

Eight Quick Tips for Improving Global Cross-Cultural Communications

Suzanne Kaplan, Principal, MultiCultural Solutions (suzanne@multi-cultural-solutions.com), and Carol Cunningham, Principal, MultiCultural Solutions (carol@multi-cultural-solutions.com)



Suzanne F. Kaplan, principal of MultiCultural Solutions, has extensive experience in global diversity training and consulting.



Carol Cunningham, principal of MultiCultural Solutions, specializes in all aspects of cross-cultural business skills.

When working abroad, understanding cultural differences can make the difference between professional success and failure in meeting your company's goals. In this article, cross-cultural consultants Suzanne Kaplan and Carol Cunningham provide eight tips for how to communicate effectively across borders.

Excellent cross-cultural communication skills are essential in our interdependent world. Communicating successfully with multicultural colleagues, clients, and customers improves business performance, competitive advantage, and talent retention.

Every day we work with people from different cultural backgrounds with all their accompanying challenges and opportunities. If handled well, these interactions can increase productivity (e.g., projects coming in on time) and improve performance, innovation, and progress. If poorly managed, they may lead to misunderstandings, mistakes, antagonistic feelings, and lost opportunities.

Since all communication is complex, it is almost impossible to send or receive any message that does not have an underlying context that can only be understood within a cultural framework. Cultural differences influence both business and social interactions. We frequently receive feedback from workshop participants explaining how improving their cross-cultural communication skills at work has improved many interactions in their personal and community lives.

"Cultural differences influence both business and social interactions."

SIDEBAR

[A World Map](#)

So before you telephone or email a colleague from a different culture, increase your chances for being understood by keeping these tips in mind:

1. Know yourself and your own cultural context.

You need to know your own culture, not just live it. How is disagreement or bad news expressed in your culture? How do you give and receive praise? How devastating is embarrassment? How do you hold your knife and fork when you eat? Answers to these questions differ greatly across the globe.

The one consistency, however, is that people tend to see themselves as the center of the world. When viewing various world maps (see map in Sidebar) and asked to indicate the center of the world, often people respond to the question by putting their country and themselves in the middle.

Pride signals that the world revolves around us, and people from other cultures are seen in context or contrast to our own values and beliefs. In addition, individually, we all have our “frames of reference,”¹ or constructs for making meaning of the world and things going on around us. Our frame of reference is a lens through which we see the world and is based on numerous factors, including our cultural background, race, gender, age, education, and values. These factors powerfully shape our world view and can be challenging to manage when we are working and communicating with those who are different from us.

Not only does each individual have a unique frame of reference, but groups also have frames of reference that come out of their shared experiences. It's important to remember this when interacting across cultures because even small differences in communication style can lead to great misunderstandings.

Think about how your cultural context impacts your communication style. In the U.S., where speed and efficiency are valued, we clearly understand the term “sense of urgency.” Often we find individuals from countries where the emphasis on time and its control are viewed differently and thus confusion ensues about what this term means. Keeping your own context clearly in mind helps you learn how to adapt to others who may interpret cultural values differently.

2. Know your audience and match the message to their communication needs and style.

Have you noticed that some cultures are more direct than others? They rely on words being literally interpreted (as in the U.S.). People say what they mean. “Yes” always means yes. However, some cultures (for example, Japanese) are more indirect. They rely less on the actual words to convey their point and more on nonverbal communication and context. “Yes” may not mean yes. It may be said because your colleague knows that is what you want to hear.

"Some cultures are more indirect. 'Yes' may not mean yes."

For example, when one asks for directions in North America, it may be clear to the person inquiring that the person responding is unsure of the exact route. But rather than admit that, the responder gives all kinds of other information to please the questioner. So, the safest solution could be to ask multiple people to find the correct way!

Specific business terms can have different meanings in different cultures. For example, in training sessions that we conduct, when our audience is asked to define the term “team,” we often get multiple definitions. A team in the United States is often defined as a group of individuals coming together and working toward a common goal. Europeans, however, tend to focus on the team being a group that's working toward a common goal—individuality doesn't factor in. And when we've asked Asians their definition, we hear that a team is a group of people loyal to each other. These variations in meanings can result in different thought processes, behaviors, and results on a “team” composed of people from multiple cultures. It's best if these differences are identified when the team first forms to get the best collaboration and “teamwork.”

"In cultures that have a distinct hierarchy, one needs to be aware of who is in the room when asking a question."

In cultures that have a distinct hierarchy, one needs to be aware of who is in the room when asking a question. If you pose a question to a subordinate and his or her boss is in the room, the person who is lower in the hierarchy may feel uncomfortable answering the question. If they give a response that the boss disagrees with, then

they could lose face. Getting an organizational chart before an important meeting and knowing everyone's name, role, title, and position in the organization can help to potentially alleviate some of these difficult and sensitive situations.

3. Respect English language barriers.

When you're working with someone who is not fluent in English or for whom English is an additional language, there are a number of actions you can take to increase the chances that your message will be understood as you intended. Keep in mind that those speaking English as a second language can be exhausted from thinking and speaking in two languages all day. These specific techniques might help:

- If you constantly speak 10 to 15 percent slower—not louder—most barriers to understanding English will be avoided.
- Avoid double negatives, slang, sports analogies, and jargon.
- Explain concepts multiple ways and include “nice to know” not just “need to know” information.
- Reduce text—use charts, diagrams, flowcharts, and executive summaries whenever possible. Arrange data on PowerPoint slides or paper in a visual fashion and limit the number of words. Use handouts.
- Take breaks in the conversation and don't surprise people.

4. Be mindful of the whole message you are sending.

Think about nonverbal messages. In a country where people generally stand closer to each other than we do, what message are you sending by standing where you stand? In many Asian countries a smile can often be a sign of embarrassment. The “OK” gesture used in the U.S. means something obscene in Brazil. You have to be culturally curious about nonverbal signals and then be mindful of the message they also send.

Within the United States many subcultures and ethnic groups have their own characteristic style of nonverbal communications. In the U.S. corporate environment, however, firm handshakes, strong eye contact, and smiles are encouraged. When business associates greet each other, they typically stand a little more than three feet apart. Dress is often relatively conservative and formal.

In Latin America, however, when people greet each other, there is often less physical distance between them and the handshake tends to be softer. In the business environment, more touching and *abrazos* (hugs) and greater use of hand and arm gestures are acceptable. Business dress tends to be more fashionable, particularly in the capital cities.

Nonverbal language is very important in cross-cultural communications because it conveys feelings, intentions, and reactions. Latin Americans may seem emotional and excitable to their U.S. counterparts, whereas Americans may seem a little cold and distant.

"Nonverbal language is very important in cross-cultural communications because it conveys feelings, intentions, and reactions."

5. Respect your audience and suspend judgment.

Look at situations across cultures as “different,” not “right” or “wrong.” If someone does something that we do not understand, our normal tendency is to interpret and judge the action negatively as “wrong.” When communicating across cultures, work on observing, asking questions for understanding and then exploring possibilities. Consciously talk to that piece of your mind that wants to judge and tell it to hold those thoughts in abeyance.

So if you're in a meeting and a young Chinese woman is not participating at the same rate as others, don't assume you know why unless you've had direct input on her cultural context. After the meeting, ask questions, do some research, explore possibilities so that you can act appropriately the next time a similar situation arises.

The reason she may not be speaking up could stem from any of the following: In her culture there is the proverb, “The nail that sticks up gets hammered down.” This means that she may have grown up thinking that if she speaks up she is being too pushy, and it is best to be silent and not present her view at the meeting. In addition, she may feel her English is not good enough to speak up or she knows that the people in the room often find her accent difficult to understand. She may also just be having a bad day!

So we need to know the context to understand the situation. Since we want all creative and innovative ideas expressed in a meeting, we have to adapt and set up the meeting so that all expectations are clear to all participants. Something as simple as a detailed agenda, sent out ahead of time, makes expectations clear and eliminates surprises.

Eating styles also differ in different countries. What may be polite in one country may be viewed as rude in another. In China slurping noodles and putting fish bones directly on the table cloth are acceptable. Chinese view blowing one's nose in public as offensive. We need to know the etiquette of the cultures in which we work so we do not make blatant mistakes that are considered unprofessional.

6. Use active listening and check for understanding.

Since active listening improves all cross-cultural communication, interpersonal relationships, and problem solving, what can you do to be sure you are being the best possible listener? Here are a few things to keep in mind and practice:

- Pay attention to both the speaker's nonverbal as well as verbal messages. If you notice inconsistent body language and words, ask the speaker what he/she is thinking and feeling—then you can be clear about the actual message.
- Use verbal and nonverbal responses to let the speaker know that you are hearing the message. The real message may be factual, emotional, or both.
- To be most effective as a listener, actively demonstrate that you understand what has been said. Listening is anything but a passive activity. Confirm verbally what you think you heard by paraphrasing back what the speaker has said. Use reflective, short statements to recap the speaker's emotions and feelings without agreeing or disagreeing. Reflective statements are especially useful in conflict situations. They help “mirror” the emotions of the speaker and show that you understand and are not afraid of what's happening. Remember that it is possible to take responsibility either as a speaker or a listener to make sure that communications are understood correctly.

"Listening is anything but a passive activity."

Periodically stop and check for understanding. “American” is sometimes your audience's second language. Even if they are speaking “American,” they may not comprehend everything that is being said. You might consider having a team member paraphrase key points to make sure everyone understands before moving on to the next topic.

Paraphrasing is a valuable tool, not only to check if message interpretation is correct without embarrassing anyone but also to explore issues more fully from a common base.

7. Act authentically.

Stewart Friedman, author and professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School, says that authenticity is especially important when times are tough. It is also incredibly important when working cross-culturally.

Friedman suggests “that the best leaders act with authenticity by looking inside to clarify what's important. Then they act with integrity by respecting the whole person—themselves, their families, and the people who work with and for them.”

That respect comes from authentically seeing cross-cultural differences as a two-way street and interacting from awareness, understanding, and knowledge. It means trying to see the world from others' perspectives and not forcing your ways on them. Yet at the same time, it means being true to yourself and your ways.

In some cultures, people stand in line in an orderly fashion. If we belong to these cultures, our normal response is to stand in line because we believe it is the right, respectful behavior. In other cultures, standing in line may not be the norm, and people push to get to the front of the line, creating a more chaotic situation. If we visit a culture where we feel that the behavior is not appropriate or goes against our value system, we can choose to behave in the way that is true to ourselves.

Another significant example we've seen in our work involves behaviors of some international students coming to American universities. The international students may have different expectations for taking exams or writing papers. What “cheating” or “plagiarism” means may be viewed differently in their culture than in U.S. culture. It is important that the student in these cases fully understands and appreciates the meaning of these terms in their U.S. cultural context. The professors, therefore, must clearly communicate that meaning. In the U.S., abiding by the rules is extremely important; in many other cultures, bending the rules may be seen as creative. Acting authentically means the professor stays true to her/his personal core values and those of the university while being aware of, understanding, and respecting others' life ways.

8. Don't spring surprises.

Putting people on the spot or addressing a topic that someone is not prepared to answer will erode trust and credibility. You need to know exactly what you want to achieve in a conversation. Think and organize your thoughts before you proceed. Send out agendas ahead of time, and do not deviate from the key points so that everyone is clear and misunderstandings are minimized.

Whether you are running a global meeting (virtually or face-to-face) or teaching a class encompassing international as well as American students, setting out clear expectations at the beginning results in easier collaboration, less confusion, and more success for everyone involved.

Using great communications skills across cultures and differences is something we need now and will need increasingly in the future. Improving our skills is satisfying, but it also involves more effort on everyone's part. It is helpful if you are “culturally curious.” Take a sincere interest in your international colleagues and their countries. Taking time to learn from them about their country and culture will help in multiple ways. Δ

"Setting out clear expectations at the beginning results in easier collaboration, less confusion, and more success for everyone involved."

1. Frame of Reference Concept comes from Barbara Berry and Blanche Edwards of The Spectrum Consulting Group, based on the work of Richard Orange.

SIDEBAR

A World Map



When presented with a map and asked “Where is the center of the world?”, most people point to where they are located.

[Return to the Table of Contents](#)

Copyright of Diversity Factor is the property of Diversity Factor and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.