

3.4: Basic Tools for Improving Intercultural Competence

We now offer two tools to assist you in becoming more interculturally competent. These tools can help you improve your interpersonal interactions and will facilitate the development of intercultural relationships. Think about ways in which these tools can enhance your own intercultural interactions and those of others around you.

By the end of this module, you will be able to:

- 3.4.1:** Explain how to use the skills from the Behavioral Assessment Scale for Intercultural Competence (BASIC)
- 3.4.2:** Explain how to use the description, interpretation, and evaluation (D-I-E) tool in interpreting meanings

3.4.1: The BASICs of Intercultural Competence

OBJECTIVE: Explain how to use the skills from the Behavioral Assessment Scale for Intercultural Competence (BASIC)

The Behavioral Assessment Scale for Intercultural Competence (BASIC), developed by Jolene Koester and Margaret Olebe,²⁶ is based on work done originally by Brent

Ruben and his colleagues.²⁷ A simple idea provides the key to understanding how to use these BASIC skills: What you actually do, rather than your internalized attitudes or your projections of what you might do, is what others use to determine whether you are interculturally competent. The BASIC skills are a tool for examining people's communication behaviors—yourself included—and in so doing provides a guide to the very basics of intercultural competence.

CATEGORIES OF COMMUNICATION Eight categories of communication behavior are described in the BASIC instrument, each of which contributes to the achievement of intercultural competence. Before we describe each of the BASIC skills, we would like to emphasize that the BASIC descriptions of behaviors are culture-general. That is, most cultures use the types of behaviors that are described to make judgments of competence about themselves and others. But within each culture there may be, and in all likelihood will be, different ways of exhibiting these behaviors.

Eight Types of Communication Behaviors

The way each culture teaches its members to exhibit these actions is culture-specific. Even among the various cultural groups that live in the United States, the rules for taking turns in a conversation vary widely.

Interactive

Display of Respect

Orientation to Knowledge

Empathy

Interaction Management

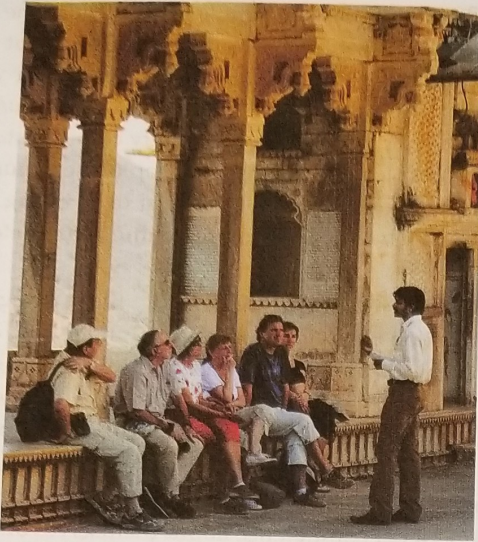
Task Role Behavior

Relational Role Behavior

Tolerance for Ambiguity

Interaction Posture

Interaction posture refers to the ability to respond to others in a way that is descriptive, nonevaluative, and nonjudgmental. Although the specific verbal and nonverbal messages that express judgments and evaluations can vary from culture to culture, the importance of selecting messages that do not convey evaluative judgments is paramount. Statements based on clear judgments of rights and wrongs indicate a closed or predetermined framework of attitudes, beliefs, and values, and they are used by the evaluative and less competent intercultural communicator. Nonevaluative and nonjudgmental actions are characterized by verbal and nonverbal messages based on descriptions rather than on interpretations or evaluations.



Learning about other cultures is a necessary prerequisite to achieving intercultural competence. Sometimes a member of the culture, such as this tour guide, can help.

For example, actions that show respect for others and the ability to maintain conversations and manage communicative interactions are necessary in all cultures for someone to be judged as competent.

REVIEWING COMMUNICATION BEHAVIORS Table 3.3 summarizes the eight categories of communication behavior used in the BASIC model.

WRITING PROMPT

Critical Thinking: Assessing Your Intercultural Competence

Mentally assess your own ability to communicate. Do you display the behaviors necessary to achieve intercultural competence? From what you now know about intercultural communication, what kinds of changes might make your behavior more appropriate and effective?

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Table 3.3 Review: BASIC Dimensions of Intercultural Competence

Interactive

Review the eight types of communication behaviors. Then challenge yourself to match each type with its description.

Types of Communication Behavior	Description
Display of Respect	The ability to show respect and positive regard for other people and their cultures
Orientation to Knowledge	The recognition that individuals' experiences shape what they know
Empathy	The capacity to behave as though you understand the world as others do
Interaction Management	Skill in regulating conversations and taking turns
Task Role Behavior	Behaviors that involve the initiation of ideas related to group problem-solving activities
Relational Role Behavior	Behaviors associated with interpersonal harmony and mediation
Tolerance for Ambiguity	The ability to react to new and ambiguous situations with little visible discomfort
Interaction Posture	The ability to respond to others in descriptive, nonevaluative, and nonjudgmental ways

Check Your Understanding

3.4.2: Description, Interpretation, and Evaluation (D-I-E)

OBJECTIVE: Explain how to use the description, interpretation, and evaluation (D-I-E) tool in interpreting meanings

We have approached the study of intercultural competence by looking at the elements of culture that affect interpersonal communication. There is, however, a tool that allows people to control the meanings they attribute to the verbal and nonverbal symbols used by others. The tool is based on the differences in how people think about and then verbally speak about the people with whom they interact and the events in which they participate.

The interaction tool is called description, interpretation, and evaluation (D-I-E). It starts with the assumption that, when most people process the information around them, they use a kind of mental shorthand. Because people are taught what symbols mean, they are not very aware of the information they use to form their interpretations. In other words, when people see, hear, and in other ways receive information from the world around them, they generally form interpretations and evaluations of it without being aware of the specific sensory information they have perceived. For example, students and teachers alike often comment about the sterile, institutional character of many of the classrooms at universities. Rarely do these conversations detail the specific perceptual information on which that interpretation is

Implementing the D-I-E Tool

Often, the interpretations people make of perceptual information are closely linked to their personal evaluation of that information. Any description can have many different interpretations, but because most people think in a mental shorthand, they are generally aware of only the interpretation that immediately comes to mind, which they use to explain the event.

For example, teachers occasionally have students who arrive late to class.

Interactive

Statement of Description

A statement of description about a particular student engaging in this behavior might be as follows:

- Kathryn arrived 10 minutes after the start of the class.
- Kathryn also arrived late each of the previous times the class has met.

Statement of Interpretation

Statement of Evaluation

based. Rarely does someone say, for instance, "This room is about 20 by 40 feet in size, the walls are painted a cream color, there is no artwork, it is lit by eight fluorescent bulbs, and the floors are cream-colored tiles with multiple pieces of dirt." Yet when students and professors say that their classroom is "sterile, institutional-looking, and unattractive," most people who have spent a great deal of time in such rooms have a fairly accurate image of the classroom. Similarly, if a friend is walking toward you, you might say, "Hi! What's wrong? You look really tired and upset." That kind of comment is considered normal, but if you said instead, "Hi! Your shoulders are drooping, you're not standing up straight, and you're walking much slower than usual," it would be considered strange. In both examples, the statements considered to be normal

are really interpretations and evaluations of sensory information the individual has processed.

The skill we are introducing trains you to distinguish among statements of description, interpretation, and evaluation. These statements can be made about all characteristics, events, persons, and objects.

- A statement of description details the specific perceptual cues and information a person has received, without judgments or interpretations—in other words, without being distorted by opinion.
- A statement of interpretation provides a conjecture or hypothesis about what the perceptual information might mean.
- A statement of evaluation indicates an emotional or affective judgment about the information.

How to Use Descriptive Statements

The tool of description, interpretation, and evaluation increases your choices for understanding, responding positively to, and behaving appropriately with people from different cultures. The simplicity of the tool makes it available in any set of circumstances and may allow the intercultural communicator to suspend judgment long enough to understand the symbols used by the culture involved.

Interactive

Situation

John Richardson has been sent by his U.S.-based insurance company to discuss, and possibly to sell, his company's products with an Argentinean company that has expressed great interest in them. His secretary has set up four appointments with key company officials. John arrives promptly at his first appointment, identifies himself to the receptionist, and is asked to be seated. Some 30 minutes later he is ushered into the office of the company official, who has one of his employees in the office with whom he is discussing another issue. John is brought into the office of his second appointment within a shorter period of time, but the conversation is constantly disrupted by telephone calls and drop-in visits from others. At the end of the day, John is very discouraged; he calls the home office and says, "This is a waste of time; these guys aren't interested in our products at all! I was left cooling my heels in their waiting rooms. They couldn't even give me their attention when I got in to see them. There were constant interruptions. I really tried to control myself, but I've had it. I'm getting on a plane and coming back tomorrow."

John would be better off if he approached this culturally puzzling behavior by separating his descriptions, interpretations, and evaluations. By doing so, he might choose different actions for himself.

Descriptive Statements

Interpretations

Evaluations

WRITING PROMPT

Description, Interpretation, and Evaluation in Action

Think back to a recent encounter you had with someone from a different cultural background. To what extent did you find yourself making a statement of description, interpretation, or evaluation to account for a cultural difference? Why do you think you made that type of statement? How did this statement impact the encounter?

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DESCRIPTIVE STATEMENTS The purpose of making descriptive statements when you are communicating intercultural is that they allow you to identify the sensory information that forms the basis of your interpretations and evaluations. Descriptive statements also allow you to consider alternative hypotheses or interpretations. Interpretations, although highly personal, are very much affected by underlying cultural patterns. Sometimes when you engage in intercultural communication with specific individuals or groups of people for an extended period of time, you will be able to test the various interpretations of behavior that you are considering. By testing the alternative interpretations, it is also possible to forestall the evaluations that can negatively affect your interactions.

WRITING PROMPT

Critical Thinking: How Do the D-I-E Skills Affect Your Intercultural Competence?



Contrast the difference between your own culture and the culture of those in this picture. Use the skills of description, interpretation, and evaluation (D-I-E) to understand these Indian women eating a traditional Indian meal. How difficult would it be for you to communicate competently in this setting?

Take a look at the picture shown above. Contrast the difference between your own culture and the culture of those in this picture. Use the skills of D-I-E to understand these Indian women eating a traditional Indian meal. How difficult would it be for you to communicate competently in this setting?

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