

# Effective communication bridging the culture gap

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Building effective communication skills and relationships within a single culture is often challenging. Bridging the gap between different cultures makes building communication skills and relationships even more difficult. I will discuss some of the challenges of cross-cultural communication and the pieces necessary to build effective working relationships.

Typically, some of the basic assumptions we make when communicating with people from our own culture must be questioned and modified when communicating with people of another culture. First on the list of items for review is verbal communication.

Parts of verbal communication, such as, tonality, tense, gender generalities and structure vary greatly from culture to culture. A majority of these differences are based on core values and perceptions in different cultures; therefore, such differences must be acknowledged if effective communication and relationships are to occur.

A principle rule of mutual respect is the basis for success in communication and relationships. Mutual respect should be based on the following criteria:

- always allow for and assume differences, until similarity is proved
- emphasize description, rather than definition or judgment
- practice empathy
- treat your interpretation as a unproved theory until further understanding proves certainty

Often, cultural differences are easily identified and therefore, easy to adapt to; but, others are significantly more difficult. An example of a cultural difference with easy adaptability could be the matter of personal space.

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Someone whose cultural background has defined their need for limited areas of personal space when working and communicating with others, as opposed to someone who feels the need for a required, yet undefined area of personal space.

The person who requires a certain sense of space may find himself/herself always backing up when working with the other person. The lack of personal space may be just as uncomfortable for one person as the lack of desired closeness is for the other. This personal space example demonstrates that some cultural differences are apparent and simple to accommodate.

Another contrast of cultural difference is demonstrated by a model of leadership consisting of one leader and many followers versus a culture based on extensive discussion and mutual decision making as a core value. It is difficult to comprehend working in a group where the participants are seldom asked for their input, but instead being led in the direction chosen by the leader.

Coming to terms with discord between core values is a complex struggle. Deeply embedded cultural norms are difficult to consciously recognize; once they are recognized, opposing norms are difficult to fully accept. An upbringing that stresses communication and equality is a core value that makes it extremely arduous to submit to someone based on his/her position as a leader, rather than on earned respect.

Mutual respect sounds like an admirable approach to different cultures, but it is difficult in practice. Often there are situations where direct, confrontational

styles of dealing with issues are necessary to achieve the desired result, but conflict with a more polite, non-confrontational style by the opposition.

The non-confrontational culture would feel they were being impolite to disagree with the other side; the other side might realize that they were impolite by being too direct and confrontational. Cross-cultural communication and relationship-building pertains not only to people from different countries, but also to people from different regions of the same country.

Showing respect for traditions and values other than ones own is probably the single most important aspect in developing good cross-cultural communication and relationships. Practicing respect is relatively simple if people from different cultures both show each other equal respect; however, it is much more difficult to develop good cross-cultural relationships if one does not feel the respect given is being reciprocated. Learning to respect each others cultural values is an ongoing process in building successful cross-cultural communication and relationships professionally and personally.