Cross Cultural Communication (Aminotes)

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By its very nature, communication is cultural and must be considered in context or through the lens of the participants' culture(s). As we learn to speak and give nonverbal messages to convey our thoughts and needs to others, our communication style is influenced by our families and our childhood experiences. Once we begin interacting with the world outside our immediate community, however, we learn that there are other communication styles, both similar to and different from our own. If we believe that communication is interactive, then we must strive to match our styles to those of others and to challenge ourselves to create relationships of merit.

With the rise of instantaneous methods of communication and social networking, it is even more imperative to realize the importance of cross--cultural communication in our everyday life and work. Operating from a base of respect and equality in the communication process makes dealing with different or difficult circumstances far more manageable for everyone. Coexistence starts with dialogue and this open exchange of ideas and positions is the basis of communication. We need to adopt a cross--cultural and truly global perspective in order to work effectively across languages and cultures. At this point, we must recognize the distinction between cross--cultural and intercultural communication. Many researchers posit that understanding cross--cultural communication is a necessary skill that precedes understanding intercultural communication. Cross--cultural communication has been defined as the comparison of communication across cultures, and intercultural communication as the ability to communicate between people from differing cultural backgrounds. Skills to be developed include language, verbal and nonverbal communication across cultures; understanding cultural influences on the expression and perception of identity and group communication; communication in cross-- or intercultural relationships; and adapting to unknown cultures. To develop these skills, be aware of the similarities and differences in perception of:

- Formality of speech and language (e.g., choose proper tense and reference, refrain from using slang)
- Etiquette, rules, or manners (e.g., what is considered polite)

- Body language (e.g., how you sit or stand may have alternate or additional meaning)
- Verbal and nonverbal cues (e.g., direct speech, implied meaning, signs or symbols)
- Personal or physical space (e.g., “comfort zones”)
- Social values and customs (e.g., what are the norms or standards of conduct, be aware of how sex or religion can inform behaviors)
- Concept of time (e.g., what is considered “late” may differ)
- Humor (e.g., what you find funny may strike another as rude or offensive)
- Privacy (e.g., asking personal questions may be invasive or improper).

Learning as much as possible about another language or culture will enhance your ability to communicate with others. When encountering someone who does not share your home language or culture, talk to people who have interacted with members of that culture or observe the similarities and differences with a respectful eye. Concentrate on learning something about the culture's history and social structures, values, and customs. Find out about a country's subcultures and any special rules of protocol. Here are some tips when cross-- or interculturally communicating:

- Take responsibility for effective communication
- Act and speak respectfully
- Show an appreciable consideration for differences
- Recognize your own biases and avoid judgments or stereotyping
- Empathize, be patient and constant
- Formulate clear messages with the other person or group in mind
- Tolerate and embrace ambiguity with a flexible nature
- Seek common ground and deeper meaning beyond the superficial impression
- Be aware of language and cultural barriers by increasing your cultural Sensitivity.

Culture shock is an experience a person may have when one moves to a cultural environment which is different from one's own; it is also the personal disorientation a person may feel when experiencing an unfamiliar way of life due to immigration or a visit to a new country, a move between social environments, or simply transition to another type of life. One of the most common causes of culture shock involves individuals in a foreign environment. Culture shock can be described as consisting of at least one of four distinct phases: honeymoon, frustration, adjustment, and acceptance/adaptation.

Living abroad can be an exhilarating experience that encourages new world views, increases cultural curiosity and supports a willingness to explore unfamiliar terrains. However, it may also invite a sense of feeling a little lost in the world.

Culture shock is a common phenomenon and, though it may take months to develop, it often affects travelers and people living far from home in unexpected ways. Culture shock is more than simply being unfamiliar with social norms or experiencing new foods and it tends to impact travelers even after they've become familiar with and comfortable in new cultures.

Culture shock generally moves through four different phases: honeymoon, frustration, adjustment and acceptance. While individuals experience these stages differently and the impact and order of each stage varies widely, they do provide a guideline of how we adapt and cope with new cultures.

Headquartered in North Carolina, the Participate staff includes both people from around the world now living in the U.S. and U.S. Americans who have spent significant time in other countries. Insights from staff members on their experiences with the stages of culture shock are included throughout this post.

1. The Honeymoon Stage

The first stage of culture shock is often overwhelmingly positive during which travelers become infatuated with the language, people and food in their new surroundings. At this stage, the trip or move seems like the greatest decision ever made, an exciting adventure to stay on forever.

"I moved to the U.S. from Brazil to a host family as a exchange student and spoke almost no English. Within three months I had found a job, a boyfriend, I moved to an apartment with two other roommates, started a Brazilian dance club and I was traveling all over California. It felt easy and quick for me to make the U.S. my home." — Fernanda Araujo, Participate events specialist

On short trips, the honeymoon phase may take over the entire experience as the later effects of culture shock don't have time to set in. On longer trips, the honeymoon stage will usually phase out eventually.

2. The Frustration Stage

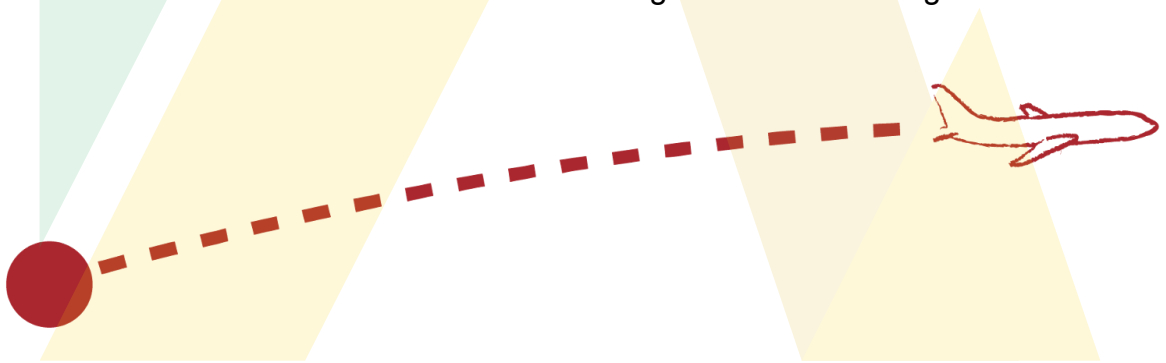
Frustration may be the most difficult stage of culture shock and is probably familiar to anyone who has lived abroad or who travels frequently. At this stage, the fatigue of not understanding gestures, signs and the language sets in and miscommunications may be happening frequently. Small things — losing keys, missing the bus or not being able easily order food in a restaurant — may trigger frustration. And while frustration comes and goes, it's a natural reaction for people spending extended time in new countries.

“Coming from a really big city, the Research Triangle in North Carolina was tiny in comparison (population-wise) but, at the same time, I realized how vast distances were in the U.S. with cities spread out over miles. Not seeing people walking all over the place was very new to me as I’ve always lived in very busy places. I also came to know good public transport only exists in the biggest of cities in the U.S. In India there are a lot of neighborhood shops and markets so you don’t need to shop for groceries or household stuff in bulk. That took a little getting used to and in grad school I actually found it pretty inconvenient.” — Nitya Mallikarjun, director of product development

“A couple of weeks into a six-month stay in a very remote town on the Pacific coast of Costa Rica, I became extremely ill and was bedridden for a week. It was completely miserable and for days all I could think was: What am I doing here? All I thought about was how to get home. Of course, once I was finally recovered, I made the mile-long walk to a nearby beach and the thoughts I had about wanting to be back home instantly disappeared.” — Tamara Oxley, marketing and communications associate

“One thing that was particularly frustrating to me in the beginning was the lack of mobility that I experienced in the U.S. Where I grew up in Germany, you can get to any point at any time thanks to a great public transportation system, sidewalks and bike lanes everywhere. In the U.S., you are very limited in the things you can do if you don’t have a car and I completely underestimated how much you have to depend on others to get around. I realized that home, for me, meant to live in a place with countless opportunities and absolute freedom. I felt less independent and I think that this was one of the main reasons I felt homesick (besides the obvious ones: family, friends, etc.).” — Arne Plum, business operations analyst

Bouts of depression or homesickness and feelings of longing to go home where things are familiar and comfortable are all common during the frustration stage.



3. The Adjustment Stage

Frustrations are often subdued as travelers begin to feel more familiar and comfortable with the cultures, people, food and languages of new environments. Navigation becomes easier, friends and communities of support are established and details of local languages may become more recognizable during the adjustment stage.

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“Because I was in Turkey for six months in a study abroad setting, acclimating to my new environment was sped up due to all of the resources I was able to access. However, I found that the best way to understand my new environment was to ask questions and learn to respect the culture in the way it currently exists. The local Turkish people seemed much more accommodating when I showed genuine interest in their customs, rather than obviously being an American who was uncomfortable with her new situation. I also found myself asking my Turkish roommates what was okay to do, not okay to do, where to go and where not to go, so I was able to adjust to my environment more quickly.” — Kate Riley, marketing and communications intern

4. The Acceptance Stage

Generally — though sometimes weeks, months or years after wrestling with the emotional stages outlined above — the final stage of culture shock is acceptance. Acceptance doesn’t mean that new cultures or environments are completely understood, rather it signifies realization that complete understanding isn’t necessary to function and thrive in the new surroundings. During the acceptance stage, travelers have the familiarity and are able to draw together the resources they need to feel at ease.

“When I moved from California to North Carolina, I came to the conclusion that one culture is not better than the other — there is no right or wrong, they are just different. And yes, that brought peace of mind, no more judgement or coming to my own conclusions.” — Fernanda Araujo

“There was a time when I realized that constantly comparing and contrasting everything would never allow me to be really happy here. Qualifying the differences worked both ways, and I felt torn between my life here and what used to be my life back in Germany. So I began to see the differences as what they are — just differences — without trying to rate them or use them to put one place over the other. Over time, I felt much more at ease with my life in the U.S., and I began to understand that these differences are what living abroad is all about.” — Arne Plum

Overcoming Homesickness in a New Country

For people living abroad, homesickness is bound to creep in. Here is what a few Participate staff members had to say about dealing with homesickness:

“I think I just acknowledged homesickness and sadness as natural parts of my cross-cultural experience. I stayed in touch with my family and friends but also worked on making friends here in the U.S., and looked for any opportunities to experience new things and visit new places.” — Anamaria Knight, director of curriculum and instructional design, on her experience moving to the U.S. from Romania for graduate school.

“I learned early on that missing your home culture is okay. I find that talking to friends and family, and having my favorite movie and/or snack in the house helps in those moments when I do miss home.” — Lisa Lundegard, e-learning business systems analyst, on immigrating to the U.S. from Sweden.

Though it can be one of the hardest part of traveling, culture shock is just as integral to the experience as food, people and scenery. By recognizing it for what it is and finding ways to cope, you can prevent culture shock from ruining an otherwise fantastic experience abroad.