



# **Intercultural Communication Handbook**



**CESLM Intercultural Information Handbook**  
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**Intercultural Communication Workshop Design  
& Materials Development**  
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**Intercultural Resource List**  
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*CESLM Intercultural Project funded by  
Language Training Programs, Alberta Employment and Immigration*

If your life intersects with people from other cultures, these workshops will benefit you!

Topics Include:

- **Identity**  
(Who We Are)
- **Point of View**  
(How We See Things)
- **Interaction**  
(How We Share Ideas)

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# DEFINITION OF CULTURE

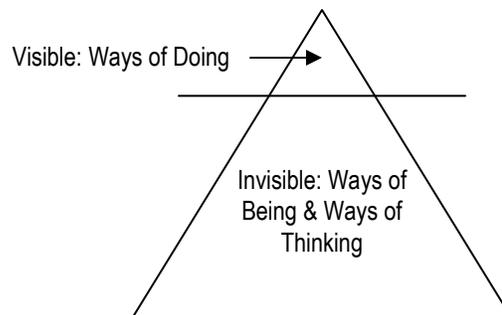
## What is Culture?

There are many definitions of culture in dictionaries, on the internet and in resource books. Some aspects emerge that are common to all of them. Culture is a human phenomenon and is common to a group of people. It is transmitted by one generation and learned by the next through observation, rules and guidelines. Geert Hofstede, an international authority on cross-cultural social psychology, says “every person carries within him or herself patterns of thinking, feeling and potential acting which were learned throughout their lifetime”.<sup>1</sup> He defines culture as the **software of the mind**.

## Elements of Culture

Culture is made up of ideas, behaviours and products. We are familiar with the products and behaviours of culture. Cultural products are such things as literature, folklore, art, music and artifacts. Cultural behaviours include customs, habits, dress, food and leisure. These are the things we can observe about a particular culture. But there is another important aspect to culture - that of basic assumptions and values that prescribe the thinking and the motivation behind every interaction.

One way of seeing this concept is the analogy of the iceberg. What we can observe about a culture is like the visible part of an iceberg. The huge invisible part of the iceberg hiding underwater represents those things that we can not observe – the basic assumptions and values of a culture.



## Our Own Culture(s)

*“There is an invisible world out there and we are living in it.” – Bill Viola, video artist*

One of the biggest steps we can take towards effective intercultural communication is to know our own culture and to recognize the incredibly powerful impact that it has on our thoughts, our communication (verbal and non-verbal) and on all our interpersonal relationships. This applies not only to relationships with people from other cultures but also on the way we communicate with people from our own culture - family members, friends, neighbours and coworkers.

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<sup>1</sup> Hofstede, Geert (1991). Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind. NY: McGraw-Hill. p. 4

**Ethnocentrism** is the tendency of most people to judge other cultures by the standards of their own culture, which they believe to be superior. Culture prescribes the behaviour (and language) that is believed to be appropriate for a given situation. This 'appropriate behaviour' is based on common assumptions and values, ideas that are held to be common sense to a particular group of people. We spend our formative years observing, absorbing and learning, the values, rules and guidelines of our own culture, without even realizing that this process is happening. Albert Einstein said that "common sense is the collection of prejudices acquired by age eighteen."<sup>2</sup>

People tend to act logically based on their own particular beliefs and circumstances. From an individual perspective, this common sense combination of basic assumptions, values and circumstances will determine logical behaviour. When you observe communication (behaviour or language) that seems ambiguous or irrational, you are not sharing the same basic assumptions or the same understanding of the circumstances as the communicator. In other words, your idea of common sense is not common to everyone.

**Misattribution** is a problem common to all cultures. It occurs when we witness behaviour that is ambiguous or strange from our perspective and we interpret the situation and assign motivation based on our own cultural frame of reference. It is hard to recognize misattribution because our own cultural values are so ingrained that we think of them as universal, and also because misattribution is often triggered by an immediate emotional response to 'inappropriate behaviour'. The tendency is to provide a negative characteristic or motivation to the other person. Hofstede says there is "always a temptation to feel that the others have bad character or bad intentions, rather than to realize that they are acting according to different rules."<sup>3</sup> It is important to recognize when we are passing judgement on the behaviour of others without considering other possible interpretations of the situation. "The core of intercultural awareness is learning to separate observation from interpretation."<sup>4</sup>

### **Stereotypes and Generalizations**

The way we think and talk about other cultures and people from other cultures can create problems in intercultural communication. Stereotypes are often the basis of our thinking about people from other cultures and in the words we use to describe them.

A stereotype is a mistaken idea from an outsider's perspective about a culture different from our own. It is an exaggerated image or a restrictive belief about the characteristics of a particular group. Sometimes it is a negative idea about a certain type or individual that is applied to everyone from that group or culture.

A more accurate description of a cultural tendency is an archetype. An archetype is developed from an insider's perspective and it is neither accusative nor restrictive. An archetype presents a general idea of cultural norms, customs and values without limiting any individual to being the archetype.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/a/albert\\_einstein.html](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/a/albert_einstein.html)

<sup>3</sup> Hofstede, Pedersen & Hofstede (2002) Exploring Culture. Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press.p.42

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p.17

<sup>5</sup> GammaVision, Inc., "Culturally-Based Patterns of Difference" (Kochman Communication Consultants, Ltd., San Francisco) quoted in Patty Lane. (2002) A Beginner's Guide to Crossing Cultures. Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

In this Intercultural Information Package the term 'generalization' will be used to convey a meaning similar to the term archetype. Although generalizations and stereotypes are often considered to be the same, there are some key differences. Stating general cultural values or characteristics means that the cultural values or characteristics described represent a tendency or a trend within a culture. This will allow room for the idea that there are individual differences within a culture but that there are also values and customs that are representative of that culture. For example 'general Canadian cultural values' would refer to a wide slice from the centre of the bell curve if our collective values and characteristics were plotted on a graph.<sup>6</sup>

## **CULTURAL VALUES AND HOW WE SEE THEM**

In her book, *A Beginner's Guide to Crossing Cultures*, Patty Lane describes culture as a set of lenses through which people see the world. Each culture has its own particular set of lenses.<sup>7</sup> If we understand our own cultural lenses and how they differ from the cultural lenses of other cultures, we can build effective intercultural relationships.

### **Identity: Individualism vs. Collectivism**

This cultural lens is the one that determines the source of our identity. It tells us who we are and describes us in relation to our society.

#### **Individualism**

Our Western culture highly values individualism. The focus is on individual achievement and individual rights. We expect people to be responsible for themselves and for their actions. We raise our children to be responsible individuals and to function independently because, as adults, they are expected to look after themselves and their immediate families.

Our school system, our legal system, our communities and our society are all set up to function on this principle. Our schools encourage students to give personal opinions and they are taught individual problem solving. Schooling works to build self-esteem and self-reliance because we must learn to rely on ourselves.

There is fairly easy mobility between classes in society; movement is based on personal achievement and wealth. Patronage is weak in our culture and in some cases is seen as corrupt.

Conflict and competition are expected. Business contracts are based on individual interests and are bound with legal ties. Decision-making within organizations is often quick and will sometimes involve open voting in meetings – with each individual voting in support of or against an idea.

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<sup>6</sup> Laroche (2003). *Managing Cultural Diversity in Technical Professions*. New York: Butterworth - Heinemann.

<sup>7</sup> Patty Lane (2002). *A Beginner's Guide to Crossing Cultures*. Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

## **Collectivism**

This focus on the individual is not the same for two thirds of the world's population. These cultures function on the idea of collectivism. The most important focus is on the group (extended family or close community). Loyalty to the group is valued above all else and there is a strong obligation to the group and to the family of any group member. Family responsibilities extend beyond the immediate family to encompass the large extended family.

Schooling focuses in attaining knowledge through a higher authority and children gain identity and self-esteem through the group. They get support and respect from the group and learn to rely on the family/group for support. Problem-solving and decision-making can take a long time since the focus is on gaining consensus within the group.

There is very little mobility between classes in society. Patronage is a reward for loyalty to the group and a patronage relationship can last a lifetime.

## **Honour, Shame and Face**

One of the central values of a collectivist culture (among two thirds of the world's people) is the idea of saving face. Bringing honour to one's family or group is paramount. To fail or to cause an embarrassment is to bring shame upon yourself and your group. It is very important to save face and to allow others to save face and maintain honour as well.

"The idea of saving face serves several important purposes: preserving interpersonal relationships, maintaining harmony, minimizing potential for conflict, restoring community solidarity (family, tribal or group) and facilitating communication between the various levels of society."<sup>8</sup> It is very important in a collectivistic culture to protect your rights without humbling or shaming others. This idea is so important that the potential for disgrace, bringing shame to yourself or to others, is a key component in decision-making. It is an even greater tragedy if this shaming is done in public. If a person is shamed in front of family, friends or colleagues a broken relationship is inevitable.

"The English words humiliation and disgrace come closest to the concept of shame, but they fail to carry the intense negative impact and social stigma of shame in these Two-Thirds World cultures."<sup>9</sup>

## **How Does Identity Affect Intercultural Communication?**

- Directness, confrontation, and candid expression of personal opinions are valued in an individualistic culture. This is considered to be an honest and straight forward style of communication for people who value autonomy above all else.
- People from a collectivistic culture use an indirect style of communication (passive voice rather than active voice), and much of what is communicated is non-verbal or euphemistic. This is done so that others will not be embarrassed or 'put on the spot' allowing them to save face.
- Communication difficulties can arise for people from an individualistic culture because they need to learn how to interpret non-verbal cues correctly and to understand the importance of 'reading between the lines'.
- A direct communication style is considered impulsive, shocking and embarrassing to people from a collectivistic culture.

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<sup>8</sup> Duane Elmer (1993). Cross-Cultural Conflict. Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. p. 54

<sup>9</sup> ibid p. 54-55

Much of what is written about culture and identity is based on the work of Geert Hofstede. Here is a comparison of various cultures around the world on Collectivism vs. Individualism.<sup>10</sup>



### **Possible Misattributions**

- A person from a collectivistic culture can misperceive the culture-based behaviour of an individualist as extremely insensitive and often as personally insulting, heartless and rude.
- A person from an individualistic culture can misperceive the culture-based behaviour of collectivists as being irresponsible (not accepting responsibility for their actions) and dishonest.

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<sup>10</sup> G. Hofstede. (1991) Culture and Organizations: Software of the Mind. New York: McGraw-Hill p. 53

## **Context: High-Context vs. Low-Context**

Much of the information available about context and culture comes originally from the work of Edward T. Hall, who described the social frameworks of cultures as “High Context” or “Low Context”.<sup>11</sup>

This cultural lens tells us about the context of an event or an activity. “Context is how we read an event or a conversation. What surrounds, precedes, and directs the action within that event is context.”<sup>12</sup> It tells us something about the importance of the environment and encompasses such things as the location and ambience of the setting; the process (how the meeting is conducted, how the participants were invited, how people are introduced or addressed, where participants sit); appearance (casual or formal attire and attitude); non-verbal communication (facial expression, tone of voice, etc.).<sup>13</sup>

### **High Context Cultures**

In a high context culture life is holistic and that everything is part of the whole. There are no boundaries separating work life, home life, social life, or spiritual life – all these are part of the holistic life. You cannot separate an idea being expressed and the person expressing it; they are the same. Non-verbal communication provides the context for conversation it is important to ‘read between the lines’. It is always the listener’s responsibility to understand what is being said. (*For more information see the section on Direct vs. Indirect Communication page 13.*)

In high context cultures the context has such great value and meaning that the context of an event is as important as the event itself. In high context countries people need a lot of information before they are willing to make decisions. They want to have a good understanding of the background and history in the situation so that they can avoid making mistakes. They need to trust the people they work with and that trust is earned through sharing a lot of information (personal and project related) with one another before they work together. This trust is based on deep relationships built with care over many years. High context cultures rely on intuition, trust, collective input and consensus-building to guide the decision making process.

### **Low Context Cultures**

We live in a low context culture which is characterized by analytical thinking. There are boundaries between work life, social life, home life and spiritual life. Low context cultures prefer that messages are explicitly spelled out and much more value is placed on verbal communication than on non-verbal communication. The message is more important than the context and the speaker is responsible for the communication.

Low context people are able to work others without needing to know much information about them. They deal with problems as they arise and consider this to be a more relaxed and efficient way of working. Independent decision making (showing initiative) is valued and, because it takes less time than collective consensus building, it is doubly appreciated in our low context culture.

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<sup>11</sup>Edward T. Hall, (1976). Beyond Culture. NY: Anchor Books. p. 91

<sup>12</sup> Sauvé (2007). Understanding and Managing Cultural Diversity in Technical and Professional Workplaces - from workshop sponsored by Canada Immigration & Alberta Employment, Immigration and Industry. p. 12

<sup>13</sup> Patty Lane (2002). A Beginner’s Guide to Crossing Cultures. InterVarsity Press. p 48-49

## How Does Context Affect Intercultural Communication?

- As people from a low context culture we believe that the speaker is responsible for the communication. Teachers or presenters expect to check to see if listeners have understood what has been presented.
- However, when you check for understanding by asking directly if the listener has understood your comment or explanation, people from a high context culture will say “Yes”, whether they understand or not. In their culture it is the listener’s responsibility to understand what has been said, and they do not want to lose face, or cause you to lose face.
- In a classroom or work setting, it is difficult to correct the work of someone from a high context culture. Because they believe that the idea and the person are the same, any correction makes them feel that you are rejecting them and all of their work.
- In North American businesses the standard business greeting is: “How can I help you?” This can be misconceived by a high context person who may perceive it as an indicator that you think he needs help.
- To communicate effectively with people from high context cultures we need to be aware of the body language, protocol and etiquette that they consider to be appropriate for the situation. In other words we need to learn to read between the lines.

Comparison of various cultures around the world in the context scale<sup>14</sup>



### Possible Misattributions

- A person from a Low Context Culture can misperceive the culture-based behaviour of people from High Context Cultures as overly sensitive, extremely formal and very picky about details.
- A person from a High Context Culture can misperceive the culture-based behaviour of people from Low Context Cultures as insensitive, disrespectful, uncaring and extremely lax about protocol and etiquette (ie. rude).

<sup>14</sup> Laroche, L. (2003). Managing Cultural Diversity in Technical Professions. p. 91

## **Authority: Hierarchical vs. Egalitarian**

This cultural lens shows us the influence of authority. It tells us who's in charge and encompasses ideas such as societal structure, power distance and status.

To understand this concept we need first to define some of the terms.

- **Hierarchical Structure** is a term referring to societies that have a graded order of inequality in ranks, statuses, or decision makers.<sup>15</sup>
- **Egalitarian Structure** refers to a society without formalized differences in the access to power, influence, and wealth.<sup>16</sup>
- **Power Distance** is the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unevenly.<sup>17</sup> It measures how much a culture has respect for authority.
- **Ascribed Status** means that social status and prestige are attributed to an individual at birth, regardless of ability or accomplishments.<sup>18</sup> It is the result of inheritance or hereditary factors.
- **Achieved or Merited Status** means that social status and prestige are attributed to an individual according to achievements rather than inherited social position.<sup>19</sup>

### **Hierarchical Structure: High Power Distance – Ascribed Status**

This society is structured as a strict hierarchy. Status is ascribed at birth and individuals are judged based on caste/social class, gender, age and by who they know. Self-esteem and identity come from status. Age is valued and respected. Opinions of older persons are valued because of their experience and wisdom. Being older and white-haired is an advantage. Asking someone's age is acceptable. Being male is valued over being female.

In the workplace there is formal communication between superiors and employees. A large social distance exists between those who have power and those who don't. Lower level managers avoid decision-making and prefer to closely follow instructions of superiors. Relationships are more important than tasks.

Malaysia and the Philippines rank at the high end of the chart for power distance according to Hofstede.<sup>20</sup> Those rated next highest are Mexico, Venezuela and India.

### **Egalitarian Structure: Low Power Distance – Achieved Status**

Egalitarian society plays down status. There is an emphasis on work and personal achievement. Individuals are judged on what they have accomplished in the areas of education, finances and business success. Self-esteem and identity come from achievements.

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<sup>15</sup> [highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/007299634x/student\\_view0/glossary.html](http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/007299634x/student_view0/glossary.html)

<sup>16</sup> [oregonstate.edu/instruct/anth370/gloss.html](http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/anth370/gloss.html)

<sup>17</sup> [wps.prenhall.com/wps/media/objects/213/218150/glossary.html](http://wps.prenhall.com/wps/media/objects/213/218150/glossary.html)

<sup>18</sup> [highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/007299634x/student\\_view0/glossary.html](http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/007299634x/student_view0/glossary.html)

<sup>19</sup> [highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/007299634x/student\\_view0/glossary.html](http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/007299634x/student_view0/glossary.html)

<sup>20</sup> Hofstede, G. (1991) Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind. NY: McGraw-Hill p. 26

Low social status at birth does not hinder ability to succeed in life. Youth is valued and age is not as important as accomplishments and achievement. A young person can be delegated authority and decision making power in the workplace based on previous performance. Youth is seen as the new energy, enthusiasm and creativity to compete in society. This culture tries to hide age and avoids discussing it. Women are valued more equally to men based on their personal accomplishments and achievements.

At work there are fewer forms of communication between superiors and employees. Managers are more democratic decision-makers. Employees are not closely supervised. Employees expect to be consulted in decision-making. Tasks are more important than relationships.

Canada ranks in the lower half with a score of 39 but the lowest scores are Austria (11), Israel (13), Denmark (18) and New Zealand (22).<sup>21</sup>

### **Risk Tolerance vs. Uncertainty Avoidance**

Although it is not true in every case, cultures that have a high level of uncertainty avoidance tend to be collective cultures with a hierarchical structure and high power distance. People from these cultures are comfortable when everyone knows their proper place or role in that society and the social order is maintained.

Cultures that have a high level of risk tolerance tend to be individualistic cultures with an egalitarian structure and low power distance.

### **How Do Power Distance and Authority Affect Intercultural Communication?**

- People from a hierarchical society display a great deal of deference to persons of high status and rank in their society. A person of lower status will not give an opinion or speak frankly if a person of high status is involved in the conversation or the meeting. This can be frustrating for a person from an egalitarian society who is trying to gauge opinions or collect information.
- People from an egalitarian society do not display a great deal of deference to persons of high status or rank in their society. When a person from a hierarchical society uses titles and/or honorifics to address us we find it to be too formal and very uncomfortable.

### **Possible Misattributions**

- A person from a hierarchical culture can misperceive the culture-based behaviour of persons from egalitarian cultures as disrespectful, improper and rude. They “don’t know their place”.
- In the workplace, persons from egalitarian cultures can misperceive the motives of a middle management individual from a hierarchical culture who does not take initiative or make decisions without consulting the boss as being lazy and indecisive.
- A person from an egalitarian culture can misperceive the culture-based behaviour of persons from hierarchical cultures as bossy and rigid (high-status persons) or as servile and cowardly (low-status person).<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Hofstede, G. (1991) Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind. NY: McGraw-Hill p. 26

<sup>22</sup> Hofstede, Pedersen & Hofstede (2002) Exploring Culture. Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press. p. 43

## **Activity: Task-Orientation vs Relationship-Orientation**

This cultural lens is based on the motivation of a culture or what drives behaviour. Hofstede calls this cultural distinction 'masculine' culture versus 'feminine' culture. He describes it as follows:

"It has been found that in all countries in the world, an unequal role distribution between men and women coincides with a tougher society in which there is more emphasis on achievement and fighting than on caring and compromise. If men and women are more equal, the result is more feminine qualities within society as a whole. This is the reason why we call an equal role distribution between the genders in a culture *Feminine* and an unequal distribution, *Masculine*. Alternative names are care-oriented versus achievement-oriented. These names have the advantage of not being confused with male versus female, but they are less vivid."<sup>23</sup>

Patty Lane uses the term 'doing' cultures for those that value results and materialism and the term 'being' cultures for those that value relationships and quality of life. She points out that they appear more like personality types than cultural values but that in spite of variations of motivation within a culture, they actually describe a propensity within an entire culture toward one or the other. This cultural lens impacts on how we value people, especially their activities and their gender roles. For 'doing' cultures activities that produce results are valued as are the people involved in those activities. For 'being' cultures activities that enhance and build relationships are valued.<sup>24</sup>

### **How Does Activity Orientation Affect Intercultural Communication?**

People from relationship-oriented cultures feel that our (North American) culture is friendly but it is a shallow friendliness that can be dependent on circumstances. They believe that real friendships are deep commitments and they are long-term.

"In much of African, Hispanic and Asian culture, setting a time, place and agenda for an evening together signals that you want a more formal, prescribed relationship, not a friendship. One signals a desire for friendship by stopping by the person's house, *unannounced*. Often it's called "popping in". Popping in at mealtime is all the better; now you can eat together and spend the evening chatting." In many cultures people will generally cook more than they need because people are always popping in.<sup>25</sup>

In a work group or committee setting people from task-oriented cultures are sometimes frustrated by the slow progress towards results that occurs when people from relationship-oriented cultures take time to consider all the implications that may arise in implementing a project and what impact each of these implications might have on all of the people involved in a project.

### **Possible Misattributions**

- A person from a task-oriented culture can misperceive the culture-based behaviour of persons from a relationship-oriented culture as weak and ineffective.
- On the other hand, a person from a relationship-oriented culture can misperceive the culture-based behaviour of persons from a task-oriented culture as shallow and uncaring of others. They see it as "showing off" and sometimes as aggressive.

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<sup>23</sup> Hofstede, Pedersen & Hofstede (2002) Exploring Culture. Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press. p. 37

<sup>24</sup> Patty Lane (2002). A Beginner's Guide to Crossing Cultures. Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. p. 61-62

<sup>25</sup> Duane Elmer (1993). Cross-Cultural Conflict. Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. p. 100

## **Time Orientation: Abundant Time vs. Limited Time**

Time orientation defines our sense of time and it is important in deciding if a culture is a limited time culture or an abundant time culture. The Greek reference is *chronos* (chronological time) or *kairos* (opportunity). Edward T. Hall uses the terms 'monochronic' and 'polychronic' time systems when discussing these concepts.<sup>26</sup> Time Horizon describes a culture's way of looking at the time continuum.

### **Limited Time Culture**

We live in a Limited Time Culture which believes that it is important to know when we start, when we finish, and when projects are due. We like to have appointments at a specific time and we believe that one person at a time should be served. We think people should be served based on time of arrival (eg. "first come; first served"; the British concept of 'queuing'). In our culture being on time is very important and people who are late or do not meet deadlines are considered to be slack and lazy.

### **Abundant Time Culture**

People who live in an Abundant Time Culture see time as an opportunity or an event. The time to start is when everyone has arrived. The time to finish is when everyone has had a good visit and said what needed to be said. There is no rush because people are a lot more important than time. "Time is understood more in terms of opportunity, the right time, the appropriate time or the meaningful time. Thus, *kairos* people value the moment, the event or the opportunity and try to make it significant or memorable."<sup>27</sup> First Nations people, Latin Americans and Africans are among the abundant time cultures.

### **Time Horizon**

People in mainstream North American culture, which is a relatively new culture, tend to be focused on a time horizon which encompasses the immediate future and looks back only to the recent past. Older cultures such (eg. Chinese, Indians, Ethiopians, and Europeans) tend to have longer time horizons. Their focus is the past and they tend to look back over a much longer period of history and the traditional or historical way of doing things has an important influence in decision making.

### **How Does Time Orientation Affect Intercultural Communication?**

Time Orientation doesn't affect communication so much as it affects relationships and organizations. If there is a very short time frame for a project or if a meeting can be held only at a particular time (for technological reasons) it is frustrating for people from a Limited Time Culture to be patient with the lack of punctuality on the part of people from an Abundant Time Culture.

### **Possible Misattributions**

- A person from a Limited Time (*chronos*) Culture can misperceive the culture-based behaviour of persons from an Abundant Time Culture as lazy and irresponsible.
- A person from an Abundant Time (*kairos*) Culture can misperceive the culture-based behaviour of persons from a Limited Time (*chronos*) Culture as uptight, unfriendly and cold.

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<sup>26</sup> Edward T. Hall (1976) Beyond Culture. NY: Anchor Books. p. 17

<sup>27</sup> Duane Elmer (1993). Cross-Cultural Conflict. Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. p. 122

## **Worldview: Premodern, Modern or Postmodern**

A worldview is the foundation of a culture's (or an individual's) way of thinking. It describes the cognitive process of a culture. In other words, cultural values are 'what' a culture thinks, but worldview describes 'how' a culture thinks.

"A worldview is a commitment, a fundamental orientation of the heart, that can be expressed as a story or in a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true or entirely false) which we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic constitution of reality and that provides the foundation on which we live and move and have our being."<sup>28</sup>

Here worldview is described using three perspectives: premodern, modern, and postmodern. Woven into these worldviews are many variables. To give us a better idea of the meaning of these worldviews, Patty Lane includes a table which shows how some of the variables are seen by persons thinking in a premodern, modern or postmodern way.

### **Variables That Comprise Worldview <sup>29</sup>**

	<b>Premodern</b>	<b>Modern</b>	<b>Postmodern</b>
<b>Truth</b>	Subjective - based on tradition	Objective	Subjective - based on experience
<b>Knowledge</b>	Mystical - capricious	Scientific	Mystical - understandable
<b>Perspective</b>	Holistic	Dualistic, Linear	Holistic
<b>Evidence</b>	Experiential - group then individual	Empirical – based on experiment & observation	Experiential - individual then group

To communicate with people of different cultures one must have an awareness of the other's worldview and beliefs. This does not mean you need to be in agreement with the other person's worldview. However, you will be able to communicate more clearly if you understand the boundaries of the other person's reality.

<sup>28</sup> James W. Sire (2004) Naming the Elephant: Worldview as a Concept. Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. p. 122

<sup>29</sup> Rex Miller & Brad Cecil. "Discerning the Times" Leadership Network 6 (Winter 2000) - as listed in Patty Lane (2002). A Beginner's Guide to Crossing Cultures. InterVarsity Press. p. 107

# BARRIERS TO INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

## The Effect of Culture on Communication Style

“Messages are often distorted as they go through the cultural filter of each person. This filter refers to how a culture verbally and nonverbally packages a message. The packaging is significantly different from one culture to the next.”<sup>30</sup>

### Direct vs. Indirect Communication

Cultures that use indirect communication firstly focus on relationships; they always take time to observe the social niceties. The message is conveyed through context by the use of non-verbal cues or subtle changes in tone or pitch to indicate meaning. The meaning of the message is hidden or implied through these contextual clues. The communication tends to be personal and one must read between the lines to get the idea. Indirect communicators deal with conflict indirectly to save face and will often use a third party to assist in solving a problem or a conflict.

Cultures that use a direct style of communication focus on accomplishing the task and deliver their message without any preliminaries by using a few clear words. The meaning is obvious and the communication tends to be impersonal. They deal with conflict head on and face to face.

When one person is using a direct cultural style and the other person uses an indirect cultural style, problems can occur. The direct person sees the indirect communicator as obtuse, unfocussed and sometimes the direct person has no idea what the indirect person is trying to communicate. The indirect person sees the direct communicator as blunt, uncaring, rude and unsophisticated.

Direct and indirect communication preferences by country. <sup>31</sup>



<sup>30</sup> Laroche & Rutherford (2007). Recruiting, Retaining, and Promoting Culturally Different Employees. Oxford, UK: Butterworth-Heinemann. p. 101

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.* p. 144

### To avoid miscommunication:

- Direct communicators need to learn how to observe carefully and pick up on some of the subtleties of communication.
- Indirect communicators need to practice using a more direct style of communication until it feels more comfortable for them.

## Canadian Misattributions Based on Pronunciation & Social Use of English

Canadians who are native speakers of English need to be aware of the possible misattributions they assign to non-native or ESL speakers based on pronunciation or the inappropriate use of register (the level of formality or the 'social use' of English).

- It is common for the **rhythm and stress** of first language to carry over into English pronunciation. A rapid, monotone and evenly-stressed delivery in English sounds to a Canadian like the person is quite annoyed, definitely irritated and maybe even angry. This is a particularly Canadian misattribution and it is applied often to persons whose first language is German, Dutch, Polish, Czech, Romanian (central European).
- Newcomers try to use their very best and most academic form of English, particularly when they come from an ascribed status culture where a high level of education and sophistication are part of the ascribed status. In Canadian culture an "inverse snobbery" is ingrained by the culture and the level of formality in language varies depending on the social situation. As somewhat indirect communicators, Canadians use language that is "too formal" for a particular situation when they wish to indicate irritation or anger. When a newcomer uses **language that is inappropriately formal** in a non-formal situation it is easy for Canadians to misperceive from this message that the communicator is "ticked off" or "patronizing" us.
- In some cultures **speaking very quietly** shows respect and also indicates that the speaker is well-educated and well-mannered. This can be misperceived by Canadians as servile or wimpy behaviour.

## Non-Verbal Messages

"Non-verbal communication refers to all information exchange except that involving the literal meaning of the words being used."<sup>32</sup>

- Greeting people by **touching and kissing** is a dangerous area of non-verbal communication. In some cultures touching indicates a friendly and caring attitude. In other cultures touching persons of the opposite sex is wrong and considered to be more than rude. Kissing is taboo in some cultures, only for family and close friends in others, and quite an acceptable public behaviour in some cultures.
- **Interpersonal space** varies from culture to culture. Canadians require a larger interpersonal space than most cultures. An indicator that interpersonal space is smaller for someone from another culture is that they keep trying to move into your

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<sup>32</sup> Laroche & Rutherford (2007). Recruiting, Retaining, and Promoting Culturally Different Employees. Oxford, UK: Butterworth-Heinemann. p. 101

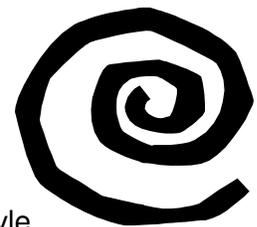
interpersonal comfort zone and you keep backing away. The inverse can also be true – if people keep backing away from you, they may feel that you are moving inside their comfort zone.

- It is very important to realize that **body language and gestures** may look the same but have a completely different meaning in another culture. Nodding your head means “No” in Nepal and shaking your head from side to side means that you agree. For further information read Gestures by Roger E. Axtell.
- Silence and turn-taking in conversation varies from culture to culture. In some cultures **silence** is part of conversation. It is used to show the speaker that you are really listening to the words that have been said and that you respect the wisdom of the speaker. It also gives time for careful thought before replying. Cultures that use silence in this way are: Far East and Middle East cultures, Scandinavian cultures (particularly Finland & Norway), and First Nations Cultures.
- In Anglo-American cultures we use **turn-taking**<sup>33</sup> in conversation – one person speaks and when he/she is finished the other person speaks. There is a great discomfort with silences and we generally assume that something is wrong (i.e. the listener is disapproving or at a loss for words) if there is silent space in conversation.
- In Latin American and Latin European cultures **speakers overlap** each other in conversation. This style is used to show a keen and passionate interest in the conversation. However, it is frustrating to Anglo-Americans who want people to be orderly and speak in turn; people from the “comfortable silence” cultures assume that is shows a lack of respect for the speaker. From the other side, of course, Latin American /European cultures see silence or turn-taking as lack of interest in the conversation.

## Thinking and Reasoning Patterns

Patterns of thinking, defining issues, solving problems, making points and arriving at decisions vary from culture to culture. Western culture teaches and uses a linear sequential pattern for reasoning and logic. Ideas are presented like the links of a chain, with clearly defined steps moving directly to a solution or conclusion. This fits with the Western individualistic culture and straightforward, direct communication style.

The Asian thinking style can be described as a spiral moving from the outside and swirling around in smaller and smaller circles toward the main thought or idea. It has also been illustrated as an onion with many thin and subtle layers that are gradually peeled away to reveal the central truth at the core. Each layer of the onion or cycle of the spiral reveals more of the ideas and background that are important in reaching the main thought. This fits with a high-context collectivistic culture and an indirect communication style which is important for protecting people’s face and not causing embarrassment or shame.<sup>34</sup>



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<sup>33</sup> Laroche & Rutherford (2007). Recruiting, Retaining, and Promoting Culturally Different Employees. Oxford, UK: Butterworth-Heinemann. p. 130

<sup>34</sup> Duane Elmer. (2002). Cross-Cultural Connections. Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. p.153



According to Elmer the African thinking style can be described in the shape of a flower – a daisy-shaped pattern. The speaker / writer would begin with a point (centre of the flower), use an illustration to expand the point (making a petal), and then return to the point or topic again. Then the speaker would repeat the point and go off in another direction to expand the point (next petal) and return to the point. Elmer believes this to be a very effective public speaking style.<sup>35</sup>

Hispanic thinking style tends to be deductive rather than inductive. The starting point is very general. Issues are defined and categorized before the main principle is decided. Logic follows to a conclusion with less attention to supporting evidence than would be required in Western thought. Sometimes new evidence is interpreted in light of the main principle which has already been determined.<sup>36</sup>



## Expressiveness

Although people of all cultures have similar emotions, the verbal and non-verbal display of emotions considered to be appropriate varies greatly from culture to culture. Verbal display is concerned with vocal variety – the voice rising and falling and changing in pitch and volume. Non-verbal display refers to facial expressions and body movements involving fingers, hands, arms and even legs. In some cases, only an attentive observer would be able to identify the emotion being expressed, while in others the behaviour is very exuberant and the voice is loud.<sup>37</sup> There are varying degrees of appropriate emotional behaviour. Laroche and Rutherford give the example that Texans seem loud, brash and boisterous to Canadians, but that Canadians appear loud and brash to Indonesians.

Cultures that value free expression of emotion think of themselves as open, honest and trustworthy. They believe that their candor is appreciated because it reflects sincerity. Within their culture, showing emotion leads to relationships with greater trust.

Cultures that are less emotionally demonstrative limit the expression of emotion. They feel that communication which is less personal is clear, concise and more effective for accomplishing a common task. They avoid angry confrontations at all costs and they have trouble trusting people who show a lot of emotion.

Misattributions often occur between these two cultural groups. These misattributions are very important in an organizational setting because they affect the relationships of people on work teams and affect decisions made about leadership and promotion.

- Cultures that value free expression of emotion can misperceive the culture-based behaviour of persons who are not emotionally demonstrative as being cold and distant, uncaring, unreadable and noncommittal.
- Cultures that are less emotionally demonstrative can misperceive the culture-based behaviour of persons who value free expression of emotion as showing a lack of control, acting in an immature and childish manner, and not being candidates for leadership.

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<sup>35</sup> *ibid* p.156

<sup>36</sup> Duane Elmer. (2002). Cross-Cultural Connections. Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press p. 158

<sup>37</sup> Laroche & Rutherford (2007). Recruiting, Retaining, and Promoting Culturally Different Employees. Oxford, UK: Butterworth-Heinemann. p. 112

## Attitude: A Stumbling Block to Effective Intercultural Communication

One of the stumbling blocks to intercultural communication can be the attitude and motivation of the people involved. We can't change the other person's attitude but we can always monitor our own. In his book Cross-Cultural Dialogues, Craig Storti offers us seven lessons which are the famous "do nots" of intercultural communication.

### **Seven Lessons** (paraphrased from Craig Storti)<sup>38</sup>

- Lesson 1 - Don't assume sameness. Try to entertain the notion that other people might be very different from you.
- Lesson 2 - What you think of as normal or human behaviour may only be cultural. Before you project your norms onto the human race, consider that you might be wrong.
- Lesson 3 - Familiar behaviours may have different meanings. Just because you've recognized a given behaviour, don't assume you have therefore understood it.
- Lesson 4 - Don't assume that what you meant is what was understood. Check for signs that the other person did or did not understand you.
- Lesson 5 - Don't assume that what you understood is what was meant. You are obliged to hear what others say through the medium of your own experience. You know what those words normally mean, but whose norms are we following: yours or the foreigner's? If they're the foreigner's, do you know what they are?
- Lesson 6 - You don't have to like or accept "different" behaviour, but you should try to understand where it comes from. You may never get used to some of the things foreigners do, but it can't hurt to try to figure out why they behave that way.  
Even when you know the cultural explanation for a certain type of behaviour you may still not like it.
- Lesson 7 - Most people do behave rationally; you just have to discover the rationale. Foreigners aren't acting this way just to get your goat. This is really how they are.

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<sup>38</sup> Craig Storti. (1994) "Seven Lessons" from Cross-Cultural Dialogues. Boston, MA: Intercultural Press. p. 129-131

## **Culture Shock**

Some barriers to effective intercultural communication can be overcome by recognizing potential problems and developing skills and strategies to help us work around them. Culture shock happens to newcomers and we can not prevent it. However, we can provide some support and assistance if we are able to recognize the signs of culture shock and have some understanding of what the newcomer is experiencing.

### **Definition**

Culture shock is a term used to describe the anxiety and feelings (of surprise, disorientation, confusion, etc.) felt by an individual caused by coming into contact with an entirely different environment, such as a different country. It often relates to the inability to assimilate the new culture, causing difficulty in knowing what is appropriate and what is not. Often this is combined with strong disgust (moral or aesthetical) about certain aspects of the foreign culture.<sup>39</sup>

One of the most difficult problems affecting immigrants is culture shock. It is a deeply personal experience and it affects individuals in different ways. Even though there are common stages in cultural adaptation, some people experience them in a different order or may miss a stage altogether. Members of the same family may experience culture shock at different times which can cause friction or conflict between spouses or between parents and children.

### **Identifying Culture Shock**

People can experience culture shock anytime they are forced to adjust to a new culture or sub-culture (i.e. going away to school) where familiar values and expectations no longer apply. Some of the indicators are: familiar cues and behaviour have changed; values that you consider to be good are not respected by others; there is a feeling of disorientation and you might also be anxious, depressed or hostile. New ways are unsatisfactory and social skills and cues that used to be appropriate no longer work. There is a hopeless feeling that the culture shock may never end.<sup>40</sup>

### **Stages of Culture Shock<sup>41</sup>**

- **Honeymoon** – arrival in the new culture. Newcomers are excited about their new life and everything is interesting. It is much like being a tourist because the person's basic identity is still rooted 'back home'.
- **Disorientation** - everything familiar is gone. Newcomers are overwhelmed by the requirements of the new culture and bombarded with stimuli in the new environment.

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<sup>39</sup> [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture\\_shock](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture_shock)

<sup>40</sup> Hofstede, Pedersen & Hofstede (2002) *Exploring Culture*. Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press. p. 22

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.* p. 22

- **Mental Isolation / Hostility** – Newcomers experience the difficult reality of daily life in a new culture. Financial and social adjustments make life very difficult. Poor language skills intensify this experience. Newcomers experience a deep sense of loneliness and homesickness. Feelings of self-blame and personal inadequacy emerge. Often newcomers feel angry and resentful toward the new culture for causing difficulties and will complain.
- **Adjustment / Integration** - The first adjustment occurs when newcomers learn language skills and make friends. Newcomers begin to enjoy new cultural experiences as they respond to new cues and have an increased ability to function in the new culture. At this point newcomers are able to see the bad and good elements of both cultures.
- **Biculturalism** – “In this stage the newcomer has become fluently comfortable in both the old and the new culture. There is some controversy about whether anyone can really attain this stage.”<sup>42</sup>

### How Can We Help?

Helping newcomers cope with the daily difficulties that arise in settling into a new home and managing daily life is an important way to provide support. Things like finding adequate housing, setting up utilities, getting around town, shopping, finding a family doctor, and enrolling kids in school are all ways that we can help. English classes are so important because knowing the language helps people organize and manage daily life themselves. This provides one area where there are positive feelings of accomplishment in the midst of all the difficulties of resettlement. Culture shock really can't be avoided, but we can help by providing practical assistance and friendly support.

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<sup>42</sup> Hofstede, Pedersen & Hofstede (2002) Exploring Culture. Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press. p. 22

## **Strategies for Effective Intercultural Communication**

Our own culture determines how we express ourselves and relate to other people. Our culture defines whom we see as “us” and “them”. Setting aside our cultural biases is not easy – it takes time and determination.

The following strategies can serve as a starting point.

1. **Treat all the people you work with as individuals.** Try to look beyond the cultural background and see the individual.
2. **Respect personal names.** Call people by the name they want to be called. Learn the correct way to pronounce it, the correct order to say it, and the appropriate titles of respect.
3. **Turn fear into curiosity.** We are often taught to be suspicious of other groups. Ask yourself, “What if we could get beyond our differences? What would I learn?”
4. **Avoid making generalizations** about a whole group of people based on one or two members. Just because one member of a group is a computer whiz, does not mean all member of the group are!
5. **Try to be open to new information** about a culture or group of people. We tend to warp or ignore information that does not agree with our view of the world.
6. **Don’t assume** that because a person is good or bad at one thing, that person is also good or bad at other things. For example, don’t assume that someone who speaks English poorly also does other things poorly.
7. **Don’t play favourites or treat others unfairly.** It is normal to feel a little uncomfortable when you are dealing with someone from another culture – but don’t let your discomfort cause you to treat that person differently.
8. **Notice the economic and social dividing lines** in your organization and community. If you are on the privileged side of the line, be sensitive to the needs and feelings of those who are not.
9. **Use acceptable terms for cultural groups.** Find out which terms are acceptable to a cultural group and which are not. Speak up if others use terms that are not acceptable to you. Let them know what you would like your group to be called.
10. **Avoid making judgments** based on the accent, timing or pace of someone’s speech. Different ways of speaking may strike you as too haughty or too subservient, or even insulting. Try to view the person objectively.

11. **Laugh with people, not at them.** Don't tell ethnic jokes or sexual jokes ever. If you are offended by a joke told by someone else, tell the person later in private. Or simply say "Ouch! That hurts!" to let the person know that your cultural toes have been stepped on.
12. **Expect to have to explain cultural unwritten rules.** People from cultures other than your own will not be able to "read between the lines". Explain cultural expectations – even though you may feel uncomfortable or embarrassed.
13. **Find out how disagreements are handled in the other person's culture.** It may be considered unacceptable to say "No" directly, or "No" may simply mean that further negotiation is expected. Avoid public displays of anger.
14. **Pay attention to gestures.** Be careful about the gestures you use and how they might be interpreted. If you are puzzled by someone else's gestures, ask questions. Tell people if they are using inappropriate gestures, but do so in a way that does not make them "lose face".
15. **Adjust your interpersonal space requirements,** if necessary. People in different cultures may feel very uncomfortable if you stand too close or too far away (by *their* standards). Notice how closely they stand after *they* approach *you*.
16. **Be very careful about touching in any way.** Watch what other people do, especially when they are with people of their own culture. Usually people do unto others what they will accept from others – except when there is a difference in status or authority.

### Changing Attitude Takes Time

- Changing your attitude and behaviour takes time so don't give up on yourself.
- Monitor your thinking. If someone's words or behaviour cause you anger, embarrassment or stress, acknowledge the emotion. Ask yourself why you feel that way. Is it possible that this is normal cultural behaviour for them and not a personal attack on you? Try to figure it out and turn it into a positive learning experience if you can.
- Laugh at yourself and laugh with others.

The following paraphrase contains some advice from Duane Elmer.<sup>43</sup>

***Let your thoughts be guided by the positive, the good and the constructive, resisting the tendency to blame and fault others.***

***Let your speech be guided by words of grace and sensitivity, resisting the harsh and judgmental.***

***Let your actions be guided by acts of love, gentleness and kindness, resisting the sharp and the abrasive.***

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<sup>43</sup> Duane Elmer. (2002). Cross-Cultural Connections. Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. p.108

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## Information about Specific Cultures

### **Centre for Intercultural Learning** (Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada)

<http://www.intercultures.ca>

This is a federal government website providing information on 211 countries (e.g., history, geography, culture, politics, economy, media). For selected countries, cultural interpreters provide local and Canadian perspectives on topics such as conversations, communication styles, religion, class, ethnicity, gender, hierarchy and decision-making, stereotypes, and recommended books, films, and foods.

**Culture Grams** – in Calgary Public Library Branches - Reference Sections R909.83 & R909.84 A series of books with detailed cultural information for many different countries.

### **Other Websites:**

Go to the ATESL homepage - <http://www.atesl.ca/> - and follow the “Resources Link”

NorQuest College Edmonton has some good information:

[http://www.norquest.ca/resources-services/resources/educational-resources-for-educators/intercultural-resources-for-educators-trainers-\(1\).aspx](http://www.norquest.ca/resources-services/resources/educational-resources-for-educators/intercultural-resources-for-educators-trainers-(1).aspx)

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## **Intercultural Discussion - Activities for Classes and Workshops**

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Try the on-line activity with the Intercultural Coach at the NorQuest College website: [http://media.norquest.ca/MDS/intercultural\\_coach/index.htm](http://media.norquest.ca/MDS/intercultural_coach/index.htm)

Check out a whole range of video clips re: Cultural Diversity and Cultural Awareness on Youtube. Be sure you view it carefully before showing it to a class – humour with sensitivity is required, and quality of information varies quite a bit.