

Some General Principles of Communicating Across Cultures

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1. Sometimes we think of culture in terms of things like music and dance, colorful outfits and distinctive foods. While these are important, the far greater part of culture is hidden, affecting everything about how people view the world, how they act, and what they believe. Culture includes geography, history, language, religion and science, but it also includes values, beliefs, attitudes, assumptions and context. From these influences come the particular behavior we attribute to any given culture. *An individual may not be aware that these influences are at work, shaping him or her.*

2. A culture is a grouping, large or small, where there are shared behaviors, values and assumptions. Cultural groupings are based on different factors such as nationality, ethnicity, religion, gender, ability, shared interests, and membership in business, communal, or family networks.

Sometimes people help choose and define their own cultural affiliations, and they sometimes move in and out of cultures, or participate in several of them at once. Also, cultures themselves do not stand still. While there may be time-honored values and behaviors, things may change in reaction to outside influences or internal pressures.

3. When people who have learned opposing definitions of what is 'polite' and 'normal' interact with each other, misunderstandings result. Suppose *I* have learned to talk with a lot of energy, expression and enthusiasm, gesturing with both hands. Nobody ever said to do this, but most people around me always behaved this way.

Now suppose *you* have learned to stand quietly with hands at sides, listen respectfully and carefully, and express yourself in subtle ways. It's quite possible that you will think I'm rude and insensitive—maybe even angry (because I'm loud) or unintelligent (because I don't notice the small signals you're giving me). On the other hand, I may think you are cold, dull or arrogant—maybe even angry (because you seem so withdrawn) or unintelligent (because you seem unable to express yourself).

If I've been taught that it's respectful to modestly look down and you've been taught that it's honest to look people in the eye, you'll think I'm dishonest and evasive, and I'll think you're disrespectful and aggressive. Even if we're both good people with good intentions, these kinds of misunderstandings make communicating together very difficult.

4. Not only ways of behaving, but goals and values vary from culture to culture. According to the values that usually prevail in U.S. business culture (which are derived from Northern Europe), people should help themselves, control their time, see change as positive, compete, be individualistic, look toward the future, be informal, and be practical and efficient.

However, other world cultures, and many cultures within the U.S., teach otherwise: that we should depend on family and friends and help them in turn, give

more importance to people and situations than to following a strict schedule, honor our rich traditions (look to the past), work together cooperatively, be ceremonious and polite, and focus on the spiritual and the ideal.

These differences in beliefs create the same kinds of problems as the differences in behaviors above: One group may look down on another group as lazy, dependant and impractical, while to those others they may seem soulless and machine-like, without sensitivity to beauty or meaning, without concern for family or friends.

5. When people interact across cultures, power and history frequently play a part. Often one side has far more power than the other. Even when the individuals involved are free of prejudice (not always the case), injustice is often built into the systems we live by. The physical, psychological and financial effects of racism and other forms of discrimination persist over generations. Part of understanding what happens between cultures is discovering more about the dynamics of power and prejudice. Part of working for better relationships between cultures is striving toward justice for *all* people.

6. There's no magic pill to make intercultural communication perfect. People are complex, and each is an individual as well as a culture member. Here are some things you can try: **A) Take time.** Avoid jumping to the conclusion that someone is ignorant or ill-intentioned. Behavior or ideas that seem odd to you may be cultural. **B) Get in tune** with the other person or group. Watch what they do, and see if you can subtly mirror their behavior and come into harmony with it. **C) Ask politely** about things you don't understand. **D) Investigate** online resources, books and films created by the people you're interested in.

7. If you're a U.S. American, or living or traveling in the U.S., you might be interested in knowing some of the values that are commonly held by the Anglo-American culture which has been dominant here. Intercultural Relations pioneer Dr. Robert Kohls identified the following 13 common values: personal control over environment/ responsibility; change seen as natural and positive; time and its control; equality/fairness; individualism/independence; self-help/initiative; competition; future orientation; materialism/acquisitiveness, practicality/efficiency; action/work orientation; informality; directness/openness/honesty.

8. Everyone has a culture, or more than one, and everybody is "the other" to somebody. Culture can be a delicate subject, but also a very rewarding one. No matter how much you know, there's always more to find out—about your own culture, about the cultures of others, and about the borderlands where cultures meet, places that are sometimes frightening, sometimes full of humor, and often rich with exciting possibilities.