

What Did You Say? Intercultural Expectations, Misunderstandings, and Communications

Frederick Zarndt
Global Connexions
frederick@frederickzarndt.com

Abstract

The ability to put things into conceptual categories or stereotypes is fundamental to perception. Stereotypes have advantages with respect to one's interactions with someone from another culture: They facilitate prediction of cultural behaviors, illuminate intent, and help one to avoid giving offense. However stereotypes also have serious disadvantages. For example, it is not hard to imagine the difficulties and embarrassments that may result when the intent predicted by a stereotype disguises real intent or when the behavior anticipated by it does not match real behavior. The film Lost in Translation provides excellent, comedic examples of such embarrassments and difficulties.

Cultures have been analyzed by several researchers using combinations of sociological surveys and personal experience. These cultural dimensions and simple behavioral tools for accommodating cultural differences are briefly described here (more fully described in the workshop).

1. Us and Them: But We Both Speak English!

What one says to compatriots in face-to-face conversations is often misunderstood; imagine the possibilities for misunderstanding with someone halfway around the world living in a very different culture and whose native language is not the one both of you are speaking! Clear communication is fundamental for the success of any project whether it is done by a small co-located group or by a globally dispersed team. And while the ubiquity of English facilitates basic communication, its use as a common language masks and disguises cultural differences and expectations. A foundation for cross-cultural communication and understanding cultural differences is not only useful but essential for any project executed by a geographically dispersed team. Such a

foundation is necessary to successfully negotiate requirements and to clearly communicate project status and progress as well as for simple day-to-day small talk.

Culture is broadly defined as “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group of people from others.”[1] Culture is different from human nature because human nature is shared by all humans. Culture is also different from personality but the border between the two is difficult to pinpoint. Generally speaking culture is what one shares with one's compatriots.

2. Uncertainty and Perplexity: Difficulties in Cross-cultural Communication

Any communication is a 3 step process of perception beginning with observation, typically followed by interpretation, and capped by evaluation or judgment. There are a number of steps in this process where communication can fail.

First, although one may think of oneself as a “good” observer, an observer perceives reality through his or her own perceptual filter. Although this filter sounds like a bad thing, in fact such a filter is necessary, or the brain would be overwhelmed with information. Consider that human eyes take in information at the rate of approximately 10 megabits per second and human ears at the rate of 50 kilobits per second. This amount of information would inundate the brain!

Hard to believe? While you are reading this, you are disregarding street noise, the sound of your colleague's keyboard, the whir of a computer fan, etc. This filter – by some called the reticular activating system -- has been programmed into your brain primarily as a result of your childhood formative years, your parents' care, and your cultural experiences. This filter allows you to see only what you expect to see.

Second, following observation one begins to interpret that which was observed. How does one

interpret? Using one's mental software – personality and culture – with which one's brain has been programmed by parents and community. Unfortunately the mental software one is using to interpret an observation may not be like the software of the persons you are observing or with whom you are interacting, in fact is guaranteed not to be the same if the observer is from a different culture.

The third step and the one that makes civil discourse between people of different cultures difficult is evaluation or judgment. (In fact evaluation or judgment makes civility difficult even between people from the same culture!) When one judges another person's or culture's actions or communications, generally the judgment does not favor the judged in the mind of the judge. Because of the judgment, the judged person or culture is often regarded with something less than respect, sometimes even contempt. This never results in clear communication or accurate understanding. repeat: Never!

3. Foundations: Cultural Dimensions and Differences

What can one do to avoid inaccurate interpretations and disrespectful judgments due to cultural differences?

Obviously understand the other culture and suspend one's judgment. There is nothing complicated with the first: It simply requires hard work and open-mindedness especially if one wants to understand several cultures.

The second, suspending judgment, is easy to say but very hard to do. It requires discernment without evaluation. It requires awareness of one's own thoughts and behaviors. And it often requires changing oneself, something which many have difficulty doing.

Rather than give specific recipes about cultural behaviors, it is far more productive to see how cultures differ in an abstract sense. The foundation one gets from such an abstraction develops understanding of cultural differences and allows flexibility in personal and business interactions.

Using sociological surveys and statistical methods, Geert Hofstede and others have measured cultural differences and found that they can be described in 5 dimensions:

- Power distance
- Collectivism and individualism
- Masculine and feminine
- Uncertainty avoidance
- Long-term and short-term orientation

Using different dimensions but the same principles, Richard Lewis [2] categorizes cultures as

- Linear-active
- Multi-active
- Reactive

Others classify differences in yet other categories. What is important to know is that while it may be difficult to thoroughly understand another culture, especially if it is radically different from one's own, it is quite feasible to learn the dimensions in which cultures differ. Dimensional understanding provides a foundation for communication with someone from another culture and a reminder that differences do in fact exist.

4. Fundamentals: Principles for Successful Cross-cultural Communication

Rules for clear communication are easy but often not practiced: (1) Keep it simple (the KISS principle), (2) Say it at least twice in two or more different ways, (3) Listen carefully and repeat back to the communicator what you hear, and most importantly (4) Respect yourself and others as yourself.

While these four principles are basic to clear communication, one should also be mindful of a few other things. First, be mindful that when someone speaks your language, you tend to assume that they also share your thoughts and assumptions. Second, if we communicate to others in a language that is not our own, we often transfer elements from our language to the other. Be careful with regard to proverbs and idioms, especially in communicating in a language not your own or with someone in a language not their own. Humor does not translate well! Conversational taboos often include religion and politics as well as questions about health, age, weight, and income (this list is by no means universal or complete).

While heeding the listener's culture, remember that effective communication should be explicit and unambiguous. Whilst at first glance the following two statements seem to contradict the preceding sentence, on further reflection you will see that it does not: Be aware that some Asian cultures may regard a direct person as rude, of questionable honor, and impolite, and conversely European cultures may view indirect communications as a waste of time and an indirect person as tricky, deceptive, and of questionable integrity.

5. Everyone Communicates Happily Ever After

Sincerity and respect are fundamental to successful and clear communication. Without these two basic human characteristics, all communication is doomed to failure.

Little needs to be said about sincerity; it is the same across cultures.

Respect deserves some additional attention because different cultures have different ways of showing respect. Keep in mind that respect is usually conceived to be something one gives to someone else; however, without first properly respecting oneself, it is not possible to respect someone else. Just as one does one's best to communicate clearly and to understand without bias, one must assume that the persons with whom one is communicating are doing their best to understand. But do remember that even with best intentions, things go awry. Mistakes happen. Fortunately they are also our greatest teachers.

[1] Hofstede, Geert and Gert Jan Hofstede, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, McGraw-Hill, New York USA, 2005.

[2] Lewis, Richard D, *When Cultures Collide: Leading Across Cultures*, 3rd Edition, Nicholas Brealey International, 2006.