

Cross Cultural Communication

Our workplaces are rapidly becoming vast, vibrant and engaged multicultural and cross-generational communities, comprising people of different cultural backgrounds, religions, ages, genders, abilities and lifestyles. The geographical, social and cultural scope is now increasingly diverse and there is great benefit in sharing and understanding new perspectives that can bring new ideas, ways of thinking and knowledge.

Australia's Diversity

In 2011, Australia had a population of 21.5 million people, 46% of which were either born overseas or had at least one overseas-born parent¹. This incredible diversity is reflected in Australia's workforce, with 13% of workers being born in non-English speaking (NES) countries and 23% born overseas². So, we have a workforce with a vast range of individual experiences, capabilities and perspectives waiting to be used. Current demographic trends show the growing significance of Australia's ageing population to our future workforce. The Australian Bureau of Statistics projects that between 2011 and 2020, the number of people aged 50 years and over will increase by more than 22%³.

With greater diversity in the workplace, it can seem difficult to develop effective communication with, tolerance of and be inclusive of another person or persons who on face value, seems so different to you.

Curiosity and tolerance are really useful mind-sets in breaking down the barriers of diversity, be it different cultural backgrounds, religions, ages, genders, abilities and lifestyles. There are a number of ways to explore and communicate with others to highlight common understandings and shared goals.

A great way of building your curiosity and tolerance is to surround yourself with people from other generations and cultures and ask questions when you see them doing something differently. Learn to appreciate differences, and different approaches instead of judging or trying to change the behaviour. Just because something is different it doesn't mean it's wrong.

Know Yourself and Challenge Your Personal Bias

Personal Bias is a person's unconscious or hidden beliefs – attitudes and biases beyond our regular perceptions of ourselves and others. Our personal bias underpins a great deal of our patterns of behaviour about diversity.

Each of us has a personal culture. When two cultural entities meet the natural reaction is defensive.

Recognising your personal triggers will improve your cross-cultural communication. If you can recognise your emotions and unconscious biases, you can manage them. If not, you may, even unconsciously, try to push your values system on someone else⁴.

There are a number of ways you can learn more about your own biases:

- Undertake the Harvard Implicit Association Test (IAT), the most effective online tool to gain greater awareness about one's own biases, preferences and beliefs. <https://implicit.harvard.edu/>
- Seek out feedback from your team and peers about whether your personal preferences and beliefs inadvertently hinder diversity⁵.

Body Language and Personal Space

Hand, eye, facial, and body gestures can have very different meanings in different countries and cultures. How you sit or greet someone, or the extent to which you should reach out and touch someone, may all be read in different and unexpected ways.

Being able to display cultural intelligence will improve your working relationships and potentially make you more successful in an increasingly globalized, multicultural working world.

Personal space is an important issue in communication. When someone enters your personal space you can feel threatened or imposed upon and as a result tune out – this is where miscommunication can occur.

Activity: Have a conversation with someone and step closer and closer together. How difficult is it to maintain the chat?

In Australia, our personal "bubble" is about one arm length (elbow to finger). However, in many other countries, personal space is much closer.



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When speaking with someone from another culture and they enter your bubble, acknowledge your emotions so you can deal with it and move on. Remind yourself that the “affront” to your personal space was not intentional, but simply what the other person is used to.

Watch Out For Cultural Assumptions

If you’ve ever travelled overseas, you probably realize just how much of our verbal and nonverbal communication relies on a shared set of cultural beliefs and attitudes. Try to avoid things like jokes, slang, or references that might be confusing or misleading in a cross-cultural context.

Practice Active Listening

Summarise what has been said in order to ensure you understand the meaning and don’t forget to ask frequent questions. This is a great technique to ensure that important information doesn’t “slip through the cracks”.

Some great examples of active listening are:

So what I understand you are saying is...

Can you tell me more about x? What does that mean for you?

Group Information In ‘Bite-Size’ Pieces

If you stop to think about it, even a single sentence in a conversation between two fluent speakers can contain a great deal of information. That’s why cross-cultural communication experts recommend limiting the amount of information you try to convey at one time. Stick to simple, direct instructions and explanations, and try to avoid complex, multi-part sentences.

When In Doubt, Opt For Friendly Formality

Australians are known for our casual, informal approach to conversations, even when they are addressing a stranger or a new acquaintance. This approach may be off-putting or unsettling to someone from a different cultural background. To ensure that you’re conveying an appropriate level of respect, use a more formal mode of speaking and gradually scale back the level of formality as the relationship develops.

Once you get the hang of culturally sensitive communication practices, you’ll be surprised at what a difference it can make in your workplace. Make the most of your diverse staff by ensuring that important information doesn’t slip through the cracks.

Tips to help you participate in respectful cross cultural communication

- Ask for advice about what to call people
- Observe how other cultures join in and take turns in a conversation. The rules will probably be different from your own.
- Be aware that all function of communication (whether complimenting, apologising, requesting, inviting, or offering) proceed according to different cultural rules.
- Understand that cultures have different goals in ‘self presentation’ – that is, the ways of achieving may differ.
- Accept that all cultures require and value politeness, but the ways in which the politeness is achieved may vary significantly.
- The concept of face is universal, without it, there would be no politeness.
- Allow for individual differences, cultures tend to use standard ways of structuring and presenting information. These ways differ across cultures.
- It is seldom necessary to change your culture, although some modifications may be practical at times.
- It is not necessary to like the culture(s) we engage with – that’s probably not realistic – but a degree of respect is essential.
- It is not necessary to understand the cultures we engage with – a very difficult task for an outsider, anyway. Instead, we need to try to determine which characteristics of a particular culture are critical ones.
- Prejudice will not just disappear; it requires the expansion of individual experience, skill and attitude.
- Minimise language problems by selecting and structuring your content to match the other person’s competence in the language.
- Where possible declare your difficulty in understanding the other person’s communication (their speed, intention or topic).

¹Australian Bureau of Statistics. Census of Population and Housing. 2011.

²Ibid.

³Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011

⁴2008 Diversity Best Practices: Proven Strategies for Addressing Unconscious Bias in the workplace.

⁵“Communication Tips” based on information in O’Sullivan, Understanding Ways – Communicating Between Cultures, Hale & Iremonger, 1994