



Australian Government



NEW COLOMBO PLAN

Connect to Australia's future - study in the region

CULTURAL AWARENESS



Part 3 Intercultural Communication

GLOBALISATION GIVES THE PERCEPTION THAT CULTURES MUST BE SIMILAR

Globalisation has contributed to the perception that because we use the same consumer products or speak the same language, our cultures must be similar. As explained in previous modules this only focuses on the tip of the iceberg. With all intercultural communication we must try to understand the different meanings behind similar behaviours.



WHAT WILL I LEARN ABOUT INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION?

At the conclusion of the module, you will have answers to the following questions.

1. What underlying themes are common in the Indo-Pacific region?
2. How can I improve my intercultural communication skills?
3. What are the common greetings in the Indo-Pacific region?
4. What does the concept of 'face' mean?
5. What is the attitude to time across the Indo-Pacific region?
6. Are there common verbal and non-verbal communication tips?
7. Is the meaning of 'yes' the same across the Indo-Pacific region?
8. Why is the use of silence important?
9. How do I find common ground with another culture?

WHAT UNDERLYING THEMES ARE COMMON IN THE INDO-PACIFIC REGION?

Cultural norms play an important role in communication. The setting, context and people communicating will dictate what is deemed as appropriate conversation. However, certain themes or underlying principles of life are widely accepted throughout the Indo-Pacific region. For example, independence, freedom and the pursuit of happiness (and leisure) are important values in Australian culture, whereas family loyalty, respect for hierarchy and strong relationships are important values in many Asian and Pacific cultures. Let's examine some traits that are common to the cultures within the Indo-Pacific region, noting that 'how and when' they are displayed can vary.

PACIFIC ISLANDS	ASIA
Pacific Island culture is informed by indigenous and colonial traditions and values. Each cultural grouping retains elements of its traditional values.	The peoples and countries of Asia are diverse in ethnic background, traditions, cultures, belief systems and religions. Not only do Asian countries differ in sociocultural traits, but subgroups within countries often differ as well.




OBSERVATION

Given the vast diversity of regional societies, any observation must be tempered with the understanding that it cannot apply to all countries in the Indo-Pacific region.


The ethnic and linguistic diversity of the Indo-Pacific region is more like the diversity of an area as variable as Europe than like that of any other single nation-state.

PACIFIC ISLANDS	ASIA
Pacific Island societies have traditionally been strongly collective and hierarchical	Asian societies have traditionally been strongly collective and hierarchical

 **OBSERVATION**

Within the Indo-Pacific region, whether Asian or Pacific Islander, Hindu or Muslim, urban or village, virtually all things, people, and groups of people are ranked according to various essential qualities.


PACIFIC ISLANDS	ASIA
Family and honour are of paramount importance. The extended family is a powerful social unit, which serves to guide and mediate the actions of family members.	Asia is a collectivist society in which the needs of the group are often placed over those of the individual. Family members often depend on and support each other.

 **OBSERVATION**

The extended family, village community and hierarchical system are three primary societal structures.

Family and community concerns will almost always be put above business or individual needs.


PACIFIC ISLANDS	ASIA
Eye contact is normally kept to a minimum between younger and older people, and people of the opposite sex. It is a sign of confrontation and disrespect if there is too much eye contact.	Direct eye contact is often considered rude. It is a sign of confrontation and disrespect if there is too much eye contact.

 **OBSERVATION**

Outward expressions of anger are considered impolite and crude. People generally go out of their way to avoid conflict.

Public displays of affection are frowned upon. Men and women rarely show affection in public. It has traditionally been considered respectful for men and women to maintain a distance from one another.

PACIFIC ISLANDS	ASIA
Society places high value on the extended family headed by the chief who has authority over family matters and land. The chief sits in the village council as the family representative.	There is a strong hierarchy in Asian society. This hierarchy is also present amongst families, and parents are at the top. Children are brought up to respect those such as parents and elders.

 **OBSERVATION**

When meeting someone for the first time, it is not unusual to ask several questions in order to establish where they fit within the hierarchy. These questions may seem very personal to some foreigners but it is best to accept them in good nature and not be insulted.

If you insult someone from the Indo-Pacific region, you will almost certainly stop any chance of building good relationships and in some countries, this could possibly lead to legal action.

Languages can be used in a hierarchical and formal way to denote respect to those who have more status.

PACIFIC ISLANDS	ASIA
<p>Respect is demonstrated by treating people according to their position and status in relationship to you.</p> <p>Lowering the eyes shows respect to elders, teachers, figures of authority etc. and humbleness on the part of the person lowering the eyes.</p> <p>It is very disrespectful and the height of bad manners in Polynesian culture to interrupt a person particularly an older person when they are speaking. Always wait until they have finished.</p>	<p>Hierarchy is embedded in language. People are named according to age, position and relationship to the speaker. The use of titles is very important.</p> <p>A businessman seeking to arrange a contract relies not only on his own abilities but also on the assistance of well-connected friends and relatives to help finalise the deal.</p> <p>The importance of eye contact between the gods and humans helps explain why Hindu's disdain eye contact in public, even between husband and wife.</p>



OBSERVATION

Displaying respect is common to the cultures within the Indo-Pacific region. Diverse cultures have unique expectations of how 'respect' is demonstrated. In conversations, people may refrain from making critical remarks and favour verbal tentativeness to avoid giving offence. Their body language can be characterised by gestures with the head and a lack of eye contact. Some people are unwilling to use the word "no" even when they actually disagree with others.

WORKING EFFECTIVELY WITH

PEOPLE FROM OTHER CULTURES

GREETINGS

ASIA

A traditional greeting in some parts of Asia is the bow.

- The traditional Japanese greeting is the bow (ojigi). People bend from the waist, eyes lowered, to the same level, or lower if the other person has more status. The deeper and longer the bow, the more status is conveyed.
- In the traditional Indian bow (Namaste), the palms of the hands are held together near the heart as the word Namaste is said.
- In Thailand a bow is called the wai. The higher you hold your hands, the more respect you show. To not return the wai is considered very impolite, only monks and the King do not have to return the wai.
- When greeting family members in Indonesia, elder males will shake the hands of the younger female relatives and that involves taking their hand and then the younger female will put that hand to their heart or their head as a sign of respect.

Different cultures require different styles in which conversational greetings may be exchanged. Greetings can differ radically, many times shaped by religious beliefs, by different sensitivities to touch and intimacy and the roles males and females play in society.

The first time you meet someone from a different culture represents an opportunity to show them respect by greeting them appropriately and demonstrating some understanding of their culture.

PACIFIC ISLANDS

Many Pacific Islands are multi-racial countries so the way of greeting differs.

- In Fiji, a handshake is the normal greeting between people. Indigenous Fijians tend to usually greet people they know with a wave and the verbal greeting of "Bula" (the literal meaning is "life"). The formal greeting is "Ni sa bula vinaka," meaning "wishing you happiness and good health".
- There are more than 300 different languages in Papua New Guinea. Tok Pisin (talk pidgin) is the most widely spoken language. In Tok Pisin saying hello depends on the time of the day. In the morning one says "Monin" or "Monin tru" (a very good morning). In the afternoon one simply says "apinun" and in the evening one says "gud nait".

CONCEPT OF 'FACE'

In Western culture there is an underlying assumption of equality, that even people of different ranks are basically the same and should be treated in a similar way. Thus, in Western culture it is okay to disagree with someone who ranks higher in the social hierarchy. However, in Asian cultures, there is the ever-present concept of 'face'. 'Face' refers to the social image, reputation, dignity or honour of a person. Causing someone to 'lose face' diminishes their self-respect among peers while 'saving face' maintains their self-respect.

HOW TO 'GAIN FACE'

Something that helps to build up a person in front of others can be said to 'gain face'.

Consider these examples:

- compliment and praise others at any opportunity, especially hosts and chefs
- show respect, especially to people who are older or more senior
- remember people's names and titles and address them appropriately
- invite others to dinner, banquets, or social events
- politely deflect compliments that come your way. Turn them around to compliment your teacher, parents, or employer
- avoid attention-seeking actions
- prevent someone else from 'losing face'.

HOW TO CAUSE 'LOSS OF FACE'

Causing someone to 'lose face' diminishes their social standing among peers, losing honour, dignity and trustworthiness.

Consider these examples:

- criticise, challenge or embarrass someone openly
- pointing out someone's mistakes in front of their peers
- disagreeing with a superior in public
- causing someone to be left out of a group
- being inflexible when negotiating prices
- arguing or causing a scene in public.



HOW TO 'SAVE FACE'

Saving face involves doing or saying things (or not saying things) to preserve someone's social status after a failure, mistake or disagreement. The culture of 'saving face' is present in everyday interactions in many countries, it informs the way people may communicate, build relationships and negotiate.

Consider these examples:

- don't mention their failings with them
- make an excuse for them that explains their failures
- give an explanation for unreasonable things they have done
- put the best construction on their actions
- don't reveal information you have about the person that would cause other people to think less of them
- take actions to correct their failures without revealing to others that you have done this
- take the blame yourself for something they have done wrong.

Face-saving can be passive or active. Passive face-saving has the 'do no harm' attitude and means that you avoid doing or saying things which would embarrass the other person. Active face saving is where you go out of your way to help them, for example by taking the blame for things that are not your fault.

ATTITUDES TO TIME

Attitudes to time may differ between different cultures. For example, being late for an appointment, or taking a long time to get down to business, is the accepted norm in many countries.



Maria **New Colombo Plan Scholar to the Republic of Vanuatu**

“I would say something that was normalised in Vanuatu that shocked me was the idea of "island time". So, over there in Vanuatu, they would often show up 30 minutes, one hour, two hours later than the expected time. And at first that was an extremely frustrating experience, I remember waiting at USP, which was the University I was studying in. And it took an awfully long time for the lecturer to come. But it's when you start questioning why is it that they're taking so long, that's when you really understand that it's not because they don't care about you. It's actually because there's things that they prioritise, such as family. So, when you start understanding to not take things personal, when someone is late, don't take it personal, because there's probably another reason why. And it's probably because in their culture, they are prioritising something as more important, such as their health or such as their family.”

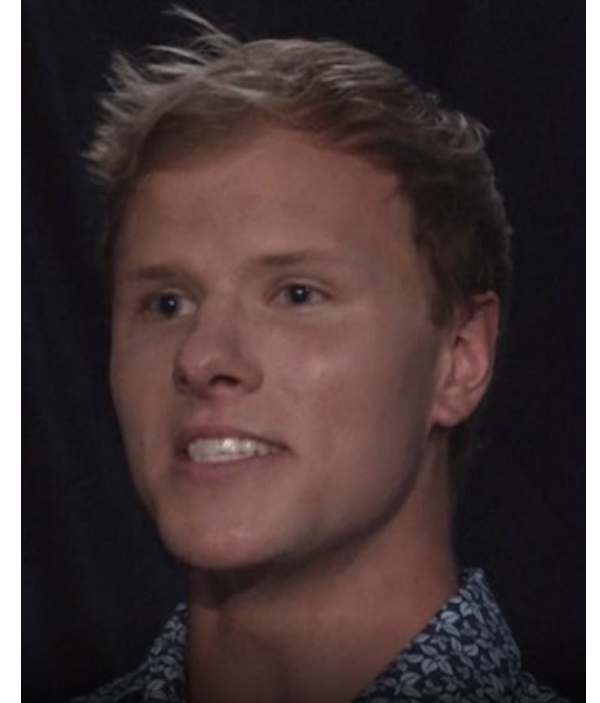
“Culture is defined by its values. And I do think that because Vanuatu has such a strong emphasis on family, it does impact their perceptions of time as well. What I mean by that is because they value spending time with their family, because they value the wellbeing of their family, a lot of the times they will prioritise that over meeting up with you for something that is business related. To them family and kinship is at the top of the chain.”

Marcus

New Colombo Plan Scholar to the Republic of Indonesia

“I think there's many differences between the way that individuals operate in Australia and Indonesia. Living in Australia, particularly as a university student and a young professional, I was very task-focused. I was very driven to reach the next deadline and perform the task and get it done, whereas often that came with a sacrifice to some of my relationships or to some of my hobbies or things like that. Whereas in Indonesia the shift is more toward the community and the family and helping each other. I learned this lesson because I'd organised a meeting with one of my professors and for me it was so important to be at the meeting on time. However, for my professor it wasn't that important.

She arrived about an hour after we'd set the meeting. Now, originally, I was quite frustrated by this because it threw out my plans for the rest of the day. And in Australia I know that if I was an hour late to a meeting with a professor, I'd probably fail the unit. Whereas what I learned afterwards was that that professor was actually helping a neighbour fix their sink. And so in her mind it was more important for her to help her friend, her neighbour than it was to be on time to a meeting. And I think that illustrates the attitude of the Indonesian people when it comes to their priorities.”



CHRONEMICS: HOW TIME IS PERCEIVED AND VALUED BY CULTURES

Chronemics is the study of the use of time, and the way that time is perceived and valued by individuals and cultures. These time perceptions include things like punctuality, willingness to wait, approaches to face-to-face interactions, and reactions to time pressure. Even within a country, different sub-cultures may regard time quite differently.

➤ Monochronic culture

In a monochronic culture, things are typically done one at a time, where time is segmented into precise, small units, and where time is scheduled, arranged and managed.

➤ Polychronic culture

In a polychronic culture, time is more fluid and changes according to the situation. Often the focus will be on the task at hand rather than the timeframe of the task. People from polychronic cultures manage interruptions well and are more flexible when it comes to change. Polychronic cultures are much more steeped in tradition and relationships rather than in tasks.

Source:

Browaeys, M and Price, R; *Understanding cross-cultural management*, Pearson, 2019



VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Australians are often very direct and brought up to 'not beat around the bush' and 'say it like it is'. In contrast for people with a high-context/indirect communication style, directness is perceived as blunt, rude and uncouth.

IT IS EASY TO MISINTERPRET COMMUNICATIONS DUE TO DIFFERENT CULTURAL APPROACHES

Bayan

New Colombo Plan Scholar to the Republic of Indonesia

“Indonesia is an incredibly diverse and multicultural society, it's very pluralistic. In fact each island has its own culture but there are certainly some principles that unite Indonesia as a nation. I guess underpinning that, is this notion that "Harmony", the official state ideology of "Pancasila" which roughly translates to unity in diversity. Indonesia, although it does have its problems, is a country that strives to uphold these principles.

They also are less direct as a people in terms of their communication with others sometimes some of the statements they make or the responses they give are ambiguous and I think that's intentionally so because they're not as direct in how they convey information verbally compared to us Aussies as we're used to. It's just sometimes you need to rely more on that body language and certain other cues to really try and decipher their true intention.”

“And once you get to know Indonesians and you establish that rapport with them and they open up and you realise that they are really curious about you and your background. They want to find out what you like about their culture, and find out more about your own as well. And a lot of people I think might be worried about making mistakes especially in their language learning, but Indonesians as a whole are very tolerant of stranger's mistakes. Also, don't be so nervous about offending others in so far that you avoid going places or certain interactions you know, because while it is important to consider local etiquette and the norms communicating with Indonesians remember we all make mistakes and Indonesians know you're a foreigner, so if you do something that would be considered impolite locally by a local, they are very tolerant of your ignorance.”

RECOGNISING THE DIFFERENCES IN COMMUNICATION PREFERENCES

In most egalitarian, individualistic cultures, there is a preference for a low-context or direct style. In many hierarchical, group-oriented cultures, a high-context or indirect style is considered more appropriate. It's important to recognise the differences between low and high context communication. It is easy to be confused or misinterpret someone's communications due to different cultural approaches.

➤ **Low-context culture**

In a 'low-context culture' the communication style relies heavily on explicit and direct language. A person with a low-context/direct communication style will make their main point first, then provide context, explanation and supporting information afterwards. Their listening style may match this, so they may focus more on the main points as the priority.

➤ **High-context culture**

In a 'high-context culture' the social context or social environment is often more important than the words being spoken. Communication is less direct, relying on implicit messages and contextual cues to relay information. A person with a high-context/indirect communication style may start with a historical context or a chain of events and their consequences, building up slowly to the main point of their message. Their listening style may match this, so they may focus more towards the end of another person's message as it builds up to the main point, paying less attention to what is said at the beginning.

Low Context / Direct Communication (Task focused)	High Context / Indirect Communication (Relationship focused)
Sender chooses words that accurately convey the message.	Sender chooses words that maintain the relationship and minimise conflict, embarrassment or loss of face.
Most information is clearly stated in what is said.	Non-verbal information is very important.
What is said is what is meant.	What is not said is often more important than what is said.
Directness is perceived as honest and 'to the point'.	Indirectness is valued and recognised as polite behaviour.
Indirectness is perceived as evasive, dishonest and time-wasting.	Directness is perceived as blunt, rude and uncouth.

Source:

2012. *Cross-cultural management textbook: Lessons from the world leading experts*, Introduction by Edgar H. Schein, Ed. by Jerome Dumetz, with Charles Hampden-Turner, Meredith Belbin, Jerome Dumetz, Juliette Tournand, Peter Woolliams, Olga Saginova, Stephen M. R. Covey, Dean Foster, Craig Storti, Joerg Schmitz

MEANING OF 'YES'

Many individual and egalitarian cultures prefer a direct communication style; for example, "yes" means "I understand", "I agree", "I will do it". It is interpreted as an affirmative response to whatever question preceded it. Many hierarchical and group-oriented cultures prefer an indirect style, "yes" simply means "I hear you" rather than "I agree with what is said". There is ambiguity in the answer and further discussion is considered more appropriate.



Bayan

New Colombo Plan Scholar to the Republic of Indonesia

“The meaning of 'yes' does differ in certain contexts in Indonesia. Indonesia is first and foremost a collectivist society and family is really the bedrock of all social interaction over there. This concept of face and saving face is central in most Asian cultures and Indonesia is no exception there. In Australia we are very direct in what we speak we like to call a "spade a spade" as they say but in Indonesia because of this notion of saving face which is really influenced by that collectivist, cultural constructs and structures, people might find it difficult, especially to foreigners to say no to certain requests or to certain questions. And so, it's important to really look for those other cues and non-verbal cues and body language when communicating with Indonesians.

To get a better understanding of if what you're asking and seeking to know, is appropriate and don't always assume that yes means yes you also need to rely a bit on the tone, the context of the question or the statement and other things and in that way we're able to more effectively communicate with Indonesian people.”

WHAT HAPPENS IN HIERARCHICAL, GROUP-ORIENTED CULTURES?

In hierarchical, group-oriented cultures in which the avoidance of conflict is vital for the maintenance of strong relationships, 'yes' can mean many things:

- 'yes'
- 'maybe'
- 'I hear what you're saying but I don't understand'
- 'that's a good idea but there's nothing I can do about it'
- 'no, but I don't want to say that because it could be considered rude and it might impact on our future relationship'
- 'I agree but I need to discuss it with the elders in my community before I can do anything about it'.

One of the main reasons 'yes' can mean so many things is because people avoid saying 'no'. 'No' can be a confronting word in any culture, leading to conflict and the breakdown of relationships. In cultures where 'no' is avoided, people will express a negative response in more subtle and indirect ways:

- no response
- avoiding the question
- changing the subject
- postponing the answer
- hesitation: "Mmmmm...."

HOW DO YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT IS REALLY BEING SAID?



- In conversations where a request is made, avoid closed questions that require a specific answer, either 'yes' or 'no' or a specific piece of information. More success will be achieved using open questions and then listening.
- If you are checking if a person has understood what you have explained, ask questions that will indicate the person understands how the information relates to them. Allow for interludes of silence that give the person time to respond. If they haven't understood, they will let you know.

Photo: Rob Maccoll

USE OF SILENCE

Maria **New Colombo Plan Scholar to the Republic of Vanuatu**

“Words are important to be heard and to be listened. But there's so much more in addition to words that is important when you are communicating in Vanuatu. Silences are equally as important as the words that someone is saying. Silence can be powerful; it can be a way of someone showing you that they're listening to you.”

“You will rarely hear someone in Vanuatu butting in and injecting their thoughts whilst you were speaking, instead they will be quiet and they will be raising their eyebrows for example, to show you that they are listening. But silence can also be a way of them showing you that they disapprove of what you are saying or they disagree, but they don't want to cause that cultural clash, so they'll rather be silent about it. But you can tell based on the way that they are looking at you as well, and that goes with body language as well.”

Laura **New Colombo Plan Scholar to Japan**

“So, I think the Japanese are quite renowned for not expressing themselves completely verbally. It's everything that's said there's an implied meaning or there's some sort of background that you should understand and if you don't, then there can be a really hard time communicating.”

“I don't think silence is used as a communication method in Japanese, but there are a lot of different language aspects called aizuchi which are little things that you pepper into your conversation. So like we'd say uhm or ahh, there's a whole range of them for Japanese and they all mean different things and give a different nuance to a conversation.”

“I think a person's listening style in a conversation, I think it's definitely influenced by culture. With the aizuchi or the conversation fillers, they're used as a way to indicate that you're actively listening to someone and if you sat there silently and did nothing in Japanese, it would be considered that you were bored and that it was quite rude.”

WHAT IS YOUR PREFERRED STYLE OF COMMUNICATING?

There are three common approaches to having a conversation.

In Australia, style 1 is the preferred style of communicating in a business context.

STYLE 1

People may take turns when speaking, not interrupt or talk over each other, and avoid silence.

A _____

B _____

STYLE 2

Silence can also play an important role in a conversation, providing the opportunity to reflect on what the other person has said and to demonstrate respect.

A _____

B _____

STYLE 3

In some cultures, people frequently talk over and interrupt each other, ask questions and finish each other's sentences to demonstrate interest, engagement and connection.

A _____

B _____

CONVERSATIONAL SILENCE

We can experience anxiety with conversational silence when talking with people from a different culture where English is a second language. Common responses to the silence include repeating the statement, sometimes louder, rephrasing the statement or asking whether they understood. All of these approaches give the person more language to process, can disrupt their thinking process and add to their possible confusion. A more effective approach is to allow the silence and give the person time to respond. If they haven't understood, they will let you know.

Source:

2012. *Cross-cultural management textbook: Lessons from the world leading experts, Introduction by Edgar H. Schein, Ed. by Jerome Dumetz, with Charles Hampden-Turner, Meredith Belbin, Jerome Dumetz, Juliette Tournand, Peter Woolliams, Olga Saginova, Stephen M. R. Covey, Dean Foster, Craig Storti, Joerg Schmitz*



NON-VERBAL

COMMUNICATION

- When you cross your fingers, you may be wishing for something special, but in Vietnam, this is an obscene gesture, especially when done while looking at or addressing another person.
- Touching or patting someone on the head is considered rude in parts of Asia. In countries such as Thailand, Laos, and Sri Lanka it is particularly offensive because as Buddhists, they regard the head as the most sacred part of the body.
- In the Philippines, curling up your index finger so as to signal 'come here' is considered to be very offensive. In fact, in most Asian countries this gesture is usually only reserved for dogs.
- A quick handshake in Fiji is considered rude and insincere.

Communication research has found that we gain almost 70% of the meaning of any interaction from non-verbal behaviour. Non-verbal behaviour is even more significant in high-context cultures. Participants of the New Colombo Plan need to be aware of specific behaviours and their meanings in the host country. Here are few examples where the use of common Australian gestures could impact your overseas experience.

- Direct eye contact can be considered very invasive in some countries such as Japan. Eye contact should remain brief or it can be mistaken for aggression and lead to an uncomfortable situation.
- When handing over something important in Japan, such as business cards and gifts, it is expected that you give and receive the object with both hands. Doing otherwise is considered disrespectful and insincere.
- The Thai gesture for "come here" is actually similar to what Western cultures would use for "go away," with an open palm angled down, moving upward and downward repeatedly.
- In Thailand pointing is reserved for addressing inanimate objects, and even then, it is more polite to point with your entire hand rather than a single finger.



TIPS FOR

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Photo: DFAT

TOP 10 TIPS

1. Be curious – Take the time to learn about the country, its cultural norms and standards.
2. Have an open mind – Our communication skills are shaped by the culture in which we live. Be receptive to different communication norms and ways to interact.
3. Practice listening and observing – Listening will teach you new ways to conduct interactions.
4. Show respect – The foundation of all intercultural communication is respect. By demonstrating respect, you earn respect and help create more open and fruitful relationships.
5. Check your language – Limit the use of acronyms, abbreviations, jargon, colloquialisms and idioms when speaking.
6. Check for understanding – Asking questions stops you making assumptions and demonstrates your willingness to learn more about a new culture.
7. Watch for gestures – Consider non-verbal cues such as facial expressions.
8. Watch the humour – Be wary of differences in the sense of humour. One person's joke is another's insult.
9. Be patient – Working in an intercultural environment can be a frustrating affair.
10. Reflect on your experience – Take time to reflect on your experience and see where you can improve.



Photo: Conor Ashleigh

Intercultural communication requires an understanding that different cultures have different customs, traditions, norms set by society, and even thought patterns. But more, it requires an understanding that individuals are shaped, but not bounded, by their cultural background. In simple terms, intercultural communication will use both verbal and non-verbal techniques – each play a part in how one person understands another.

FINDING COMMON GROUND

**WE OFTEN INTERPRET BEHAVIOUR
ACCORDING TO OUR OWN VALUES
AND BELIEFS**

HOW TO FIND COMMON GROUND

If you find yourself in a situation where you are becoming frustrated due to cultural differences....



STOP AND SUSPEND JUDGEMENT

To suspend judgement is to avoid judging the behaviour of others as wrong, but accept they are just different. A person's behaviours are often logical in their own cultural context.



USE YOUR OBSERVATION AND LISTENING SKILLS

To use your observation and listening skills helps you to recognise and respect differences between their culture and your own.



FIND COMMON GROUND

Recognising and respecting the differences will make it much easier to find common ground and enable you to be more flexible in your approach.

One of the key areas where you can be challenged when working across cultures and tempted to judge negatively, is in relation to culturally different behaviour.

It is a common way of dealing with behaviour – instead of actually describing it and saying what people do, we more often interpret the behaviour according to our own values and beliefs, and then judge and name it accordingly.

This means that the same behaviour can be described in very different ways, depending on the values and beliefs of its different observers.

Dominic

New Colombo Plan Scholar to the Republic of Vanuatu

“If you get frustrated due to cultural differences, it's good just to take a step back and really put things into perspective and really understand, or try to understand, why people over there might think differently, or what's influenced them throughout history or through their religion or through their lifestyle. And then, I think, you're able to understand why they do things. Or maybe you might never understand it, but you just have a better perspective and appreciation for it.”

Jai

New Colombo Plan Scholar to Hong Kong

“The best thing to do is to take yourself out of the situation that you're currently in and think, breathe, relax and then go back out and explore that culture. Because when you're in a cultural situation that is vastly different to your own, the best thing to do is to learn and engage and to understand the rights and wrongs, so that you can better educate yourself to grow and to progress into that culture.”

“But you also need to take time for yourself. Accept that you're in a completely different culture and you know potentially a very foreign world and understand that that's OK, respect that you're in that position and then just breathe. Take a moment for yourself before you go back out and do it again.”

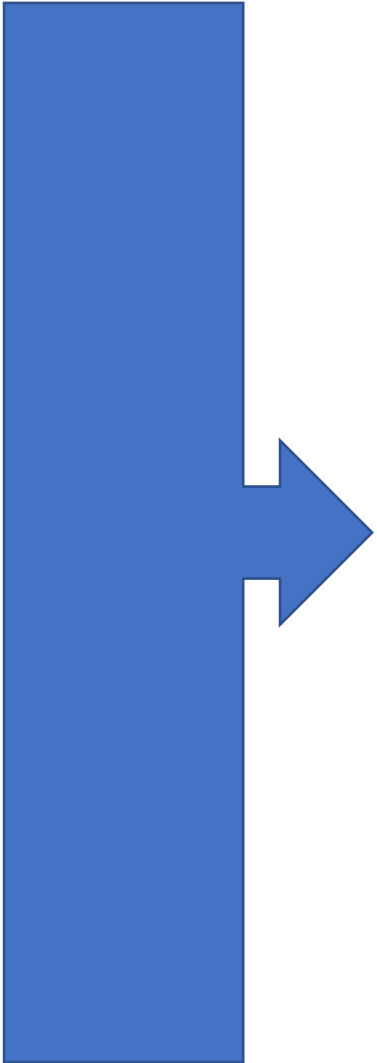
REFLECTION

Note: Before departing on your NCP assignment, learn as much as you can about your host countries' culture – this will help reduce the stress of the different experience.

Using knowledge of your culture as a reference point consider the following questions:

- What has your culture taught you as the best way to 'get the job done'?
- What parts of your culture have become part of the way you do things and what you consider normal?
- Which aspects of your individual personality and culture will you have to adapt to suit the host environment?

Let's review



Intercultural communication requires an understanding that different cultures have different customs, traditions, norms set by society, and even thought patterns. But more, it requires an understanding that individuals are shaped, but not bound, by their cultural background.

In simple terms, intercultural communication will use both verbal and non-verbal techniques – each play a part in how one person understands another.

Cultural norms play an important role in communication. The setting, context and people communicating will dictate what is deemed as appropriate conversation. However, certain themes or underlying principles of life are widely accepted throughout the Indo-Pacific region.

One of the key areas where you can be challenged when working across cultures and tempted to judge negatively, is in relation to culturally different behaviour. It is a common way of dealing with behaviour – instead of actually describing it and saying what people do, we often interpret the behaviour according to our own values and beliefs, and then judge and name it accordingly. This means that the same behaviour can be described in very different ways, depending on the values and beliefs of its different observers.

If you find yourself in a situation where you are becoming frustrated due to cultural differences, the key action is to stop and suspend judgement. To suspend judgement is to avoid judging the behaviour of others as wrong, but accept that they are just different. A person's behaviours are often logical in their own cultural context. You can then use your observation and listening skills to recognise and respect differences between their culture and your own. This will make it much easier to find common ground and enable you to be more flexible in your approach.

Different cultures require different styles in which conversational greetings may be exchanged. Greetings can differ radically, many times shaped by religious beliefs, by different sensitivities to touch and intimacy and the roles males and females play in society.

The first time you meet someone from a different culture represents an opportunity to show them respect by greeting them appropriately and demonstrating some understanding of their culture.

In Western culture there is an underlying assumption of equality, that even people of different ranks are basically the same and should be treated in a similar way. Thus, in the West it is okay to disagree with someone who ranks higher in the social hierarchy. However, in Asian cultures, there is the ever-present concept of 'face'.

'Face' refers to the social image, reputation, dignity or honour of a person. Causing someone to 'lose face' diminishes their self-respect among peers while 'saving face' maintains their self-respect. The culture of 'saving face' is present in everyday interactions in many countries, it informs the way people may communicate, build relationships and negotiate.

Chronemics is the study of the use of time, and the way that time is perceived and valued by individuals and cultures. These time perceptions include things like punctuality, willingness to wait, approaches to face-to-face interactions, and reactions to time pressure. Even within a country, different sub-cultures may regard time quite differently.

- In a monochronic culture, things are typically done one at a time, where time is segmented into precise, small units, and where time is scheduled, arranged and managed.
- In a polychronic culture, time is more fluid and changes according to the situation. Often the focus will be on the task at hand rather than the timeframe of the task. People from polychronic cultures manage interruptions well and are more flexible when it comes to change. Polychronic cultures are much more steeped in tradition and relationships rather than in tasks.

In most egalitarian, individualistic cultures, there is a preference for a low-context or direct style. In many hierarchical, group-oriented cultures, a high-context or indirect style is considered more appropriate.

It's important to recognise the differences between low and high context communication. It is easy to be confused or misinterpret someone's communications due to different cultural approaches.

So how do you understand what is really being said?

- In conversation where a request is made, avoid closed questions that require a specific answer, either 'yes' or 'no' or a specific piece of information. More success will be achieved using open questions and then listening.
- If you are checking if a person has understood what you have explained, ask questions that will indicate the person understands how the information relates to them. Allow for interludes of silence that give the person time to respond. If they haven't understood, they will let you know.

Congratulations you have completed
Part 3 – Intercultural Communications

