



CROSS CULTURAL COMMUNICATIONS

As people travel across the globe to conduct business, it is not uncommon for conflict to arise due to the differences in communication style. Those differences in style are often not recognised or understood, thus preventing a positive working relationship.

A.J. Schuler, Psy.D., of Schuler Solutions (www.schulersolutions.com), provides eight potential "hot spots" when communicating across cultures. Try to keep these differences in mind during cross-cultural communication as they could help you understand where the other person is coming from — and result in a more efficient business meeting.

1. Opening and Closing Conversations

Customs vary per culture as to who has the right or duty to speak first to whom. There also is a correct way to begin and end a conversation that includes address, salutations, levels of deference to age or social position and gender.

2. Taking Turns During Conversations

There are numerous factors to consider when interacting across cultures, such as the context of the conversation, the audience and the relationship between the individuals. Depending on these factors, you will need to know whether to take turns in an interactive way or stop and listen without comment, as producing a response can indicate a challenge or a humiliation in some cultures.

3. Interrupting

Interruption by vocal and emotional expression are considered the default conversational style in some cultures among men or those considered to be equal. However, Americans or Northern Europeans may confuse this style for argument.

4. Use of Silence

It is a good idea to understand the local customs with regard to making business agreements, the transaction of commerce and the extent to which details are specified in advance and enumerated in writing.

5. Appropriate Topics of Conversation

To speak or not to speak, that is the question. In some cultures, it is a sign of thoughtfulness and deference to pause before a response and, in others, it can be misconstrued as a sign of hostility.

6. Use of Humour

In contrast to the U.S., many cultures do not use humour to ease the awkwardness of new relationships. In fact, laughter can be a sign of disrespect in other cultures, thus leading to misunderstandings.

7. Knowing How Much to Say

Be sure to know when to get to the point or when to elaborate on a subject that would normally take very little time. In some cultures, age and social standing can help you determine how much you will want to say.

8. Sequencing Elements during Conversations

Timing is everything. What you say and when you say it can change your intention in certain cultures, thus impacting subsequent behaviour.