

CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION: SEVEN TIPS TO PREVENT MISCOMMUNICATION AND ALIGN YOUR TEAM



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Whether you are a CEO trying to strike a deal with an important client in a foreign country, or a team member trying to get something accomplished in your own office, cultural differences in communication often present major challenges. And fluency in English doesn't necessarily make all communications crystal clear. Even for people who speak the same language there are "cultures within cultures". Americans, Australians, citizens of the UK and India all grew up speaking English, but accents and cultural biases can be barriers to good communication. And barriers to communication often translate into barriers in business.

The problem is, when you don't pick up on how different cultures perceive you, you can inadvertently offend people and create resentment. Soon enough, there is a "them against us" or siloed mentality and a breakdown of communication among departments. Productivity goes down, and you can lose talent.

It doesn't have to be this way. Here are seven tips to help you successfully defuse the landmines of relationships with other cultures — here and abroad.

1. Allow time for people to process what you say. Check for understanding; clarify; ask them to rephrase what they heard.
2. Read body language. Trusting your instincts will help you. Observe if the person is congruent. Do the words that come out of their mouths match their body language, voice tone, and how they truly feel? Can you tell from their subtle body language or voice tone that are they pushing back? If you're not sure how to "read" peoples' non-verbal communications, a good resource is a book by British authors Allan and Barbara Pease, *The Definitive Book of Body Language*. (1)
3. Use your mirror neurons (2). Put it another way, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." This means behave as those around you do; conform to the larger society; and respect the beliefs and practices of a local culture. For example, no loud talking if a restaurant is pleasantly hush; no shorts and Hawaiian shirts in Paris or London; no eating on the street in Sweden; no interrupting, unless you are in New York where it's somewhat acceptable.

4. Avoid slang, and professional jargon like: slam-dunk, drink the Kool-Aid, landscape (competition), optics, just to name a few. My own favorite mystery words from recent meetings, (and for full disclosure, even though I have been in this country for four decades and am completely fluent, I'm native French) are: cross-pollination, TOM (target operating model), swim lane (in a flow chart), socialize an idea, the pillars of the strategy, and line of defense. Huh?
5. If you have an accent or your audience does, start slowly, give them a chance to get used to your cadence, then resume at your normal speed, no faster than 125 words per minute. Slow down! Enunciate clearly. Pause before you make an important point.
6. Know yourself and your culture. Self-awareness and awareness of others are key traits of successful leaders worldwide. Erin Meyer, author of the Culture Map, (3) points out cultural traits that impact communication, such as knowing when to speak, and when to be quiet. If you come from a culture where it's ok to speak up whenever you feel like it, observe the quiet people, and invite them to speak so you don't miss out on good ideas.
7. Skip the jokes, they are fraught with misunderstanding and a waste of time. Case in point, Chinese translators don't even bother translating jokes. They say: "Westerner made a joke, please laugh". Safer that way.

The best thing about cross-cultural communication is that you are never done learning. And the next best thing? Your faux pas will provide an endless source of good laughter when you reminisce. Bonne chance!

- The Definitive Book of Body Language, by Allan & Barbara Pease
http://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/24/books/review/Buckley.t.html?_r=0
- American Psychological Association October 2005, Vol 36, No. 9
<http://www.apa.org/monitor/oct05/mirror.aspx>
- The Culture Map: Breaking through the Invisible Boundaries of Global Business, by Erin Meyer <http://erinmeyer.com/>

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