

TALKING TO SPEAKERS OF OTHER LANGUAGES

Cultural Linguistic Services, Human Resources, 120 USB,
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Globalization lies at the heart of modern culture; cultural practices lie at the heart of globalization.

— John Tomlinson, *Globalization and Culture*

You can be totally rational with a machine.
But if you work with people, sometimes logic often has to take a backseat to understanding.

—Akio Morita

CROSS-CULTURAL BASICS

Cross-cultural communication takes some effort because you cannot rely on shared assumptions, values, and beliefs. Also, these shared assumptions, values, and beliefs are often hidden and may take some time to discover (unlike differences in food, clothing, and native language, which are often obvious).

The rewards you can get from cross-cultural communication make the extra effort worthwhile. People from other backgrounds can help you gain new perspectives, challenge your problem solving skills, and make you more flexible.

There is no easy way to achieve good cross-cultural communication, but here are some basic ideas to remember:

- Don't leap to conclusions, and avoid using stereotypes to make judgments.
- Be patient and tolerate ambiguity and complexity.
- Be willing to take risks and make mistakes.
- Be adaptable with your expectations and your work-style.
- Actively pursue learning about the differences between cultures.

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION TIPS

Cultural generalizations may be accurate about the typical behavior of a certain culture as a whole, but individuals choose to follow or NOT follow certain cultural norms based on their personalities. It's important to remember that culture is always changing, and people adapt to different cultures surrounding them to differing degrees. One country may contain many, very different cultural groups. Generalizations tend to refer to the most privileged group. For all these reasons, WE NEED TO FOCUS ON THE INDIVIDUAL WHEN TRYING TO COMMUNICATE.

- Avoid using jargon, slang, idiomatic expressions, contractions, and colloquialisms unless you are certain their meanings will be understood. Don't use words that you have just learned unless you are sure you can use them correctly. Avoid long sentences, double negatives, and negative wording.
- People's intelligence is often unjustly judged based on their language ability. Do not lose confidence in yourself if language learning is difficult. Very intelligent people may have trouble acquiring a new language as an adult.
- If a listener seems to be having trouble understanding you, enunciate more clearly, speak more slowly, or try to use a standard accent. Invite feedback on the clarity of your speech.
- Do not expect "yes" to always mean *yes*. Do not expect to hear "no" as the only way to say *no*. When you have doubts about what was communicated, rephrase what you think was said, and ask if that is correct.
- Work on building relationships with people you need to communicate with. This may take some time, and be uncomfortable if they are different from you, but it will probably help you understand more of what they say. Try not to feel offended when people from other backgrounds don't act the way that you expect them to. They may not mean to offend you.
- Teach others skills that you are good at. Some U.S. natives may not be good at working cooperatively in groups. Those from some different cultures may need to be encouraged to take greater personal responsibility and work more independently.
- Do not criticize your co-workers or friends directly in front of others. Being direct with someone who highly values indirectness may lead to offending someone unintentionally. Be careful about giving praise in front of others. Some U.S. natives may need frequent praise and appreciate it in front of others, but those from less competitive, individualistic cultures may feel embarrassed.
- Encourage co-workers or friends to talk about conflicts with you directly or through a mediator. Reassure them by explaining what will happen if they come to you with a problem or suggestion, otherwise you may never hear about what is bothering someone.
- If someone seems to be suffering from severe culture shock or depression, be sensitive about the person's feelings. Everyone who chooses to go abroad or live in a new culture experiences culture shock to some degree. It may be necessary to explain that seeking help from a counselor is not shameful, and will be confidential.

More Conversational Puzzles

These conversation examples are also by Craig Storti ([Figuring Foreigners Out: A Practical Guide](#)).

◆ The Deadline

- Carol: How's the design coming along, Yang?
- Yang: Fine, fine.
- Carol: Are we still on schedule?
- Yang: Oh yes. We're working extra hard on this.
- Carol: Great. My people are anxious to see the new layout.
- Yang: Of course. When are they expecting to see it?
- Carol: By the end of the week, like we agreed.
- Yang: I see.

Is the design still on schedule? Does Yang really not know when the deadline is?

◆ A Question

- Theresa: That was an excellent presentation. You and Dr. Nagai must have worked very hard on this.
- Miss Yoshikawa: I was very honored to be asked by Dr. Nagai to assist him on this project. He's my thesis advisor, you know.
- Theresa: Well, you were very good. He's lucky to have found you. I had a question about a point you made at the end.
- Miss Yoshikawa: Yes, of course. Let me just get Dr. Nagai.
- Theresa: Oh, don't bother him; he's talking to some other people. Anyway, it's about a point that you made.
- Miss Yoshikawa: I see. Can I get you some tea?

Will Miss Yoshikawa answer Theresa's question? Why does she insist on getting Dr. Nagai?

For More Help...

- Try the SkillSoft class "The Impact of Culture on Communication": <https://login.uiowa.edu/uip/login.page?service=http://web-farm3.its.uiowa.edu/skillsoft/>
- Peruse [Figuring Foreigners Out: A Practical Guide](#) by Craig Storti, 1999, Intercultural Press. (Available in Books 24/7 after you login to SkillSoft.)

CONVERSATIONAL PUZZLES

These conversation examples by Craig Storti ([Cross-Cultural Dialogues](#), [Figuring Foreigners Out: A Practical Guide](#) both from Intercultural Press) can be used for discussion with co-workers or friends.

THE THINKER

- RICHARD: DID CLAUDE TURN IN HIS FINAL DRAFT YET?
- ISABELLE: NO, HE'S STILL WORKING ON IT. YOU KNOW CLAUDE, ALWAYS THINKING AND PONDERING.
- RICHARD: BUT I NEEDED THAT REPORT LAST WEEK.
- ISABELLE: I KNOW. CLAUDE NEVER MEETS HIS DEADLINES; IT'S A REAL PROBLEM. BUT HIS IDEAS ARE SO WONDERFUL, AREN'T THEY?
- RICHARD: I'VE COMPLAINED ABOUT HIM TWICE TO OUR BOSS, BUT HE DOESN'T DO ANYTHING.
- ISABELLE: YOU'VE COMPLAINED? WHY?

Who is the employee from the U.S.? Why doesn't Richard like Claude? What would you do if you were Isabelle and Richard's co-worker or boss?

TEA

- MR. WALKER: I WAS WONDERING, MR. SINGH, IF THE BOOKS I'D ORDERED HAD COME IN YET?
- MR. SINGH: YES, YES. THE BOOKS HAVE ARRIVED AT THE WAREHOUSE.
- MR. WALKER: OH, GOOD. MAYBE I CAN PICK THEM UP ON MY WAY HOME.
- MR. SINGH: NO, NO. I WILL SEND SOMEONE TO BRING THEM FOR YOU.
- MR. WALKER: THAT'S VERY KIND, BUT I DON'T MIND GOING ALONG. IN CASE THEY NEED HELP.
- MR. SINGH: NO, NO. YOU WAIT HERE, MR. WALKER. AND WE WILL DRINK TEA.

Why will Mr. Walker feel uncomfortable drinking tea? What could Mr. Walker and Mr. Singh do so that they both feel comfortable?

FOR MORE INFORMATION, OR FOR WORKPLACE SPECIFIC ASSISTANCE:
PLEASE CONTACT CULTURAL LINGUISTIC SERVICES, THE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA
[HTTP://WWW.UIOWA.EDU/HR/ADMINISTRATION/LINGUISTICS](http://www.uiowa.edu/hr/administration/linguistics)

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