

Building Relationships across Cultures © copyright by Robert (Bob) W. Lucas

If you have known someone from a culture other than yours, chances are you know that there are distinct differences in the way people from various countries communicate, process information, communicate and approach different situations. There are no right or wrong ways; just differences. With this in mind, and a bit of contemplation, you can build effective relationships with virtually anyone from around the world. The following are a few tips for successfully connecting with and effectively getting to know others from around the world.

Avoid assumptions related to communication ability. Assumptions can cause relationship breakdowns and misunderstandings. If you must assume, then assume that the other person is an intelligent and competent person with whom you can communicate and work with if you both approach the situation with a positive, can do attitude. For some reason, many Americans feel that if they raise their voice to someone who does not speak English well, that the person will understand what is being said. An example of how communication can break down between people from different backgrounds was seen several years ago in the popular movie *Rush Hour* starring Jackie Chan and Chris Tucker. In that movie, both played police officers, Tucker from Los Angeles and Chan from Hong Kong. They met at the Los Angeles airport when Chan flew in. Here is a synopsis of a scene in which Tucker goes to the airport to pick up a Chan. Tucker assumes that Chan cannot speak English and raises his voice as he yells, "Do you understand the words that are coming out of my mouth?" Not only did Chan understand, but he later begins to communicate fluently in English. When Tucker acts surprised and miffed, Chan nonchalantly says, "I did not say I didn't speak English. You assumed that I did not speak English."

Such actions do little to enhance communication and learning. In fact, yelling or changing tone does nothing to enhance learner understanding and may well anger or embarrass them. It certainly makes you look foolish. Just because a participant is unable to speak English, does not mean that he or she is hearing impaired.

Use short words and sentences when speaking. Without appearing condescending, frequently take the time to verify understanding of your message by others before continuing your delivery. Failure to do so might result in a waste of time and frustration for both you and the other person. To achieve this, avoid direct questions, such as "Do you understand?" Not only can this be answered with a yes or no, but it can also offend someone who speaks and understands English well. The nonverbal message is that the person may not be smart enough to get your meaning. Instead, try tie-in questions, such as, "How do you think you will do/use this?" or others that will give you an indication of whether there is comprehension of the information that has been provided. These types of questions help you and your participants to visualize how the information will be put to use. These questions will also give you a chance to clarify the information if the person has misunderstood your explanation.

Avoid culturally specific references. To reduce the risk of misunderstandings by people who speak English as a second language or a language other than yours, use universal language and references. Avoid words, examples, or acronyms that are unique to your culture. For example, people from the United States should avoid the following types of comments with others who are not from the United States:

- "I'll need your 'John Hancock' on this form," (referring to a U.S. historical figure);
- "If plan A fails, we'll drop back and punt" (referring to U.S. football);
- "Looks like we scored a home run with that last activity (referring to baseball);
- "Close, but no cigar" (referring to winning something at a carnival)
- "Win one for the 'Gipper'" (referring to Notre Dame football coach Knute Rockne).

These phrases might be understood by someone acculturated to the U.S. society, but will probably not make sense to someone from another culture. Such comments will only confuse others and do little to enhance comprehension.

Be conscious of non-verbal cues. Continually monitor nonverbal reactions as you converse with someone regardless of where they come from. For example, people often have a puzzled or confused look on their face when they do not grasp a concept or something they heard. If you feel there is confusion or loss of comprehension, stop and try to reestablish a bond. Also, be aware of the nonverbal cues you send and make sure that they are in congruence (agree with) with your verbal message. For example, if you explain at the beginning of a conversation that the information punctuality to meetings is important so that a project can stay on schedule, yet you return late from breaks or lunch, you send a conflicting message. The potential problem this creates is that others will likely follow your lead and start returning late also.

Use a step-by-step approach when explaining something. Clearly outline exactly what you will do or what will be expected of others in any given situation. Write this information down for future reference by others so that you prevent misunderstandings. In taking this approach, you also aid others in your group, who benefit from having information delivered visually, by allowing them to potentially better grasp concepts and instructions.

Use humor cautiously. It is probably best to avoid jokes when dealing with someone from another cultural until you get to know them well. This is because cultural values and beliefs result in different levels of social acceptance on many topics. In addition, jokes are often based on incidents, people, or environmental factors from a specific culture. These might not be shared or understood by someone from outside that culture.

If you plan to use humor, make sure that the content or delivery will not inadvertently offend others. You are usually safest using self-effacing (directed at yourself) humor. Even so, be careful not to choose an aspect about yourself (e.g. body type, baldness, physical characteristics that stands out) that is shared by others or that can be viewed as a stereotype (e.g. all divorced people do...or all overweight people like me are too lazy to exercise) and that might embarrass a learner. If something is shared by someone in your group and they are self-conscious about the characteristic or aspect,

they may feel that people are now looking at them as a result and may become irritated by your attempt at humor. They might then shut down and withdraw mentally or physically from the participation in team activities or a relationship with you. Acceptable comments about yourself might involve something that you did that was foolish or was not well thought out and that caused you embarrassment or put you in a humorous predicament.

Avoid criticism. Another important point to remember related to relationship building is that in many cultures, saving “face” or esteem is an important value. To avoid inadvertently offending someone from another culture, if someone does not understand something that was said or instructions provided, or if they make mistakes (e.g., they improperly fill out a form or use the wrong word), you should not directly point out the mistake, especially in public. Instead, take the responsibility for correcting the error or clarifying the misunderstanding as if it was due to something you communicated (e.g. “I’m sorry I do not speak your language...,” “I am sorry that these forms are so confusing, I have trouble with them too,” or “I do not know why this process has to be so difficult. I have trouble myself. I would like to go through it one more time. Would that be alright?”).

By taking such an approach, you take responsibility for the error or misunderstanding and do not put the other person in an awkward situation or in one in which they would be embarrassed or offended in front of others or in which their self-esteem is damaged.

Building relationships with others, no matter what their background is, is not difficult. It just takes a little thinking and planning on your part.

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