

A composite image featuring a globe, a large percentage sign (%), and a large number 1, with three business professionals in the foreground.

Five Keys to Successful Intercultural Communication

By Vicki Flier Hudson

While traveling in Nepal for a year, I spent many hours in tea shops talking to tourists passing through town.

“What do you think of Nepal?” I asked.

Their answers rarely strayed from one of two responses.

“Nepal is a poor country full of people who want to rip you off,” said one camp.

“Nepal is a spiritual country where the people are very much in touch with nature,” said the other camp.

Both answers bothered me. Although the second response was certainly kinder than the first, neither was complex enough to capture the spirit and richness of Nepali culture. This constrained perception of the cultures around us is something that is not limited to tourists. Inattentiveness to the complexity of culture is one of the main impediments to successful intercultural communication, and no culture is exempt.

By all appearances, we are living in a shrinking world, one where an explosion of wealth, technology, and

change has us all scrambling to keep up. Emerging economies like India and China have taken the world stage. We now have the ability to purchase products and services and chat with colleagues from anywhere in the world, all from our computers. Does this increase in global communication mean that we understand each other any better? Are we really becoming more alike? Just like the tourists in

everyone in touch with cultural differences. Culture influences do matter, so what should we do? How can we communicate successfully with people who have such varied backgrounds and experience? Although there are no magical answers, the five keys to intercultural communication presented here will help you navigate more effectively in a complex global environment.

rest of the world. When we view commonality as the best way to get along with people and accomplish goals, we may project similarities onto our colleagues or clients that are not there. As a result, we might experience conflict with them when differences do arise, or we may not meet their needs. Similarly, when we overemphasize differences, we create defensiveness, an “us versus them” mentality, and we miss opportunities to learn from viewpoints outside our own sphere. Just as the tourists’ answers to my questions about Nepal indicated an overly simplified cultural mindset, failing to understand the intricacies of cultural influence can lead to ineffectiveness in our dealings with the international community. If we each make room for both differences and commonalities and have an understanding of how culture shapes actions, we will have more conscious and effective conversations with our colleagues from around the world as well as here at home.

Our personal and professional growth depends upon our ability to live comfortably in a “connected” world.

Nepal, a strong need exists to examine culture more deeply and the role it plays in our daily lives. Nowadays, our personal and professional growth depends upon our ability to live comfortably in a “connected” world.

Research indicates that national culture still plays a significant role in the workplace. A study by Accenture in 2006¹ concluded that cross-cultural communication would continue to present the main challenge for global organizations wishing to reach their full potential. Another study by the founder of Let’s Bridge IT, a company specializing in offshore consulting, found that unresolved cultural issues can add up to 30% to initial project costs.² Christoph Boehm, chief executive office of TransCrit Offshore IT-Consulting, called cultural differences “the highest risk factor of offshore information technology delivery.”³

Even if you do not conduct business internationally, the changing demographics of the U.S. are putting

Key #1: Strike a Balance Between Commonality and Difference

Today, navigating cultural differences can be confusing, in part because they are not as visible as they used to be. You might interact with people in another country who seem “just like me.” For example, many of my colleagues in India dress in Western clothing, listen to iPods, follow modern and innovative business practices, and speak fluent English. Working with them over time, however, I have discovered that they still operate by core Indian values, eat traditional foods at home and at work, and view life through an Indian perspective.

The key to successful intercultural communication is to strike a balance between focusing on commonality and focusing on differences. Contrary to popular belief, an overemphasis on commonality can contribute to just as many issues as overemphasizing what is different between ourselves and the

Key #2: Find Variety Within Variety

With the global economy in full swing, mobility is at an all-time high. People from the rural areas of China are flooding into the cities to look for opportunities, students from India are studying in London, and American workers are seeking jobs in India. Today in the U.S., you are more likely than ever to encounter many nationalities. This variety offers both challenges and a wider array of ideas and solutions.

The key to successful intercultural communication here is to look for variety within variety. For example, imagine you are a U.S. citizen working with a group of people from Mexico. Variety inherently exists because there are two cultures present. Consider, however, the ➡

following questions:

- What part of Mexico or the U.S. are your colleagues from?
- What languages do they speak?
- What is their experience in your industry?
- What kinds of business practices have they experienced?
- What did they do before working with you?
- What are their cultural views and practices regarding gender and age?
- What are their core cultural values?
- Where have they traveled or lived?

The list goes on. Learning about culture-general patterns is helpful, because in spite of the rapid changes in the world, cultural traditions remain strong. To be effective we must also seek out the variety within those cultures and leverage any differences to accomplish our communication objectives.

For example, when I last visited Chennai, India, I met with the senior vice-president of a software company for an interview. We talked about cultural differences, and I asked him how much he thought Indian culture had changed. His response was not what I expected.

“I don’t think the cultural differences are that significant anymore,” he said. “We’re all data driven now, and we’re all aiming for the same results, especially in business.” I then asked him about his background. He had been born in India, educated in

the U.K., and had worked in the U.S. As soon as I walked out of his office into the employees’ cubicles, I saw that cultural differences were alive and well. The staff members had

Narayan had never met. Narayan set out, found the neighborhood and the house, and rang the bell. A man answered and invited him in. They had tea together and snacks were

Cross-cultural communication will continue to present the main challenge for global organizations wishing to reach their full potential.

never been outside of India, came from small to mid-sized towns, and had little exposure to Western business practices. They were shy and spoke little to me.

To be effective in communicating with the people from that company, we would need to examine the variety of backgrounds and be willing to shift our style accordingly to accommodate the differences between us.

Key #3: Adapt to Different Cultural Rules

We use the word “culture” frequently in the workplace, but how do we define it? There are protocols and etiquette for every culture, such as whether you bow or shake hands, but we could memorize a book of these details and still experience intercultural challenges. Beneath the surface of etiquette lies another layer of culture, the values by which people of a particular culture orient their lives.

For example, when I was in India earlier this year, I visited a friend named Narayan who lives in Bangalore. He told me that his father once asked him to deliver a package to a man named Suresh, whom

served. Narayan was there for 45 minutes before his host finally asked him what had brought him in. Narayan replied that he was there to deliver the package from his father. “What package?” the man replied.

Even though Narayan had gone to the wrong house (Suresh actually lived two doors down) and was a stranger to his host, he had been offered hospitality as if he were a member of the family. This type of interaction is common in India, because Indian culture is oriented more toward the collective. In the U.S., we sway more toward individualism, and chances are if the same interaction had occurred in this country, Narayan would have been sent on his way the moment the homeowner discovered the visitor had the incorrect address.

Neither scenario is better or worse, but a difference does exist. It just emphasizes the point that if we are to communicate successfully across cultures, we must learn to adapt to other cultural rules. This does not mean that we need to change or abandon our own values, but that we must become adept at shifting our framework, seeing things

through another's eyes, and coming up with creative ways to solve intercultural challenges. Without knowledge of the deeper layers of culture, we run the risk of not meeting our goals, or missing out on useful resources in the workplace.

Key #4: Widen Our Communication Repertoire

Everyone has a preferred method of communication. For example, when a project does not go as planned at work, two different communication styles might emerge. A person with a more

explicit style might go to the boss and say, "This deadline will not be met. The timing is just too tight, and we do not have the resources to complete everything by the date you expected. We need two more weeks." A person with a more implicit style of communication might

Want to Know More?

Recommended Websites

Atlanta World Trade Center—International Events
www.wtcatlanta.com

Books on Culture and Diversity Intercultural Press
www.interculturalpress.com

Cross-cultural Compare and Contrast
www.geert-hofstede.com

Etiquette Around the World
www.ediplomat.com/np/cultural_etiquette/cultural_etiquette.htm

Society of Intercultural Education, Training, and Research
www.sietarusa.org

Recommended Reading

Gundling, Ernest. *Working Globe Smart* (Davies Black Publishing, 2003).

Gundling, Ernest, and Anita Zanchettin. *Global Diversity* (Nicholas Brealy Publishing, 2006).

Hall, Edward. *Beyond Culture* (Anchor Books, 1981).

Huijser, Mijnd. *Cultural Advantage: A New Model for Succeeding with Global Teams* (Intercultural Press, 2006).

go to the same boss and say, “Boy, we are sure busy over in Quality Assurance. The guys are working Saturdays to meet the deadline.”

In the second scenario, if the employee and the boss have two different communication styles, the boss might think everything is fine. The boss would empathize that the staff is working hard, but would never dream that the employee was actually saying he could not meet the deadline. What happens when the deadline is not met? People are blamed, the product is not shipped, and chaos ensues.

Did the person in the second scenario cause the problem by not being more explicit about the possibility of an unmet deadline? Did the boss cause the problem by not picking up on his employee’s cues? Answering these questions does not solve the problem, and saying one way of relaying the message is better than the other forces us into an “either/or” framework of communication.

The most effective way to navigate different communication styles is to widen our communication repertoire. For example, if all you have in your toolbox is a hammer, then everything starts to look like a nail. If you have several tools, however, you will be able to

participate deftly in a variety of intercultural situations. We can learn to listen more carefully for subtle cues, to read body language, pay attention to tone, be more specific with our instructions, appreciate how other cultures communicate, and adapt our style to facilitate the goal at hand.

Key #5: Adopt a “Both/And” Mentality for Success

Working across cultures brings challenges and sometimes frustration to our work environment, but we are rewarded for our efforts through the richness of differences. In today’s marketplace, the best framework by which to operate is one of “both/and” rather than “either/or.” When two cultures work together, the question often arises, “Who should adapt to whom?” There is a saying in Japanese that loosely translates to “incorrect question.” Perhaps a more effective set of questions would be:

- How should we adapt to each other?
- How can we leverage our differences to meet our common goals?
- What creative solutions can we offer to the organization? What challenges might we face as a multicultural workforce?

When we move beyond the “either/or” mentality to one that encompasses “both/and,” we enter into endless possibilities for enriching relationships across cultures.

For example, imagine that a manager says to me, “Should I make my employees from Korea learn to speak English while they are working here, or is that culturally insensitive?” That type of question forces an “A or B” answer instead of a creative solution. Why not

offer the Korean employees English lessons as part of their training, but also have them teach the English-speaking staff some phrases in Korean? Perhaps the Koreans could take English lessons and then practice their English by teaching the rest of the staff about Korean culture. The solutions are endless if we ask the right questions and stay open to all possibilities.

Thinking Outside the Cultural Box

Working across cultures continues to present challenges, in spite of all the technology that allows us to connect to the rest of the world. Through widening our communication repertoire, adapting to various cultural rules, and thinking creatively, we can meet any challenge and enrich ourselves in the process.

Notes

1. “Improved Cross-cultural Communication Increases Global Sourcing Productivity (Accenture, 2006), http://accenture.tekgroup.com/article_display.cfm?article_id=4376.
2. The study was presented in January 2008 at the conference for the Society of Intercultural Education, Training, and Research. The study was conducted by Melanie Martinelli, the founder of Let’s Bridge IT.
3. Boehm, Christoph. “What Makes IT Offshore Different?” (TransCritt – Offshore IT, 2003), [www.competence-site.de/offshore.nsf/7A15926FA7432764C1256E62002B10CD/\\$File/transcrit-offshore-intro.pdf](http://www.competence-site.de/offshore.nsf/7A15926FA7432764C1256E62002B10CD/$File/transcrit-offshore-intro.pdf).

ata

