

Cross cultural communication is about dealing with people from other cultures in a way that minimises misunderstandings and maximises your potential to create strong cross cultural working relationships. The tips below should be seen as a starting point to greater cross cultural awareness.

Be Supportive

Effective cross cultural communication is in essence about being comfortable. Giving encouragement to those with weak English gives them confidence.

Maintain Etiquette

Many cultures have certain etiquette when communicating. It is always a good idea to undertake some cross cultural awareness training or at least do some research on the target culture.

Slow Down

Even when English is the common language in a cross cultural situation, this does not mean you should speak at normal speed. Slow down, speak clearly and ensure your pronunciation is intelligible. Speak in plain English and avoid acronyms, jargon and slang.

Separate Questions

Try not to ask double questions such as, "Do you want to carry on or shall we stop here?" In a cross cultural situation only the first or second question may have been comprehended. Let your listener answer one question at a time.

Avoid Negative Questions

Many cross cultural communication misunderstandings have been caused by the use of negative questions and answers. In English we answer 'yes' if the answer is affirmative and 'no' if it is negative. In other cultures a 'yes' or 'no' may only be indicating whether the questioner is right or wrong. For example, the response to "Are you not coming?" may be 'yes', meaning 'Yes, I am not coming.'

Take Turns

Cross cultural communication is enhanced through taking turns to talk, making a point and then listening to the response.

Write it Down

If you are unsure whether something has been understood write it down and check. This can be useful when using large figures.

Check Meanings

When communicating across cultures never assume the other party has understood. Be an active listener. Summarise what has been said in order to verify it. This is a very effective way of ensuring accurate cross cultural communication has taken place.

Avoid Slang

Even the most well educated foreigner will not have a complete knowledge of slang, idioms and sayings. The danger is that the words will be understood but the meaning missed.

Watch the Humour

In many cultures business and work is taken very seriously. Professionalism and protocol are constantly observed. Many cultures will not appreciate the use of humour and jokes in the business context. When using humour think whether it will be understood in the other culture. For example, Australian sarcasm can have a negative effect on people from another culture.

Eye Contact

In many cultures it is rude to look people in the eye. As a sign of respect, people from some cultures frequently listen without looking at the person speaking.

Body Language

Some individuals who show few signs of attention when spoken to may nevertheless be listening. Do not assume that a person who is not responding appropriately has failed to grasp your message and proceed to speak in a louder voice.

Speak Quietly and Calmly

Raising your voice can cause confusion and unpleasantness. A quieter voice accompanied by a more personalised, less aggressive approach achieves much better results. It activates normal co-operation tendencies.

Be Patient

Listen, be receptive and allow people time to finish a thought or a sentence. Do not talk over people and do not try to fill silence with unnecessary talk. To interrupt or show disinterest or impatience is to show a lack of respect.

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