

Intercultural Communications: How Does Culture Complicate Communication?

by **Perficient Latin America** on October 4th, 2017 | ~ 3 minute read



Interacting with people from different cultures and in different locations around the world is now just another day at the office for most people. The advent of the internet, inexpensive travel, international business, and even, more robust study abroad programs, means that more people than ever before are exploring the world and connecting cross-culturally daily. However, that doesn't mean that cross-cultural

cultural differences.

What is culture?

Culture encompasses the social norms and behaviors of a particular society or group, and those norms and behaviors vary greatly across peoples and countries. One of the most descriptive, and perhaps most accurate, concepts of culture uses an iceberg to illustrate the components of culture that are obvious and those that are hidden, offering a clear illustration of just how complicated culture can be to interpret and understand.





The very tip of the iceberg, or the smallest portion that is visible above the surface of the water, features visible or identifiable components of culture, such as food, dress, language, dance, arts, etc. These visible components tend to be easily understood at face value. Lurking beneath the surface are the more foundational and often misunderstood components of culture, like interpretations, core values and morals, ways of communicating and assumptions. All of these concepts resting below the surface of the iceberg are complicated and rarely change easily or frequently, thus making them harder to understand and interpret for someone outside of the “in” group.

This simplified, but accurate, depiction of the true complexity of culture helps to underscore the complexity of intercultural communication. Intercultural communication is the process of communication that occurs when individuals from one culture connect with individuals from another. Now, those two individuals most likely have very diverse and different cultural norms and particular ways of communicating, making the likelihood of miscommunication or misunderstanding very high.

How Does Culture Make Communication Difficult?

Communication issues with individuals from other cultures stem from the ways in which a particular culture applies hierarchies, understands communication norms, makes assumptions about interactions, finalizes and

cultures, on the other hand, are not as direct in their communication and have a tendency to imply responses or avoid directly responding to questions.

Additionally, the use of hierarchies and authority within organizations can have a profound impact on communications. One culture might be well versed in the idea of a flat organization where anyone can raise issues to the CEO or managers. In other organizations, the hierarchical ladder must be observed and workers towards the bottom are only supposed to bring up these new ideas or problems with their direct manager. During interactions with individuals or group meetings with many different levels of participants, certain individuals might not share their ideas if senior staff members are in the room or they might not elevate problems if managers are present. This can cause problems that resonate beyond miscommunications and affect business practices or relationships.

To illustrate these issues more clearly, an example in software outsourcing is when differing hierarchies and communication styles within teams leads to lags in product development as teams wait for approval to be given by the correct person. Additionally, under these circumstances, problems with development might not be clearly stated or elevated until the product launch which could spell disaster for both parties. For this reason (and many others), nearshoring has become a very popular alternative to offshore software development. Nearshoring cuts down on (but does not completely eliminate!) miscommunications due to culture because of the geographical proximity of the outsourcing partner.

In our experience as software outsourcing professionals working with clients from over 14 countries, we've become familiar with a lot of the communication nuances present when working with different cultures. That doesn't mean we have perfected the art of communication by any means, but we have compiled best practices that can ease intercultural communication pains. Consequently, we've put together a part 2 of this article outlining those practices in order to help guide individuals in their interactions with people from different cultures.

Stay tuned for the ten guidelines to achieving successful intercultural communications!

10 Tips for Improving Your Intercultural Communication Skills

by **Perficient Latin America** on October 6th, 2017 | ~ 4 minute read



This is Part 2 of a three part series on intercultural communications. Part 1 addressed the complexity of culture and how it can impact communications when individuals from one culture interact with individuals from another. In this feature, we focus on the lessons we've learned from our cross cultural interaction and how you can use those tips to achieve impactful, successful cross-cultural communications.

How can you improve intercultural communications?

There are a number of strategies that can be used to better understand and improve intercultural communications. And, while it depends on the situation and what component of culture you are dealing with, the guidelines listed below can be used to help in any cross-cultural situation to make sure your message and intention is clear, and that you understand what others are saying.

Tips for Achieving Successful Intercultural Communications:

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Tips for Achieving Successful Intercultural Communications:

1. Do your homework.

If you know ahead of time who you will be speaking with or what country you will be visiting, it makes sense to research cultural norms and standards, and communication methods for that particular place. Do not walk into the situation unprepared if you can avoid it.

2. Ask.

It might be uncomfortable for you and the person you are asking, but by showing your willingness to ask when you don't understand or when you lack the cultural knowledge necessary to avoid cultural faux pas, you are demonstrating your willingness to learn more about a new culture and the prevailing communication norms instead of rushing through unaware.

3. Accept that you'll commit errors.

Even with all the research you're going to do and the questions you're going to ask, you will still make mistakes. Don't take it personally, rather do your best to be self-aware, actively learn from your mistake and apologize if you offend anyone or cross boundaries. Mistakes will always happen, the problem begins when you don't use a mistake as an opportunity to learn to avoid the same issues in the future.

4. Avoid colloquialisms, jokes, and idioms.

Humor is culture oriented and until you have spent significant months or years learning it, jokes should be avoided as it can be easy to offend or belittle, and in professional situations that can spell disaster. Idioms should be avoided for a different reason, and that is that they vary greatly by culture and often are untranslatable. In Colombia, "Hacemos la vaca" means to collect money to buy something together. It has literal meaning and if you weren't with someone who could explain, you would be very confused as to why people were making a cow.

5. Practice actively listening and observing.

Listening is a highly regarded skill. When communicating with others from another culture, it is incredibly important to actively pay attention and listen to what people are telling you. Listening can help you understand that there isn't one right way to conduct interactions. Additionally, varying viewpoints or ideas might contradict your own, but you'll still need to listen respectfully.

6. Repeat or confirm what you think was being said.

It can be helpful to repeat or confirm what you believe to have been the objective of the conversation. This process will help you avoid misunderstandings, especially when speaking different languages. Write it out if you have to, but make sure you align everyone's understanding before moving forward.



7. Don't ask yes or no questions.

Instead, use open-ended questions to avoid confusion. With open-ended questions, the person with whom you are interacting must explain or clearly outline their point, making it easier to understand their response and the context surrounding it.

8. Pay attention to nonverbal communication.

Communication is also extremely nonverbal. Pay attention to nonverbal cues such as intonation, eye contact, and posture. Observe how people conduct interactions with others from their same culture and follow their lead. Certain cultures avoid strong eye contact when speaking, so you'll make someone highly uncomfortable if you are trying to force strong eye contact they are not used to doing the same.

9. Speak slowly and clearly.

This will help you avoid mistakes and seeming nervous. Speaking slowly and clearly is often interpreted as being confident. Additionally, taking time to think before you speak can help you to avoid communication issues and words you might regret later.

10. Take a deep breath and enjoy it!

It can be a challenge to communicate effectively with people from other cultures, and you are bound to find people with whom you can communicate more effectively and more enjoyably than others. Remember, that the whole process is a lifelong lesson in empathy, understanding, and self-awareness which can translate to vastly improved professional and personal interactions and successes beyond just intercultural communications. So, take a deep breath and start communicating!
