

# **Cultural Perspectives – Steps to Working Effectively in a Global Environment**

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What happens when cultures collide? In today's increasingly global work environment, more and more employees are working across cultures without understanding the behaviors, values, and assumptions of their foreign colleagues or business partners. Developing awareness of our own cultural perspectives and how our actions may be perceived by our foreign counterparts will provide the skills to work more competently in international settings.

Lack of awareness can lead to all kinds of pitfalls. We all learn from a young age how to behave in certain circumstances and we assume that our behavior is natural and shared by everyone. Since we tend not to think consciously about the routine acts in our life, when we encounter a situation where someone is acting differently, our initial reaction is often that the person is wrong. However, when we realize that the majority of the people surrounding us are acting in a similar manner to that one individual, we are apt to become confused and uncomfortable because we do not understand the underlying cultural messages.

For example, Arvind, an Indian engineer who works for a high tech company and travels regularly to the U.S. on long-term consulting assignments, encountered challenges when he arrived in the U.S. for the first time. He had expected to receive the same guidance he got at home when he worked on assignments. Instead, he was thrown into a situation in the U.S. where he had to figure out the steps to take on his own. Since his style of working was to receive direct orders from his superiors to complete a certain task, he was not used to the American standard that each individual is in charge of his or her destiny and needs to be self-motivated to get a job done. His initial experience in the U.S. left him feeling anxious and uncertain if he were doing the job appropriately.

Perhaps, if Arvind had better understood that the role of American managers is to delegate work from a big picture perspective rather than to act as a mentor and show their staff what to do, he would have known that it was not only appreciated but also expected that he take initiative instead of waiting to be told what to do. Since the Indian work environment tends to be very hierarchical with each individual responsible only for the job he is given, the notion of stepping into a co-worker's territory—even to handle the most menial of tasks—is alien and would generally not happen in India. Conversely, in the U.S., employees are rewarded for taking initiative, for speaking up in meetings to share new ideas, even if the ideas do not fall into the realm of the individual's job function, if somehow they can contribute to the growth of the company. The American proverb "the squeaky wheel gets the oil" indicates the extreme to which Americans value the individual voice and the benefits one can get by speaking out or taking initiative. Once Arvind learned this value, it was easier for him to adapt his behavior to conform to the local environment when he was working on assignments in the U.S.

Another case involved Gary, an American manager working in France. He became exasperated by the amount of time it would take the French to make decisions. He complained that the endless meetings never resulted in anything concrete. Animated discussions would take place but the meetings always seemed to end on the same note—with plans to resume it on another day to resolve the problem or figure out the action to take. From his perspective coming from a culture where time is money and working quickly and efficiently is critical to progress, he felt that too much time was wasted without reaching a conclusion.

Had Gary had a better understanding of the authoritarian top down management style of the French, he would have been able to better position the importance of thoroughly discussing a subject before jumping into making a decision. In the U.S. innovation and creativity reign and the impact of making a mistake is not the end of the world but is viewed as an opportunity to learn for the future, to improve oneself. Second chances are the norm. In France, on the other hand, failure is not so easily forgiven or forgotten. As a result, risk is weighed much more carefully since the consequences of error are much more detrimental to an individual's—or a company's—longstanding reputation. The French will therefore often take much more time to carefully study multiple angles of an issue prior to making an important decision. Additionally, since there is less authority granted to individual employees, a topic may first need to be presented to senior management for final approval, thus slowing down the decision-making. Without understanding this difference in expectation, Gary instead assumed that his French colleagues were ineffective in their leadership roles.

On the flip side, the French may have perceived Gary's desire to make rapid decisions as careless and irresponsible. Because it is so crucial to avoid making mistakes in French society and because the ramifications of doing so are much greater, Gary's willingness to change course if a decision did not make sense later on after implementing it may have cost him his reputation and credibility in the eyes of his French colleagues.

Our cultural perspectives therefore dictate not only our actions but also our reactions to situations and our expectations of others' behaviors. As illustrated in the above cases, both Arvind and Gary's professional credibility before their foreign colleagues could have been negatively impacted had they not learned thereafter that each of their perspectives were simply not aligned with those of their host cultures. In both circumstances, Gary and Arvind formed conclusions about the others' behavior, which were peppered with stereotypes. Once they understood the expectations prevalent in their respective host cultures, it was easier for them to relax and accept the situation, as well as to adapt their behavior to facilitate interaction in the future.

While human behavior has many dynamic factors that influence it—with culture being just one component—the following steps may help you avoid similar types of snares when working in an international environment.

- 1) **Reinterpret behaviors from others' cultural perspectives.** Try to put a particular situation into context when the rules seem alien to you. Ask your co-workers or clients for clarification on what motivates them so you can increase your knowledge of what they are doing and why.
- 2) **Accept that you don't understand what you don't know.** We all want to believe that we are competent in all areas and highly skilled at our jobs. However, no matter how culturally savvy we may be, there are always nuances that will trip us. If someone is behaving in a way that seems inappropriate, take the time to ask him or her to explain the action instead of making assumptions based on your own cultural filters.
- 3) **Increase awareness of your own preconceptions.** We all carry cultural baggage that prescribes our behavior, certain values and how we perceive the world and others. It also allows us to categorize situations and people. The more we become aware of our biases, the easier it will be to accept and understand others' differences. This will ultimately help break stereotypes and false generalizations about people and their culture.
- 4) **Be willing to test, adapt and change as needed.** A key component to creating cross-cultural competency is the ability to observe how our own actions and behaviors impact the environment. It can be dangerous to throw ourselves into a situation and "do as the Romans when in Rome" because we are still blinded by our own cultural filters. However, through astute observation we can determine certain rules of how we should or should not be behaving.
- 5) **Don't judge others by your own cultural values.** Remember that they belong to you and may not be shared by all cultures. There is no right or wrong—only different. Learn to respect those differences.
- 6) **Keep communication simple.** Try to minimize and customize correspondence as much as possible and always confirm that there is an understanding. Avoid using words that have more than one meaning. Steer away from slang and industry specific jargon that could get lost in translation across cultures.
- 7) **Recognize and accept that lifestyle priorities differ across cultures.** You may be a workaholic who adheres strictly to deadlines, sometimes to the point of sacrificing your personal life, however your colleague overseas may give preference to his 25-member family above all else. While you may each be motivated by different things, it is important to respect the boundaries of the other and to modify your expectations accordingly. Ultimately this will ensure a more harmonious relationship.
- 8) **Always clarify meaning when communicating.** What you may consider a forthright and honest way of bringing up an issue might cause your colleague to lose face because of your direct approach, thereby creating distrust and a strain in future interactions. Be aware of how you are presenting the subject and watch for body language, which represents 55% of all communication. Also, don't assume you understand gestures. What may be acceptable in one culture can often be an insult in another. Use verbal expressions to explain any non-verbal gestures you use.

- 9) **Assume responsibility for your own actions.** Keep in mind that you cannot change your environment—only your own response to it. If you are feeling frustrated by the lack of responsiveness to your suggestion or the lack of participation in a brainstorming meeting, remember that you are not responsible for another’s conduct or his or her performance. Even if you are working together on a multicultural project and one of your team members makes what you perceive to be an egregious mistake, consider that each individual will bring his or her own work style and perspective to the team. Use this as an opportunity to get to know your foreign colleagues better by asking them for an explanation and trying to understand their reasoning.
- 10) **ADAPT** to your new environment by examining your surroundings. **ADJUST** your thinking and behavior to the circumstances or situation in order to be successful and **ACCOMMODATE** your style to meet others’ expectations.

Applying these principles may help divert a crisis situation and will allow you to gain perspective into how life operates in other cultures. At the same time, it will also provide you with more insight into who you are and what motivates you. Being placed in a foreign setting—whether at home or abroad—can be both alienating and frightening. We end up delving more deeply into ourselves to try to make meaning of what is happening around us while at the same time striving to belong. Gaining cross-cultural knowledge will, in most cases, facilitate building stronger and longer-lasting relationships, help you reduce the stress that evolves from not understanding the environment around you, and increase your capacity for communicating.