



Cross Cultural Communication II ([Aminotes](#))

Ethnocentrism - Ethnocentrism is the view that one particular ethnic group is somehow superior to all others. The word *ethnocentrism* derives from the Greek word *ethnos*, meaning “nation” or “people,” and the English word *center*. A common idiom for ethnocentrism is “tunnel vision.” In this context, ethnocentrism is the view that a particular ethnic group’s system of beliefs and values is morally superior to all others.

Example - One of the most well-known and horrific examples of ethnocentrism pertains to Nazi Germany. Adolf Hitler decided he hated Jewish people, as well as other groups of people, and had many innocent people slaughtered in concentration camps. Obviously, they didn't deserve the torture they received, and this was clearly an extreme case of ethnocentrism. While prejudice certainly leads to problems, very rarely in history has ethnocentrism led to the mass slaughter of millions of innocent people at the scale witnessed in Nazi Germany.

Stereotype - A stereotype is an over-generalized belief about a particular category of people. Stereotypes are generalized because one assumes that the stereotype is true for each individual person in the category. While such generalizations may be useful when making quick decisions, they may be erroneous when applied to particular individuals. Stereotypes encourage prejudice and may arise for a number of reasons.

Implicit stereotypes are those that lay on individuals' subconsciousness, that they have no control or awareness of.

In social psychology, a stereotype is any thought widely adopted about specific types of individuals or certain ways of behaving intended to represent the entire group of those individuals or behaviors as a whole. These thoughts or beliefs may or may not accurately reflect reality. Within psychology and across other disciplines, different conceptualizations and theories of stereotyping exist, at times sharing commonalities, as well as containing contradictory elements.

Only males play video games is a common stereotype. In fact, almost half of all gamers are female, when including mobile phone gaming. Women are more likely to play mobile phone games than traditional video games.



Explicit stereotypes are those people who are willing to verbalize and admit to other individuals. It also refers to stereotypes that one is aware that one holds, and is aware that one is using to judge people. People can attempt to consciously control the use of explicit stereotypes, even though their attempt to control may not be fully effective. Explicit stereotypes are the result of conscious, intentional, and controllable thoughts and beliefs. Explicit biases are usually directed toward a group of people based on what is being perceived. An explicit stereotype regarding gender, for example, may be "All adolescent males enjoy watching sports."

Xenophobia - *Xenophobia* is the irrational fear or dislike of people who are different from oneself, particularly foreigners. The term xenophobia originates from the Greek words *xénos* (stranger) and *phóbos* (fear), so it essentially means the fear of strangers. However, it is more often used to describe hatred or hostility, especially toward immigrants, migrants, and refugees from other countries.

Xenophobia is a type of *specific phobia*, a common mental disorder. Therefore when such views are significantly and negatively impacting a person's life, the person may qualify for diagnosis of specific phobia. (Only a mental health professional can make a diagnosis.)

Xenophobia comprises multiple aspects of prejudice and may be based on any racist, religious, ethnic, cultural, or national discrimination. Xenophobic attitudes and behaviors are often triggered by a fear that outsiders or foreigners are a threat to one's community or national identity. People with xenophobic attitudes often want to secure the perceived purity of their own culture or nation.

For example, an American man who feels threatened or angry that his company has hired Russian interns would be considered xenophobic. Perhaps deep down he fears that his cultural and religious values are being threatened by what he perceives as an influx of different types of people. He fears being outnumbered, losing his job to one of these "other" people, or losing his current way of life.

Cultural Relativism - It is the view that individual beliefs and values systems are culturally relative. That is, no one ethnic group has the right to say that their particular system of beliefs and values, their *worldview*, is in any way superior to anyone else's system of beliefs and values. What's right for one culture might be wrong for another



and that's alright. There is no absolute standard of right and wrong by which to compare and contrast morally contradictory cultural values.

Example - An Australian and a Japanese person meet for a business meeting. The Australian explains their point of view, as does the Japanese person and the Australian responds their opinion to what the Japanese person had said. Yet, the Japanese person remains quiet. To the Australian, it seems like the Japanese person had nothing to add, but in Japanese culture it is common to hold the opinion close to the chest upon getting the information, go away, think about it, and come back with a thought out answer. Using cultural relativism you can see how actions within a meeting can be reacted too in different ways and see as rude or polite depending on the cultural context.

5 Strategies for Effective Cross Cultural Communication

Listen
Effectively communicate
Avoid ambiguity
Respect differences
No judgment

Strategy 1: Listen

Active listening is the single most useful way to overcome barriers to effective communication. We listen for meaning by checking back with the speaker to ensure that we have accurately heard and understood what was said. Communicating across cultures adds another layer to the “noise” that is already present, which makes it critical to add that extra step of checking back.

Listen for meaning. For example, people from diverse cultures may use the same word in different ways, so repeating what you think you heard and asking if that's what was intended confirms your understanding of its meaning.

Incorporate the following techniques into your everyday communications:

- Listen without thinking ahead or considering what you will say next.
- Ask questions to ensure that you accurately understand the message being conveyed.



- Don't assume that you understand the meaning of someone else's statement. And, don't assume that what you mean to convey is understood by the listener. Paraphrase back to the speaker to clarify understanding.

Strategy 2: Effectively communicate

Virtual teams must compensate for the lack of visual and physical cues. The aim is to keep the communication lines open and transparent so that when conflicts arise—and they will—you can quickly find a resolution. Here is a helpful four-step technique to keep your cultural communication lines open.

- **Respond** with appropriate words that will not inflame a situation when you sense difficulty. If you have an impulse to disagree with, reject, or ignore what someone has said, ask or email for clarification.
- **Deliver balanced feedback.** To influence another or when you have concerns about someone's work or idea, itemize the merits and faults in the correct order, making them **specific and task-related feedback**. Remember to express all faults as *concerns*.
- **Build on an idea.** Mention an additional benefit or advantage, and/or suggest a modification when someone presents an idea. Indicate the connection between the person's idea and what you'll say. *"What you said makes me think that...."* or *"Not only that, but it would also make sense to...."*
- **Give credit and positive reinforcement.** To increase the likelihood of a behavior recurring or to compliment someone whose behavior exceeds expectations, provide a specific example of the idea or task being credited. Indicate the benefits: "It sure will help marketing generate interest in our newest models."

Strategy 3: Avoid ambiguity

Avoiding or tolerating ambiguity doesn't necessarily mean that you deliberately avoid ambiguous situations. The goal is to avoid the uneasiness that could lead to frustration, which hinders your ability to effectively communicate. Having prior knowledge about team members' cultures can also help reduce ambiguity. The greater your knowledge about another culture the less ambiguous it becomes.

Try some of these suggestions to learn more about your colleague's culture:

- Make it your business to learn at least one fact about every member's culture.
- No one expects you to master a slew of foreign languages; however, using the phrases *please* and *thank you* in the individual's native tongue is appreciated.



- Watch or read the news from your team members' countries of origin. Discuss cultural topics to better understand different viewpoints (though it may be best to avoid political issues).
- Become aware of the traditional festivals of your virtual team members' countries. They may genuinely appreciate a greeting via email or IM on that day.

In addition, here are some ideas to build a virtual environment that avoids ambiguity:

- Create a safe, friendly environment that encourages participation.
- Recognize your own assumptions and pre-judgments, which may be clouded by cultural backgrounds, past experiences and subconscious bias.
- Encourage participation in conference calls so that questions are brought up.
- Build in feedback loops to ensure clarity.

Strategy 4: Respect differences

Just as you want to be respected for distinctive characteristics that you may bring to a group, others do as well. While diverse cultures vary in how they show respect (e.g. the bow in Japan) following these general guidelines should lead to positive results:

- Make it your business to learn at least one fact about every member's culture.
- Assume a clear and welcoming tone when you communicate by phone.
- Demonstrate flexibility. Be open to discussing other options.
- No one expects you to master a slew of foreign languages; however, using the phrases please and thank you in the individual's native tongue is appreciated.
- Respect different time zones when scheduling virtual meetings. Work toward sharing this responsibility so that everyone's availability and time preferences are honored equally.

Strategy 5: No judgment

Respecting others means suspending judgment. Consider several alternative possibilities and use this three-step evaluation approach:

- **Describe the issue.** For example: A recruiter is staffing up the data processing area when an applicant walks in, and without a glance at the recruiter, sits down in the nearest chair without waiting to be invited. Before you make assumptions about this behavior, consider several reasons for it:
 - He suffers from a painful leg condition which is alleviated by sitting.
 - In some cultures (like the Samoan culture) it is not appropriate to speak to, or even make eye contact with, authority figures until invited. You do not



stand while they are sitting, because to do so would place you physically higher than they are, implying serious disrespect.

- **Interpret.** Instead of believing this young man to be rude, consider the possibility that he is merely acting appropriately for his cultural background.
- **Evaluate.** Instead of thinking, “I won’t pass this young man on to the data center,” contemplate saying, “Thanks for coming in today to our company. Please tell me a little about yourself.” (And find out about his cultural prism.)

The following strategies can help you suspend judgment when working with people of other cultures:

- Take the time to reflect before saying or doing something that you may regret and consider several interpretations of the behavior or situation in question.
- Accept the possibility that what occurred could be due to some other circumstances (e.g., having a bad day, dealing with personal issues).
- Be aware of your personal biases. For example, in business situations, you may prefer to communicate in a direct manner rather than to smooth over differences without confronting an issue. Be aware that different cultures handle areas of disagreement in a much more circumspect manner. Increase your self-awareness when you find yourself in these situations and make that extra effort to explore the issue in as non-confrontational a manner as possible, even if that takes additional time. Repeat, rephrase and maintain your cool.
- Be patient, flexible, forgiving. Remain positive. Don’t always assume the worst, most negative outcome.
- Avoid blaming others or making comments such as, “You don’t understand” or “What’s your problem?” because they may cause the other party to respond defensively.
- Use descriptive and objective language.
- Be mindful of terms people use to explain themselves and the world around them, as certain terms have different meanings across cultures. For example, in certain countries, such as in India, when your communication partner says “yes,” it’s possible that s/he is merely telling you that your statement is understood, *not* that there is agreement. It’s up to you to go back and forth until you’re satisfied that what you conveyed was understood *and agreed to*, even if that means asking the person to repeat back to you what you have just agreed on. In addition, follow up with an email to solidify it in writing.

Whether you interact with local or global colleagues, you are always operating in a cross-cultural world. And your biggest challenge on virtual teams is the cross-cultural



one. It's a whole other layer on top of the other virtual team elements, one that is always lurking in the background.

