



Lesson 3.1 Cross-cultural communication: Different ways of thinking

Discuss:

- ▶ What is cross-cultural communication? Is it important?
- ▶ What should we pay attention to in cross-cultural communication? How can we enhance our cross-cultural communication competence?



Cross-cultural communication

- ▶ Cross-cultural communication is the communication between people who have cultural differences due to nationality, age, working style, gender, ethnicity, race, etc.
- ▶ It can be verbal and non-verbal and can include the use of words, gestures, eye contact, or body language when interacting cross-culturally.



Examples of the challenges of cross-cultural miscommunication

Example 1:

- ▶ A team lead asks one of their highest-performing team members, a transfer from an international office, to handle two large projects simultaneously.
- ▶ When the team lead checks in, the team member assures them that they're "fine" and their workload isn't overwhelming.
- ▶ Later, the team lead finds out the team member has been staying several hours late each night to complete the work.
- ▶ <https://www.grammarly.com/business/learn/cross-cultural-communication/>

What went wrong?

- The team lead is from a culture that is generally plain-spoken and straightforward. They take their team member literally when they say they're fine with their workload.
- The team member's culture strongly discourages criticizing their managers or other senior staff. They worry that speaking up about their workload would negatively impact their career.

Example 2

- ▶ Your new marketing campaign features a series of video and print ads featuring families using your products.
- ▶ All the families are of the same ethnicity and share the same structure, two heterosexual parents and two kids.

What went wrong?

- Families that do not resemble the families from the ads feel excluded and choose to buy from other brands that feel more welcoming to them.
- This can also alienate employees who belong to a minority group that isn't part of the campaign, and they feel ostracized and isolated.

Example 3

- ▶ You're chatting with a colleague over your company's Slack or Microsoft Teams when they tell you that they're going through a hard time. You want to be sympathetic, and decide to add various emojis to your message.
- ▶ However, the emojis muddled your message of support and your colleague is left questioning the sincerity of the interaction, or they feel overwhelmed by your response after opening up about a sensitive topic.



What went wrong?

- Emojis are tricky. Not only is the context in which they are used critical to consider, but some emojis might hold different meanings to different people.
- Emojis are wide open to a number of interpretations based on context, worldview, and cultural background—and not all of those interpretations may be positive.

Example 4

- ▶ In this example, we have an American company selling high-end technical goods to a potential Chinese buyer.
- ▶ Relations have been going well and the Chinese have been invited for a factory tour in anticipation of the contract between the two companies finally being signed.
- ▶ The evening after the tour, the Americans host the Chinese delegation for a dinner at a local restaurant.
- ▶ Upon entering the restaurant, the head of the Chinese delegation is greeted by a junior member of the US team. He asks where he should sit, to which he is told to, “sit where you like”.
- ▶ The next day the Chinese delegation left the USA without signing any contract. Days later the US team received word that the Chinese felt humiliated and were reconsidering the business relationship.

What went wrong?

- ▶ In Chinese culture, hierarchy is really important, whereas in American culture, it's more about equality and displays of hierarchy aren't culturally comfortable.
- ▶ So, when the head of the Chinese delegation was only greeted by a junior member of the team, rather than the most senior, he immediately felt a loss of face.
- ▶ To add insult to injury he was then told to 'sit anywhere' – when, ideally, he should have been given the seat at the head of the table next to the most senior member of the US team. In Chinese culture, people tend to hide their feelings. For this reason, the team did not say anything at the time.
- ▶ The US team had to work hard to repair the damage. This cultural misunderstanding led to an 8-month delay in the signing of the contract.

How to improve cross-cultural communication as individuals

- ▶ Enhance cross-cultural communication awareness
- ▶ Listen actively and respond with empathy
- ▶ Be respectful at all times
- ▶ Strive for clarity in all communications

More tips

- **Maintain etiquette.** Many cultures have specific etiquette around the way they communicate. Before you meet, research the target culture, or if time allows, do some cross cultural training.
- **Avoid slang.**
- **Speak slowly.**
- **Keep it simple.**
- **Practice active listening.**
- **Take turns to talk.**
- **Write things down if necessary.**
- **Avoid closed questions.** In many cultures it is difficult or embarrassing to answer in the negative, so you will always get a 'yes' even if the real answer is 'no'. Ask open-ended questions that require information as a response instead.
- **Be careful with humour.**
- **Be supportive.**

Cross-cultural communication: different ways of thinking

Chinese vs Western thinking

- ▶ Exercise 1: Matching
- ▶ Exercise 2: Reading & discussing

Thought	Eastern (Chinese)	Western
Where Thinking Happens	 Internally	 Externally
Perception	 Holistic	 Focused
Priority	 Society	 The Individual
Bad Behavior	 Shame	 Guilt

Thought	Eastern (Chinese)	Western
Goal	 Harmony	 Truth
Attitude	OK. Accepting	?! Questioning
Processing	 Cyclic	 Linear
Tendency	 Repetition	 Innovation