

# Cross-Cultural Communication for Managers

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**M**anagers must become proficient cross-cultural communicators if they wish to succeed in today's global environment. The purpose of this article is to synthesize multiple insights—from fields as diverse as anthropology, psychology, communication, linguistics, and organizational behavior—and apply them specifically to managerial communication.

Let's start with two definitions. *Culture* consists of the values, attitudes, and behavior in a given group of most of the people most of the time. Though nearly all of the examples in this article are drawn from different countries, managers can apply precisely the same kind of analysis to the culture of any given region, industry, organization, or work group.

*Managerial communication* is communication in a management context to achieve a desired result (writing a memo, interviewing an applicant, running a meeting, preparing a presentation). To be effective in any given culture, however, managers should consider the following seven issues *before* they begin to communicate:

1. Setting communication objectives
2. Choosing a communication style
3. Assessing and enhancing credibility
4. Selecting and motivating audiences
5. Setting a message strategy
6. Overcoming language difficulties
7. Using appropriate nonverbal behaviors

## SETTING COMMUNICATION OBJECTIVES

**A**s a general rule, managers should delineate consciously and specifically what it is they want their audience to do as a result of the communication—sign a contract, provide information, approve recommendations, or come up with a solution. If you are working in a different culture, you may have to reconsider your communication objective, asking yourself the following two questions:

### **Is my objective realistic, given the culture?**

A realistic goal in one culture may not be so in another. One way to get at what might be realistic is to analyze what psychologists call the "locus of control." People in some cultures tend

to believe in "internal control" over destiny—that is, that people can control events themselves. People in other cultures believe in "external control" over destiny—that is, events are predetermined and uncontrollable.

For example, suppose you are trying to communicate in an Islamic culture—anywhere from North Africa to the Middle East to Indonesia (the largest Islamic nation). What an American might see as a perfectly reasonable goal, such as "construct the new building on schedule," a Muslim might see as irreligious, because Muslims believe that human efforts are determined by the will of Allah, not by a schedule. Non-Muslims may have to adjust their expectations accordingly. Muslims are not the only ones who believe in external control over events: Filipinos, though predominantly Christian, also tend to be fatalistic. A well-known saying in Tagalog is *babala na*, or "God wills it." Filipinos may view the achievement of your objective as predetermined by fate rather than as controllable by individual effort.

**Is my time frame realistic, given the culture?** What constitutes an appropriate time frame in one culture may not be achievable in another. It all depends on the culture's concept of time.

In some cultures, timetables are exact and precise; one can expect people to start meetings on time and meet deadlines. Examples of such cultures include Germany and Switzerland. Other

*We need to remember that other cultures do not necessarily share our behaviors—verbal or nonverbal.*

**Figure 1**  
**Cultural Values Systems**

| <i>Attitude Toward ...</i> | <i>Range</i>                                                                           |                                                                   |                                                                   | <i>Communication Implications</i> |
|----------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| NATURE                     | <b>Submit to nature</b><br>Life determined by God/fate                                 | <b>Harmony with nature</b><br>Live in harmony with nature         | <b>Mastery over nature</b><br>Control and challenge nature        | COMMUNICATION OBJECTIVE           |
| TIME                       | <b>Past tradition</b><br>Goals of past are sufficient                                  | <b>Present moment</b><br>Goals reflect present demands            | <b>Future goals</b><br>Goals directed toward future               | COMMUNICATION OBJECTIVE           |
| SOCIAL RELATIONS           | <b>By rank or class</b><br>Authoritarian decision making                               | <b>By entire group</b><br>Group decision making                   | <b>By individual</b><br>Individual decision making                | AUDIENCE SELECTION                |
| ACTIVITY                   | <b>Being</b> , not accomplishing, most important; minimize work                        | <b>Inner development</b><br>most important                        | <b>Accomplishment</b><br>and future most important; maximize work | AUDIENCE MOTIVATION               |
| HUMANITY                   | <b>Basically evil</b><br>Initial lack of trust, people won't change, control necessary | <b>Mixture good and evil</b><br>Initial choice, people can change | <b>Basically good</b><br>Initial trust, controls unnecessary      | AUDIENCE MOTIVATION               |

Source: Adapted from Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961)

cultures have more relative and relaxed attitudes toward time; one may be kept waiting; projects may move more slowly. Examples here are Latin and African countries. An executive in Cameroon tells of a meeting scheduled for 9:00 a.m. in Yaoundé. People began to arrive at 1:00 p.m. Surprisingly, however, when the last person showed up at 2:00 p.m., the other Cameroonians admonished him for being late.

A useful framework for adapting a communication objective in any given culture comes from the field of anthropology. **Figure 1** summarizes Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's "Cultural Values Systems" framework and adds managerial implications. To set an effective communication objective, one should analyze a culture by what the authors call "nature" and "time."

As an example, imagine you are working in Saudi Arabia. American and Saudi Arabian cultures fall on opposite ends of Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's "nature" and "time" orientations. American beliefs are based on internal control and future orientation toward time, as aptly summarized in the phrase "can do." Saudi beliefs are based on external control and past orientation

toward time, and are epitomized by the phrase *Insba'allah*, "If Allah wills."

## CHOOSING A COMMUNICATION STYLE

Once you have established a communication objective, consider the most effective communication style to accomplish it. Use different styles in different situations:

- "Tell": to inform or explain, when you need to control the content of what you are communicating and don't need audience involvement;
- "Sell": to persuade people to do something differently—needs some audience involvement;
- "Consult": to interact with the people with whom you are communicating and whose input you need;
- "Join": when you want to collaborate or brainstorm with your audience, whose ideas form the message content.

Some styles, however, will be more effective in some cultures than in others. You may need to be more autocratic or more democratic than usual if you cross cultural barriers.

**What is the cultural attitude toward authority?** Tell styles may be more acceptable in autocratic cultures, in which power is unequally concentrated and the leader is seen as automatically right. Consult styles may be more acceptable in democratic cultures, in which power is more dispersed and the leader has to earn respect.

**Figure 2**, Hofstede's "Differences in Work-Related Values," shows ways of analyzing a culture's attitude toward authority. This figure summarizes the communication implications of the author's research studies on managers in 40 countries. One of his four dimensions is "power distance," the extent to which power is autocratic. Cultures such as those in Sweden, Norway, and Israel rank low in power distance. They are, therefore, more democratic; communication may be participative to the point at which either subordinates or superiors control the communication. The United States has a rather low power distance (ranked 15 out of 40); communication is somewhat participative, although usually controlled by the manager. French culture exemplifies high-power distance, a country in which Hofstede finds "little concern with participative

management American-style, but great concern with who has the power."

**How do people define themselves: primarily as individuals or as a group?** Tell/sell styles might be more typical in individualistic cultures, with their emphasis on individual achievement, decision making, and efficiency. Consult/join styles might be more typical in group-oriented collectivist cultures, with their emphasis on group belonging and loyalty.

Referring again to Figure 2, one should analyze a culture in terms of "individualism/collectivism." According to Hofstede, Anglo cultures are the most individualistic, with the United States ranking as the most individualistic of all. On the other hand, various South American cultures are collectivist; identity is based in the social system, not the individual. Hofstede points out that in individualistic cultures, value standards apply to everyone. In collectivist cultures, however, value standards differ for in-groups and out-groups. Similarly, James Fallows (1989) defines group boundaries in terms of the group's "radius of trust"—how many people considered "us," who deserve decent treatment, and how many considered "them," who can be devalued or abused.

**Figure 2**  
**Differences in Work-Related Values**

| <i>Dimensions Differentiated</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | <i>Communication Implications</i>       |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| <p>1. <b>POWER DISTANCE</b><br/>Extent to which power is unequally distributed, centralized, and autocratic—and such leadership is accepted by all members</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Highest power distance cultures: Philippines, Venezuela, Mexico</li> <li>• Lowest power distance cultures: Israel, Denmark, Austria</li> <li>• United States: Somewhat low (15 out of 40)</li> </ul>                                              | COMMUNICATION STYLE, AUDIENCE SELECTION |
| <p>2. <b>INDIVIDUALISM/COLLECTIVISM</b><br/>Extent to which people define themselves as individuals or part of a larger group</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most individual cultures: United States, Australia, Great Britain</li> <li>• Most collective cultures: Saudi Arabia, Venezuela, Colombia, Peru</li> <li>• United States: Highest (40 out of 40)</li> </ul>                                                                     | COMMUNICATION STYLE, AUDIENCE SELECTION |
| <p>3. <b>UNCERTAINTY AVOIDANCE</b><br/>Extent to which people feel threatened by ambiguous situations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Highest uncertainty avoidance: Japan, Portugal, Greece</li> <li>• Lowest uncertainty avoidance: Singapore, Hong Kong, Denmark</li> <li>• United States: Fairly low (9 out of 40)</li> </ul>                                                                                                            | AUDIENCE MOTIVATION                     |
| <p>4. <b>MASCULINITY/FEMININITY</b><br/>Extent to which dominant values emphasize assertiveness and materialism ("masculine") versus people, concern for others, and quality of life ("feminine")</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most masculine cultures: Japan, Austria, Switzerland, Italy</li> <li>• Most feminine cultures: Sweden, Norway, Netherlands, Denmark</li> <li>• United States: Somewhat masculine (28 out of 40)</li> </ul> | AUDIENCE MOTIVATION                     |

Source: Adapted from Hofstede (1980)

Divisions between “them” and “us” are found in a variety of boundaries. For example, in many parts of Africa, the tribe is the most important unit in society—more important than the nuclear family or the nation. The tribe is a source of social and moral sanctions as well as political and physical security. In some South American countries, the family is the most important unit. You may have a hard time doing business unless you are connected to the right families. In Egypt, class standing may be of paramount importance.

As a final note on communication style, Americans will probably feel most comfortable using the range of styles appropriate in the United States when they are in Australia, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Canada, and New Zealand. These cultures combine tell/sell styles when needed for the efficiency of individualism and consult/join styles when needed for the democracy associated with a small power difference. On the other hand, Americans may have to adjust their styles in various South American and Asian countries, which combine tell/sell styles when needed for the autocracy of a large power distance and consult/join when needed to enhance the group loyalty of collectivism.

#### ASSESSING AND ENHANCING CREDIBILITY

**R**egardless of what communication style you use, your credibility will always have a tremendous impact on your communication effectiveness. Five factors, based on a synthesis of the social power theories of French and Raven (1959) and Kotter (1979), affect your credibility: 1) rank or hierarchical power; 2) personal goodwill toward an audience; 3) expertise or knowledge; 4) image or attractiveness; and

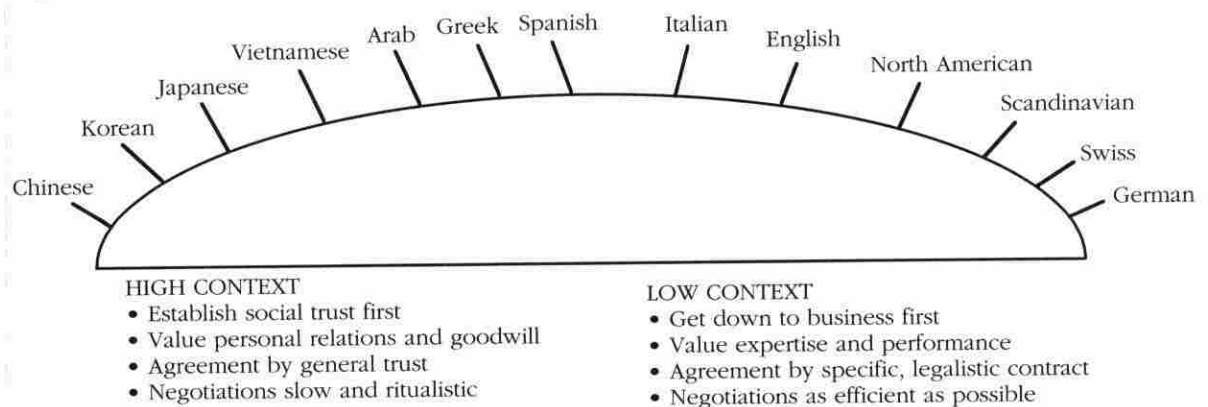
5) the values and standards shared with your audience. Different cultures value different aspects of credibility more than others.

**What is the relative importance of rank credibility?** Clearly, rank credibility is more important in Hofstede’s high-power-distance countries, such as the Philippines, Venezuela, and Mexico, and less important in low-power-distance countries, such as Israel and Denmark. Not only might you “pull rank” differently in different cultures, you may also need to gain rank credibility by association in some cultures. For example, you might need to establish rank through family status in South America, village chiefs in Samoa, and schooling in France.

**What is the relative importance of goodwill credibility?** Goodwill credibility is based on your personal relationship and personal “track record” with your audience. In many cultures, business relationships are built entirely on this kind of social and personal trust. You must take the time to build these relationships before you get down to business.

Communication expert Edward Hall’s analysis of cultures, summarized in **Figure 3**, provides yet another useful method for managers to differentiate cultures. He classifies cultures as ranging from “high-context” (establishing a context or relationship first) to “low context” (getting right down to business). Examples of high-context cultures, in which goodwill credibility is particularly valued, include many cultures in Asia and the Middle East. In these cultures, you need to learn about the expectations regarding food and hospitality—when, where, what, and how food is prepared, presented, and eaten—and should expect to socialize and establish a relationship before you start doing business.

**Figure 3**  
**High Context and Low Context Cultures**



Source: Adapted from Hall (1976)

**What is the relative importance of expertise credibility?** Many other cultures place a higher value on expertise than on personal trust. These cultures Hall classifies in Figure 3 as low-context cultures, which include German, Swiss, and Scandinavian cultures. If you are working in these cultures, you may need to establish your competence or prove your expertise. You may not need the elaborate socialization process or personal rapport needed in high-context cultures.

**What image is valued?** Image credibility is based on your audience's desire to look like you (your attractiveness). That image varies tremendously across cultures. For example, being older is an advantage in Korea and many places in Africa, as is being from the upper class in Great Britain and India and being male in Iran. Obviously, you cannot change your age, class, or sex, but you may have to work harder to establish credibility in cultures where your image is not highly regarded.

**What values do you share?** Classic American business culture values—such as improving next quarter's bottom line, making more money, or meeting a challenge—are not necessarily universally admired. Search to find values you have in common with a foreign culture, such as the good of the society, organization, or department; increased status or prestige; or appeals to excellence or moral correctness. Establishing an initial common ground is a powerful way to build credibility.

## SELECTING AND MOTIVATING AUDIENCE MEMBERS

Just as credibility analysis ascertains how your audience perceives you, audience analysis gets at how you perceive them. The culture in which you are communicating often has a huge impact on how you choose and appeal to your audience.

**Should you select or include different people?** Many management situations involve multiple audiences. Depending on cultural expectations about rank, authority, and group definition, you may need to include additional or different primary audience members—those who receive your message directly. You may need to add different secondary audiences—those who hear about, need to approve, or are affected by your message. Finally, you may need to reevaluate who represents the key decision maker in your audience. For example, are superiors usually addressed directly, or at least included, in all decisions? Are subordinates? Do you need to add influential officials, leaders, power brokers, contacts, tribe or sect members, or family members?

**What will appeal to them?** Once you have decided whom to include in your audience, con-

sider what audience appeals or benefits will work best. Research on influence, persuasion, and motivation offers a wide variety of audience appeals, including material wealth and acquisition, task enhancement, career advancement, achievement and challenge, self-worth, security, satisfaction and fulfillment, personal relationships, group relationships, and altruism.

Referring again to Figure 2, think about where the culture falls in terms of Hofstede's "uncertainty avoidance," or tolerance for ambiguity. Try appeals to security issues in such high uncertainty avoidance cultures as Japan, Portugal, and Greece; consider appealing to risk and challenge in such places as Singapore, Hong Kong, and Denmark.

Hofstede's "masculinity/femininity" dimension in Figure 2 measures the importance a culture places on material wealth versus quality of life. You might, for instance, appeal to people in such "masculine" countries as Austria and Switzerland with promises of material rewards. In contrast, those in such "feminine" countries as Sweden and Norway may respond to appeals tied to quality of life issues, such as job satisfaction and flexibility.

Managers should reserve typical American audience appeals—material wealth and achievement—for masculine cultures with low uncertainty avoidance. "This combination," Hofstede notes, "is found exclusively in countries in the Anglo-American group and in some of their former colonies. . . . One striking thing about the concept of achievement is that the word itself is hardly translatable into any language other than English" (1980).

**What is their attitude toward work?** You may be able to motivate your audience more effectively by analyzing cultural attitudes toward work itself. How central is work as a life role—as opposed to leisure, community, religious, and family activities? How fully do people identify with their profession, as opposed to some other subgroup, sect, or elite? If they do identify with their work role, is their identity associated with their product or service, their company or organization, or their profession or occupation?

The MOW International Research Team has come up with a "work centrality index," which ranks responses from people in various countries in terms of how committed they are to work, how much they identify with work, and how much importance they attach to work. This study found that work centrality was high in Japan, average in the United States, and low in Great Britain (MOW 1985). Appeals to corporate affiliation, for instance, might work better with the Japanese than with the British.

Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's framework in Figure 1 also differentiates cultural attitudes to-

*"Search to find values you have in common with a foreign culture, such as the good of the society, organization, or department; increased status or prestige; or appeals to excellence or moral correctness."*

ward work on a scale they label "activity." In such cultures as the United States, the dominant mode of activity is *doing*: to achieve fully, people tend to maximize work. In other cultures, by way of contrast, the dominant mode of activity is *being*: to live fully, people tend to minimize work. For example, offering to raise salaries of Mexican workers might

result in decreasing the number of hours the Mexicans want to work. Offering overtime pay to Malaysians might not change the numbers of hours worked, because Malaysian workers might be more interested in spending extra time with family and friends.

#### SETTING A MESSAGE STRATEGY

**B**ased in part on audience analysis, message strategy represents a fifth set of issues to consider for effective communication. Cultural norms will affect decisions about the message structure, channel, and format.

##### **What kind of structure is appropriate?**

Some cultures prefer business messages to be structured fairly directly—getting right to the point and stating conclusions or the bottom line first. Such cultures value what they perceive as openness and honesty. In other cultures, however, business messages are typically indirect, building up to the point and stating conclusions or the bottom line last.

To make decisions regarding direct or indirect structure, international managers may find Hall's framework in Figure 3 useful. Low-context cultures (such as German, Swiss, Scandinavian, North American, and British) may favor direct structures. High-context cultures (such as Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Vietnamese, and Arabic) may favor indirect structures.

In high-context cultures, directness may be seen as abrupt, demanding, or intrusive. Worse still, inappropriate directness may cause people in these cultures to "lose face." As international experts Copeland and Griggs point out (1985):

... much has been written about "face-saving" in Japan and China, but face-saving is important absolutely everywhere, the United States included. The difference is only a matter of degree and

nuance. Where an American might feel a little guilty or inadequate, an Asian, Arab or South American may feel deep shame and humiliation. What an American might see as a little honest and constructive criticism, the foreigner may take as a devastating blow to pride and dignity.

In authoritarian cultures, managers may need to use more direct structures than they are used to for "downward" communication to subordinates, and more indirect structures than they are used to for "upward" communication to superiors.

##### **What message channel is appropriate?**

Communication channels change constantly. To communicate across cultures, managers need to stay aware of advances in technology—computers, electronic mail, cellular phones, videoteleconferencing, and facsimile transmissions, just to name a few—and be sensitive to what technology is available, compatible, and acceptable in another culture.

In addition to affecting technological channels, cultural norms affect the most basic kind of channel choice: the decision to write or speak. In Figure 3, the high-context cultures valuing personal trust tend to prefer oral communication and oral agreements. Low-context cultures, which value efficiency, tend to prefer written communication and written agreements. In high-context cultures, confirming an idea in writing may imply that you think their word is no good. For example, when Ford Motor Company agreed to acquire the production side of Ferrari and use the Ferrari name in the United States,

... the deal was made on handshakes between gentlemen. Soon, though, Ford's attorneys arrived in Italy with contracts, and a crew arrived to take inventory. This was normal business procedure to the Americans, but Ferrari was disgruntled—to his thinking he had an understanding with a gentleman, not with a group of attorneys and accountants. The deal fell through. (Copeland and Griggs 1985)

##### **What message formats are appropriate?**

You may need to adjust the physical format of your message in different cultures. For example, in many countries, standard paper sizes differ from those in the United States. These size differences can affect duplication, printing, filing, page breaks, and other document design issues. In addition, standard business formats such as memos or reports may be different from those to which Americans are accustomed; in Japan, memos are neither as prevalent nor as lengthy as

in the United States. Similarly, presentation formats differ across cultures—including issues of presentation length, timing, number of visual aids, flamboyance, and the nature of interaction with audience members.

## OVERCOMING LANGUAGE DIFFICULTIES

Language difficulties represent one of the biggest barriers to cross-cultural communication. Even if English is spoken by everyone involved, dialects, accents, slang, jargon, and code words vary tremendously among different countries, regions, subcultures, industries, organizations, and professions. For instance, the word “billion” means a thousand million in the United States, and a million million in Britain; the verb “to table” used during a meeting means to postpone discussion in the United States, and to discuss right away in Britain.

Conducting business in a foreign language compounds any problems. If you are going to spend more than a year in a country, do your best to learn the language. At the very least, you can overcome some vulnerability and isolation; at best, you can achieve much better relationships and other business advantages. If you don't know the language well, use your foreign language for socializing but not for business activities. If you don't know the language at all, you have two options:

- Use English, speaking carefully and without unnecessary large words or jargon (remember that non-native English speakers are often embarrassed to admit when they don't understand English); or

- Use an excellent interpreter who is thoroughly briefed in advance, pausing after every short paragraph or thought.

Even with excellent fluency or interpretation, however, language itself poses at least four kinds of problems.

**Barriers caused by semantics.** The first level of potential problems has to do with semantics, or word meanings. Some words are literally untranslatable. For example, to conduct business in Korea, you must understand the concept of *kibun*, which does not translate into English. Its meaning is something similar to “inner feelings” or “mood”: people must communicate in a manner to enhance one another's *kibun* or risk creating an enemy and destroying the relationship. Similarly, understanding the word *sisu* will help you understand the character of your Finnish business associates. This untranslatable word means something akin to “guts,” “against-all-odds stamina,” or “dogged persistence”; in some ways the word encapsulates two centuries of historical Finnish struggles. As a final example, Russians may find their current economic transition even

## How Are MNCs Training Americans to Work Overseas?

“Essentially, American top managers believe that a good manager in New York or Los Angeles will be effective in Hong Kong or Tokyo,” say J. Stewart Black and Mark Mendenhall. Their recent exhaustive review of studies shows that more than 70 percent of U.S. expatriates and 90 percent of their families are sent overseas without any cross-cultural training whatsoever. “Despite the need for cross-cultural skills and the shortage of managers who possess these skills,” note the authors, “most human resource decision makers do nothing in terms of cross-cultural training for employees in general or even specifically for selected employees embarking on international assignments.”

As a result, they found that between 16 and 40 percent of all expatriate managers sent on foreign assignments return before they are supposed to because of poor performance or inability to adjust. Direct costs of failed expatriate assignments for American corporations are estimated to exceed \$2 billion a year.

On the brighter side, Black and Mendenhall also reviewed a variety of cross-cultural training program studies—and concluded that such training overwhelmingly results in increased cross-cultural skills development, cross-cultural adjustment, and job performance.

The authors recommend three characteristics for effective cross-cultural training programs:

- 1) They should be considered “a necessity, not a luxury. . . . Training costs are small compared to the potential costs of early returns or business losses due to the lack of cross-cultural competency.”

- 2) They should be “a family affair . . . to counteract spouse and family adjustment problems.”

- 3) They must be experiential, participative, and behavioral—using teaching methods such as simulations, field trips, and role plays, and avoiding “dog and pony” shows.

Sources: J. Stewart Black and Mark Mendenhall, “Cross-Cultural Training Effectiveness: A Review and a Theoretical Framework for Future Research,” *Academy of Management Review*, 15, 1 (1990), pp. 113-136, and “A Practical But Theory-based Framework for Selecting Cross-Cultural Training Methods,” *Human Resource Management*, Winter 1989, pp. 511-539.

more difficult because several key English words and phrases—such as “efficiency,” “free market,” and “regulation”—are not directly translatable into Russian.

### Barriers caused by word connotations.

The second level of language problems has to do with “connotation,” or implications of words. For example, the words *mañana* in Spanish and *bukara* in Arabic translate as “tomorrow.” Their connotation, however, may be closer to “some time in the future.” In Japanese, the word *hai* translates as “yes,” but its connotation may be “yes, I'm listening,” rather than “yes, I agree.” In Polish, *nie ma* translates as “there is none” or “we don't have any.” Its connotation can be “there hasn't been any in a long time and there probably never will be.” For a treasury of examples, see D. Ricks' book, *Big Business Blunders* (1983). The author points out, for instance, that “Come Alive with Pepsi” was translated as “Come Out of the Grave with Pepsi” in German and “Bring Your Ancestors Back from the Grave” in Asia.

**Barriers caused by tone differences.** A third set of potential linguistic barriers has to do with tone—the mood or feeling your words convey. For example, in some cultures tone is usually more formal, whereas in others it is more informal; in some it is more polite, in others more offhand; in some more impersonal, in others more personal; in some more dry, in others more colorful. Decide if and when you want to make marginal adjustments in the tone of your writing or speaking when you are in another culture.

**Barriers caused by differences among perceptions.** A final level of potential difficulties emerges when you stop to realize that, according to many linguists, people who speak different languages actually view the world in different ways. Eskimos perceive snow differently because they have many words for it; Hopi Indians perceive time differently because they do not distinguish among past, present, and future verb tenses; Japanese perceive responsibility differently because they have a grammatical form called “adversative passive” used for reporting

unpleasant events; Thais perceive “no” differently because there is no such word in their vocabulary.

## USING EFFECTIVE NONVERBAL BEHAVIORS

**A**lthough managers generally understand that language differences can cause major barriers to communication, they may not recognize that nonverbal barriers can cause even greater problems. Some scholars, such as Knapp (1980), estimate that 65 to 90 percent of what we communicate is, in fact, nonverbal. Keep in mind three sets of challenges in cross-cultural nonverbal communication: body language and vocal qualities, space around you, and greeting behaviors.

**Body language and vocal qualities.** Notions of appropriate posture, gestures, eye contact, facial expression, touching, pitch, volume, and rate differ across cultures. As a simple but potentially disastrous example, nodding the head up and down in Bulgaria means “no,” not “yes.”

Successful executives must avoid using any gestures considered rude or insulting. For instance, in Buddhist cultures, the head is considered sacred, so you must never touch anyone's head; in Muslim cultures, the left hand is considered unclean, so never touch, pass, receive, or eat with the left hand. Pointing with the index finger is rude in cultures ranging from the Sudan to Venezuela to Sri Lanka. The American circular “A-OK” gesture carries a vulgar meaning in Brazil, Paraguay, Singapore, and Russia. Crossing your ankle over your knee is rude in such places as Indonesia, Thailand, and Syria. Pointing your index finger toward yourself insults the other person in Germany, the Netherlands, and Switzerland. Avoid placing an open hand over a closed fist in France, saying “tsk tsk” in Kenya, and whistling in India.

On the receiving end of nonverbal communication, prepare yourself to recognize gestures that have meaning only in the other culture. Chinese stick out their tongues to show surprise and scratch their ears and cheeks to show happiness. Japanese suck in air, hissing through their teeth to indicate embarrassment or “no.” Greeks puff air after they receive a compliment. Hondurans touch their finger below their eyes to indicate caution or disbelief.

Finally, resist applying your own culture's nonverbal meanings to other cultures. Vietnamese may look at the ground with their heads down to show respect, not to be “shifty.” Russians may exhibit less facial expression, and Scandinavians fewer gestures, than Americans are accustomed to, but that does not mean they are not enthusiastic. People in Latin and Mediterranean cultures, on the other hand, may gesticulate

### Are Cultures Growing More Similar?

Are cultures becoming more similar worldwide or are they maintaining their differences? Is the world moving toward one way of doing business or does each different culture maintain its own unique approach?

John Child's comparison of myriad cross-cultural studies reveals two groups of equally reputable researchers—one group concluding that the world is growing more similar and the other concluding that cultures are maintaining dissimilarity. In the words of international expert Nancy Adler, “Looking closer, Child discovered that most of the studies concluding convergence focused on macro issues—such as the structure and technology of the organizations themselves—while most of the studies concluding divergence focused on micro level issues—the behavior of people within organizations. Therefore organizations worldwide are growing more similar, while the behavior of people within organizations is maintaining its cultural uniqueness.”

Many managers, however, assume that people from different cultures are basically similar to themselves. Researchers Burger and Bass worked with managers from 14 countries, asking each manager to describe the work and life goals of a colleague from another country. In every case, the managers assumed their foreign colleagues were more like themselves than they actually were.

Americans in particular believe that other countries are becoming more like us. “The assumption is erroneous,” notes economic analyst James Fallows. “The United States is not an ordinary society. The differences between America and other cultures run deep and matter profoundly. They are differences of kind, not just of degree. Of course, people are essentially the same anywhere on earth, but cultures are not.”

*Sources:* N. Adler, *International Dimensions of Organizational Behavior* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1986), pp. 45 and 66; J. Child, “Culture, Contingency and Capitalism in the Cross-National Study of Organizations,” in L.L. Cummings and B.M. Staw, eds., *Research in Organizational Behavior*, Vol. 3 (Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, 1981), pp. 303-356; P. Burger and B. Bass, *Assessment of Managers: An International Comparison* (New York: Free Press, 1979); J. Fallows, *More Like Us: Making America Great Again* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1989), pp. 1-2.

and touch more often than Americans, but don't infer that they're "pushy." Southerners in the United States tend to speak slowly, but don't infer that they're dumb; northerners may speak more quickly, but don't infer that they're arrogant. Compared to Americans, Brazilians may interrupt more, Asians may respect silence more, and Arabs may speak more loudly.

**Space around you.** A second aspect of non-verbal communication has to do with norms regarding space. In general, Americans feel comfortable in the following zones of space: zero to 18 inches for intimacy only (comforting or greeting); 18 inches to four feet for personal space (conversing with friends); four to 12 feet for social space (conversing with strangers); and more than 12 feet for public space (standing in lobbies or reception areas). Different cultures define the acceptable extents of these zones differently. Venezuelans tend to prefer much closer personal and social space and might consider it rude if you back away. The British, on the other hand, may prefer more distant personal and social space and might consider it rude if you move too close.

Closely related to this is the concept of touch. Anglos usually avoid touching each other very much. In a study of touching behaviors (Knapp 1980), researchers observed people seated in outdoor cafés in each of four countries, and counted the number of touches during one hour of conversation. The results were: San Juan, 180 touches per hour; Paris, 110 per hour; Gainesville, Florida, 1 per hour; and London, 0 per hour.

**Greeting behaviors.** Because first impressions are long-lasting, greeting behavior is particularly important. Handshakes can range from the hearty, firm *G'day* shake of an Australian to the gentle, light, single shake of the French. Many Latin and Mediterranean cultures greet with an *abrazo*—some combination of handshake, hugs, and shoulder pats. In Algeria (with its Arabic and French roots), anything less than a handshake plus embrace might be alienating. The Hindu *namaste*, the Thai *wai*, and the Laotian *nop* all involve a palms-together praying motion coupled with a bow. The Japanese bowing conventions, however, are so complex that most non-Japanese are well advised to stick with a handshake.

What name should you use? Americans tend to be too quick to use first names. A general rule is, don't use first names unless invited to do so. In addition, find out about naming conventions. In some cultures, the surname comes first: in Hungary, the composer known in the West as Béla Bartók is actually named Bartók Béla; in China, Zhou Enlai is "Mr. Zhou." In some cul-

tures, the surname is second: in Spain, Miguel Ortega Gonzales is "Señor Ortega." Some cultures use a polite familiar with the Mr. or Mrs. equivalent followed by the first name: in Brazil, Enrique Lopez is "Senhor Enrique"; in Poland, Stanislaw Musial is "Pan Stanislaw."

Perhaps the most unusual naming convention comes from Iceland, where people are officially known by their first names; listings are alphabetized by first name. A man's last name is his father's first name plus *son*; a woman's last name is her father's first name plus *dottir*. Because a woman does not change her name with marriage, husband, wife, son, and daughter each has a different last name.

What title should you use? In a country such as Sweden or Israel, titles are relatively unimportant. In other places, such as Germany or Austria, titles are very important; even the wife of a German professor carries her husband's title: "Frau Professor Schmidt" or "Frau Professor." In Korea, titles are often used in place of names because of Confucian attitudes about saying names aloud.

As we have seen, culture permeates every aspect of management communication, from basic decisions about setting a realistic communication objective to specific behaviors when greeting people. At the same time, seemingly superficial behaviors such as greetings can often reflect important and deep-rooted cultural values. The next time you are communicating in a different country, region, industry, or organization, keep in mind the following points:

- Read about and discuss the culture before you go. A single party conversation on the topic will probably not be sufficient; the more you can learn about economics and industry, politics and government, religion and philosophy, history, symbols and traditions, social structures, cultural achievements, language, sports, and food, the more successful you are likely to be.

- Listen, react, and interpret the culture while you are there. All you can learn from studying in advance is never the same as what you can learn when immersed in the culture. Stay alert; be flexible; be willing to modify your ideas. Use your new associates as resources: most people are happy to explain their customs to interested foreigners.

- Imitate group members to learn by example, especially for nonverbal communication. Be particularly aware of how group leaders behave; follow their example when appropriate.

- Perhaps most important, try to maintain an open attitude—of patience, tolerance, objectivity, empathy, and respect—to increase your understanding, cooperation, and effectiveness. □

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