

Cross-cultural Communication Challenges

We all communicate with others all the time -- in our homes, in our workplaces, in the groups we belong to, and in the community. No matter how well we think we understand each other, communication is hard. "Culture" is often at the root of communication challenges. Our culture influences how we approach problems, and how we participate in groups and in communities. When we participate in groups we are often surprised at how differently people approach their work together.

Culture is a complex concept, with many different definitions. But, simply put, "culture" refers to the common experiences which shapes the way a group or community understand the world. It includes groups that we are born into, such as gender, race, or national origin. It also includes groups we join or become part of. For example, we can acquire a new culture by moving to a new region, by a change in our economic status, or by becoming disabled. When we think of culture this broadly, we realize we all belong to many cultures at once.

Our histories are a critical piece of our cultures. Historical experiences -- whether of five years ago or of ten generations back -- shape who we are. Knowledge of our history can help us understand ourselves and one another better. Exploring the ways in which various groups within our society have related to each other is key to opening channels for cross-cultural communication.

In a world as complex as ours, each of us is shaped by many factors, and culture is one of the powerful forces that acts on us. Culture is central to what we see, how we make sense of what we see, and how we express ourselves.

As people from different cultural groups take on the exciting challenge of working together, cultural values sometimes conflict. We can misunderstand each other, and react in ways that can hinder what are otherwise promising partnerships. Oftentimes, we aren't aware that culture is acting upon us. Sometimes, we are not even aware that we have cultural values or assumptions that are different from others!

Six fundamental patterns of cultural differences -- ways in which cultures, as a whole, tend to vary from one another -- are described below. The descriptions point out some of the recurring causes of cross-cultural communication difficulties. As you enter into multicultural dialogue or collaboration, keep these generalized differences in mind. Next time you find yourself in a confusing situation, and you suspect that cross-cultural differences are at play, try reviewing this list. Ask yourself how culture may be shaping your own reactions, and try to see the world from others' points of view.

Six Fundamental Patterns of Cultural Difference

1. Different Communications Styles

2. Different Attitudes Toward Conflict
3. Different Approaches to Completing Tasks
4. Different Decision-Making Styles
5. Different Attitudes Toward Disclosure
6. Different Approaches to Knowing

Six Fundamental Patterns of Cultural Differences

1. Different Communication Styles

The way people communicate varies widely between, and even within, cultures. One aspect of communication style is language usage. Across cultures, some words and phrases are used in different ways. For example, even in countries that share the English language, the meaning of "yes" varies from "maybe, I'll consider it" to "definitely so," with many shades in between.

Another major aspect of communication style is the degree of importance given to non-verbal communication. Non-verbal communication includes not only facial expressions and gestures; it also involves seating arrangements, personal distance, and sense of time. In addition, different norms regarding the appropriate degree of assertiveness in communicating can add to cultural misunderstandings. For instance, many Americans typically speak in loud raised voices to emphasize the conversation. Other cultures consider loud speaking to be discourteous or to imply anger. Pointing might also be offensive. Remember, your mother would say, "don't point, it's not polite." So when visiting other cultures, speaking loud especially across a crowded area and pointing might be considered rude and ill-mannered.

2. Different Approaches Toward Conflict

Some cultures view conflict as a positive thing, while others view it as something to be avoided. In the U.S., conflict is not usually desirable; but people often are encouraged to deal directly with conflicts that do arise. In fact, face-to-face meetings customarily are recommended as the way to work through whatever problems exist. In contrast, in many Eastern countries, open conflict is experienced as embarrassing or demeaning; as a rule, differences are best worked out quietly. A written exchange might be the favored means to address the conflict. When traveling on a mission trip, discussing a problem and arguing with people in other culture may be our way of getting our point across or trying to resolve a situation. However it might result in offending others and creating greater confusion.

3. Different Approaches to Completing Tasks

From culture to culture, there are different ways that people move toward completing tasks. Some reasons include different access to resources, different judgments of the rewards associated with task completion, different notions of time, and varied ideas about how relationship-building and task-oriented work should go together.

When it comes to working together effectively on a task, cultures differ with respect to the importance placed on establishing relationships early on in the collaboration. A case in point, Asian and Hispanic cultures tend to attach more value to developing relationships at the beginning of a shared project and more emphasis on task completion toward the end as compared with European-Americans. European-Americans tend to focus immediately on the task at hand,

and let relationships develop as they work on the task. This does not mean that people from any one 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. When working on a mission project, accomplishing the task might be the most important thing to us, and yet other may not see the urgency and desire to spend time relating.

4. Different Decision-Making Styles

The roles individuals play in decision-making vary widely from culture to culture. For example, 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, 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 U.S.; in Japan 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. Asking people to make a decision to accept Christ, may seem simple to us. However, they may not understand what that means or how they can make a decision. Their affirmative may be nothing more than expressing an interest in what we are saying.

5. Different Attitudes Toward Disclosure

How we reveal information about ourselves differs in each cultures. In north American culture frankness is almost a virtue. In other cultures, it is not appropriate to be frank about emotions, about the reasons behind a conflict or a misunderstanding, or about personal information. Keep this in mind when you are in a dialogue or when you are working with others. When you are dealing with a conflict, be mindful that people may differ in what they feel comfortable revealing. Questions that may seem natural to you may seem intrusive to others. The variation among cultures in attitudes toward disclosure is also something to consider before you conclude that you have an accurate reading of the views, experiences, and goals of the people with whom you are working. As we talk to people of another culture on the mission field, we may feel what they tell us is accurate, when in reality it maybe inaccurate or only part of the truth. We should not be quick to jump to conclusions.

6. Different Approaches to Knowing

Notable differences occur among cultural groups when it comes to epistemologies -- that is, the ways people come to know things. North Americans cultures tend to consider information acquired through cognitive means, such as counting and measuring, more valid than other ways of coming to know things. Compare that to African cultures' preference for affective ways of knowing, including symbolic imagery and rhythm. For Latin cultures knowledge acquisition is more experiential. Asian cultures' epistemologies tend to emphasize the validity of knowledge gained through striving toward transcendence.

You can see how different approaches to knowing could affect ways of analyzing a community problem or finding ways to resolve it. Some members of your group may want to do library research to understand a shared problem better and identify possible solutions. Others may prefer to visit places and people who have experienced challenges like the ones you are facing, and touch, taste and listen to what has worked elsewhere. On a mission trip, as we share about ourselves and about the Lord, we can't assume that everyone understands or processes

information in the same way. Sharing from our heart may be more effective than presenting logical explanations of the Gospel.

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