

# Cultivating Empathy to Build Cultural Bridges

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I still remember my first professional job as a 22 year old having recently arrived in Paris. As it turned out my on-the-job training consisted more about learning about my new culture—in this case working with the French aristocracy—than about the actual work itself. To this day, I'm grateful to my American colleague, Cary, who was married to a French count and had been living in France for years. Cary was a huge comfort to me as I navigated this new cultural horizon. She created a safe haven where I could ask those stupid questions I thought I should have the answer to and she validated my frequent *faux pas* by sharing stories of her own mistakes when she had first arrived in France.

As we prepare to celebrate Valentine's Day tomorrow, it's a good time to reflect on how you can be more empathetic in your work across cultures. Are you acting as a cultural mentor to someone, similar to Carey? Sadly, I often hear clients complain about the polarized atmosphere within their global teams. Instead of experiencing the collaborative teamwork they aspire to have, they encounter an us vs. them environment. Developing cross-cultural competence helps break barriers and instead build bridges across cultures. However, to move from a relationship rife with misunderstanding and contention to one of cohesiveness and harmony, it is critical to cultivate empathy.

So you might ask how you can cultivate empathy, particularly in the fast-paced virtual environment where face-to-face interaction is limited or non-existent. While it can be more challenging when you can't just walk to someone's cubicle or office to resolve a misunderstanding or conflict, it is not impossible. Empathy is also a critical component to building trust, especially in the relationship-oriented cultures found in many Latin American, Mediterranean and Asian countries. Below are a few areas to consider:

1. When a disagreement arises, probe to get more information from your colleague to better understand her perspective instead of assuming that her behavioral norms should mirror your own. Since our perceptions are often shaped by our cultural lenses, we frequently disregard that other's behaviors may have a cultural overtone. Make an extra effort to further explore *why* a particular matter is important to your colleague from her cultural standpoint. Ultimately this will foster better understanding of her worldview, alleviate the conflict and allow you to seek a mutually acceptable solution.

2. Show sensitivity around language issues. Since English is undoubtedly not the mother tongue of many of your global colleagues, there are understandably communication disadvantages they encounter that a native English-speaker does not. Acknowledging this fact and offering support or allocating extra time for meetings or deadlines demonstrates your thoughtfulness.
3. Be aware of important local events, be it a holiday or a newsworthy incident, and show genuine interest in learning more about it and what it means to your colleague. This is a great opportunity to get her to open up about a non-work related subject. Sharing information about a comparable holiday or event that is meaningful to you allows for an exchange where you may be able to find some commonalities. At the very least, your concern and curiosity will display understanding.
4. Be willing to validate your colleague's point of view, even if you disagree, and avoid trying to prove you're right. This is important in a public setting where potential face loss could occur. If this happens, particularly in a cultural that favors indirect communication as a means to maintain harmony, trust is difficult to regain.
5. If you need to give negative feedback, find ways to make yourself vulnerable to defuse potential defensiveness on your colleague's behalf. Keep in mind that humility and authenticity as well as an expressed commitment to supporting them goes a long way in building trust.

While cultural differences can fuel divisiveness within global teams, being mindful of some of the ways that you can enhance your connections on a personal level will go far in fostering a more collaborative and productive work environment. Remember it's the soft skills that allow us to relate to each other that keep people engaged and motivated and drive performance.

Happy Valentine's Day!