

What Works for Some Does Not Work for All *The Need for Cross-Culturalization in the Workplace*

By Dr. Linda Eagle

As the world of business becomes increasingly global and homogenous, cultural differences have faded into the background or even disappeared altogether. It seems then that if a concept is able to be taught, it would stand to reason that the concept could be simply translated into other languages and taught on a global scale. All members of a working society would understand new methodologies and systems in the same manner and would be able to begin using new information right away to further the productivity of the business. This, however, is not always true.

Understanding Communication

Cross-cultural communication (also known as intercultural communication) is all about trying to figure out how members of very different cultures and societies communicate with one another. Often times, it is necessary to draw upon the fields of psychology, anthropology, cultural studies and communications to gain a better understanding of this process.

A number of scholars have become experts in the field of cross-cultural communications and have written books and devised theories to help managers and other business people gain insight into the mechanics of successful international business endeavors. For example, Geert Hofstede uses an analysis of various countries to determine how they might interact in any given situation with members of another country. "Understanding and appreciating intercultural differences ultimately promotes clearer communication, breaks down barriers, builds trust, strengthens relationships, opens horizons and yields tangible results in terms of business success."¹

Businesses large and small must recognize that an ethnocentric view of the world is increasingly counter-productive and it is therefore vital to understand how to communicate with organizations and consumers in other cultures in order to compete in a global marketplace.

¹ Kwintessential Cross Cultural Solutions. [Why Cross-Cultural Training?](http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/cross-cultural/cross-cultural-awareness.html) London, 2007. 10 Sept. 2007
<<http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/cross-cultural/cross-cultural-awareness.html>>

Lost in Translation

Communicating with people of a different country is already challenging enough with language barriers, local idioms that do not translate across cultures and dialects of various languages and regions of a country. You should speak clearly and directly, taking time to address each point at an even pace (speaking quickly will only garble your words and make understanding more difficult), and maintain eye contact with each of your audience members to ensure that you are picking up on any non-verbal signals that might convey that your message is not being received correctly. Also, ask if your audience has questions periodically, as this will guarantee that everyone is on the same page and you can proceed to your next point.

It is important to remember to keep an open mind when addressing a new audience, being particularly cautious not to stereotype a group of people based on their race, sex or national origin. Kathy Irving's book, *Communicating in Context: Intercultural Communication Skills for ESL Students*, states that "good communication skills depend on becoming familiar with the cultural context to which a language naturally belongs," and serves to "bridge the gap between linguistic and cultural competence."²

When using words and phrases of a stereotypical demeanor, your message will be lost as you will be offending the members of your audience. Understanding the cultural context and not the myths and stereotypes that exist about a culture will help you get your message across clearly and effectively.

Presentation Skills for Multi-Cultural Audiences

When presenting to a group of people from various regions in the world, remember the following tips to ensure your message is reached and understood by all attendees:

- **Avoid sports analogies** – Not all participants will understand the intricacies of a country's favorite past time and small nuances and jargon related to a particular sport may be lost on your audience, thereby misconstruing your message.

² Krasnick, Harry. "Reviews." *TESOL Quarterly* June 1988: 319. 10 Sept. 2007
<[http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0039-8322\(198806\)22%3A2%3C319%3ATCPCCF%3E2.0.CO%3B2-B](http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0039-8322(198806)22%3A2%3C319%3ATCPCCF%3E2.0.CO%3B2-B)>

- **Avoid metaphors, phrases and common sayings** – While many countries share idioms and phrases, the meaning is often easily misunderstood altogether.
- **Speak clearly and enunciate** – You do not need to slow your speech to be understood by a mixed audience. Simply smile, breathe and take your time explaining each point, making sure that all participants, including those who do not speak English as a second language, clearly understand your message.
- **Be sure to use notes to support your speech** – Audience participants are only human – even the most practiced speaker may lose some audience members' attention due to distractions or noise of one sort or another. Having to breach a language barrier makes it more difficult. Therefore, using notes by means of a PowerPoint or overhead presentation, or passing out printouts of your speech will help all involved.
- **Avoid language that may be offensive** – While colloquialisms and common phrases may have lost their meaning in one cultural, they may be extremely offensive to another. As such, it is best to avoid using any types of language of this nature whenever possible.
- **Know what level of interaction may be appropriate for your audience** – Familiarize yourself with Hofstede's Values and understand that some cultures may not be inclined to jump head-first into exercises and interactive question sessions.
- **Use humor sparingly and carefully** – While people from all cultures enjoy a good laugh, humor is extremely specific to regions and groups. What is funny to one group, may be complexly inappropriate to another. When in doubt, don't chance it!
- **Be wary of introductions** – You should ask your participants or fellow speakers how they prefer to be introduced, as it may seem disrespectful if you call them something too familiar when a more formal title is required for your presentation.
- **Pair social events to participants' needs** – Many cultures enjoy social gatherings where food and drink is present. Be aware that not all participants may be excited to partake in this sort of event (for religious or other reasons). Similarly, be

mindful of social settings that might also make your participants feel uncomfortable.³

Training Is Key

Teaching a concept or the basics of how to use a new system across cultures does not have a one-size-fits-all solution. One must know how best to teach to a specific culture and how that method may differ from that used for another audience. Additionally, it is crucial to understand that not every country operates with the same technology – the latest advances and software upgrades that are used in one country may not have been embraced yet in another country. As such, technology can often be a barrier to effective cross-cultural communication.

It is wise, then, to recognize which methods of teaching are more widely accepted for your particular audience at the time of your presentation. For example, computer-based learning (also known as eLearning) is the preferred method in many locations within the United States. However, in India, where person time is much less expensive, instructor-led learning coupled with role-play activities is favored.

There is more to global business training than learning a new language. People must be educated in manners, customs and above all, people must be taught to keep an open mind to cultural differences if they are to be successful internationally.

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³ Stewart, Pamela. "How Not to Be a Cultural Knucklehead in a Global Business World." Escape from Cubicle Nation. 9 Sept. 2007.

<http://www.escapefromcubiclenation.com/get_a_life_blog/2007/01/how_to_not_be_a.html>