAL  
UNDERSTANDING**

**PBI**

**THE FUTURE OF INTERCULTURAL  
COMMUNICATION**

**SESSION 14**

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## What is intercultural communication?

Intercultural or cross cultural communication refers to **communication** between individuals and groups of different **cultural backgrounds**. In business, this involves understanding different professional norms, beliefs, perceptions and mentalities, and communication strategies. Everything from language, gestures, mannerisms, customs, and systems of power and authority can differ between cultures.

This makes intercultural communication imperative for companies that have a diverse workforce and/or intend to compete in the global economy.

Keen to better comprehend today's world to **do better business** tomorrow?

Keen on learning how to better understand other cultures and communicate with them? Find out how with these 5 steps below.

### . **Keep It Simple**

“Every human is like all other humans, some other humans, and no other human.” — Clyde Kluckhohn

First and foremost, intercultural communication is a form of communication much like any other. It's a flow of information between people.

**Think** in terms of your audience and **speak** to their understanding. Yes, you are communicating with humans of diverse origins. But, just like yourself, they are just that – humans!

We all wish to comprehend each other and find joy in discovering common ground between us. To make things easier for everyone, be **clear in your speech** (enunciation, diction, grammar) **and your purpose**.

Be wary of **jargon** and **complex structures** such as double negatives. This also applies to idioms, as these are highly contextual. Though fun to use in business language, even expressions like “from the get-go”, “touch base”, and “ballpark figure” can be confusing and distract from your main idea.

This is very important to keep in mind as some members of your audience may not be fluent speakers of your language.

Ultimately, the best kind of message is a **clear message**.

## **2. R-E-S-P-E-C-T**

Aretha Franklin couldn't have said it better. When people feel respected, understood, and listened to, it builds a profound level of **trust** and **esteem**.

This is the foundation of positive, rewarding relationships, and ideally what you should aim to achieve for powerful communication in any setting.

**Respect** is a fundamental element of all business communication. Though it comes in a myriad of different forms, you can be sure that it exists in all cultures of the world.

It can be challenging in intercultural settings to know what is acceptable, let alone effective, in communication. Some people will respond well to more frank and direct language and approaches, whilst others may find this aggressive. With **conscientious research and observation**, this will likely become easier as you go.

Being mindful of others; paying attention to their customs; showing curiosity about their traditions; being open and receptive to their worldviews – these are habits of people who interact with others effectively and consciously.

### **3. Strike A Chord**

Great leaders know that true communication is never one-sided or void of emotion. In fact, anything related to teams or groups requires **collective effort, cooperation**, and, ideally, **mutual understanding**.

“The essence of cross-cultural communication has more to do with releasing responses than with sending messages. It is more important to release the right response than to send the right message.” — Edward T. Hall

With this in mind, consider how you view yourself in relation to others. Of course, if you are in a higher-tier (executive or managerial) role, you are responsible for others and perhaps not on their same level as far as the

business' organisation is concerned. However, your amount of authority and duty over others does not have to dictate your form of **personal expression**.

If you wish to really resonate with your team or audience, speak to them as **equals and partners**. Communicate in a way that not only carries but evokes emotion.

A great trick for leaving a deeper impression can be as simple as choosing your words wisely. Think about the difference between the words 'lead' and 'command', or 'educate' and 'enforce'. **Words carry meaning**, and the vocabulary that you use when communicating should be in line with the values and messages that you wish to convey.

#### **4. When in Doubt, Leave It Out**

"The stranger sees only what he knows." — African proverb

It is **human nature** to be wary of the unknown. But for some of us, curiosity (and even overconfidence) can tempt us to try and tackle things that we are perhaps not prepared for.

As strangers to another culture, we may only see and perceive what is already familiar to us, potentially **misunderstanding** or critiquing things that we are not fully informed about.

Discussing certain cultural, religious, and political situations can provoke bias or tension, distracting from your message. If you do find yourself out of your

depth when faced with an audience or an issue that is unfamiliar to you, don't fret! Take a moment to reflect, and approach sensitive subjects with due care. This is a great opportunity to **research** and **expand your knowledge base** further. Otherwise, by diving straight into the deep end and 'winging it', you may risk offending others (or, at the very least, coming across as unprofessional).

You know what they say about assuming!

## **5. Enjoy the Experience**

"A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots." — Marcus Garvey

**Perspective** and **attitude** can have an immense effect on the way that you interact with others. Ultimately, communicating with others should be a pleasure, not a chore. And this should show when you do it.

If you have set up your business in a new market or are hoping to expand your business overseas, for example, this is a wonderful test of your business savvy, ambitions, and awareness.

Furthermore, those who embrace the global and intercultural aspect of business and life consider it a **privilege** to be able to interact with people who have so many different viewpoints and backgrounds to offer.

Of course, these differences can create gaps between people, potentially presenting challenges that affect productivity and professional rapport. But if we are to prepare for a **future of international business** and exchange networks that know no bounds, these gaps must be bridged. And this is where intercultural communication plays a key role.

The fact is that intercultural communication permeates everything we do as human beings. From the moment we are born, we all carry a whole range of identities within us that are the product of our own characters and their interaction with the outside world and we are all members of groups which carry their own identities. Hence, every time we remotely think about doing anything we are in the realm of intercultural communication. It is something that has existed since well before the moment when you could point to a primate and say “that is human behaviour” and will be with us until the moment we either wipe ourselves out or morph into something demonstrably different. In short, it will never leave us and it is ever-present. So, the more immediate question is therefore ‘What Can We Do Improve Intercultural Communication?’

For this, we need to pan back and consider:

1. What ‘Culture’ means

2. Which 'Cultures' we want to talk about interacting with each other – think 'dimensions' here, e.g. national, professional, social, associative etc? Some of these are very dislocated physically but still strongly cohesive these days
3. What can we realistically expect in terms of success? E.g. How do we deal with those who have no interest in thinking of their relationship with others in anything but their own terms?
4. Who is best to mediate and work out What Good Looks Like (the UN, professional negotiators, independent consultants, business gurus, everyone at their own level taking grass-roots responsibility?).

There is a whole academic field that has grown up since the Second World War to tackle these enormous questions, Intercultural Studies, which remains woefully under-appreciated, including by many who would hugely benefit from it. But the techniques – and most importantly, the mindset – it espouses is, thankfully, used by pretty much anyone seeking to do good and reaching out to our fellow human beings in a positive way every day on this planet.

It is one of the great, lesser-known, forces that can and will shape our world. To gain the prominence it deserves however, I'd argue what it really needs is to do is:

- (i) Ensure it's covering the full spectrum of cultural dimensions, not just the national which preoccupied it for the first decades of its development



(ii) Demonstrate its benefits beyond its current focus on values and diversity, both of which are not only static but divisive, and move to a standpoint of addressing motivations, which you have a far greater chance of working with dynamically and - hence - fruitfully

(iii) Do a better job of communicating its fundamental importance to everything we do, not just in theory but in everyday practice.....again, well beyond just the national differences which have been the mainstay of intercultural for so long: These are absolutely critical business, social and human skills.

### **Developing International Competence and Intercultural Communication Skills is an Investment in the Future**

Today's working life environment is global and characterised by multicultural and multidisciplinary teamwork in global networks. This sets demands on the employees who need new kinds of skills and competencies to be able to do their work effectively. Since the main task of the universities of applied sciences (UAS) is to educate and prepare their students for the future working life, it would be crucial to be able to predict what skills and competencies the graduates will need. Due to the challenges brought about by globalisation, especially international skills and cultural knowledge have become essential in any work.

The objective of the present article is to discuss the skills and competencies needed in the working life environment the UAS graduates will face after graduation. This article also discusses how employers regard international skills and knowledge when recruiting new employees. In addition, the article describes how the goals set for internationalisation in the Finnish higher education are reached and with what kind of methods. Furthermore, possibilities to develop the students' intercultural communication competence.

### **New Competences for Multicultural Workplaces**

Because of the fast internationalisation of the working life in Finland, the importance of intercultural knowledge and versatile communication and language skills will grow at workplaces in the future. The ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity will increase, and as a result, cultural tolerance will be more and more demanded. (Sajavaara & Salo 2007.) The future workplaces will be global and multicultural. As a result, profound knowledge of working with people from different cultures is a prerequisite to succeed in the future working environment.

According to the Confederation of Finnish Industries (EK 2011) the ways of doing work and the competencies required will be different in the future. The competencies that will be emphasised include, for example, the ability to work in networks, communicate, share knowledge and learn in teams. In addition, the future competencies include internationalisation,

business knowledge, technological and environmental knowledge as well as design thinking. Internationalisation will be part of any business in the future. This requires the ability and willingness to think and operate globally. In addition to these abilities, knowledge of different market areas and their cultures as well as knowledge of international trade and languages is required. (EK 2011, 12.)

The future employees should be flexible, multiskilled and multitalented and easily trained for new tasks. In the future the need for well-educated workforce will grow in many fields. (Sajavaara & Salo 2007, 233.) In order to prepare students for the future, education should promote creativity and problem-solving skills, and it should be based on real-life phenomena and adopt methods from working life (EK 2011, 3). The problems encountered at work are often interdisciplinary without one single correct solution and require combining knowledge and skills from many different fields. Moreover, the work is frequently done in multidisciplinary teams. For example, even if engineers still need strong technical and mathematical skills, they also need team working skills, collaborative learning skills, shared expertise, business skills, communication skills, international skills and the ability to operate in international networks. (Mielityinen 2009, Alatalo-Korpi 2009, 14.)

## **Extended International Competence**

The Centre for International Mobility (CIMO) together with Demos Helsinki conducted a study in 2013 to find out how employers regard international skills and knowledge when recruiting new employees. The results indicate that Finnish employers do not recognize all the skills and competencies that students develop during the international mobility periods and when gaining international experiences. The challenge is to better define the learning outcomes people gain in international mobility and make them visible. In addition to the traditional outcomes, such as tolerance, language skills and cultural knowledge, new sets of skills should be added when describing international competence. The three new extensions to be added in the international competence are the so-called hidden skills, namely, productivity, resilience and curiosity. Figure 1 shows the traditional and the new extended international competencies. (Hidden Competencies 2014, Demos Helsinki 2013.)

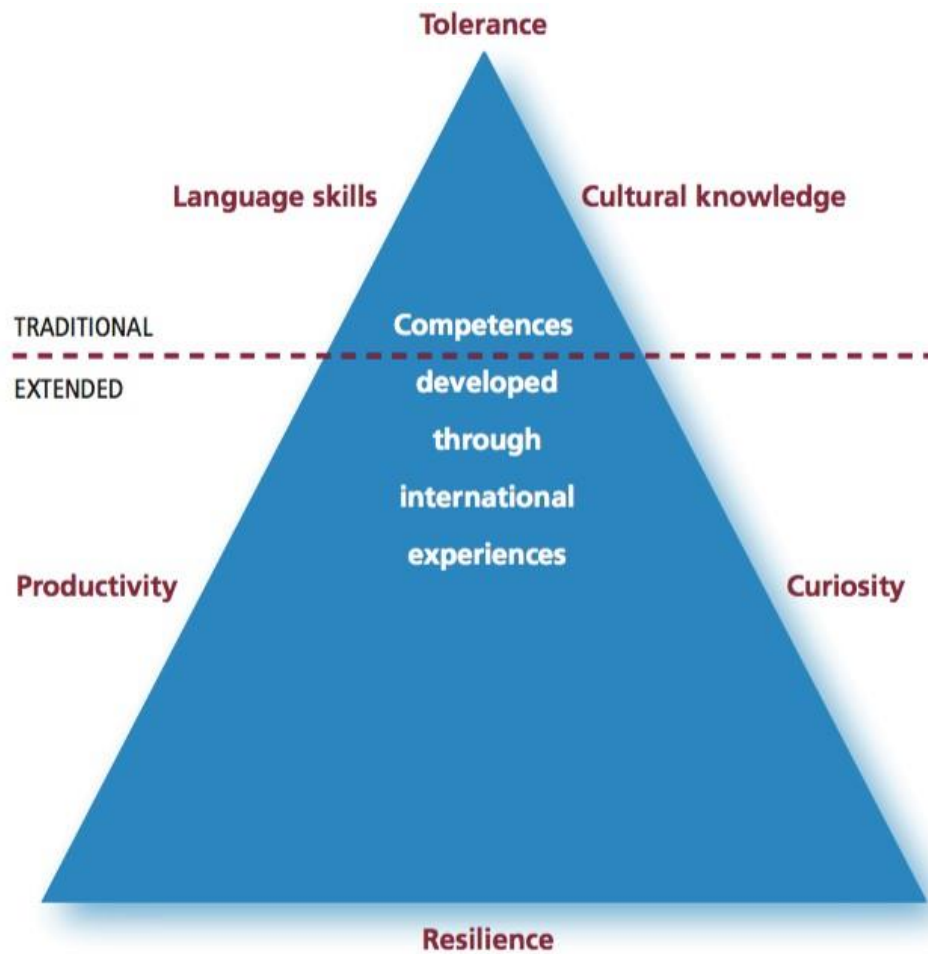


Figure 1. Traditional and Extended Competencies Developed Through International Experiences (Hidden Competencies 2014, 8)

The most important of the extended international competencies is curiosity for three reasons. Firstly, curiosity makes it easier to benefit from new experiences and opportunities. Secondly, it answers the question of which type of expertise is required in societies. Thirdly, curiosity is motivational, a curious person is interested in and capable of directing his attention to new issues. A curious person is interested in global phenomena and events and

able to see their effects, which again helps in understanding global changes and finding new solutions. (Hidden Competencies 2014, 27–29.)

International competence has traditionally been associated with language skills, studying or working abroad and willingness to travel. However, the competence is much more than that. An internationally competent person also has abilities connected with creativity, networking and interest in new things as shown in Figure 2. The international competence can also be developed in hobbies and in free time. (Hidden Competencies 2014, 21–22.)



Figure 2. Traditional and Extended Understanding of International Experience (Hidden Competencies 2014, 21)

In the extended understanding of international competence, language and communications skills are seen as the basis for international networking and development of expertise. Versatile communication skills are needed in the global working life when working in multicultural and multidisciplinary teams and networks. (Jalkanen, Almonkari & Taalas, 2016.) Language and

communication studies play a central role when training internationally competent professionals at universities of applied sciences.

### **Modes of Internationalisation**

According to the Finnish higher education international policy (Korkeakoulujen kansainvälistymisstrategia 2009, 26–31) the studies at a university of applied sciences give the students readiness and abilities to work in an international working environment. To reach this goal, students are offered a number of various ways to develop their international skills and competencies during their studies. However, international mobility is the most frequently applied method of internationalisation in the Finnish higher education. Students are encouraged to include an exchange period of at least three months in some foreign partner university as part of their studies. As a result, about 10,000 Finnish higher education students head abroad for an exchange period or an internship every year. (Finnish National Agency for Education 2017.)

If the modes of internationalisation have no well-defined learning outcomes, and they are arranged randomly as isolated experiments, internationalisation is very difficult to integrate into the curricula. The students should be able to develop their international competence consistently throughout their studies. However, while there are serious attempts to make internationality

an integral part of the studies, at the same time separate international modules are created inside the curricula. (Garam 2012a.)

Even if the number of students going on a student exchange has increased in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in higher education, all students are not willing to study or do their work placement abroad. Therefore, in addition to student mobility, internationalisation should be integrated in the studies at the students' home university in Finland.

Internationalisation at home can be defined as "Any internationally related activity with the exception of outbound student and staff mobility" (Crowther, Joris, Otten, Teekens & Wächter, 2000, 6). The opportunities to enhance internationalisation at home include bringing the Finnish and international students together by arranging studies in a foreign language in multicultural groups. Moreover, courses given by international exchange teachers or arranging an international week are other examples. (Garam 2012b, 3–4.)

Internationalisation and intercultural learning for the domestic students does not happen simply through the presence of foreign students or courses provided in English at the home university. To develop the local students' international competence and intercultural communication skills, the students should be actively involved in the intercultural activities and provided teaching of intercultural communication as well as possibilities for reflecting their cultural experiences. The students' intercultural encounters and experiences



should be consciously fostered inside and outside classrooms. (Crowther, P. et al. 2000, Garam, I. 2012a.)

### **Intercultural Communication Competence**

The term intercultural communication competence (ICC) is used when referring to the abilities and skills needed in interaction with people from different cultures. ICC is regarded as a precondition for successful intercultural interaction and encounters which involve meeting and communicating with persons representing another cultural background. ICC comprises components such as motivation, attitudes and emotions, knowledge, and behavior and skills. Motivation refers to the desire to communicate appropriately and effectively, knowledge means the awareness needed in intercultural situations, and skills are the abilities necessary for intercultural communication. (Gudykunst 2004, Korhonen 2002, Spenser-Oatey & Franklin 2009.) All these elements should also be part of intercultural communication training and teaching.

Intercultural communication competence can best be taught through a practical approach by sharing cultural knowledge and using methods of experiential learning and reflection. Intercultural communication needs to be experienced, not merely learnt through lectures or literature. (Gore 2007.) Experiential learning that involves also attitudes and emotions is based on the idea of learning by doing, and through active participation. The

students' real-life experiences are included as part of the learning process. The underlying assumption is that people learn best from their own experiences. (Korhonen 2004, 53.)

There is a wide range of teaching methods available for intercultural learning, for example, discussions, case studies, critical incidents, films and videos, role plays, self-assessment, reflection, simulations and games and computer-based tasks. However, if the goal is to learn intercultural effectiveness, sensitivity, creating intercultural relationships, and performance in multicultural environment, as it should be, the most effective method is face-to-face teaching. The choice of methods for intercultural communication training depends on the desired outcomes and goals. The expected outcomes are the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to be a more effective communicator in a new environment. (Fowler & Blohm 2004.)

The availability and extent of intercultural communication studies vary a lot in the higher education degree programmes. In many degree programmes there are no intercultural communication studies at all. Typically courses dealing with intercultural communication are arranged in English in multicultural student groups for international degree students or exchange students. Intercultural communication and cultural knowledge can also be part of the language and communication studies. However, it is challenging to combine intercultural contents in the language courses, because the curricula typically include very scarce language studies. The compulsory language and

communication studies are often limited to a 5-credit course in Finnish, English and Swedish. (Garam 2012b, 49–50.)

The Global Mindedness survey carried out by the Finnish National Agency for Education in 2013–2016 examined the impact of international mobility periods on students' attitudes. The survey concluded that the exchange period abroad does not change the students' attitudes. (Finnish National Agency for Education 2017.) Attitudes are one of the key factors of the intercultural communication competence (ICC), and they tend to change slowly, just like beliefs, values, or norms of culture. Especially negative ethnic attitudes, prejudices, and ethnocentrism are hard to change. An exchange period of a few months is not long enough to affect people's attitudes that are learnt in their own culture. However, what is considered crucial in changing attitudes is that the encounter of a new culture is discussed with the students before the exchange and objectives are defined for the exchange. The students should be given an opportunity to discuss the intercultural encounter before the exchange to make it easier to adapt into the new culture. Additionally, the international experience should be reflected after the exchange period. (Finnish National Agency for Education 2017.)

### **Intercultural Communication Studies**

Internationalisation at institutes of higher education is mostly concentrated on student and teacher mobility even if most students and teachers do not

participate in it. Thus, internationalisation at home should be made possible for all students. For example, the students could be provided with studies and training in intercultural communication skills to develop their intercultural competence. Intercultural communication studies are one way to implement internationalisation at home for students who do not participate in international mobility. These studies, on the other hand, also prepare the outgoing students to benefit better from their international mobility period.

Intercultural communication is a multi- and interdisciplinary field of study including fields such as anthropology, sociology, linguistics or philosophy. Most of the theories and concepts of intercultural communication are, however, based on social psychology. Intercultural communication refers to interaction between people who represent different cultural backgrounds. (Korhonen 2002, 43–44.)

The objective of teaching intercultural communication is to facilitate communication and cultural adaptation by improving cultural awareness, giving knowledge, affecting the attitudes, acquiring skills for effective communication with people from different cultural backgrounds. To reach these goals, both the theory of cultures and practical assignments as well as contacts with people from other cultures are required. (Korhonen 2002, 50–52.)

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