Successful Communication in Multicultural Environments

What can native English speakers do in a multicultural setting to promote the clear, accurate communication that is critical for success?

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INTERCULTURAL FOCUS

The United States is an increasingly multicultural society and while American English is the predominant language in the U.S., the number of non-native English speakers continues to grow. Many programs exist to help non-native speakers learn and adapt to communicating in English; however, communication is a two-way process. The question becomes what can native English speakers do to communicate more effectively with their non-native counterparts? This paper will focus on assisting native English speakers to understand the communication process better and to communicate more effectively in today's culturally diverse environment.

Why is this critical? How will this information be helpful to you? Consider the organizations with whom you work. Did the people in these organizations all grow up in the same town, in the same state, in the same country? Most organizations today have people from many different backgrounds and cultures who work together. In addition, the number of organizations operating internationally is also rapidly increasing. These changes are not limited to multinational companies; they include all types of institutions: government, non-governmental organizations and the academic sector among many others. There is also more diversity within the consumer base, client groups and partners. A key aspect of this trend is a significant increase in contact between people from different cultural backgrounds. This diversity allows the opportunity to connect, share and work with people from new and different backgrounds. For organizations, this interaction is often beneficial, as diversity fosters fresh ideas and new approaches to projects and problem solving. The correlated challenge is that people from different cultural backgrounds bring different understandings and expectations regarding group dynamics, management style, social customs and communication norms.

Cultural differences may seem minor and easy to resolve, such as learning a new way to say 'hello' or adapting to a different style of dress or trying new food. Culture however is multi-

layered and differences may not always be evident, for example the importance of time or non-verbal communication patterns. Consequently, in the workplace, obstacles to communication and management will come from obvious as well as unseen differences. Additional difficulties in the workplace will arise from the lack of knowledge, underlying apprehension and distrust that is normal when people from different cultures work together. These concerns can quickly escalate into larger problems and, if left unaddressed, can have a significantly negative impact on productivity and organizational cohesion. The question becomes: how can one create an environment attentive to diversity that still has the required structure needed for success?

Communication

Although many tools can help to create a productive multicultural environment, one of the most critical is good communication skills. Communication is at the core of any business. It is how we share information, how we establish trust, how we develop relationships and how we maintain relationships.

Is communication difficult? No, at a very basic level communication is easy, for example pointing to indicate something is generally easily understood. However, success in business requires much more than basic communication skills. We need communication skills that allow us to share information accurately as well as build constructive relationships. Communication skills are also critical because communication happens externally and as such, *it is permanent*. We must try to be careful in our exchanges because once something is communicated, it can be qualified or contextualized - but it can never be withdrawn. Often statements made by politicians and other public figures hurt their image or cost them their job, *even if the statement was made many years before*. This is not an experience that is limited to public figures, – how often in our own lives have we heard something like, "do you remember the time that you said..."

These are some of the many reasons that communication skills are crucial and are in many ways the single most important tool we have for creating a successful working environment. The problem is that while basic communication is easy, communicating effectively is actually quite difficult. It can be challenging even in conversations between people with identical backgrounds (for example, think about conflicts with a sibling, spouse or child). How many times are these conflicts in some way related to communication failure? Effective communication is often challenging in a homogenous setting and in a culturally diverse environment, it becomes much harder.

Noise is another factor that is often associated with communication difficulty. It can be very hard to hold an involved conversation in a crowded and noisy bar. Noise, however, is not just auditory. It can refer to anything that is distracting or interferes with communication. For example, it could be caused by not understanding the meaning of a word or how the word is being used. Psychological issues such as stress or anger can also be considered noise, as they will interfere with our ability to communicate effectively. When we are stressed or distressed, we may find it difficult to form cohesive sentences and our listening ability is often greatly diminished.

In summary, effective communication is a complex and challenging process. Because of the many hindrances that can degrade or obstruct our ability to pass information, communication is problematic in the most familiar of environments. Further, it is often much more challenging in culturally diverse environments because of the additional linguistic barriers, difference in communication styles, expectations, approaches and understandings, etc. Yet, because of the permanence of communication, it is critical that we be attentive to both what we say and how we say it.

So how *does* one communicate effectively in today's multicultural world? To improve communication we must better understand what it is to communicate.

Communication defined

What is communication? Communication is a way for us to both share information (our thoughts, ideas, feelings, needs, etc.) and make connections with other people. On a very basic level, it is the process of transferring information. This means that at least two parties are needed for the process. Verbal communication requires coding information in symbols, sending it and subsequently receiving and decoding the symbols. One of the initial problems in communication is that the process of using symbols to represent our thoughts, feelings or ideas is itself often difficult. Spoken language is the most common way of communicating thoughts, yet what we are thinking is often more complex than the language we have to express it. Have you ever struggled to find the right words to describe or express something? Our communication effectiveness is limited by our ability to use language; by our ability to code complex thoughts into symbols. Likewise, the language ability of the person with whom we are communicating also limits communication effectiveness. No matter how well we organize and communicate potentially complex thoughts, we must also rely on the ability of

the recipient to decode the language. The result of these challenges and limitations is that we may not be communicating exactly what we want to say.

Not all communication challenges are limited to language. We send and receive messages on many levels such as by the clothes or jewelry we wear. Further, communication is not always intentional. A simple example of this could be a wave to a friend on the street and a taxi sees you and stops. In this instance, the communication with your friend was intentional and the communication with the taxi was unintentional. In sum, communication is the complex process of sending and receiving of information, at multiple levels, intentional or otherwise to the world around us. A process that becomes *much more complex* in a multicultural environment.

How does one effectively communicating in a culturally diverse environment? The obvious tool that emerges when looking at multicultural communication is language skills. Certainly knowing how to speak another language is advantageous; if you are working in Tokyo, knowledge of Japanese is invaluable. However, effective communication goes well beyond structural knowledge of a language and must include the social or cultural component. This social component of communication is not only a critical aspect of effective communication but is also often the hardest aspect to learn.

The social component to communication

What is this social aspect to communication and how do we learn about it? First, remember that communication is not used just to share information; it is a way of connecting with others. For example, if you are sitting in a bar alone and another person comes in, he or she may ask you about the weather. Do they do this because you think you are not aware of the weather? Of course they know you are aware. When we say, "Sure has been hot the past few days", we are not really talking about the weather at all. What we are really doing is acknowledging that we are two people passing some time together in the same place and establishing a basic connection. The challenge is that both parties must be aware of the intended meaning of the message we are using to establish this connection.

This emphasizes another component of social communication, comprehending the intended meaning in a message. One example would be the simple question, "How are you doing?" You could reply "Fine, thanks". Alternatively, you could say, "I'm tired because I stayed up late working on a project, I am really stressed, my child is sick, I did not sleep well and I have not had my coffee yet". Literally, this is an open-ended question regarding a person's

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well-being. Functionally, however, in colloquial United States English, "How are you doing?" is just a greeting. Thus, while the latter reply is an appropriate response to the literal question, it may not represent appropriate communication, since we tend to respond to people based on what they mean rather than what they literally say. For people not versed in the social aspect of communication within a particular cultural context, cases such as the commonly used "How are you doing?" can be confusing, frustrating and alienating. Which is why to communicate effectively you have to know both the linguistic meaning and the implied or underlying meaning of a statement.

Sometimes, when the functional meaning of a saying or expression cannot be inferred from its literal translation in a language, this is called an idiom. Idioms and other similar nuances exist in every communication system and are often more complex than the given example. Moreover, because these components are so ingrained in the language, native speakers are rarely aware when they use them. To complicate things further, idiomatic expressions change within a language depending on where it is spoken. American English idioms are often not the same as the ones used in Australian English, British English, Indian English or South African English (idioms also will change within different regions of a country such as Boston, LA and Dallas).

Another component of social communication is culture-bound terms. For example, something as simple as the concept of a 'knock, knock joke' may not be understood by someone from another culture, even if they are a native English speaker. Other culture-bound words that are common in the United States that may be hard to understand include, 'pie chart', 'high five', 'get out of jail free card', 'touchdown', 'piggy bank', etc. Like the other aspects of social communication, we are rarely aware when we use these terms. Further, while their meaning may seem obvious to us they can be the source of great confusion for others. It would be similar to someone from Britain using the phase "Bonfire Night". This term would have very little meaning without understanding the cultural reference of Guy Fawkes, the revolutionary who attempted to blow up the British House of Parliament on November 5, 1605 (celebrated now as Bonfire Night).

Differences in communication

Differences in communication traits come in many forms other than just diverse vocabulary. There will be basic differences in the grammatical components in language, such as the order of the elements in a sentence, the genderization of nouns or the use of prepositions. Another difference between languages is there may not be corresponding terms or concepts. A simple

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example would be trying to describe an igloo to someone from a central African country or trying to use the metaphor of an oasis when talking to a speaker of the Yupik languages of northern Alaska. Further, even if both people are speaking a common language, such as English, identical words may have different meanings. For example, "lift" in American English could be a verb that means to provide a ride; in British English, it could be a noun for elevator. A "nick" in American English could be a noun for a small cut; in British English, it could be a verb that means to steal. In American English, a 'snag' could be an unforeseen obstacle or an action that means to catch something. In Australian English, a 'snag' could be a sausage. Imagine how it could be interpreted in Australia if you said, 'I am sorry I was late, I hit a snag on my way in'.

Non-Verbal Communication

These are some of the challenges of communicating using language. Moreover, as noted earlier, we also communicate to others on secondary channels such as sight, touch, smell or taste. The challenge is that we cannot always control these secondary aspects nor are we always aware of the secondary information that we are sending. A simple example of intentional secondary communication is the manner in which we dress or the jewelry we wear, such as a wedding ring. Generally going to a job interview we will be well groomed, well dressed and arrive early. We do this to communicate to the prospective employer that we are professional and reliable.

Other means of communication that we can try to control include our smell, movement (fidgeting), our body position (posture), facial expressions, yawning, the vocabulary we use, etc. Note, I say, 'try' to control because our ability to control these messages depends foremost on our awareness of these messages. It also strongly depends on less controllable aspects, for example, if we are nervous or scared we may be unable to control our smell or body movements. There are also numerous elements of communication that are harder or impossible to control, for example, our age, skin color, gender and other physical traits.

The challenge is that people will interpret our non-verbal communication, intentional or otherwise, in different ways. Perhaps a person rides a bike to work and wears green to indicate that he or she is environmentally friendly. Riding a bike could indicate environmentally friendly or it could indicate that the person is too poor to own a car, the person has a low social status or perhaps the person had their driving license revoked. The color green can also have different interpretations; in the United States among other things green can mean 'go' as in a traffic signal, environmentally friendly, envy, a novice or money.

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In other places, green could indicate a new family member, water, a sacred color in Islam or perhaps infidelity on the part of your spouse.

Awareness of non-verbal communication is invaluable. It helps us to be at least somewhat conscious of secondary messages that we may be sending out in face-to-face settings as well as potentially providing a way to reinforce a primary message. The challenge is that in today's diverse organizational settings the meanings of these secondary messages can completely change. The following will describe four components of non-verbal communication; kinesics (movement), proxemics (distance), intonation (tone) and chronemics (time) and give some simple examples of how these can differ in a diverse settings.

1. Kinesics looks at the interpretation of body movement such as body language, gestures, eye contact, etc. For example, in some places, eye contact is encouraged because it is a sign of paying attention or of interest. In other environments, eye contact is discouraged, as it is a sign of aggression. Even gestures as simple as head movements to show agreement or dissent can be different. For example, the Indian head wobble, a kind of side-to-side head tilting motion, which, depending on where you are in India can mean, among other things, yes, no or I don't know. In another example, a way to show support or encouragement to a colleague could be a quick pat on the back; however, in many settings this is completely inappropriate and very unprofessional. Further, there also are environments where touching of any kind is strictly prohibited especially between the sexes.

2. Proxemics looks at how people use personal space or their personal space requirements. In some places, it is polite to stand at least one foot away from other people during conversations. Standing too close could, among other things, communicate romantic interest or aggression. In other cultures however, it is common for people to stand or sit right next to each other during a conversation. Moving away in this setting could convey lack of interest in the conversation/topic, distrust or personal dislike.

3. Intonation can also send non-verbal messages. The sentence, "You are going home" could be either a statement or a question depending on the accent on the word 'home'. The difficulty is that the meanings associated with intonations are not universal. For example, intonation that would indicate a question for one group could indicate irritation or anger to another group. This simple difference has the potential to create huge communication problems or challenges for a diverse group.

4. Finally, chronemics is the study of how people use time. In conversation if someone asks a question, the amount of time it takes someone to respond can vary greatly. Some groups will respond to a question almost immediately (or start answering while the question is still being posed). In these situations, people might expect to get an almost immediate reply once a question has been asked. However, in other settings it is more common for people to take their time in replying to a question. Conflict can arise when a person may be insulted if they get an immediate reply to their statement when they believe that more time should be given to *considering* what they had just said. Conversely, someone who expects an immediate reply and does not get one may think his or her conversation partner is uninterested in the topic or has nothing to add. This also brings up another issue, that one must also consider the time it takes for people to process information in their non-native languages. Even if someone wants to reply immediately, he or she may not be able to because of the time it takes to decipher the question and formulate an answer. Lastly, there is the issue of talking over someone else. In some environments, it is common to interrupt or talk over someone else who is speaking, however in other settings this is considered extremely impolite or rude and will be a source of conflict.

    Another example of chronemics relates to scheduling. In the United States, it is typical to arrive for a job interview about 10 – 15 minutes early; arriving late will often mean an immediate loss of consideration by the employer. Arriving late for business meetings in the U.S. could be viewed as, interruptive and potentially disrespectful or rude. However, in some cultures, meetings rarely start at the stated time and tardiness is tolerated and even expected.

Non-verbal communication is not limited to face-to-face exchanges. If we send a physical letter in the mail, the type of paper we use sends a message. For instance, we often choose nicer paper when we send wedding invitations or resumes. Even the stamp we choose sends a message. When using e-mail, we communicate based on the time an e-mail is sent as well as the e-mail account we are using (i.e. work, home, school, Yahoo!, Hotmail, etc.). These are some of the many ways we may be subconsciously and inadvertently communicating to those around us.

How to address communication challenges

Communication is a complex and challenging process. This paper has examined just some of the many ways in which communication can vary between cultures as well as individuals. While effective communication is difficult especially in diverse environments, good communication is achievable! Many steps can help us communicate effectively. In my experience however, there are three essential points to remember when working with diverse groups. I list them as The ABCs of Intercultural Communication*:

- One, **A**cknowledge differences in communication style between yourself and those around you. Encourage groups to remember they each may have differences in communication style. Even if a group seems to be completely homogenous, anticipating variance will help increase awareness of distinctions that may not be immediately obvious. Acknowledging differences is the most important step and the most critical to be effective.

- Two, **B**i-level: asserts that communication is not just speaking and listening but is a holistic process including verbal and non-verbal channels. Awareness of non-verbal communication is critical, as it will send messages that will reinforce or invalidate what you say verbally.

- Three, **C**larify! If you are unclear or even think you may be unclear about what is being communicated, ask for clarification. Have you ever had a discussion with someone else and had a clear understanding of what was said only to discover later that your understanding was much different from that of the other person? Spending a little extra time to verify understanding can save a lot of time and frustration.

Here are some other guidelines to keep in mind in cross-cultural communication:

- Be patient, things will not run as smoothly in a multicultural group as they will in a homogenous one. Allow people time to process information and respond. Allow time for the communication process to develop. A little bit of patience can save a lot of stress and headache.

- Be self-reflective, communication is a **two-party system**; try to be aware of your role in any communication difficulties. Just because what you are saying is perfectly clear to you, does not mean that it will be perfectly clear to someone else. Also, remember that not everyone speaks at the same level, be accommodating when listening to others.

- Remember one or more people may not be speaking in their native tongue. Choose your words carefully, try to avoid using obscure words and try to refrain from using idioms or other non-literal expressions. Native English speakers are rarely aware of how many

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idioms exist in the language. For example, 'bear in mind', 'keep in mind', 'take into account', are all idioms for the word 'remember'. A quick search on the web under idioms will help to increase awareness of the number of idioms in English, also look up 'phrasal verbs'.

- Avoid using culture specific terms that can be confusing such as, blue-collar, white-collar, high-five, get-out-of-jail-free card, knock-knock, etc.

- Try to avoid abbreviations and acronyms. Terms such as FYI, ASAP, NYC, UCLA, MBA, Cali, Sci-Fi, Mickey D's, Ho-Jo, etc. can be very confusing to non-native English speakers.

- When giving someone a long number sequence, spell out the numbers rather than using shortcuts. For example, for 22555 say: "two, two, five, five, five" instead of "double two, triple five" (or trip fives).

- Try to be adaptable and open to new ways of communicating and using language. People may speak slower, faster or interrupt more, people may use different vocabulary (such as lorry rather than truck), people may want to do business in a café rather than a conference room, people may want to socialize and ask about your family before they talk about business, etc.

- When working with a diverse group, use turn taking. Some people will be more comfortable speaking in the group and may seem more aggressive. Turn taking is one way to encourage all members of a group to contribute.

- When working with a group that includes non-native speakers, always allow them extra time to process what is said as well as extra time to contribute to a discussion. Remember it is not easy to communicate complex ideas and it is much harder when it is not in your native language.

- Be explicit in your communication, it is better to have too many details rather than too few.

- When you have opportunity, use multiple forms of communication. If you are able, after a conversation, call and/or follow up with an e-mail or memo.

- When following up on a conversation, avoid using yes or no questions such as "do you understand?" or the idiomatic "do you get it?" to gauge understanding. Instead, ask someone to review the conversation or key points with you. This gives you a better way to determine their understanding of the information conveyed in the conversation.

- Create a positive environment. People will communicate more easily when they feel comfortable. The better the relationship you have, the better you will be able to communicate.

- Encourage dialogue in your group. Small group activities can foster communication and promote connection between people with divergent backgrounds.

- Do not rely on either common stereotypes or consultants who are 'experts' in country X. Chances are that country X has a **_wide range_** of communication styles. The best way to find out about communication norms of a particular group is to speak with someone who is from the **_specific_** area or city. For example, chances are that you would not send someone from Dallas, Texas to explain to a foreign client how to communicate effectively in New York City.

- Take diversity awareness trainings. These trainings will focus on general understandings of diversity rather than learning about the specific habits or traits of a cultural group. The trainings work by creating a broader understanding of diversity and increasing overall cultural awareness of the participants. They can help both managers and groups to communicate more effectively in a variety of setting. These trainings also work as team exercises and will provide an opportunity for dialogue, which will allow people to learn more about each other and create the prospect for a more genial workplace.

In sum, more and more organizations include culturally diverse groups and multicultural collaborations. Managing or working in these environments can pose challenges, but it can also be the source of fresh perspectives and ideas. In today's global and diverse world, we can leverage these advantages and mitigate the risks through both awareness of the complexity of communication and by adapting our own communication techniques. Moreover, these communication issues are not unique to diverse settings, good communication skills are essential for success in any environment. The better we are able to communicate the greater the chance we will have to develop trust, enhance collaboration, increase productivity and succeed when working in any setting or with any group.

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