Tactics for removing cultural barriers: A practical approach to effective communication

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Do we expect other cultures to adopt our customs or are we willing to adopt theirs? This might translate to how foreign relations are to be conducted. Do we compromise or force other people to deal only on our terms? Effective communication with people of different cultures is especially challenging. Cultures provide people with ways of thinking – ways of seeing, hearing, and interpreting the world. Thus the same words can mean different things to people from different cultures, even when they talk the “same” language. If the people involved are not aware of the potential for such problems, they are even more likely to fall victim to them, although it takes more than awareness to overcome these problems and communicate effectively across cultures.

Over the years, the world has undergone a transformation process in which it has become a particular omnibus form of culturally diverse societies. Whether it is based on race, ethnicity, age, gender, religion, physical abilities, sexual orientation or socio-economic status, you are more likely than ever to find yourself in a culturally diverse organisational setting. With this diversity comes the potential for great benefits as well as potential problems. Many of these problems consist of difficulties in the form of communicating, problem solving and resolving conflicts within diverse groups where people have significantly different values, beliefs, perspective, work styles and communication styles. In order to overcome these potential problems and to draw upon the possible benefits, each of us must enhance our ability to understand cultural differences, and to effectively communicate and resolve conflicts with those who are different from ourselves. Working with diverse cultures in their home element is more a matter of finesse, diplomacy and communication than the direct application of coercive power. Cultural literacy is about understanding one’s individual cultural patterns and knowing one’s own cultural norms.

Cultural norms and patterns

Cultural norms are the standard, model or pattern a specific cultural, race, ethnic, religious or social group regards as typical. Cultural norms include thoughts, behaviours and patterns of communication, customs, beliefs, values and institutions. As individuals,
groups, and societies we can learn to collaborate across cultural lines. Usually our own
culture is invisible until it comes into contact with another culture. People are generally
ethnocentric; they interpret other cultures within the framework of the understanding
they have their own. Jean Willis has established six fundamental patterns of cultural
norms that have greatly affected relations between differing cultures:¹

1. Communication styles
Communicating between two cultures involves generating, transmitting, receiving, and
depicting coded messages or bits of information; it is about much more than language,
although language is certainly key to communication and should be a part of any
cultural training program. The focus, however, should be more on effective use and
application of language. Someone struggling to communicate in an unfamiliar language
cannot communicate complex issues. The goal should be to orient language-skill
developmental programmes where we need to find simple ways of communication that
will speak to other cultural norms and that will require listening. Communication is a
two-way street.

Another major aspect of communication style is the degree of importance given to
nonverbal communication. In addition, different norms regarding the appropriate degree
of assertiveness in communicating can add to cultural misunderstandings.

2. Attitudes toward conflict
People most often deal directly with conflicts as they arise. For example, a face-to-face
meeting is a customary way to work through problems. In many Eastern countries, open
conflict is considered embarrassing or demeaning. Differences are best worked out
quietly. Another means might be enlisting a respected third party who can facilitate
communication without risking loss of face or being humiliated.

3. Approaches to completing tasks
From culture to culture, people have different ways of completing tasks. They might
have different access to resources, different rewards associated with task completion,
different notions of time, and different ideas about how relationship-building and task-
oriented work should go together. Asian and Hispanic cultures tend to attach more value
to developing relationships at the beginning of shared project, with more emphasis on
task completion toward the end. For example, Europeans and North Americans tend to
focus immediately on the task at hand, allowing relationships to develop as they work
together. This does not mean that people from any of these cultural backgrounds are
more or less committed to accomplishing the task, or value relationships more or less; it means they may pursue them differently.

4. Decision-making styles

The roles individuals play in decision-making vary widely from culture to culture. For instance, in the U.S. decisions are frequently delegated – that is, an official assigns responsibility for a particular matter to a subordinate. In many Southern European and Latin American countries, however, there is a strong value placed on holding decision-making responsibilities oneself. When decisions are made by groups of people, majority rule is a common approach in the Western countries; in Eastern countries consensus is the preferred mode. Be aware that individuals’ expectations about their own roles in shaping a decision may be influenced by their cultural frame of reference.

5. Attitudes toward personal disclosure

In some cultures, it is not appropriate to be frank about emotions, the reasons behind a conflict or misunderstanding, or about personal information. Questions that might seem natural to you might seem intrusive to others. The variation among cultures in attitudes toward disclosure is also something to consider before you conclude that you must have an accurate reading of the views, experiences, and goals of the people who you interact with.

6. Approaches to knowing

Notable differences occur among cultural groups when it comes epistemologies – that is, the ways people come to know things. European cultures tend to consider information acquired through cognitive means, such as counting measuring, more valid than other ways of knowing, including symbolic imagery and rhythm.

Barriers to effective multicultural communication

Obviously, not all individuals acculturate similarly. Some find the daily challenges of responding to another culture to be too stressful and overwhelming. If possible, such individuals will choose to return to their cultural origin; if they cannot do so, various kinds of maladaptive adjustments, or even mental illness, can occur. People misunderstand each other for a wide variety of reasons, and these misunderstandings can occur between people who are culturally similar as well as those who are different. However there are some unique issues to consider whenever from different cultural backgrounds come together. I refer to these problems as the barriers to effective multicultural communication.2
1. STEREOTYPING – The most significant barrier to effective cross-cultural communication is the tendency to categorise and make assumptions about others based on identified characteristics such as gender, race, ethnicity, age, religion, nationality socio-economic status. Whether we realise it or not (and we often do not), **we all stereotype and make assumptions about others at one time or another**. Most of us do so on a regular basis, examples as job interviews, teachers, store owners… More subtle examples include shying away from people who are culturally different (which is why people of similar racial and cultural backgrounds tend to group together), or assuming people will behave a certain way based on their race gender, place of origin or position within an organisation.

The Social Cognition theory – as Dr. Tyrone A. Holmes describes³ – states that stereotyping occurs from natural processes we use to understand the world around us. We stereotype because of our tendency to categorise (or generalise) everything and everyone around us, so we can interact with the world more efficiently. This Social Cognition approach outlines four, largely unconscious human actions that lead to the creation of stereotypes:

A. Formation of “US” and “THEM” Groups

The step in the development of stereotypes is the categorisation of people into two groups: “us” (in-group) and “them” (out-group). This happens all the time, and we often don’t realise it. The groups are formed along a wide variety of diversity dimensions such as race/ethnicity, gender, age, nationality, religion, geographic location, family status, socio-economic status, sexual orientation and physical characteristics.

B. Preference for the In-group

The second step consists of the natural tendency to prefer the group of which one is a member (in-group). It makes sense that we would come to prefer the group that we are constantly a part of. A good example of this is in the way sports fan root for “their” team. These bonds are usually drawn based on geography and the local team is the one most people pull for. That team is part of our in-group.

C. Illusion of Out-group Homogeneity

The third step is where actual stereotyping takes place. Simply stated, we tend to perceive members of out-group to be more like one another than members of our in-group (where, of course, we recognise that we are not all the same). This is probably because we have the opportunity to directly experience the diversity (ways in which members are different) within the in-group while we have limited experience interacting with members of the out-group. That is what leads to making generalisations about members of out-group. Some examples include...
statements like, “those people all look alike to me”, “they are good dancers”, “they are great at maths, but not very good leaders” and “they are such bad drivers”.

D. Expectancy Confirmation

Once we develop stereotypes about members of different groups, there is a powerful psychological process at work that leads us to maintain these stereotypes. This process, known as expectancy confirmation, consists of the tendency to use instances when stereotypes are supported (and let’s face it, there are times when a stereotype will fit certain members of a group), as “proof” that the stereotype is valid. And once again, this will often happen unconsciously.

2. LACK OF UNDERSTANDING – Another major barrier is the lack of understanding that is frequently present between people from different backgrounds. Because people may have differences in values, beliefs, methods of reasoning, communication styles, work styles, and personality types, communication difficulties will occur. In order to avoid this barrier, each party must have a clear and accurate understanding of the thoughts, feelings, ideas, values, styles, desires and goals of other person. But this understanding is not always gained. This is compounded by the fact that many of us are not very effective at getting to understand the ways in which others may differ.

3. JUDGMENTAL ATTITUDES – The third major barrier includes the judgmental attitudes of us have when it comes to interacting with people who are different. Most of us would like to believe we are open minded and accepting. But in reality, a great many of us find discomfort with those who are different in terms of values, beliefs and behaviours. We may then evaluate them in a negative light. This is the essence of ethnocentrism, where we evaluate good and bad, right and wrong relative to how closely the values, behaviours and ideas of others mirror our own. We must suspend judgment about their ways, and try to get to understand them from their perspective. But for most of us, this is much easier said than done.

Removing barriers in human interactions

Our judgmental attitudes may preclude intercultural interaction in favour of banding together with culturally similar individuals. Simply stated, we all have a tendency to gravitate toward those we perceive to be most like ourselves, and to move away from those we perceive to be less like ourselves. This human dynamic manifests itself in many forms and situations. For example, it impacts who we interact with at work, school and in our social lives. It impacts who we sit next to at meetings or at lunch
And whether we realise it or not, we tend to sit next to, interact with and develop relationship with the people we perceive to be most like ourselves. It is important to note that this dynamic does not last long. But it is also important to state that even in a group with kind, loving people, our tendency to band together in similar cultural and racial groups is strong. Some type of icebreaker activity designed to help participants get to know each other better. The key to getting people to interact across cultural differences is to provide them with continuous proactive opportunities to “break the ice”. The reason this is so important is twofold. First, the process must be proactive and intentional because left to their own devices, most people won’t seek out interaction, so we must intentionally create opportunities for such events to take place. Second, once this interaction takes place, it is almost always positive. They recognise that they can use their similarities to build a bridge of understanding across differences, as well as removing the unpleasant impacts of culture shock. What is nice about this approach is that you can take “baby steps” in building relationships across cultural differences. By attempting to build relationships step-by-step with one person at a time, you can maintain a relative degree of comfort and not put yourself in the position of being overwhelmed by uncertainty and anxiety. Over time, as your comfort level with culturally different people increases, your discomfort level with minority-majority situations will decrease.

Young Yun Kim and Brent Ruben use the term intercultural transformation to describe the process by which individuals move beyond the thoughts, feelings, and behaviours of their initial cultural framework to incorporate other cultural realities. The process can be described as follows:

“The process of becoming intercultural – of personal transformation from cultural to intercultural – is a process of growth beyond one’s original cultural conditioning. One consequence of extensive communication experiences and the subsequent internal transformation is the development of a cultural identity that is far from being ‘frozen’. An intercultural person’s cultural identity is characteristically open to further transformation and growth. This does not mean that a highly intercultural person’s identity is culture-free or cultureless. Rather, it is not rigidly bound by membership to any one particular culture… A second consequence [of an intercultural transformation] … is a cognitive structure that enables a broadened and deepened understanding of human conditions and cultural differences and a view of things that are larger than any one cultural perspective. … The increased cognitive depth and breadth is, in turn, likely to facilitate corresponding emotional and behavioural capacities as well.”

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Tactics for setting appropriate conditions of intercultural communication

Once we have established the prerequisites for understanding intercultural communication issues, we should then seek to remove those barriers from the way of effecting interactions. The major tactics that might be employed for this purpose fall under two categories:

– Removing language which appears to stereotype participants
– Reducing violations of cultural rules during discussions and conversations.

When people from diverse cultural backgrounds come together in one place, the possibility of someone saying or doing something that could offend another, increases significantly. However, there are some things you can do to greatly minimise this possibility. Holmes refers to them as the “Dos and Don’ts of Intercultural Communication”:

1. Don’t talk to people in a patronising fashion (e.g., don’t “talk down” to people).
2. Don’t make assumptions about people, particularly those who are culturally different from you (e.g., don’t assume certain people have certain values or like to do certain things).
3. Don’t assume a culturally different person is an “expert” about his or her cultural group. (e.g., don’t ask someone, “what do your people think about this?”).
4. Don’t assume a culturally different person is representative of all the members of his or her cultural group (e.g., because one member does something does not mean all members think or act like that).
5. Don’t ask inappropriate questions or engage in inappropriate behaviours, especially of a personal nature (e.g., don’t ask if you can touch someone’s hair; don’t ask about a person’s grooming habits).
6. Don’t try to speak or act like a culturally different person if it is not YOU (e.g., don’t pretend you like certain foods or music if you really do not, just to build a relationship).
7. Do talk to others as equals (e.g., treat people respectfully, even if they are lower on the organisational chart).
8. Do recognise that cultural differences exist but confirm these differences before you act on them (e.g., get to know a person rather than act on your assumptions).
9. Do stick to the tasks at hand until you have established an effective relationship (e.g., avoid a great deal of personal conversation until you get to know someone).
10. Do treat every person you come into contact with as an individual (e.g., avoid stereotyping based on group membership).
11. Do seek to find common ground between yourself and others, particularly those who are culturally different (e.g., keep in mind that you will often have much in common with a culturally different person).

12. Do consider the feelings, thoughts and experiences of others, particularly those who are culturally different (e.g., listen and care about what others are saying; avoid using demeaning words).

13. Do be YOURSELF at all times (e.g., just relax and be yourself, don’t try to be what you think others want you to be).

In culturally diverse communities, differences may be expected to exist in the communication styles. If left ignored, communication differences will inevitably lead to various types of miscommunication which may lead, in turn, to conflicts which erode community climate and cause certain groups or individuals to feel unwelcome. Neil Payne has established a list for those working in an intercultural team, strongly believing that the following ten tips are good guidelines to keep in mind to ensure communication to be clear:6

1. If possible it is beneficial to bring all team members together physically. This can be at regular intervals.

2. The manager or team together should establish clear ground rules of engagement covering issues as such:
   a. how meetings are to be structured
   b. how decisions will be made
   c. how written communications will be used
   d. how responses should be processed or given
   e. how conflicts will be resolved
   f. whether interrupting a speaker will be acceptable.

3. Written agendas for team meetings are important to give structure.

4. Clear, easy-to-understand objectives that are communicated frequently must be created.

5. Carefully monitor how comfortable all team members are with the technology used in meetings or communication. Support those that may be struggling.

6. Develop clear guidelines for communication regarding formality and timelines of response.

7. Solicit feedback from all participants.

8. Be careful not to always interpret silence as agreement or incomprehension.

9. Follow-up meetings with written communication to be sure everyone understands.

10. Create an atmosphere that tolerates differences.
Conclusion

It should be clear by now that interculturally competent communicators integrate a wide array of culture-general knowledge into their behavioural repertoires, and they are able to apply that knowledge to the specific cultures with which they interact. They are also able to respond emotionally and behaviourally with a wide range of choices in order to act appropriately and effectively within the constraints of each situation. William Shakespeare suggested that the world is a stage filled with actors and actresses, but they come from different cultures and they need to coordinate their scripts and actions in order to accomplish their collective purposes. Intercultural communication will become far more commonplace in people’s day-to-day activities, and the communication skills that lead to the development of intercultural competence will be a necessary part of people’s personal and professional lives. It should also be clear that intercultural communication is a complex and challenging activity. Intercultural competence, although certainly attainable in varying degrees, will elude everyone in at least some intercultural interactions.

References

5. HOLMES, T.A.: op.cit. (Ref. 3)