FAQ: Cross-Cultural Communication

Question 1: Is there a difference between communication and intercultural communication?

Answer 1: The fundamental difference between communication and intercultural communication is the element of culture. The basic definition of communication is the exchange of information between a sender and receiver. Intercultural communication, as defined by Richard Porter and Larry Samovar (1999), is communication occurring "whenever a message producer is a member of one culture and a message receiver is a member of another."

Culture also plays an important role in how a person interprets information. For intercultural communication to be successful, people must be cognizant of differences among cultures.

It is important to consider how messages are communicated visually as well. In logos, advertisements, memos, and other messages, you want to be sure your messages are accurately conveyed. Colors, font sizes, photographs, and/or illustrations can represent different things to different cultures. These symbolic forms are another way that individuals encode and decode nonverbal messages in the communication model. Interpretation of symbols is not universal and can lead to varied translations of messages, meanings, and concepts.

When a person is viewing a symbol, three main things can contribute to how that person will interpret the meaning of the symbol: personal experiences, cultural meanings, and universal understanding (Universal Symbols, 2004).

For example, a red stop sign or graphic on a highway can be interpreted differently. Some cultures view red as a warning sign while others may not. Conversely, the symbol, or illustration for male and female restrooms is understood worldwide.

Question 2: How do country customs affect intercultural communication?

Answer 2: Each country has customs. Customs are specific cultural practices common to a group of people or society. They deal with opinions about society, gender, and points of view. For example, people in one culture may greet strangers with a hug and kiss and people in another culture may bow. Different customs can lead to miscommunications depending on how a culture views time, space, body odors, emotional expressions, and gender.

How a culture perceives time is a custom that can cause misunderstandings. For example, a meeting in Germany scheduled for 10:30 a.m. has a different meaning or expectation than a meeting scheduled for the same time in Columbia. German culture insists on more punctuality and formality in business meetings whereas Colombians tend to be more relaxed and less likely to be as punctual as their German colleagues.

Another example includes Sudanese customs. Sudanese cultures tend to have a male-oriented society. When two men meet each other, it is acceptable to shake hands and then tap each other’s shoulder simultaneously. Females hug and rub cheeks among friends (About Sudan, n.d.).
**Question 3:** What are some challenges posed by language in intercultural communication?

**Answer 3:** There are many languages spoken worldwide and thousands of words in each language. Sometimes, languages and meanings become altered in translation. When there is not a direct translation for words or phrases, it is called an issue of language equivalency. For example, in the Eskimo language, there are 20 definitions for the word snow. Eskimos can make 20 different distinctions relative to the word snow with no equivalents in the English language (Intercultural Communication, 2003). With no equivalent, misunderstandings of the message and meaning may occur. Meanings behind phrases can also cause confusion. Idioms are multiword constructions that act as semantic units and are often culturally specific. Consider an idiom that Americans might use such as *let the cat out of the bag*, meaning to disclose a secret. To a nonnative English speaker, when this phrase is literally translated, it loses its meaning. A cat being let out of a bag has no connection to speaking about something confidential; the communication message is lost. Acronyms are another language challenge because they use letters to stand for words; when words are translated to another language, the translated words may begin with different letters, thus making the acronym hard to understand. Being aware of one’s native language and cultural background helps communicators with meaning and message intent.

**Question 4:** What are communication styles, and how do they affect intercultural communication?

**Answer 4:** It is understood and acknowledged that individuals within certain cultures may not conform to all societal norms or use the communication styles presented in this course. Cultural generalizations, in this context, are presented as learning points in an educational forum with general definitions about communication styles and attitudes when discussing these respective cultural groups and societies. This generalization is not representative of all members of a particular society or culture.

In addition to the nonverbal communication of kinesics, Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey, and Chua (1988) explain three spoken communication styles including a direct and indirect style, an elaborate or more succinct style, and an instrumental or affective style.

**Direct or Indirect**

This communication style uses a direct or indirect way of showing meaning and intention. When a person uses an indirect style, he or she expects the receiver to make his or her own inference, or meaning, of the message. Asian cultures use an indirect style to communicate while Americans use more direct styles, telling the listener exactly what they mean.

**Elaborate or Succinct**

Some styles are more elaborate; they use many words to communicate. Middle Eastern and Arab cultures use a more elaborate style to communicate. In contrast, some cultures are more exact or precise with their styles.
Instrumental or Affective

More goal-oriented communication styles are affective or instrumental. For example, Americans tend to be instrumental in their communication styles to get to the point of business in meetings instead of socializing or asking about personal information, which is viewed as a waste of time. Conversely, Latin-American and Arab cultures use a more effective communication style that focuses on socializing at the beginning of business meetings before getting to the business agenda.

Question 5: What are some of ways to overcome barriers in cross-cultural communication?

Answer 5: Breaking assumptions and stereotypes about other cultures are primary drivers of communicating more clearly across cultures.

Believing that one's culture is superior to another and learning to respect differences in cultures are two barriers that arise in intercultural business communication.

Some guidelines for overcoming these cultural barriers include the following (Intercultural Insights, 2000):

- **Be patient.** Communicating across cultures is going to involve mistakes, missteps, and misunderstandings.
- **Create ground rules.** Ground rules help a group understand business expectations. For example, punctuality is not of equal importance across all cultures.
- **Ask questions before expressing emotions.** Unexpected behaviors can induce certain emotions and help create stereotypes and other assumptions. Questions help everyone learn about intercultural differences.
- **Use written words in communication.** Non-English speaking cultures may have a wider reading vocabulary, so it is advised to use written communications, such as supporting text slides or handouts, whenever possible in business presentations.
- **Have respect.** The most important behavior when working with diverse cultures is to show respect for another’s culture. This is a universal concept.

References


