

5 Strategies for Effective Cross-Cultural Interactions

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Most people would agree that it's easier to connect with colleagues who share basic similarities—culture, language, communication styles—because that mutual understanding facilitates the kind of communication that make work relationships smoother. According to a 2016 global survey from CultureWizard, with respondents from 80 countries, **68 percent** reported that cultural challenges were the biggest hurdle to global virtual team productivity and **18 percent** reported that their companies have lost business opportunities because of cultural misunderstandings (my firm would estimate that number to be higher).



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These days, even if you share office space with co-workers, multicultural factors are at play. This means that your staff must work effectively across diverse communication styles and cultural backgrounds to achieve business goals.

But what does working effectively mean on a practical level? It means actively working to understand people to influence and motivate them to achieve business results. This is even more critical when managing employees in global organizations.

Virtual team managers must learn how to effectively communicate across cultures to accomplish results. If you follow the five strategies below, you will develop your cross-cultural virtual communication skills and become more effective in these global settings.

I use the acronym LEARN to outline these steps:

- L**isten
- E**ffectively communicate
- A**void ambiguity
- R**espect differences
- N**o judgment

Strategy 1: Listen

Active listening is the single most useful way to overcome barriers to effective communication. We listen for meaning by checking back with the speaker to ensure that we have accurately heard and understood what was said. Communicating across cultures adds another layer to the “noise” that is already present, which makes it critical to add that extra step of checking back.

Listen for meaning. For example, people from diverse cultures may use the same word in different ways, so repeating what you think you heard and asking if that’s what was intended confirms your understanding of its meaning.

Incorporate the following techniques into your everyday communications:

- Listen without thinking ahead or considering what you will say next.
- Ask questions to ensure that you accurately understand the message being conveyed.
- Don’t assume that you understand the meaning of someone else’s statement. And, don’t assume that what you mean to convey is understood by the listener. Paraphrase back to the speaker to clarify understanding.

Strategy 2: Effectively communicate

Virtual teams must compensate for the lack of visual and physical cues. The aim is to keep the communication lines open and transparent so that when conflicts arise—and they will—you can quickly find a resolution. Here is a helpful four-step technique to keep your cultural communication lines open.

- **Respond** with appropriate words that will not inflame a situation when you sense difficulty. If you have an impulse to disagree with, reject, or ignore what someone has said, ask or email for clarification.
- **Deliver balanced feedback.** To influence another or when you have concerns about someone’s work or idea, itemize the merits and faults in the correct order, making them **specific and task-related feedback**. Remember to express all faults as *concerns*.
- **Build on an idea.** Mention an additional benefit or advantage, and/or suggest a modification when someone presents an idea. Indicate the connection between the person’s idea and what you’ll say. “*What you said makes me think that....*” or “*Not only that, but it would also make sense to....*”
- **Give credit and positive reinforcement.** To increase the likelihood of a behavior reoccurring or to compliment someone whose behavior exceeds expectations, provide a specific example of the idea or task being credited. Indicate the benefits: “It sure will help marketing generate interest in our newest models.”

Strategy 3: Avoid ambiguity

Avoiding or tolerating ambiguity doesn’t necessarily mean that you deliberately avoid ambiguous situations. The goal is to avoid the uneasiness that could lead to frustration, which hinders your ability to effectively communicate. Having prior knowledge about team members’ cultures can also help reduce ambiguity. The greater your knowledge about another culture the less ambiguous it becomes.

Try some of these suggestions to learn more about your colleague’s culture:

- Make it your business to learn at least one fact about every member's culture.
- No one expects you to master a slew of foreign languages; however, using the phrases *please* and *thank you* in the individual's native tongue is appreciated.
- Watch or read the news from your team members' countries of origin. Discuss cultural topics to better understand different viewpoints (though it may be best to avoid political issues).
- Become aware of the traditional festivals of your virtual team members' countries. They may genuinely appreciate a greeting via email or IM on that day.

In addition, here are some ideas to build a virtual environment that avoids ambiguity:

- Create a safe, friendly environment that encourages participation.
- Recognize your own assumptions and pre-judgments, which may be clouded by cultural backgrounds, past experiences and subconscious bias.
- Encourage participation in conference calls so that questions are brought up.
- Build in feedback loops to ensure clarity.

Strategy 4: Respect differences

Just as you want to be respected for distinctive characteristics that you may bring to a group, others do as well. While diverse cultures vary in how they show respect (e.g. the bow in Japan) following these general guidelines should lead to positive results:

- Make it your business to learn at least one fact about every member's culture.
- Assume a clear and welcoming tone when you communicate by phone.
- Demonstrate flexibility. Be open to discussing other options.
- No one expects you to master a slew of foreign languages; however, using the phrases please and thank you in the individual's native tongue is appreciated.
- Respect different time zones when scheduling virtual meetings. Work toward sharing this responsibility so that everyone's availability and time preferences are honored equally.

Strategy 5: No judgment

Respecting others means suspending judgment. Consider several alternative possibilities and use this three-step evaluation approach:

- **Describe the issue.** For example: A recruiter is staffing up the data processing area when an applicant walks in, and without a glance at the recruiter, sits down in the nearest chair without waiting to be invited. Before you make assumptions about this behavior, consider several reasons for it:
 - He suffers from a painful leg condition which is alleviated by sitting.
 - In some cultures (like the Samoan culture) it is not appropriate to speak to, or even make eye contact with, authority figures until invited. You do not stand while they are sitting, because to do so would place you physically higher than they are, implying serious disrespect.
- **Interpret.** Instead of believing this young man to be rude, consider the possibility that he is merely acting appropriately for his cultural background.
- **Evaluate.** Instead of thinking, "I won't pass this young man on to the data center," contemplate saying, "Thanks for coming in today to our company. Please tell me a little about yourself." (And find out about his cultural prism.)

The following strategies can help you suspend judgment when working with people of other cultures:

- Take the time to reflect before saying or doing something that you may regret and consider several interpretations of the behavior or situation in question.
- Accept the possibility that what occurred could be due to some other circumstances (e.g., having a bad day, dealing with personal issues).
- Be aware of your personal biases. For example, in business situations, you may prefer to communicate in a direct manner rather than to smooth over differences without confronting an issue. Be aware that different cultures handle areas of disagreement in a much more circumspect manner. Increase your self-awareness when you find yourself in these situations and make that extra effort to explore the issue in as non-confrontational a manner as possible, even if that takes additional time. Repeat, rephrase and maintain your cool.
- Be patient, flexible, forgiving. Remain positive. Don't always assume the worst, most negative outcome.
- Avoid blaming others or making comments such as, "You don't understand" or "What's your problem?" because they may cause the other party to respond defensively.
- Use descriptive and objective language.
- Be mindful of terms people use to explain themselves and the world around them, as certain terms have different meanings across cultures. For example, in certain countries, such as in India, when your communication partner says "yes," it's possible that s/he is merely telling you that your statement is understood, *not* that there is agreement. It's up to you to go back and forth until you're satisfied that what you conveyed was understood *and agreed to*, even if that means asking the person to repeat back to you what you have just agreed on. In addition, follow up with an email to solidify it in writing.

Whether you interact with local or global colleagues, you are always operating in a cross-cultural world. And your biggest challenge on virtual teams is the cross-cultural one. It's a whole other layer on top of the other virtual team elements, one that is always lurking in the background.

In our shrinking world, organizations must adapt to this new age where colleagues from many rich cultures simultaneously compete and collaborate. Managers are finding that cultural differences in their virtual teams pose special problems and opportunities that were not anticipated. The good news is that many have developed capabilities to overcome these difficulties and now learn how to effectively communicate across cultures.



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She will be speaking at the upcoming IMA conference on 19 June 2017 in Denver, Colorado, on "Mastering the Challenges of Cross Cultural Communications."

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