

Appendix B—Cultural Considerations in Risk Communication

Two key principles apply to cross-cultural communication.

First—Learn about the culture from a member of that culture.

The best way to learn what you need to know in preparing for communication with another culture is from members of that culture, not from a book. A good source may be one of your fellow employees who has spent significant time in that culture. The team member's insight will be useful and should be solicited, but may not be as useful as insight from a member of the culture.

Second—Recognize that cross-cultural communication occurs once you leave your organizational culture.

The second principle is to recognize that you are engaged in cross-cultural communication when the culture is different than your organizational culture. Cultural differences do not just occur between countries, ethnic groups, or indigenous groups. Cultural differences could occur with any community whose culture is different from your organization's culture.

What is Culture?

Culture is a group of behaviors, values and beliefs held by a group that define how they conduct life. It can be thought of as a common identity that is pervasive yet hidden. Many people think of culture as country of origin, ethnicity or tribal affiliation, but it can be much more extensive. For example, your organization has a culture that you quickly learned when you joined that organization. No one handed you “stone tablets” on how the organization's culture operated, e.g., written rules on how success is achieved, how things really get done, and boundaries. But you learned it quickly. Cultures can be as varied as United States Soccer Moms, Tahiti, the National Football League, a Native American tribe, Wall Street, etc. Therefore, many of us are members of different cultures at the same time.

“Culture is a group of behaviors, values and beliefs held by a group that define how they conduct life/operate.”

One structural model of culture envisions a body of water, like a lake. Above the surface of the water are the cultural **behaviors**. These are the things we can clearly see, such as how people dress, eat, walk, or play, as well as aspects of their life like arts, architecture, music, dance, language, and celebrations. Below the water are the cultural aspects that are harder to see and understand. These “below the water” factors drive the behaviors above the water. These are called **values** and **core beliefs**.

Values determine what is right and wrong and what is desirable or undesirable in a culture. Laws and rules are derived from these values. Values would be things like the importance of work, family, money, security, education, religion, morals, ethics, and government.

behaviors
core beliefs

Core beliefs would be things like how time is allocated (Is time limited or is time plentiful?), doing versus being (Do you live to work or work to live?), mastery of nature versus harmony with nature, emotional expression (What level of emotional expression is acceptable?), one truth versus many truths, and individual versus group.

Cultural Traps

When communicating in a different culture, there are two traps to avoid: the “weirdness” factor and the “ethnocentric” factor.

It is better to view cultural differences as interesting rather than “weird”.

The weirdness factor is seeing the behavior above the water as weird or wrong rather than interesting. This is sometimes a natural reaction because as children we are taught a series of behaviors (eating, dressing, talking, etc) that are the “right” way to do things. We get corrected when we step out of those boundaries. So when we, as adults, are in a different culture and see a behavior that was wrong for us as children, we may see that behavior as “weird.” For example, if we travel to another culture and see people eating a salad with their hands and smacking their lips, our tendency may be to see this as sloppy eating. “What a mess! Why aren’t they using some form of utensil?” If we understood the values and core beliefs of their culture, we could probably find out why they eat that way and find it interesting, not weird. We may encounter similar weirdness feelings if people talk louder, or stand closer, or dress differently.

The ethnocentric factor is trying to figure out a different culture through our own lenses of culture. Our own way of living is frequently all we have as a reference point. This is a trap that is hard to avoid unless you gain knowledge from members of the other culture. For example, someone may come from a culture where if someone states that they agree on a plan or a decision it usually means they are on board with the plan. There are other cultures where it is impolite to disagree, so agreement does not necessarily indicate affirmation of the plan. In some cultures, it’s impolite to start a meeting or a party an hour late, in others it is impolite to start on time.

Since the weirdness and ethnocentric traps are challenging, here are two solutions in planning dialogue with other cultures:

- 1) Try to view cultural differences as interesting
- 2) Talk to stakeholders within the culture to find out what to do about these differences

In that discussion, be clear about what your mission is. Determine if they think your mission is worthwhile. In one case study, a meeting mission was to communicate with several communities about air emissions from a chemical plant. It was assumed that all the adjacent communities and associated groups would be interested in that as well. So meetings were developed about air emissions and health for all stakeholder groups.

Two cultural groups were not nearly as interested in air emissions as other cultural groups. In other words, the wrong meeting mission existed for these two groups. One group was a very low-income community made up of immigrants from Mexico and Central America. A town hall meeting was conducted in Spanish about air emissions. The community members were very polite and asked few questions. However, they weren't interested in learning about the air they were breathing. They were interested in economics; that is, jobs. They were also interested in courses in English as a Second Language. In hindsight, how could this group have been misread? The ethnocentric assumption: "Aren't most communities living around this chemical plant thinking about air emissions?" did not necessarily hold true.

Another cultural community that was misread was the realtors in this city. Most of the realtors were not as concerned about air emissions as other groups. Many of them had grown up in areas with chemical plants and were generally aware that the air emissions had been significantly reduced over the years. What many of them wanted to discuss was their concern that large numbers of managers/supervisors/personnel in the chemical plant no longer lived in the community because they could easily commute from higher income surrounding communities 20 and 30 miles away. This was a disappointing trend that they had observed over the past several years. What the realtor cultural group wanted was better opportunities to make a sales pitch to purchase homes in this city.

A recent Business News article noted that Wal-Mart had to make some cultural adjustments for their stores in Germany. According to this article, the customers in Germany were used to fending for themselves and resented the friendly greetings that they were receiving in the store aisles. The article also said that as a rule the German customer didn't appreciate the employees touching their purchases and packing their bags at the checkout stations. They preferred to pack their own groceries. One German customer was quoted as saying, "I'm not used to someone stuffing and carrying my bag. I can do that myself." Wal-Mart assumed that everyone liked friendly greetings and help with their bags, falling into the ethnocentric trap.



So, clearly, in the above two stakeholder groups, the mission was wrong due to ethnocentric assumptions. Once you have an understanding about the mission and its worth to your stakeholders, it's time to decide how to accomplish the mission. What is your plan? Which stakeholders are you going to communicate with and in what order? How, when and where will you communicate with them? Will you use third parties?