



Communicating Across Cultures

Culture is the widening of the mind and of the spirit.

—Jawaharlal Nehru

Effective communication is fundamental in the corporate environment, because business is a collaborative activity—goods are purchased, deals are negotiated, and issues are discussed. Effectively communicating with people of different cultures is especially challenging because cultures provide people with different and specific ways of thinking and interpreting the world around them.



What is culture and how does it relate to business?

Culture is a set of shared values that a group of people holds, affecting how it thinks and acts. It also affects how the group sees things: whether they view something as right or wrong, normal or strange.

Communication styles vary enormously around the world, and these differences can contribute to a large variety of business styles. The same words can mean different things to people from different cultures, even when they are speaking the same language. When the languages are different, and translation has to be used to communicate, the potential for misunderstandings is even larger. Articulation and speaking rates can often have an impact on the ease of understanding between a speaker and their audience.



There are roughly _____ spoken languages in the world today, with the most popular language being _____.



According to experts, only _____% of the 750-800 million people who speak English learned it as a first language.

Below are tips for those who communicate frequently with non-native English speakers, and for non-native English speakers who are required to present information in a second language.

Tips for native English speakers

1. **Slow down your speaking pace.** Slowing your speaking rate will make it easier for your audience to follow your message.
2. **Avoid slang and idiomatic expressions.** Slang or expressions such as “spill the beans” or “cut the waffle” don’t translate across every culture, so be aware of the words you choose.
3. **Clearly announce topics and topic changes.** Providing a “headline” so your audience knows the subject about to be discussed will ensure everyone’s attention is synchronized.
4. **Articulate your words clearly.** Put simply, use crisp and clear diction so you can be understood.
5. **Restate main points frequently.** Repetition is always helpful for your audience to be able to easily follow and understand your main points.
6. **Use simple and clear language.** Try not to use overly complicated or technical jargon that might be a challenge for non-native speakers to understand.
7. **Face your listener and don’t cover your mouth when speaking.** Your audience can use the visual element of your lips moving to help them listen and follow you.
8. **Check in frequently to confirm understanding.** Utilize skill checks and checkbacks to ensure comprehension among your audience members.
9. **Keep sentences short.** Avoid long, complicated sentences that will be hard for a listener to follow.
10. **Be patient.** Keep in mind how challenging it is for a non-native speaker to listen and translate your words in the blink of an eye.



Tips for non-native English speakers

1. **Allow people to suggest words to communicate more quickly.** If there is someone on the call or in the meeting that can assist with clarifying vocabulary or translating a word or phrase, let them assist.
2. **Listen actively.** Avoid distractions and focus on the speaker's main idea.
3. **If you do not understand a word, ask them to repeat it or write it down.** The only way a speaker will know if his words are being understood (or not) is for you to offer honest feedback.
4. **Participate actively in discussions.** The more practice you get speaking and engaging with English-speakers, the easier it will become.
5. **When speaking, say less.** Whenever speaking in a second language, keep your answers and message as concise as possible.
6. **Choose your words carefully.** Make sure you have chosen the right words before you speak them. Once they are out, you own them.
7. **Articulate your words clearly.** If an audience can't understand a non-native speaker, it is often not because of vocabulary or word choice, but instead because of enunciation not being clear.
8. **Keep a dictionary handy for reference.** If you are unsure of a term or word being used, take a moment to refer to your dictionary so you are clear on the meaning before proceeding.
9. **Slow your speaking rate.** By slowing your speaking rate, it will not only help you have a better grasp of vocabulary, it will also allow your audience to more easily follow your thoughts and message.
10. **Take notes and review them later.** Notetaking will help reinforce the information you learned previously to make the points stick.



Iceberg Model of Culture

Anthropologist Edward T. Hall developed the theory that culture is like an iceberg, and we can only see a small portion of it that is visible above the water. The true mass that forms the majority of the iceberg, however, is below the surface and not visible.

Try to imagine you are standing on an iceberg that represents you and your culture and you are going to merge with another team, who is standing on another iceberg that represents their culture. Think of what each of you would see looking across at the other.

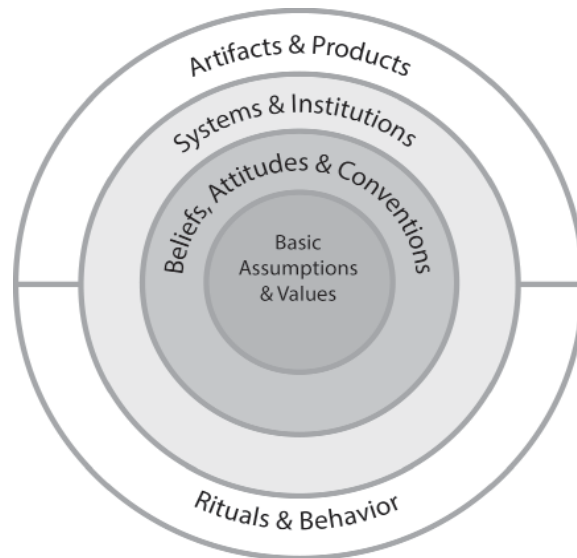
Hall suggested there are two parts to culture: internal and external. He believed that only a small portion of the external culture is above water and visible in the behaviours of a society. The larger portion, internal culture, is hidden beneath the surface in the beliefs, values, and thought patterns of a society.





Spencer-Oatey Onion Analogy

Various studies informed by theories of cultural comparisons were done by Helen Spencer-Oatey. She found that culture is generally viewed as a mixture of factors and underlying human behaviors and interactions. Spencer-Oatey visualized these factors by means of cultural layers, much like an onion. The layers are explained as follows:



Layer	Visibility	Examples
Artifacts and Products	Most explicit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Food • Clothing • Architecture • Art • Language
Rituals and Behaviour	Most explicit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gestures • Ways of greeting • Ceremonies
Systems and Institutions	Less explicit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education • Government • Law and order • Health care • Family life
Beliefs, Attitudes & Conventions	More implicit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Religious and moral beliefs • Attitudes towards other groups • Concepts of manners and behavior



Basic Assumptions and Values

Most implicit (core)

- Power differences among group members
- Importance of respecting tradition
- The importance of conforming to social expectations and norms
- The right to pursue personal pleasures and interest

In today's global business environment, the key to success with cross-cultural communication is developing an understanding of and respect for the differences between various cultures. This means you must be culturally literate—able to communicate in a way that effectively gets a message across to all parties involved, while not excluding or offending anyone due to unintended cultural misunderstandings.



What are the consequences of lacking cultural awareness when conducting business internationally?

Below are some examples of past cross-cultural business blunders:

- An American oil rig supervisor in Indonesia shouted at an employee to take a boat to shore. Since it is bad form to berate an Indonesian in public, a mob of outraged workers chased the supervisor with axes.
- Global internet search engine Bing experienced a slight problem after they launched in China, because “Bing” in Mandarin sounds like “illness.”
- An advertisement released by Mountain Bell to promote its telephone services in Saudi Arabia in the 1980s failed miserably. Advertisements illustrated an executive talking on the phone with his feet propped up on the desk, and showed the soles of his shoes – an act that is considered extremely offensive in the Arab culture.
- Pepsodent tried to sell its toothpaste in southeast Asia by emphasizing that it “whitens your teeth.” They found out that the local natives chew betel nuts to blacken their teeth, something they find attractive.
- An aftershave for men marketed in the Middle East in the 1970s, depicted a pastoral scene featuring a man and his dog. However, the product dramatically failed in Islamic countries, where dogs are considered unclean.



Understanding High Context vs. Low Context Cultures

Probably the single most useful concept for understanding cultural differences in business communication is Edward T. Hall's distinction of low-context and high-context cultures. Understanding whether your international colleagues are high context or low context will help you adapt your communication style and build stronger relationships. While every group has a little of both contexts, the distinctions are useful to understand where cultural differences reside and how differing cultural points of view arise.

High context communication

In a high context communication cultures (Mediterranean, Slav, Central European, Latin American, African, Arab, Asian, Indian) the listener must combine messages portrayed by the speaker's verbal communication and nonverbal behaviors to get the full meaning of the message. In this style of communication emphasis is placed on understanding without direct verbal communication. High context communicators expect the listener to read between the lines. Words are not as important as context, which includes tone of voice, facial expression, gestures, posture, and status.

Traits of a high context culture:

- Communication is more indirect and less explicit
- Face-to-face interactions are preferred for nonverbal communication
- Strong boundaries with clearly defined roles of authority
- Long-lasting relationships are important
- Developing trust is essential to business interactions
- Knowledge is situational and relational
- Shorter, simpler contracts

Tips for communicating with a high context speaker:

- Employ keen listening and observation skills
- Understand that nonverbal behaviors are as important as actual words
- Encourage elaboration on ideas
- Ask for explanations of opinions
- Carefully build and maintain relationships
- Avoid overly personal questions
- Expect and anticipate indirect communication



Low context communication

In low context communication cultures (the United States and most of northern Europe) the meaning of messages is in the verbal communication and emphasis is placed on explicit messages. Low context communicators use words that express the full extent of the intended meaning. Nonverbal and subtle behaviors are not considered as heavily when interpreting the message. Direct communication is preferred and respected. People who are low-context communicators value logic, facts, and straightforwardness.

Traits of a low-context culture:

- Messages are explicit and specific
- Rule oriented: people play by clearly defined external rules
- Knowledge and information are accessible to all
- Interpersonal relationships can be intense but short term
- Decisions and activities are action oriented
- Longer and more detailed contracts

Tips for communicating with a low context speaker:

- Recognize that nonverbal behaviors do not play as great a factor with intended meanings
- Don't rely on subtle clues - focus on the literal meaning of the words spoken
- Use direct and specific communication
- Show interest by asking questions of the other person
- Stick to agreed upon rules or standards



Low context cultures include:

- The United States
- Canada
- Germany
- Switzerland
- England
- Austria
- The Netherlands
- Australia
- New Zealand
- Israel
- Scandinavia

High context cultures include:

- Most African countries
- Brazil
- China
- Russia
- Saudi Arabia
- The United Arab Emirates
- Mexico
- Spain
- India
- Italy
- Japan

Cultural Barriers to Effective Communication

According to communication specialist Stella Ting-Toomey, there are three distinct ways in which culture interferes with effective communication and cross-cultural understanding:

1. **Cognitive constraints** – these involve worldviews and the backdrop in which a group understands and interprets information.
2. **Behavior constraints** – these affect how people of a specific culture behave verbally and nonverbally with the people around them.
3. **Emotional constraints** – these involve the level of emotion exhibited by different cultures in various situations or scenarios.

When communicating across cultures, awareness is key. Each one of the above constraints can lead to communication problems if one is not careful and observant. If a person is not aware of the potential for such problems, they are even more likely to fall victim to them.



EXERCISE: Communicating Across Cultures

Please discuss the following scenarios and how high or low context influenced each:

Scenario #1

Susan and Erica had been working together as teachers in Istanbul, Turkey. After being in Turkey for a few months they decided to explore more of the country. As they got further into the countryside and away from Istanbul, they started to feel hostility toward them. On one occasion they stopped at a small coffee house in a village and found themselves the center of attention. They felt shaken by the numerous stares. Susan and Erica could not understand the difference in attitude between people in Istanbul and those in the countryside.

Scenario #2

A U.S. software manufacturer decided to explore the possibility of entering the Japanese market. They arranged a meeting with a major Japanese firm to discuss a joint venture. Representatives of each firm met up in New York City. Following the initial introductions, the men sat down at opposite sides of the table. After offering their Japanese guests a drink, the U.S. representatives proceeded to take off their jackets and roll up their sleeves to begin business discussions. The meeting was unsuccessful and the joint venture never took place. What cultural faux pas did the Americans commit?

Scenario #3

Michael is a British trainer working with a team of software engineers in Bangalore, India. On the first day of training, his instruction was to begin at 9:30am. At 9:30am, Michael was ready, but only four of his eight participants had arrived. Another 30 minutes passed and gradually the other team members arrived. When Michael asked why they had come late, the participants smiled and shrugged, citing the rains and traffic as the cause of their tardiness and delay.

**Scenario #4**

Sam Walker had worked hard to become the top sales representative of his burgeoning travel company. When the company received an invitation from a Brazilian firm to present a proposal to them, Sam was chosen to fly to Sau Paulo. Excited, Sam had set up an appointment to make his presentation the afternoon he arrived. Upon arrival, he was met by his host contact who told him the presentation was postponed for two days to give Sam a chance to rest and see the sights. Sam insisted he was fit and ready for the presentation and pressed to have it that afternoon. Eventually it was moved back to the original slot, but Sam noticed that none of the executives at the meeting seemed engaged. At the end of the meeting the chief contact suggested they all meet again in two days. Why did Sam get this reaction?

Scenario #5

Linda James had been assigned to the Paris office of his marketing company. Having studied French in college she welcomed the opportunity. Upon arriving at the new office, Linda looked forward to meeting her new colleagues and getting to know them. While waiting for a meeting to begin she decided to initiate some conversation with another member of the staff. She introduced herself and inquired as to whether the man was married and had children. The co-worker became distant and unapproachable. Why?

*Culture is the intersection of people
and life itself. It's how we deal with life,
love, death, birth, disappointment.*

- Wendell Pierce