

MANAGING CULTURAL DIFFERENCES



Funded by the Government of Ontario

Photo Credits: All photos © JUPITERIMAGES, 2008

Prepared for the Ontario Regulators for Access Consortium, 2008
www.regulators4access.ca

This manual and all the text herein is copyrighted by Ontario Regulators for Access Consortium (ORAC) and is not to be used, distributed or copied without the express permission of ORAC.

Funded by the Government of Ontario

MANAGING CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Contents

Managing Cultural Differences Project	2
What Is Culture?	3
Stereotypes & Generalizations	4
Cultural Choices	5
Cross-Cultural Communication	6
Personal Space	6
Body Language & Gestures	7
Tone of Voice & Emotions	8
Sense of Humour	8
Dress Code	9
English as a Second Language	9
Accents	10
Acronyms & Abbreviations	10
Different Versions of English	11
Sports English	12
Communication Tools	12
Silences in Conversation	13
Connotations	14
Some Things to Consider	15
Exercise 1: What Does Sarah Mean?	15
Exercise 2: Connotations	15
Exercise 3: See You On...?	16
Cultural Values in the Workplace	17
Feedback	17
Hierarchy	19
More Cross-Cultural Communication Tips	23
Additional Reading	24

Managing Cultural Differences Project

Dear Colleague:

The Ontario Regulators for Access Consortium (ORAC) is committed to sponsoring and developing opportunities for regulators which promote and facilitate reducing unintended barriers to the access of internationally educated professionals to regulated/licensed practice in Ontario. One initiative supporting this objective is this manual which focuses on understanding cultural differences and its potential impact on making fair procedural decisions.

The **Managing Cultural Differences Project** was initiated by the Ontario Regulators for Access Consortium. ORAC represents 38 regulated professions and trades in Ontario. This manual is part of an interactive workshop designed to facilitate sharing of ideas and best practices within the regulatory community. Funding for this project was generously provided by the Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration, Government of Ontario.

ORAC encourages your organization to use this manual, and the education program, to promote best practice in entry to practice initiatives.

Sincerely,

Jan Robinson
Registrar & CEO
College of Physiotherapists of Ontario

Project Lead

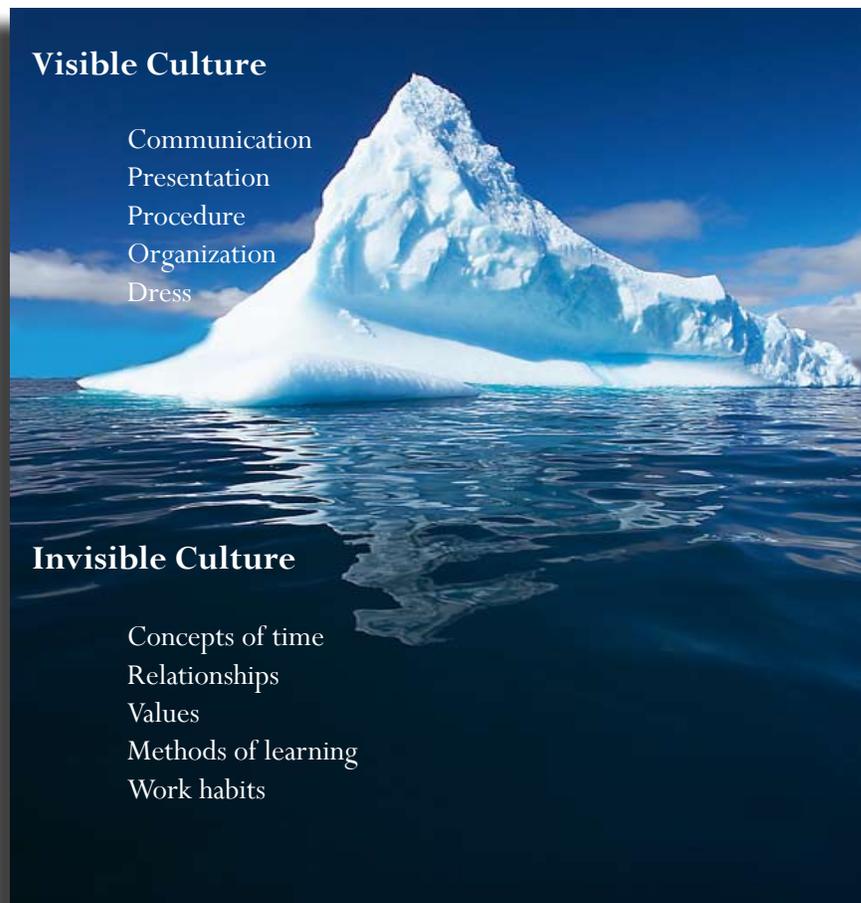
“Culture is the way we do things when nobody tells us how to do them.”

Jack Kemp

What Is Culture?

Culture can be represented as an iceberg. Like an iceberg, culture has:

- A small, “visible” part which we perceive through our senses. For most Canadians, tasting sushi, dressing in saris or djellabas, watching foreign movies, playing mah-jong, learning a new language or listening to ragas, represent cross-cultural experiences. In the business world, culture is visible through how:
 - Communication and language are used;
 - Reports, documents, seminars, and so on, are presented;
 - Procedures are undertaken;
 - Organizations are structured; and
 - Dress and appearance are given importance.
- A large, “invisible” part which consists of the values and thought patterns that each culture has created over time. This part includes the way people handle time all the way to the motivations and meaning people attribute to their existence. Since this part of a culture cannot be observed, it needs to be inferred from what people say and do. In the business world, the invisible part of the cultural iceberg includes:
 - Time and time consciousness;
 - Relationships;
 - Values and norms;
 - Mental processes and learning; and
 - Work habits and practices, including concepts of management, feedback and hierarchy.



“Culture is like water to a fish. A fish does not know that water exists until it jumps out of it.”

Stereotypes & Generalizations

Cross-cultural training is based on generalizations—a useful tool—but your application of this tool is critical. Keep in mind the various factors which affect individual behaviour. Ultimately, how you apply the contents of this manual needs to be based on your own evaluation of individuals and situations.

Remember, as individuals, we are:

Like no other: Each person is unique. Personality is an individual's unique set of mental programs that belong exclusively to them, developed through unique personal experiences. The fact that each person is unique and should be approached as an unique individual can not be overemphasized.

Like some others: What we share with some people but not with others is our **culture**. For example, we share our corporate culture with our co-workers. We share our national culture with our compatriots. Culture is the shared learning within a given social environment.

Like all others: We are all human beings. We all need food, shelter, clothing and affection in order to survive and grow. Human nature is common to all of us. It represents what we bring to the world at birth.

While stereotypes and generalizations are often considered the same, there are some key differences that need to be kept in mind.

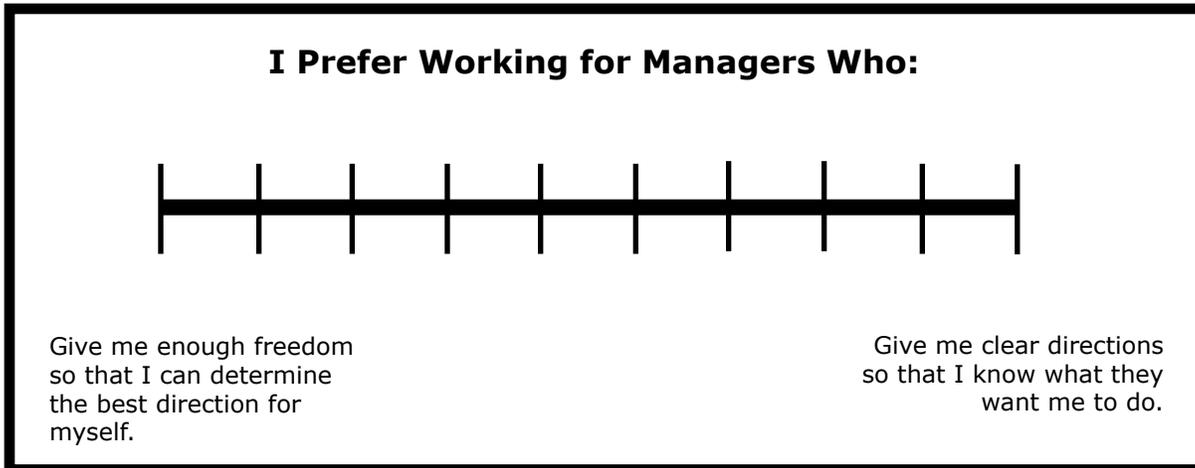
Stereotypes	Generalizations
Present a fixed and inflexible image of a group;	Are based on a large sample of a group;
Ignore exceptions and focus on behaviours that support the image they present;	Provide general characteristics based on cultural and social factors;
Are ethnocentric or racial.	Assume that individuals within groups vary in their compliance;
	Inform rather than prescribe.
Examples: All French people like wine;	Examples: Wine is an important aspect of French culture;
Americans love fast food.	When eating, convenience and speed are important for Americans.

A generalization helps outsiders to identify topics that are likely to be sensitive and should be handled with care. It is important, however, to remember that two people may grow up in the same culture but develop very different personalities. Their culture as a whole is centred on certain core values held by the majority in that culture but individuals develop personalities on both sides of the centred values. Canadians tend to be more sensitive to differences within our culture than to differences within other cultures. For example, Canadians can quickly differentiate between Canadians and Americans but have more difficulty differentiating between Chinese and Japanese or between Ethiopians and Kenyans. Conversely, Chinese can differentiate between Chinese and Japanese; the difference between Canadians and Americans is less obvious to them.

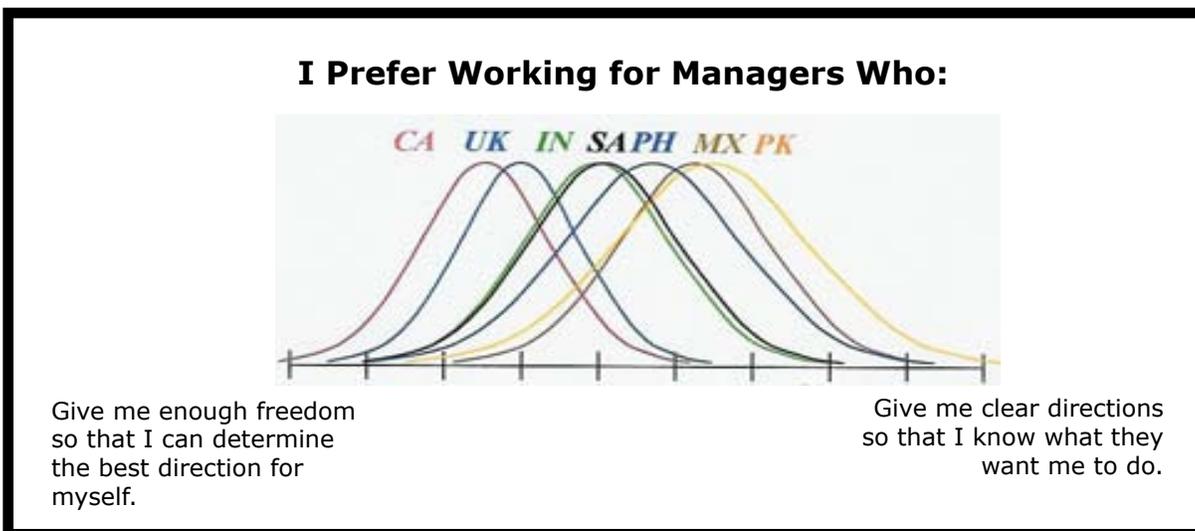
Cultural Choices

Culture is about making choices – in most cases, instant choices between various options or the choice of one option without really seeing any alternative.

On the scale below, which position best represents the kind of manager you prefer to work for?



The following chart compares the normalized distributions of answers obtained to the above question from employees of four international accounting firms (PricewaterhouseCoopers, Deloitte, Ernst & Young and KPMG) from the following countries: Canada (in red); United Kingdom (in blue); India (in green); South Africa (in black); The Philippines (in purple); Mexico (in brown); and Pakistan (in orange).



Two important conclusions can be drawn from this graph that need to be taken into consideration when working with people from different cultures:

One, “You cannot judge a book by its cover.” People from the same culture do not all prefer the same managerial style. There is a significant range of preferences within each cultural group and it is therefore impossible to conclude that, just because someone is from a given country, he or she is likely to prefer a given managerial style; and

Two: This graph shows that there are systematic differences between cultures. The “average” Pakistani expects clearer directions from a manager than the average Canadian manager expects to give. This difference in expectations needs to be both understood and taken into consideration in order for Pakistanis and Canadians to work together effectively.

Cross-Cultural Communication

The following section of this manual examines the “visible” parts of the cultural iceberg that may arise in professional situations involving you and internationally educated professionals (IEPs).

Think of a time when you have encountered the following cross-cultural communication issues. What did you? What other cross-cultural communication pitfalls have you encountered?

Personal Space

We all have an invisible bubble of space around us that we consider our personal space: Our “comfort zone.” We usually only allow people who are close to us emotionally (children, parents, partners, or close friends) to come physically close to us. When strangers enter this personal space bubble, their presence generates a strong “flight or fight” emotional reaction. We become tense and defensive or we may step back, cross our arms, laugh, and so on, as ways to either re-establish distance or to bring strangers emotionally closer to us.

In multicultural situations, misunderstandings may arise during conversations between diverse people because the size of this invisible bubble varies from culture to culture.



If someone with a smaller personal space stands at the distance that feels “right,” this distance might be too small for someone else; they get the “flight or fight” feeling that tends to prevent participation in the conversation. Subconsciously, the person who has a larger personal space may get annoyed because the other person “does not have the right to come this close.”

If these two people stand at the distance that feels “right” for the person with the larger personal space, the distance is too large for the other person. The latter is likely to subconsciously feel snubbed, perceiving the behaviour as standoffish and a “put-down” when no such thing is intended.

What can you do?

- Being too far is not as damaging as being too close; give people more space.
- If your counterpart reacts in a startled way as you approach, you have probably come too close. Gradually move out of your counterpart’s comfort zone.
- You can determine the size of people’s comfort zone by looking at how far they extend their hand when they shake hands with you; the size of their comfort zone is usually twice the distance between their body and their hand.
- If people enter your personal space, remember that they probably do not intend to be aggressive towards you. Take advantage of the room lay-out to create a comfortable distance (talk across a desk or a table, for example) or move back slowly to recreate the space you need. If they follow you, mention to them that the lack of personal space makes you uncomfortable and that you will not be able to help them because you have difficulties concentrating on the conversation. End by asking them to move to a comfortable distance so that you can focus on helping them.

Body Language & Gestures

Communication through body language can result in many misunderstandings. In Canada, making eye contact implies involvement, respect and attention. In other cultures, making eye contact is disrespectful.

Smiles mean very different things to different people. In Canada, people smile in order to demonstrate friendliness towards strangers. In some cultures, people smile only “when there is something to smile about,” such as when a business relationship is moving in the right direction.

People who smile at strangers are perceived in some cultures as either simple-minded or trying to take advantage of them. People from these cultures may react defensively when strangers smile at them.

Smiling in some cultures is used to hide strong emotions, like embarrassment or anger, that should not be displayed. Some people may smile when someone brings up a topic that they would rather not discuss, like the death of a loved one, or to show when they are angry.

Physical contact is also subject to misinterpretations. In Canada, any physical contact between strangers is an accident and results in an apology. In other cultures, physical contact is far more common, from daily greetings to bumping into people in the streets or public transport.

What can you do?

- When someone behaves in a way that you do not understand, describe what is confusing you (“I see you do _____”) and explain how your culture interprets this behaviour. Ask what this behaviour means in your counterpart’s culture (“What does _____ mean to you?”).

The same gesture can mean different things in different cultures, as the following examples demonstrate:

- The gesture that means “OK” in Canada means “money” in Japan, “zero” in France and is a very rude gesture in Brazil and Russia.
- Showing the soles of your shoes to people in many Muslim countries is a major insult. It means “You are dirt; you are the scum of the earth.”
- Chinese people count from one to ten on one hand. The combination of fingers used by Chinese to indicate numbers from six to ten eludes most westerners.
- The gesture used by Chinese to say “Come here” is often understood by westerners as meaning “Get lost.”

What can you do?

- If people react in an unexpected manner when you make a gesture, stop and say “By this gesture, I mean _____. What does this gesture mean to you?”
- If you are confused, hurt or offended by someone’s gesture, check that you have the correct interpretation of the gesture. Say something like “You just did _____. What does this gesture mean to you?” Once you have clarified the misunderstanding, explain to your counterpart what this gesture means to you, so that he or she knows why you reacted the way you did: “The way I interpret this gesture is_____.”



Tone of Voice & Emotions

The range in tone of voice and emotions that can be safely expressed in the work place is culturally determined. As always, there are variations among individuals. Within the same culture, some people express more emotions than others. Variations from culture to culture tend to be quite noticeable in many cases and create major challenges in the workplace.

When someone expresses more positive emotions than is customary by Canadian standards (such as being excessively happy), this person is perceived as childish, exuberant or over the top. In general, this situation does not create major problems.

When someone expresses more negative emotions than is customary by Canadian standards (such as showing frustration about a project), this usually has major negative consequences. If this takes place during a meeting, Canadians will agree to anything this person wants just to terminate the meeting as quickly as possible, then reconvene the meeting without him or her. They will then undo what was agreed upon during the previous meeting and find entirely different solutions. The opinions and ideas of the person who was considered “out of control” will not be taken into consideration.

When someone expresses less emotion than is customary by Canadian standards, Canadians are not able to determine whether the person they are dealing with is happy or unhappy. This often generates frustration when they are trying to obtain a qualitative assessment of the situation.

What can you do?

- Try to overlook differences in this area as much as possible. Note that it is much easier said than done.
- You may at times expect a specific emotional reaction—such as happiness when you tell an IEP that they have obtained their license—that does not seem to be there. This does not mean that they are not feeling this emotion. Don’t hesitate to ask “How does this make you feel?” or “Your facial expression seems to indicate that you are _____. Is that correct?”
- If you are dealing with people who show more emotion by Canadian standards, try to keep calm even when they are showing a lot of negative emotions. Avoid judging them as childish when they show more positive emotions than you think the situation warrants.

Sense of Humour

What people find funny varies immensely from culture to culture. While a good joke brings a sense of connection and builds rapport between people, a bad joke can destroy trust by offending people unwittingly: One bad joke can erase the trust created by ten good ones.

What can you do?

- Avoid using humour with people from a different cultural background than yours until you learn what they find funny. Do not try to be intentionally funny.
- Avoid being offended when people make jokes that you perceive as attacks. They probably did not mean to insult you and reacting in a negative manner will likely compound the problem.
- If you say or do something that seems funny to people without intending to be humorous, try to avoid reacting in a hurt manner.

Dress Code

What someone wears often affects the way other people perceive them:

- If someone is overdressed by other's standards, that person will be perceived as trying to be more important than others.
- If someone is underdressed by other's standards, that person will be perceived as not taking others seriously.
- If someone does not wear a piece of equipment required for safety or practical reasons, that person will be perceived as not knowing the work environment.



What can you do?

- Don't hesitate to tell an IEP how they should dress for specific events. Chances are they are wondering what would be appropriate to wear.

English as a Second Language

When English is not an IEP's first language, working in English all day creates several challenges for them as well as for native English speakers. IEPs find that:

- Speaking English is very tiring;
- Native English speakers may finish their sentences;
- Expressing their ideas or explaining a complex technical issue completely is very difficult;
- They may be perceived as slow thinkers;
- Their technical capabilities may be underestimated.

What can you do?

- Schedule interviews or presentations by IEPs early in the day so that they are still "fresh."
- Unless communicating by telephone is important in your regulatory body, place less emphasis on the results of telephone interviews, since non-native English speakers can often communicate better in person.
- If you are listening to a non-native English-speaker, focus on the actual message that this person is trying to communicate once you have understood the actual words.

Accents

Accents also can create difficulties. Being asked to repeat things several times may create self-consciousness in people who have strong accents.

What can you do?

- If you understand part of a sentence up to a specific point, say “I understood what you said up to the word _____; I did not get the rest. Could you please repeat this part?” This approach gives people a feeling a progress that really motivates them to continue trying.
- Don’t give up after one attempt—if you do not understand people because of their accents, ask them clarifying questions that will lead them to give you more details so that you have a better chance of understanding what they are trying to communicate.
- Suggest accent modification courses to people if you frequently experience challenges in understanding them. It may help them in their future career and integration into Canadian society.

Acronyms & Abbreviations

People in different cultures do not use the same acronyms, abbreviate the same words or do not abbreviate words in the same manner. This may result in significant confusion.

For example, in Indian organizations, employees refer to long-distance and international calls as “STD’s” which in North America stands for “sexually transmitted diseases.” In one instance, an employee issued a document explaining how to make STDs throughout the organization. When this document reached the parent U.S. organization, it created both confusion and laughter.

Some acronyms or abbreviations may mean something comical or offensive in other languages. For example, Toyota had to change the name of its MR2 in its French market, since MR2 sounds really bad in French (“merdeux” or “crappy, filthy” in English).

As another example, a Venezuelan was quite offended when a Canadian described the Canadian International Development Agency using the acronym CIDA. CIDA sounds like the Spanish acronym for AIDS (SIDA).

What can you do?

- Don’t hesitate to ask what an acronym or abbreviation means.
- Define an acronym or abbreviation the first time you use it. Do this systematically in all written communication.
- Don’t be offended if people start laughing once they finally understand what you meant by the acronym or abbreviation you used. It’s not personal.
- Avoid laughing at people’s strange reactions to acronyms or abbreviations.

Different Versions of English

Difficulties may arise when communicating with people who have learned and used different versions of English. English as it is spoken in Canada is not quite the same as in the USA, the UK, South Africa, India or other parts of the Commonwealth. Some words may have different meanings that result in embarrassing misunderstandings.

Here are some examples:

- In North America, to “table an issue” means to put an issue up for discussion while in the UK it means to delay discussion of an issue;
- In the UK., to “strike out” means to go after an opportunity but means “to fail” in North America;
- In North America, a “bomb” is a failure; in the UK a “bomb” is a success.
- In North America, to “root” means to be a supporter of a sports team; In Australia, however, it means to have sexual intercourse. Australians usually get a good laugh when someone says “I root for the Blue Jays.”

What can you do?

- Watch people’s faces as you speak. If they look like they don’t understand what you are saying or have a reaction that does not match your expectations, say it again in a different manner.
- If an IEP uses words or expressions that generate negative reactions in you, ask yourself what triggered that reaction. Then ask yourself whether this person meant to trigger this reaction. You may want to ask other people who have knowledge of an IEP’s culture what the word or expression means to them.
- If an IEP does not understand a specific word or phrase, try to use a synonym or explain the same idea in a different manner.
- Don’t be offended if someone starts laughing once what you have in mind is finally understood. It’s not personal.



Sports English

Canadians use many sports terms (“three strikes and you are out,” “way out in left field,” “the whole nine yards”) that IEPs have never heard of as the sports the terms come from are not popular in their culture. As a result, IEPs can become confused and cannot participate fully in a conversation.

What can you do?

- Explain what the sports terms mean when you use them.
- Suggest that an IEP watch at least one game of a Canadian sport with which they are unfamiliar with someone who understands and likes the game. This person can explain what is happening to them and point out the sports terms and how they are used in everyday communication.

Communication Tools

IEPs may have used communication tools in their culture differently from how these tools get used in Canada.

In cultures where relationships are very important, people tend to use telecommunication tools that allow greater personal contact than Canadians would use to communicate similar information. Some cultures might use the telephone in situations where Canadians would use email or would schedule a face-to-face meeting in a situation where Canadians would schedule a telephone conversation.

The use of voice mail may be quite different between cultures. Canadians will leave extensive, detailed voice mail messages describing a situation or what they need from the person they called and expect an equally detailed voice mail response. An issue can be resolved without either party speaking directly. In cultures where relationships are very important, people will leave short messages like: “Hi, it’s me; Call me back.” The recipient is expected to determine who called by identifying the voice—this identification reinforces the relationship between the two people—and how quickly he or she needs to respond based on the urgency in the caller’s voice or the frequency of voice mail messages.

What can you do?

- Match people’s use of telecommunication tools. Respond to voice mail messages by telephone, respond to email messages by email, and so on.
- Try to overlook what may appear to you as interruptions when IEPs who are used to communicating face-to-face or by telephone leave voice mail messages that are not actionable or insist on meeting you. They do not mean to increase your stress level; it is how they are used to doing business.
- Try to overlook personal comments contained in email and voice mail messages. They are meant to keep up a relationship, not to waste your time.
- Before calling someone, think of what you want to say. If you are leaving a voice mail message, compose the message on paper then read it to the answering machine. This decreases the chances of being misunderstood.

Silences in Conversation

There are at least three different communication styles around the world when two people have a conversation. These differences in communication patterns can create significant issues during meetings that involve people from different cultural backgrounds.

In Canada and the USA, a person speaks, then stops and leaves a small pause that implies “Over to you now.” Another person speaks until there is a small pause and the conversation goes back and forth like this. Waiting until the person who is speaking is done and then picking up quickly where he or she left off indicates that one is listening carefully.

In the Far East, people leave long silences in conversations. These pauses reflect the attention that is given to what the speaker has just said. Listeners show that they are paying attention by thinking about what the speaker said before answering.

In Latin American, southern Europe and India, people tend to speak at the same time. Listeners show that they are paying attention to what the speaker is saying by repeating the same words at the same pace and at the same time, once they have guessed what the speaker is about to say.

Complications arise because Canadian participants consider the interruptions of Latin participants rude while Latin participants consider that their Canadian counterparts do not pay enough attention to what they say. Canadian participants consider that Far Easterners do not contribute sufficiently to the meeting whereas Far Eastern participants consider that they are not given the opportunity to do so.

What can you do?

- Point out to people that they start to speak too quickly if they start speaking before you are finished. Avoid making a value judgment—they do not do this to be rude but because it is natural to them.
- If you find that silences last longer than you would like and find yourself answering your own questions, bite your lip and give your counterparts a chance to speak.



Connotations

Some words or expressions carry connotations in Canada that differ from the connotations intended by an IEP. As a result, an IEP may not realize that what they say has different implications for a Canadian. This can create major misunderstandings if a Canadian does not stop and think: “Is what I understood what was really meant?” If an IEP’s sentence makes grammatical sense and the words chosen make sense together, a Canadian will react to an unintended connotation. If that reaction is negative, the whole conversation can quickly turn unpleasant.

Conversely, a Canadian may tell an IEP something that gets missed entirely. Some IEPs have mentioned situations where Canadians told them to “get lost” in such nice and polite manner that they did not understand.

Here are some examples of misunderstood connotations:

- The French word “demander” means “to ask for.” Because it is close to the word “to demand,” IEPs from French-speaking countries sometime “demand an explanation” when they are really “asking for an explanation;” they get a very different reaction from what they are expecting.
- In Eastern Europe, customer-service representatives dealing with clients who are experiencing difficulties with a product or service will typically ask: “What is your problem?” or “What’s wrong with you?” When they translate this sentence literally into English, their question is interpreted very differently because, in Canada, this question has a very negative connotation.
- A Canadian sent an email message to an Indian who did not speak English well. This message stated that the Canadian’s spouse had been hospitalized and that he had to cancel a scheduled meeting. His Indian counterpart responded: “Of course, I understand your excuse.” What he meant was, “Of course, I understand your reasons.” Such differences in connotation can significantly damage a relationship if the people involved do not realize that they are dealing with a misunderstanding.

What can you do?

- Watch peoples’ faces as you speak. If they have a reaction that does not match your expectations, don’t hesitate to say it again in a different manner.
- If people react in a defensive, hurt or offended manner, point it out. Say, “It appears to me that I may have offended you inadvertently,” and ask what was the word, action or behaviour that prompted the reaction. It often takes a few questions to pinpoint the trigger word, action or behaviour. Once you have identified what this trigger was, explain what you really meant. Be prepared for people to remain on the defensive after you have explained your intentions to them. If they have limited experience with cross-cultural differences, they may not be able to accept your explanation; they may never have encountered someone who has said something the way you have.
- Remember that qualifying statements imply different levels of probability and choose accordingly. For example, “I will do it”, “I may do it”, “I might do it”, “Maybe I will do it”, “Perhaps I will do it”, “I would do it...(if)” all imply different probabilities. This also applies to double negatives: “It is not impossible” does not carry the same probability as “It is possible.”
- If you find yourself reacting negatively to a comment made by an IEP because of its intensity, clarify with the person what meaning was actually intended. You may want to ask someone who is familiar with the IEP’s native language in order to determine the intent of the word or phrase and if it is supposed to sound as strong as it does in English.

Some Things to Consider

Exercise 1: What Does Sarah Mean?

Consider these email messages between you and Sarah, a client. You are both based in Toronto.

On June 6, Sarah writes: “Could you please come and participate in a meeting in Montreal on July 7? I will be in Ottawa on July 6 and I’m planning to fly into Montreal that night and then fly back to Toronto after the meeting. I’ll provide more details once I have them.”

On June 7, you respond: “I will take the first flight from Toronto to Montreal that morning and the last flight back. Will the meeting take place in downtown Montreal or outside?”

On June 8, Sarah responds: “I have not booked my travel yet—I’ll let you know the place soon.”

What does Sarah want to see in your response?

How will you respond to Sarah?

Exercise 2: Connotations

One of your colleagues, Amy, is discussing with you the outcome of a meeting. One of the objectives of this meeting was to determine who would write the draft report and by what date. Amy attended this meeting, but you did not. Interpret the meaning in the following statements Amy makes? What difference will her tone of voice make?

1. Chris will have the draft report completed by Monday.
2. Chris might have the draft report completed by Monday.
3. Chris said he will have the draft report completed by Monday.
4. Chris said he can have the draft report completed by Monday.
5. Chris said he may have the draft report completed by Monday.
6. Chris said he thinks he will have the draft report completed by Monday.
7. Chris thinks he will have the draft report completed by Monday.
8. Chris believes he will have the draft report completed by Monday.
9. Chris assumes he will have the draft report completed by Monday.

Exercise 3: See You On...?

In his book *Figuring Foreigners Out: A Practical Guide*, Craig Storti relates this dialogue between an American manager, John, located in the USA and his Indian employee, Xiang, located in India:

JOHN: It looks like we're going to need a few people to come in on Saturday.

XIANG: I see.

JOHN: Can you come in on Saturday?

XIANG: Yes, I think so.

JOHN: That'll be a great help.

XIANG: Yes. Saturday's a special day, did you know?

JOHN: How do you mean?

XIANG: It's my father's birthday.

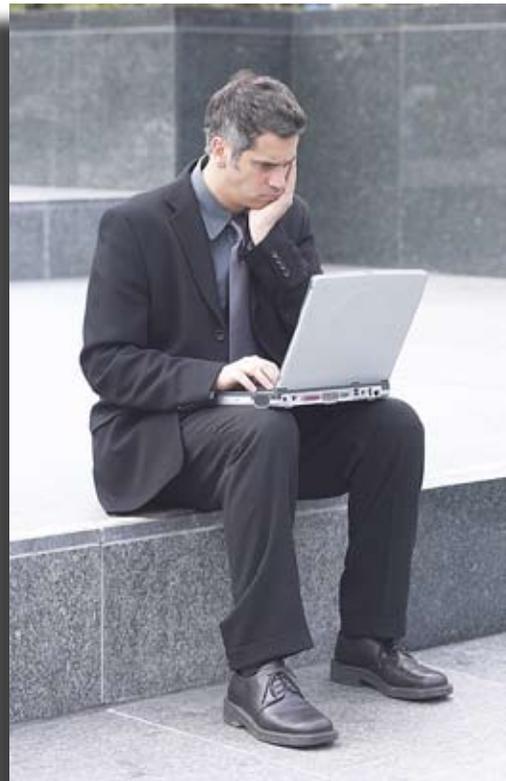
JOHN: How nice. I hope you all enjoy it very much.

XIANG: Thank you. I appreciate your understanding.

What is going to happen on Saturday?

What is going to happen on Monday?

Where does the misunderstanding between John and Xiang come from?



Cultural Values in the Workplace

So far this guide has looked at the “visible” parts of the cultural iceberg. Remember that there are also the “invisible” parts of the cultural iceberg that need to be dealt with in the workplace. These invisible parts are the values and thought patterns that each culture has created over time. This guide looks at two cross-cultural issues that are likely to arise in the workplace:

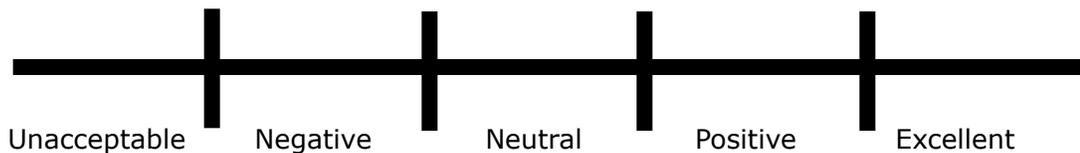
- How one’s culture affects the way people give and receive feedback; and
- How one’s culture affects one’s behaviour in hierarchical work places.

Feedback

Giving feedback to another person is an integral part of any organization’s development. When feedback is given and received by people of similar cultural backgrounds, the interpretation of feedback is relatively straightforward, since both giver and receiver interpret feedback using the same scale. The terms and tone of voice that connote excellent work, work that needs improvement or work that is substandard—even neutral, or non-committal, assessments—are understood by both parties.

Misunderstandings, however, often arise when the giver and receiver of feedback do not have the same cultural background because different cultures have different scales for interpreting feedback. A mildly negative comment made by an IEP can be interpreted as harsh criticism by a Canadian. Similarly, mild criticism by a Canadian to an IEP can be seen as a neutral assessment; in both cases, feedback is misunderstood, since it is not evaluated in the proper cultural context.

Feedback in a single cultural context



The range of possible feedback can be represented by the above axis in the following manner:

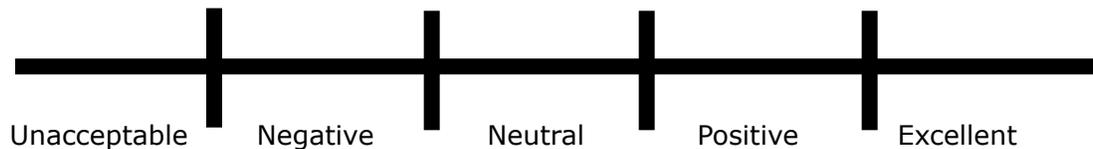
- The left side of the axis, marked with “Unacceptable,” corresponds to feedback of unacceptable performance. A manager commenting to a subordinate that his or her performance falls in this area would be in essence giving notice that some very fast and significant corrective action is needed.
- Between the first and second mark, marked “Negative,” corresponds to negative feedback. A manager commenting to a subordinate that his or her performance falls in this area expects corrective action.
- The next range, marked “Neutral,” indicates that the feedback is neither positive nor negative.
- The next range, marked “Positive,” corresponds to positive feedback.
- The range on the far right, “Excellent,” corresponds to feedback for outstanding performance.

When feedback is given and received by people of similar cultural backgrounds, the interpretation of feedback is relatively straightforward, since both giver and receiver interpret feedback using the same scale.

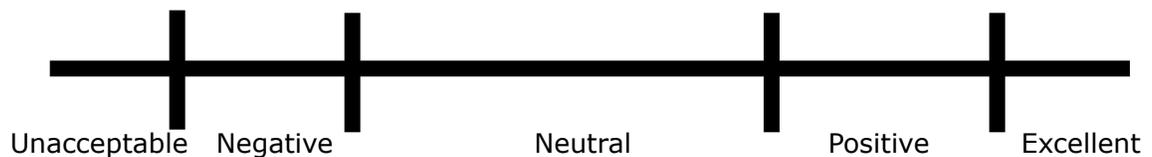
Feedback within a multicultural context

Misunderstandings often arise when the giver and receiver of feedback do not share the same cultural background, because different cultures have different scales for interpreting feedback. This situation can be shown on the axes below using, as examples, Canadian and Polish interpretation scales:

Canada



Poland



As this illustration implies, a comment intended to be neutral by a Pole may already be in the “negative” or “positive” range of a Canadian listener, prompting him or her to react in an unintended manner. Conversely, a Pole may not interpret feedback from a Canadian properly if this feedback is mildly “negative” or “positive,” since it may still be in their cultural “neutral” range.

In the context of teams, this difference of interpretation of feedback can create havoc in a project. A mildly negative criticism made by a Pole is likely to be interpreted as a big deal by a Canadian. Since they are not evaluated in the proper context, indirect comments often miss their mark.

Note that in other cases the relative positions of the two axes are reversed. While Canadians have a narrower neutral zone than Poles, the Canadian neutral zone is wider than, for example, IEPs from China or Mexico. In these cases, mild criticisms made by Canadians may be taken by Mexican or Chinese IEPs more seriously than intended. Conversely, comments made by Mexican or Chinese IEPs may not elicit any reaction from Canadians, contrary to IEPs’ expectations.

What can you do?

- Ensure that you are very clear and consistent when giving feedback to IEPs. Explain how you expect the feedback to be received or acted upon.
- Ask IEPs how they interpret the feedback they have received to see if it is an accurate assessment and whether their action plan will address the issue sufficiently.
- Don’t be offended if IEPs give you feedback that sounds negative. Ask them if your interpretation of the feedback is what they intended and whether your action plan will address the issue sufficiently.

Hierarchy

Hierarchy is the degree to which less powerful and more powerful members of institutions, organizations and cultures accept the fact that power is unequally distributed between them.

In hierarchical cultures, dependence of subordinates on superiors is accepted as the norm by both sides—roles are clearly defined and individuals are unlikely to question their bosses. In a non-hierarchical, or consultative, society, equality of status and interdependence between different layers of power is considered desirable—subordinates will, and are expected to, question or even contradict those in more senior positions.

In consultative cultures, managers are like coaches: They have influence only through their ability to convince team members. Directions are given in a general sense—“Draw me a picture of a horse”—and many projects are initiated by staff members.

In somewhat hierarchical countries, managers are expected to make the final decision after consulting with their staff. Directions are given with more details—“Draw me a horse that looks somewhat like this picture.” Staff members are expected to balance taking initiative and implementing decisions made by managers.

In highly hierarchical cultures, managers (often referred to by their title, like chief or director, and so on) make decisions based on their experience. Directives are given to employees—“Here is a paint-by-number picture of a horse, you go fill it.” Staff members are expected to implement the decisions made by managers.

Look at the following table in order to determine whether your managers and colleagues are more or less hierarchical than you are.

	Compared to consultative people, hierarchical people tend to:	Compared to hierarchical people, consultative people tend to:
Titles and Protocol	Prefer using formal terms of address (“Sir”, “Your Excellency”); Use a position’s title to address people (“Director,” “Professor” and so on); Pay more attention to protocol (where people sit, what order they enter a room, and so on).	Prefer using first name and informal forms of address; Not pay much attention to protocol.
Compensation	Consider it inconceivable that people might earn more than their managers.	May earn more than their managers.
Decision Making	Provide frequent updates to their managers; Ask their managers to make decisions.	Provide infrequent updates to their managers; Make decisions without consulting their managers.
Delegation of tasks and responsibilities	Tend to prefer closed-ended assignments; Prioritize tasks and responsibilities based on the position and title of the delegating person; Report frequently to their managers and verify that their managers concur with their suggested direction.	Tend to prefer open-ended assignments; Prioritize tasks and responsibilities based on urgency and importance; Take extensive initiative to make decisions and implement them without checking with their managers first.

	Compared to consultative people, hierarchical people tend to:	Compared to hierarchical people, consultative people tend to:
Performance evaluation	Avoid evaluating the performance of their managers or rate their managers as excellent; Avoid writing the first draft of their own performance evaluations—only managers are qualified to evaluate their performance.	Participate in the evaluation of the performance of people below, above and peers; Write first draft of their own performance appraisal.
Distribution lists	List people in decreasing hierarchical order.	List people in alphabetical order or randomly.
Career management	Are motivated by the title of the next position and by the opportunity to have more people reporting to them.	Are motivated by the content of the position and by the opportunity to have access to more resources.
Discussions	Quote famous people, articles or books; Refer to the title or position of people in conversations.	Quote past experience; Do not mention the title or position of people in conversations.
Problems	Focus more on finding why a problem exists and who created it than on solutions and prevention; Place significant importance on finding who created the problem (blame).	Focus more on the solution to a problem and preventing it from occurring again; Gloss over personal responsibilities in the creation of a problem.
Direction	Ask more questions and request more specific instructions; Keep asking questions after consultative people consider that they have given sufficiently clear directions.	Ask fewer questions and request less specific instructions; Stop asking questions and are ready to leave before hierarchical people consider that they have given sufficient direction.
Life outlook	Tend to react strongly and negatively to lack of respect of hierarchy and to breach of protocol.	Fail to see lack of respect of hierarchy and breach of protocol.
Promotion process	Focus on their current responsibilities and tasks; Promotion is usually a step change in hierarchical cultures.	Expect to take gradually more responsibilities from their managers; Promotion is usually a gradual increase in responsibilities in non-hierarchical cultures.

What Can You Do?

- Adapt your style to meet your managers' and colleagues' hierarchical expectations or align your expectations with respect to their decision-making style. List all the decisions that you and your teammates make on a regular basis and classify them in five categories:
 1. Decisions that you make by yourself;
 2. Decisions that you make based on input provided by a report;
 3. Decisions made jointly;
 4. Decisions that you expect other people to make then run by you;
 5. Decisions that you expect people to make on their own.

If you are the manager or co-worker of an IEP who is used to a more hierarchical work place than you, you could:

- Meet more often with them to ensure that your expectations are aligned. Hierarchical employees expect to give more frequent updates than may be considered necessary.
- Ask them to do a complete analysis of a situation and to make recommendations to you. Explain that this is not a test to determine whether they come up with the answers you want. You trust their judgment and want to see what conclusions they reach and how.
- Provide clear expectations and boundaries. When you delegate a task, specify clearly what is already known and what needs to be researched. This will save them both time and stress.
- Encourage them to take more initiative. Discuss with them what initiative means to you, what you expect from them and how you will evaluate their performance.
- Give them projects that are on your critical path. You will likely pay closer attention to their progress in that case.
- Quote experts in the field. Hierarchical people tend to respect the opinion of experts and follow their recommendations. An expert's quotation supporting your point of view is likely to have significant weight with them.

If you are the manager or co-worker of an IEP who is used to a less hierarchical work place than you, you could:

- Give them more leeway. They expect to give you less frequent updates than you may consider necessary.
- Specify when you want to hear from them. Specify check points and dates when you want them to give you a progress overview; if you leave progress reports up to them, you may feel that you are kept in the dark.
- Let your employee do some exploratory work before you specify the parameters of their work. They would rather find the answer by themselves than be told.
- Explain clearly how involved you want to be on a project. Explaining why you want to keep your finger in the pie will help them accept your involvement more easily and welcome your input to a greater extent.
- Give them projects that are not on your critical path, require significant initiative or are fairly undefined. You will likely let them be more independent.
- Use more concrete examples. People who place little value on hierarchy tend to be more easily convinced by concrete examples than by quotations from experts.

If an IEP is your manager and has different hierarchical expectations than you, how would you integrate the above suggestions into your work relationship?

More Cross-Cultural Communication Tips

Here are some additional tips that will help you interact more effectively with IEPs:

- Simplify communication by using less complex sentence structure and vocabulary.
- Try to remain cool and composed, even when you have made a mistake that results in embarrassment for you. In most cases, no one means to embarrass you.
- If you do not understand a word an IEP uses, ask them to spell it, write it down, use a synonym or say the word in their native language and get the word translated.
- Never shout to be understood.
- Use the corporate words for the technical work you do.
- Help an IEP with documents and presentations and with sensitive email or phone calls. This will help remove some sources of misunderstanding.
- Give your counterpart the benefit of the doubt.
- Suspend judgment.
- Be patient.
- Adapt your communication style to that of your counterpart.
- Explain what you mean in greater detail.
- Look for alternate interpretations when you have a negative reaction.
- Ask people who know an IEP's language to translate or interpret for you.
- Write minutes of meetings.
- Communicate important messages through several media to ensure that they are received the way you intended.
- Ensure the messages you send are consistent.

**When everything fits except one small thing, don't let it go: Ask.
It may be the tip of a cultural misunderstanding iceberg.**

Additional Reading

Want to find out more about cross-cultural communication? Here are some other resources:

Axtell, R.E. *Essential Do's and Taboos: The Complete Guide to International Business and Leisure Travel*. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, 2007.

Axtell, R.E. *Gestures: The Do's and Taboos of Body Language Around the World, Revised Edition*. Chicago, IL: John Wiley & Sons, 1997.

Hall, E.T. and M. Reed Hall. *Understanding Cultural Differences: Germans, French and Americans*. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 1990.

Hofstede, G. and G.J. Hofstede. *Culture and Organizations: Software of the Mind*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004.

Laroche, L. *Managing Cultural Diversity in Technical Professions*. Burlington, MA: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2002.

Laroche, L. and D. Rutherford. *Recruiting, Retaining and Promoting Culturally Different Employees*. Burlington, MA: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2006.

Morrison, T. *Kiss, Bow, or Shake Hands: The Bestselling Guide to Doing Business in More Than 60 Countries*. Avon, MA: Adams Media, 2006.

Ricks, D.A. and G. Bertola. *Blunders in International Business*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 2006.

Storti, C. *Figuring Foreigners Out: A Practical Guide*. Boston, MA: Intercultural Press, 1999.

Trompenaars, A. and C. Hampden-Turner. *Riding the Waves of Culture: Understanding Diversity in Global Business, Second Edition*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1998.

Trompenaars, A. and P. Woolliams. *Business Across Cultures*. Mankato, MN: Capstone, 2004.



Text: Lionel Laroche

Since 1998, Lionel Laroche has provided cross-cultural training, coaching and consulting services to over 15,000 people on four continents. Lionel specializes in helping professionals and organizations reap the benefits of cultural differences in their work. He is the author of over 100 publications examining the impact of cultural differences on people and organizations. His publications have appeared in over 30 trade magazines published in eight countries. He has written two books, *Managing Cultural Diversity in Technical Professions*, and *Recruiting, Retaining and Promoting Culturally Diverse Employees*, and has provided cross-cultural training and consulting services to professional associations and regulatory bodies across North America.

Born in France, Lionel obtained his “Diplôme d’Ingénieur Polytechnicien” from the Ecole Polytechnique de Paris, France and his Ph. D. in Chemical Engineering from the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena, California, USA.



www.regulators4access.ca

Funded by the Government of Ontario