

## CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION FOR LEADERS

By Dr. Merlin Switzer

Switzer, Merlin. "Cross-Cultural Communication for Leaders," *EPPC Global Management*, March 2009, <http://www.eppcmanagement.com/home.asp>.

Imagine being a leader in a culture very different from yours with a people whose life experience and perspective is radically different. Such was the experience of Don Brewster who gave up a comfortable position as an executive pastor in a mega-church to move to Cambodia where he and his wife started Rahab's House ([www.aim4asia.org](http://www.aim4asia.org)), a recovery home for girls rescued from sexual exploitation and slavery...girls sold by their parents to brothels or kidnapped and forced into submission.

As Brewster worked with Cambodian staff, he asked their opinions, trusting their responses, to navigate through cultural differences. What he found was that his staff had an "inability...to say, "No' to me even when I was wrong." Over the next two to three years, as he worked with his staff and learned more about the culture, things significantly improved.

What Brewster didn't fully understand were two important cultural differences. First, loyalty to one's supervisor is highly valued, so when he asked his staff a question they responded by telling him what they thought he wanted to hear. Second, was the notion of saving face, common in many Asian cultures. When Brewster was wrong, his staff members were reluctant to tell him he was wrong, because they didn't want to cause him to lose face...even though he asked for their input.

This article identifies some of the leadership challenges leaders, like Brewster, are apt to encounter in cross-cultural communication and how to prepare to deal with them.

### **Culture Shock**

Brewster's experience exemplifies the challenges of cross-cultural communication, especially for global leaders. The more dissimilar two cultures are, the more cultural shock can occur. Cultural shock, says Morgan W. McCall, Jr. and George P. Hollenbeck, in their book Developing Global Executives, is "the surprise and anxiety that we experience as a result of a loss of identity when we are immersed in a different culture." Culture is the ideology people carry around in their heads. It is a lens through which people see and interpret the world around them. It gives context to communication.

Unfortunately, this cultural lens is often unconscious. Leaders, and people in general, may not even be aware of how this lens impacts one's interpretation when communicating. This is often true even among team members in an organization within the same culture. In the midst of cultural shock, it is easy to see different as bad—opening the door to creating barriers caused by stereotypical thinking, ethnocentrism (a belief in the inherent naturalness of one's own culture), and prejudice, which limits the absorption of information and responses one considers.

Edward Hall is considered a pioneer in the understanding of cultural differences. Three of Hall's concepts that will help in the understanding of cultural differences are: high-context versus low context, monochronic versus polychronic, and proxemics.

### **High-Context versus Low-Context**

Communication is verbal and non-verbal. While both send a message, the interpretation depends on context. According to Steve Raimo, in his article "The Impact of Edward Hall on Cross-Cultural Leadership," says, "Context has to do with how much you need to know before you can communicate effectively." Pointing, talking at the same time as another, and smiling are examples of non-verbal communication that may be acceptable in one culture, but not in another.

High-context cultures are those where people understand the unwritten rules, i.e., context. The culture provides a high level of context that helps people understand cultural expectations. In the communication process, much is understood and taken for granted.

Conversely, low-context cultures provide little context, so rules are not as easily understood. People may not have a common understanding of cultural expectations. Hence, more explicit explanation must be provided to reduce the chances of misunderstanding.

In highly mobile environments, like the U.S., people need a lower-context culture where more information is needed to provide context. In stable environments where people tend not to move around, the culture provides a richer, higher-context that allows for more shared understanding.

### **Monochronic versus Polychronic**

Time is a commodity that is viewed differently among cultures. Monochronic and polychronic represent two perspectives on how time is understood and managed.

Monochronic cultures view time as linear, sequential, and fixed. Monochronic leaders, for example, tend to divide the day up in fixed blocks, to schedule time and focus on one specific

task during a given time block. They make lists, track activities, and organize their time around a routine. They focus on **when** tasks need to be done.

Polychronic cultures, on the other hand, see time as continuous, without beginning or end. Birth and death are not beginning and ending points, but rather events in the continuum of time. The polychronic leader would prefer not to have a detailed, scheduled day. Rather, they prefer to make plans and meet deadlines in their own way. They focus on **what** needs to be done...and will likely work on multiple tasks at the same time.

These two perspectives have a significant impact on their respective cultures. Consider interpersonal relationships. In monochronic culture, relationships are subordinate to one's schedule. In polychronic cultures, relationships are more important than schedules, so other tasks may be put off or delayed in order to attend to an interpersonal matter.

In which culture, monochronic or polychronic, would an appointment be considered fixed? Monochronic is the correct answer. Polychrons view an appointment time as flexible.

U.S. Americans are considered monochronic. Let's suppose a monochronic leader visits a leader in Latin America where the culture is polychronic. The monochronic arrives a few minutes early for an appointment expecting the meeting to start on time, but ends up waiting one or two hours before the Latin American leader arrives or the appointment is moved to the next day...or week. How do you think that would go over? Unless the U.S. leader understands this cultural difference, he/she may be very upset, while the Latin American has no sense that he has committed any "offense."

### **Proxemics**

Proxemics refers to space. One aspect of this is how close two people stand during a conversation. Nina Brown, in "Edward T. Hall: Proxemic Theory, 1966," identifies three types of personal space: intimate space for close friends and intimates, social and consultative (business) spaces in which people feel comfortable in routine social interactions, and public space for those interactions that are viewed as impersonal.

The amount of space that is acceptable for these three types of personal space varies by culture. Tara Maginnis, in "How's your personal distance—watch this space," recounted taking American students on a tour of Russia. She commented, "In western eyes people are yelling at and shoving them, flirting with them, perhaps even molesting them by 'intimate' touching—all signs of 'space-invasion'...a few days of such 'molestation' by dozens of Russian strangers can scramble the nerves of all but the most traveled foreign visitor."

In actuality, the perceived difference is focuses space. According to Maginnis, intimate space for Russians is about half of that for Americans, whereas intimate space for Americans is about half of that for northern Europeans. Hence, the Russians seem pushy and intrusive to Americans, while northern Europeans feel the same way about Americans.

### **Lessons Learned**

In addition to Brewster’s experience, here are the experiences of three other leaders who have been involved in cultures other than their own. Each has learned some important lessons about cross-cultural communication.

Lorin Staats works for the Jian Hua Foundation (JHF), a not-for-profit organization, in China. He looks for a cultural mentor, someone who understands the culture and can give him cultural insights, as well as answer probing questions. He has found mentors essential to connect with the culture and its people. He has also found flexibility invaluable, helping him to see things differently and understanding the mindset of others.

Leslie Brown volunteered to help a Christian orphanage in Kenya for four months. Though Brown read considerable information about Kenyans prior to her visit, she found that communication was tricky. The on-site orphanage director would agree to do things, but then not follow through. Brown learned that “yes” didn’t always mean yes. A desire to please and avoid conflict contributed to a “yes” response, when the intention was otherwise. She also found that she interpreted communication through her western cultural lens, which resulted in a gap between her perception of what was said, and what she experienced.

Jean Baptiste Kamate, World Vision’s coordinator for Rwanda, finds that building strong relationships within the culture is essential, and can open many doors. He also found that taking time to actively listen with humility is important. He suggests, “Local people know a lot we do not know. We are not experts; we are learners.”

### **How to Prepare**

Both Brewster and Brown spent time learning about cultures they would engage. They displayed inquisitiveness, which is a great first step according to the book Global Explorers.<sup>1</sup> Inquisitiveness involves actively seeking information about another culture. Inquisitiveness is a part of the preparation process.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Stewart Black, Allen J. Morrison, and Hal JB. Gregersen, *Global Explorers*, (New York: Routledge, 1999), 41.

Websites, like CountryReports.org and tmaworld.com, are great resources to gather information about other cultures. Sources like these help inquisitive minds get a broad perspective about a country's history, economy, religion, do's and don'ts, and family life.

In the cross-communication process, clarify what you want to communicate and the desired end result. Take time to develop a communication plan, and what actions you will take. Be careful with metaphors and humor, as people in other cultures may not understand the context and miss the point...or worse yet, be offended. Be prepared to make communication mistakes and accept them with humility. Relationships are very important in some cultures, so take time to build relationships where possible.

Thomas Zweifel, in his book Culture Clash, provides a number of guidelines for being a global citizen. Here are a few of his tips relevant to cross-cultural communication: Watch your host and listen actively, respect others and their culture, never take English for granted, and learn from each interaction.

During and after communication, monitor the situation to see if your communication is getting the desired results. Make adjustments as necessary. Be sure to follow up on anything you say you will do. Be prepared to laugh at your mistakes...or laugh with others as they laugh at you.

## **Conclusion**

Taking time to prepare for cross-cultural communication has merit whether the interaction will be short or long-term. Understanding whether a culture is high-context or low-context, monochronic or polychronic, and how the culture views space, will help in preparing for a cross-cultural communication experience. Leaders who are prepared will enjoy more effective cross-cultural communication, and more likely get the results they desire.

## **Bio**

Dr. Merlin Switzer works exclusively in the field of leadership. He holds a Doctor of Strategic Leadership with an emphasis in Leadership Coaching. Dr. Switzer is a leadership coach, consultant, trainer, and conference speaker. He has worked with numerous leaders and organizations across the U.S. to help leaders be more effective. More recently, he has worked with leaders in Ecuador and Cambodia.

Contact Information:

Dr. Merlin Switzer

P.O. Box 944

Rocklin, CA 95677

Phone: 916-788-1094

Email: [change@surewest.net](mailto:change@surewest.net)

Website: [www.SwitzerOnLeadership.com](http://www.SwitzerOnLeadership.com)