

Strategies to Improve Intercultural Communication

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Many U.S. companies today are making an exerted effort to develop culturally diverse workforces that can better represent them globally. While these multicultural workforces bring new perspectives and ideas that companies can use, such as diversity, both in the workforce and in the client base, they also bring unique challenges.

As a result, many business leaders are **seeking strategies to navigate cultural diversity**. They need to grasp the concepts of intercultural communication, which are skills that become more important as the global population makes tighter connections.

With intercultural training, which has become a survival guide in the global business environment, companies can improve their value and marketability.

“Understanding culture is an antecedent to doing business,” says Dr. Elizabeth Tuleja, who developed and teaches an online course in intercultural management for the Stayer Center for Executive Education within the University of Notre Dame’s Mendoza College of Business.

Tuleja moved to China in 2017 as a Fulbright U.S. Scholar to teach **intercultural management** and global leadership at Sichuan University in Western China.

“You can know all the functional aspects of international business. But if you don’t know how to develop relationships and understand people based upon their norms and behavior and what they expect from you, then you’re not going to be as successful,” she said.

Advanced programs in workplace diversity clarify the kinds of cross-cultural communication and management skills required in today’s business environment.

Intercultural Communication First Taught to Diplomats

American anthropologist Edward Hall is often given credit for the field of intercultural communication. He used the term for the first time in his book “The Silent Language” in 1959.

The first group taught and trained in the discipline was made up of American diplomats and personnel who needed to sharpen intercultural skills. From there, it spread to universities in the 1970s. It has since developed into a more robust academic field.

Growing Diversity in the Workplace

The U.S. workforce, which generally includes 25- to 64-year-olds, is in the midst of a wholesale demographic transformation. The white working-age population is projected to decline from 82% to 63% between 1980 and 2020, according to the **National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education**. In that same time period, the minority portion of the workforce is expected to double from 18% to 37% and the Hispanic/Latino portion of the workforce is projected to almost triple from 6% to 17%.

Those numbers reflect the cultural diversity in today’s U.S. workforce, but do not account for global clients that companies must relate to daily. All of this is prompting managers to seek new skills in intercultural communication.

“In order to become more effective in daily interactions at work, home or abroad, it is essential that people develop a keen awareness and understanding of the differences that exist regarding human values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviors,” Tuleja said in her book, “Intercultural Communication for Business.”

“In today’s global workplace, we must be able to embrace such differences and acknowledge them as opportunities for learning and enrichment rather than forces for confusion and trouble,” she says in her book.

If the global world were a village of just 1,000 people, there would be 584 Asians, 95 Europeans and just 52 North Americans. Only 86 of them would speak English, Tuleja explains in one of her online course lectures for Advanced Intercultural Management.



If the world were a village of 1,000 people, there would be

- 584 Asians
- 95 Europeans
- 52 North Americans
- 269 Other

Only 86 of them would speak English

Business learning does not necessarily equate to cultural learning, she said. “Past and current research into cross cultural communication in management suggests we must understand how to deal with people to be successful.”

To become competent in another culture, look beyond behavior to see if you understand attitudes, beliefs and values. “In any work environment, we need to look backstage if we want to understand the way things operate,” Tuleja said.

6 Tips for Improving Intercultural Communication Skills

- 1. Do your research.** If you know in advance who you are dealing with or will be working with, research cultural norms and standards for a specific location.
- 2. Practice listening and observing.** Actively pay attention when communicating with people of other cultures. Listening will teach you new ways to conduct interactions.
- 3. If you don’t understand, ask.** While it might be a little uncomfortable, if you don’t understand something, speak up. It demonstrates your willingness to learn more about a new culture.
- 4. You will make mistakes.** Be prepared for that. No matter how much homework you do, you will make mistakes. Just do your best to be self-aware and learn from your mistakes.
- 5. Start communicating.** It may be a challenge to communicate with people of other cultures, but it can also be enjoyable. It is a lifelong process requiring self-awareness, understanding and empathy. Intercultural communication can improve both your professional and personal interactions.
- 6. Ask open-ended questions.** Don’t ask yes or no questions. Open-ended questions require the person you are communicating with to explain or outline a point, which makes it easier to understand their response.

In today's ever-changing and increasingly diverse global business settings, an **effective manager** needs skills that go beyond conveying a message accurately and efficiently. The most highly sought-after managers today are those who can lead teams with knowledge, experience and an array of intercultural management tools. Those tools include the communication insight to successfully lead highly diverse groups in complex tasks.

The manager who develops those skills can then pass them along to employees to increase awareness, to teach them how common workplace gestures or phrases might be considered offensive or at least misunderstood by coworkers from other cultures.

Cultural mistakes can be something as simple as offering a handshake. Some international cultures don't share that custom, such as Thailand, where they instead place palms together at chest level and bow.

And in some religions, an otherwise common gesture like a fist bump or high-five with a female can be considered highly intrusive. Islam, for example, prohibits all non-essential touching with someone of the opposite gender.

Get Value, Team-Building from Intercultural Communication Training

- Workplace training supports a community-building program that doesn't single out any person or group. Use newfound skills in intercultural training to connect and motivate the entire team.
- People from cultures around the world need fairness, respect and understanding and your employees need to sense your commitment to all of those. For example, learn how to avoid mistakes like holding happy hour meetings that exclude those who don't drink or can't attend for religious reasons.
- Managers who can build cultural sensitivity among employees and redirect culture-related conflict can rise above the rest. Prepare to understand and respond to current business needs.
- Connect and network with other managers with similar challenges who are learning the same skills you are.

As a manager, develop awareness and identify cultural issues in your workplace. Get training to help you understand what is happening among your staff and why. The more you understand, the more you can develop your skills to competently and sensitively interact with people from other cultures.

Source: <https://www.notredameonline.com/resources/intercultural-management/strategies-to-improve-intercultural-communication/> (Accessed: 08 May 2020).