

- Expect and identify cultural differences.
- Look out for cultural differences.
- Draw cues from nonverbal communication.
- Speak and write clearly for other cultures.
- Learn the importance of names and titles.
- Use humor judiciously.
- Show your respect for other cultures.
- Become a lifelong learner of other cultures.

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Anticipate and Adapt to Cultural Differences

To communicate effectively across cultures, you need to be able to anticipate those differences so that you are prepared to bridge the cultural divide by adapting your communication style. Acquiring these skills means concentrating on four points. First, examine your own cultural conditioning. Second, review your experiences with other cultures. Third, watch for discomfort that can signal cultural differences. Fourth, recognize and modify your communication approach.

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Examine Your Own Cultural Conditioning

The way you express yourself, or the way you show that you are pleased, grateful, or angry, for example, is determined by the culture in which you live. Further, cultural conditioning goes beyond language and expressions. It defines, among other things, the subjects you consider appropriate for discussion, your perception of time, the amount of privacy and personal space you need to

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feel comfortable, and the manner in which you address the people around you—your boss, your friends, your family, your peers, or the people working for you. Around the world, different cultures carry very different attitudes about fundamental things, and express those attitudes in diverse ways. Within each culture, these attitudes form a commonsensical approach to life. No single culture is more correct or less advantageous than any other—it's not a matter of a right way or a wrong way. Your way is one among many.

As leader of a task force, Cheryl is having difficulties managing Chen, one of the team members. He promised to compile a report by the deadline she set, but he didn't. When she talks to him about it, he won't look her in the eye. Cheryl suspects that Chen is either very disorganized or doesn't respect her as a leader. His unwillingness to make eye contact looks like evasive behavior to her.

In Cheryl's culture, deadlines are firm commitments, and making eye contact is a sign of honesty. She knows that Chen is from a different culture, but she is not aware of how strongly her own culture has influenced her conclusions about his behavior.

Becoming aware of your own cultural conditioning requires you to step outside of your cultural borders. That's not an easy task, but here are five questions to ask yourself that can help you recognize the influence of your own cultural boundaries on your communication style.

1. Do I understand my own cultural background and conditioning?
2. Do I approach interpersonal encounters on the job with an awareness of how differences may affect communication?
3. Do I have the attitude that "different" is bad, inferior, or wrong?

4. Am I aware of ways that I stereotype others?
5. Am I willing to adjust my communication in order to be more effective?

Review Your Experiences with Other Cultures

You can also build your cultural awareness by reviewing your experiences with other cultures. All of us are from time to time likely to find ourselves in situations in which we are the cultural outsider. Perhaps you've attended a wedding, funeral, or holiday gathering that is completely unfamiliar to your understanding of such ceremonies. Perhaps you have traveled abroad and returned with anecdotes about the strange behavior and customs of the people you encountered.

In these casual brushes with other cultures, we may taste unfamiliar food, meet people who are either more or less emotionally expressive than we are, or find ourselves more crowded or with more personal space than we're comfortable with. The pace of conversation may seem faster or slower.

Here are three actions you can take to review your experiences with other cultures:

1. Make a list of lessons learned in previous cross-cultural interactions. What did you learn? How did you learn it?
2. Review your previous cross-cultural encounters. What communication difficulties did you experience? How did you overcome them?
3. Reflect on which cross-cultural differences are the most difficult for you to adjust to. Why do you think that is?

Watch for Discomfort that Can Signal Cultural Differences

During a visit to a foreign country, distant city, or even another company, cultural differences can seem colorful, exotic, and appealing. But when the time spent in another culture is longer than a visit—or when you work and conduct business with people of other cultures—your cultural biases can emerge with more force. The disregard for time that seemed so delightful on the island vacation feels very different on Monday morning in the office when the clock is ticking. A modest, deferential manner that was appealing in one cultural context may strike you as passive and ineffectual in a conference room.

These experiences feel unfamiliar because we are looking through the lens of our own cultural expectations. Unconsciously, we expect other people to think, feel, and act the way we do. When they don't conform to our expectations, we put our own interpretations on their behavior. But when you're working across cultures, interpretation often becomes misinterpretation. You run the risk of negatively judging the words and actions of people of other cultures, or incorrectly assigning motives to unfamiliar behavior because you're viewing an experience from the limited perspective of your own culture.

The discomfort you feel when cultural boundaries collide can be used to your benefit by alerting you to cultural differences. In your interactions with other people, be aware that cultural differences may be coming into play when you experience such feelings as confusion, anxiety, frustration, misunderstanding, tension, impatience, irritation, or anger.

When you feel uncomfortable, it's natural to retreat from that discomfort. After all, you probably feel you are most effective as a manager when you are operating from a familiar place, where you can draw confidence and make decisions based on past experience.

From our work at CCL, we have coined the phrase “jump-back response” to describe this desire to retreat. To be more effective when communicating across cultures, resist your jump-back response. Stay with the discomfiting experience and learn from it. Compare the unexpected and discomfiting behaviors you experience when communicating across cultures and compare them to your knowledge of your own cultural expectations.

Why doesn't she just say yes or no? *In one culture an indirect answer may signal indecisiveness, while in another culture it signals deference and respect.*

Why is he always staring at me like that? *In one culture staring can signal aggressiveness or intimidation, while in another culture direct eye contact shows attention and esteem.*

Why does he have to get right in my face whenever he talks to me? *In one culture the halo of personal space and privacy can be much smaller than it is in another culture.*

Why doesn't she tell me if she doesn't understand something? *In one culture asking questions is accepted as an effective tool for communications, while in other cultures questioning superiors may signal insolence.*

Why does he sit there smiling when I'm talking about his performance problems? *In one culture smiling during a discussion about performance problems may signal contempt and disinterest, while in another culture a smile may reflect sincerity and attention.*

Why does he make a joke out of everything? *In one culture a glib nature can signal a lack of confidence or seriousness, while in another culture it's a sign of deference.*

Recognize and Modify Your Communication Approach

When you work with people of other cultures, you must expect that differences will surface, recognize those cultural differences by the discomfort they produce, and anticipate that those differences will create a need for more thoughtful and deliberate communication. Don't assume that your own cultural customs are correct and superior to others or take the attitude that the other person has to change his or her ways. Be alert to the need to modify your communication style when

- Another person's behavior makes you uncomfortable.
- Another person's response or reaction seems inappropriate or confusing.
- You assume that you're right and the other person is wrong.
- You stereotype and denigrate another cultural group.
- You ignore or exclude someone because understanding, and making yourself understood, seems too difficult.

It's important that you make changes to your communication patterns after you recognize that those changes are necessary. A person from another culture is likely to be forgiving the first and second times you make a mistake, but if you persist you will appear ignorant, insensitive, dismissive, or disrespectful.

Consider, for example, the use of "why" questions as a way to get more information. In some cultures, such as that of the United States, it's completely acceptable to ask "Why did you do the job this way?" In other cultures, Japan's for example, the same question is considered rude as it puts the other person on the defensive. In this case you can change your communication behavior: "That's an interesting approach you took to the problem. Tell me a little more about it." This gives the other person a chance to share more information with you without risk. Other simple changes that you can make after recognizing different cultural behaviors include learn-