During a visit to a foreign country, distant city, or even another company, cultural differences can seem colorful, exotic, and appealing. But when the time spent in another culture is longer than a visit, or when you work and conduct business with people of other cultures, your cultural biases can emerge with more force. The disregard for time that seemed so delightful on the island vacation feels very different on Monday morning in the office when the clock is ticking. A modest, deferential manner that was appealing in one cultural context may strike you as passive and ineffectual in a conference room.

These experiences feel unfamiliar because we are looking through the lens of our own cultural expectations. Unconsciously we expect other people to think, feel, and act the way we do. When they don’t conform to our expectations, we put our own interpretations on their behavior. But when you’re working across cultures, interpretation often becomes misinterpretation. You run the risk of negatively judging the words and actions of people of other cultures or incorrectly assigning motives to unfamiliar behavior because you’re viewing an experience from the limited perspective of your own culture.

The discomfort you feel when cultural boundaries collide can be used to your benefit by alerting you to cultural differences. In your interactions with other people, be aware that cultural differences may be coming into play when you experience feelings such as confusion, anxiety, frustration, misunderstanding, tension, impatience, irritation, or anger.

Keeping Your Feet on the Ground

When you feel uncomfortable, it’s natural to retreat from that discomfort. After all, you probably feel you are most effective as a manager when you are operating from a familiar place, where you can draw confidence from and make decisions based on past experience. From our work at CCL, we have coined the phrase **jump-back response** to describe this desire to retreat. To be more effective when communicating across cultures against your knowledge of your cultural expectations.

**Why doesn’t she just say yes or no?** In one culture an indirect answer may signal indecisiveness, whereas in another culture it may signal deference and respect.

**Why is he always staring at me like that?** In one culture staring may signal aggressiveness or intimidation, whereas in another culture direct eye contact may show attention and esteem.

**Why does he have to get right in my face whenever he talks to me?** In one culture the halo of personal space and privacy may be much smaller than it is in another culture.

**Why doesn’t she tell me if she doesn’t understand something?** In one culture asking questions may be accepted as an effective tool for communications, but in another culture questioning superiors may signal insolence.

**Why does he sit there smiling when I’m talking about his performance problems?** In one culture smiling during a discussion about performance problems may signal contempt and disinterest, whereas in another culture a smile may reflect sincerity and attention.

**Why does he make a joke out of everything?** In one culture a glib nature may signal a lack of confidence or seriousness, but in another culture it may be a sign of deference.

Time to Change Your Style?

When you work with people of other cultures, you should expect that differences will surface, recognize those cultural differences by the discomfort they produce, and anticipate that those differences will create a need for more thoughtful and deliberate
communication. Don’t assume that your own cultural customs are correct and superior to others or take the attitude that the other person has to change his or her ways. Be alert to the need to modify your communication style when

- Another person’s behavior makes you uncomfortable.
- Another person’s response or reaction seems inappropriate or confusing.
- You assume that you’re right and the other person is wrong.
- You stereotype and denigrate another cultural group.
- You ignore or exclude someone because understanding, and making yourself understood, seems too difficult.

It’s important to make changes in your communication patterns quickly once you recognize that changes are necessary. A person from another culture is likely to be forgiving the first and second times you make a mistake, but if you persist you will appear ignorant, insensitive, dismissive, or disrespectful.

Consider, for example, the use of why questions as a way to get more information. In some cultures, such as that of the United States, it’s completely acceptable to ask, “Why did you do the job this way?” In other cultures, Japan’s, for example, the same question is considered rude because it puts the other person on the defensive. In this case you can change your communication behavior: “That’s an interesting approach you took to the problem. Tell me a little more about it.” This gives the other person a chance to share more information with you without risk. Other simple changes that you can make after recognizing different cultural behaviors include learning how to make the correct greeting (a handshake? a bow? a hug?), when to offer your business card (before or after the other person does?), and when and how to question superiors.

It’s Not So Easy Anymore

When you listen to people who have the same cultural background and native language as you do, you can usually get the gist of their meaning without special effort. You can easily understand their words and “read” their body language and tone of voice. You can make assumptions that are valuable shortcuts to understanding.

When you listen to people from other cultures, your task is more difficult. You can’t make the same assumptions. Effective cross-cultural communication requires an extra measure of awareness and attention. To focus on the other person’s message, keep the following questions in mind each time you communicate across cultures:

- What do I know about this person’s culture?
- Do I take the time to focus on a person from another culture, so I can understand where he or she is “coming from”?
- Do I pay attention to a person’s words and body language?
- Do I listen for feelings and unvoiced questions?
- Do I clarify and confirm what I have heard?
- Do I check to make sure the other person has fully understood what I said?

Look for Nonverbal Communication

Whether you’re talking to someone from your own culture or someone with a different cultural perspective, much of the message is relayed through nonverbal cues. When communicating across cultures, it’s important not only to hear what the other person is saying but also to observe what that person’s body language (facial expressions, hand gestures, eye contact, tone of voice) is saying.

Keep in mind, however, that like spoken language, nonverbal expressions such as eye contact and body position have different meanings in different cultures. A clenched fist, a slouched posture, an open hand, or a smile can tell us how to understand a communication only if we have a cultural context for defining the body language.

Even silence can communicate. In some cultures, remaining silent after someone has spoken shows respectful contemplation and consideration of the person’s words. If your culture doesn’t allow for such conversational pauses, resist filling these gaps with additional explanations and alternative wording.

Also remember that body language is a two-way medium—your own gestures and facial expressions can have unintended messages when you are communicating with someone from another culture. Although your words may say otherwise, your body can communicate boredom, defiance, persuasion, or condescension.

How can you interpret, or “hear,” all of that body language if you’re not familiar with the other culture? Keep your eyes open for patterns of behavior among various cultural groups. Ask a trusted person from the cultural group. Read up on the business customs of other cultures, and pull information from the Internet (travel sites can be especially helpful in describing cultural customs).
A Little Self-Reflection Helps

Another good place to start is with a look at your own body language. Ask someone to videotape a presentation that you give at your organization, or observe yourself in a mirror. Ask yourself:

- What do my nonverbal communications look like?
- How might I be perceived by someone with a different cultural background?
- Do I match the stereotype of people from my country?
- How can I check if I suspect that my body language is being misinterpreted by someone from another culture?

Body Language Varies by Culture

Body language is not a universal language. If you experience unexpected behavior when you are trying to communicate in a cross-cultural setting, it’s likely that the other person’s culture is different from yours and that you are unfamiliar with the cultural context behind the behavior.

A manager is conducting an annual performance review with one of his direct reports. He begins the session by discussing all the areas in which the employee’s performance met or exceeded goals. The employee listens attentively, with a serious and thoughtful expression. But when the manager begins to discuss weaknesses and problem areas, the employee starts smiling. The sterner the manager’s tone, the broader the employee grins. The employee doesn’t comment on anything the manager says or defend or explain himself. The manager becomes angry because he believes the employee is mocking him and treating the evaluation as a joke.

Sustained eye contact means respect and attentiveness in some cultures but is a rude invasion of privacy in others. A gesture that denotes enthusiastic approval in some cultures is an insult in others. In this case the employee’s smile was not a sign of mockery but an expression of deep embarrassment and shame. The manager’s angry feelings toward the employee’s behavior signal that there may be a miscommunication because of cultural differences.

Frank and Nick leave the office to go to lunch together. When they get into the elevator, Nick stands one foot away from Frank even though the elevator is otherwise empty. When Frank moves a couple of steps away, Nick moves closer to him so that they are almost touching.

Every culture has its own standards about how much personal space feels right and comfortable. From Frank’s cultural perspective, physical closeness is an expression of intimacy and feels completely inappropriate in a business relationship. In Nick’s cultural view, such closeness is natural behavior. Putting more distance between himself and Frank would show that they don’t know or don’t like each other.

John goes to the airport to meet Yuri’s plane. The two men have talked several times on the phone but have met only once before. When Yuri spots John in the baggage area, he enthusiastically embraces him and kisses him on both cheeks. John feels uncomfortable and hopes nobody he knows has witnessed this greeting.

Every culture has its own unwritten rules about touching. In John’s culture the only acceptable touching in business relationships is a handshake. In Yuri’s culture bear hugs and kisses are an acceptable and even expected form of greeting, no matter what the relationship is and regardless of gender.

When Hong Mei presents her proposal at the meeting, Vincent reacts strongly. He pounds on the table and questions her in a loud voice. When Hong Mei casts her eyes down in embarrassment, Vincent seems to get more excited. He leans across the table and jabs his hand toward her face.

Every culture has its own ideas about what kind of emotional expression is acceptable and right. In Hong Mei’s culture emotional reserve and restraint are cherished and expected. In Vincent’s culture feelings are freely expressed in loud voices, expansive gestures, grimaces, groans, and exclamations. Anything less conveys coldness and disengagement.

Susan travels to London for a meeting with Gillian and Philip. She wants to make a good impression and to indicate that she is happy to be working with them, so she nods and smiles at their comments and observations.
Even the most innocent gestures can be misconstrued. Susan thinks her smiles and nods indicate attentiveness and express her happiness at being part of the team. Gillian and Philip come from a cultural background in which attentiveness and sincerity are marked by a reserved demeanor. Susan’s behavior indicates to them that she is insincere, superficial, and unprofessional.

Just as spoken words can be misunderstood during a cross-cultural encounter, so too can nonverbal behavior. If a behavior upsets you beyond what seems appropriate, that’s a good sign that cultures are colliding, not communicating. Ask questions to make sure you understand the meaning of behavior that seems out of place.

New World, New Lenses
Managers can no longer afford to view the world—an increasingly connected world—through a single cultural lens. Instead, an expanded cultural horizon is becoming increasingly essential to effective leadership. Teams, work groups, communities, and organizations become more diverse every day. Adding new lenses to your cultural viewpoint not only increases your awareness of other cultures and your effectiveness in working with people from other cultures but also develops your understanding of your own cultural conditioning.

There are many personal and leadership benefits of an expanded cultural horizon, and their effects are powerful. You can appreciate different ways—perhaps better ways—of accomplishing goals. You can gain insight into your own behavior. You can discover “out of the box” ways to communicate clearly and effectively. And you can become more comfortable in suspending your judgment, which fosters a more creative work environment.

Cultural differences arise in all levels of an organization and affect all leaders, from the project team to the executive suite. As you become more aware of those differences and more skilled at communicating across cultures, you’ll become a better manager and a more effective leader.

SUGGESTED READING
Harris, P. R., and Moran, R. T. Managing Cultural Differences. Houston: Gulf, 1996.

Capture, Clarify, and Confirm
There are three practical rules for ensuring better cross-cultural communications:

1. Capture. To avoid misunderstandings, injured feelings, and confusion, focus fully on the conversation. Capture what is said and refer to your knowledge about other cultures to derive meaning.

2. Clarify. If you aren’t completely sure you have understood what the other person is saying, look for nonverbal cues to explain the message. Alternatively, you can ask a knowledgeable insider to check your understanding.

3. Confirm. To make sure the other person has understood you, give him or her an opportunity to paraphrase or clarify what you have said. You might want to write down your message or schedule a short follow-up conversation to repeat, in a different way, your original message.


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This article is adapted from Communicating Across Cultures, a CCL Ideas Into Action Guidebook that helps managers become aware of cultural differences, recognize when cultural differences pose a leadership challenge, and adapt their communication styles to enhance their effectiveness as managers. For more information, call 336/545-2810 or visit our Web site, at www.ccl.org