

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Intercultural or cross cultural communication refers to **communication** between individuals and groups of different **cultural backgrounds**. Intercultural communication skills are those required to communicate, or share information, with people from other cultures and social groups. While language skills may be an important part of intercultural communication, they are by no means the only **requirement**. Intercultural communication also requires an understanding that different cultures have different **customs**, standards, social mores, gestures, and beliefs, or **thought patterns**. Finally, good intercultural communication skills requires a **willingness** to accept differences and adapt to them.

A Starting Point for Intercultural Communication

A desire for intercultural communication starts from the point of view that communication is better if it is constructive, and does not suffer from misunderstandings and breakdowns.

Knowledge for Intercultural Communication

Key areas of knowledge for those wanting to improve their intercultural communication are:

- Some knowledge of the cultures, organisations and institutions, history and general way of living of different communities and nations.
- Recognition that these aspects affect behavioural norms. For example, there is considerable 'history' between the Greeks and Turks, and therefore it may be considered potentially a problem to serve Turkish food to a Greek person.
- An understanding of how culture can affect communication and language. For example, people from Nordic countries are often said to speak more **directly** than native English speakers who tend to use more 'polite' language. Scandinavians in the UK have reported causing **offence** to English people by failing to say 'please' and 'thank you' enough.
- Some understanding of the conventions that may govern behaviour in certain specific intercultural environments, such as views on the role of women, or the licence (or otherwise) permitted to children.
- Crucially, **awareness** of your own and other people's beliefs and **values**, and a willingness to **recognise** when these may clash.
- Sensitivity towards **cultural stereotypes** that may affect and interfere with intercultural communication.

Applying Your Knowledge

Once you have developed this knowledge and understanding, you can start to apply it to your communications across cultures and even languages.

Some useful starting points may be:

Demonstrate your willingness to meet others at least halfway by learning a few phrases in their language.

This is easy if you know that you're going on holiday somewhere, but it's also important for expatriate assignments and other business trips. A few phrases, even if it's only 'Good morning', 'good evening', and 'thank you', will go a long way.

Talk to people who know the culture about common traps and problems.

Before you go, find people who know the region to which you're travelling, and ask their advice. Ask your co-workers (friends) what people commonly do that's just 'wrong', or what problems they have encountered, and learn from it. Listen carefully to their answers, including what they don't say, as this can tell you a lot.

Adapt your behaviour, and don't always expect others to adapt to you

This includes not being offended if someone unwittingly does something that you find difficult to accept. You don't have to accept it, but it's best to explain politely why you find it hard.

Check your understanding and that of others

The best way to avoid misunderstandings is to listen carefully and check understanding regularly in the course of a conversation. Ask questions to make sure that you have understood, and ask others to recap what you have said to ensure that they have understood you.

Don't be afraid to apologise

You can usually see quite quickly if you have caused offence. The fastest way to manage that is to apologise, and ask what it was that you did. A confession of total ignorance will often go a long way to mitigate offence. Ignoring it will just offend further.

Use local television to learn about behavioural issues and norms

You wouldn't want to rely on television dramas as your only source of information, but they can provide useful insights. In the UK, for instance, Coronation Street or EastEnders could give you an idea of what's considered acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. Comedies are perhaps less reliable as they often use communication difficulties to generate laughs.

Reflect on your experience

As with so many aspects of life, a little reflection about your experience can help you to put it in context, especially if you are able to discuss it with someone else in a similar position.

It is important to understand what intercultural communication is but it's also important to understand what it isn't. Intercultural communication is targeted at allowing for positive and productive interaction. You are not joining this culture, you are not becoming a member of another society, you are not abandoning your own culture.

Ex. 1) **Decide if the following sentences are true or false. If they are false, make them true.**

1. If you have good language skills, you cannot make a mistake in your intercultural communication.
T/F
2. Accepting differences is necessary for successful intercultural communication. T/F
3. There is a connection between cultural background and people's behaviour. T/F
4. Native English people speak more directly to be understood clearly. T/F
5. Believing in cultural stereotypes usually helps in intercultural communication. T/F
6. Learning some basic phrases in a foreign language is good as it shows your interest in the culture and communication. T/F
7. It is not polite to make sure if you have understood. Asking questions may make people feel irritated.
T/F
8. The best way to get some cultural insight is to watch comedies which are funny and show acceptable patterns of communication. T/F
9. If you unintentionally cause offence, it is better to apologise and ask why it was wrong. T/F
10. Intercultural communication does not mean that you are a member of another culture or leave your own. T/F

Ex 2) **Complete the following sentences with some of the highlighted words.**

1. His way of thinking and behaving is very predictable. He has the same _____ as I do.
2. _____ match people of the same ethnic group with the same qualities.
3. _____ on your own behaviour can help you to establish better relationships.
4. If you want to success, you need to _____ to the changing situation.
5. To remember all the important facts, let's _____ the points again.