2. Cultural Differences and Similarities

Learning Objectives

Upon completion of the module Cultural Differences and Similarities, you will:

- Understand that cultures have similarities and differences
- Recognise that culture impacts all aspects of behaviour
- Recognise that your own culture impacts your behaviour
- Understand differences in direct and indirect communication across cultures
- Understand differences in the perception of time across cultures
- Understand the importance of family across cultures
- Know practical tips to start a conversation using general cultural similarities (family)

Note on video interviews:

All participants in the interviews tell real stories around their own experiences. Part of their story is which culture they identify with, and, we asked each participant how they wanted to be represented. Some chose to be represented as just Australian, some chose to be a combination of Australian and some other cultures, and yet others chose their culture of origin. We respected their choices.

Stories: Famous

Jing Han
China

China is famous for culture, food and languages I suppose.

Maurizio Pascucci
Italian

What is my culture famous for? I guess something like creativity in a way, and a certain disregard for the rules.

Jay Borthwick
Australian
I guess what we are famous for is one that we are easy going. Especially in the business lifestyle, one we are easy going but we are very direct - we get the job done at the end of the day. I really think what defines us as a nation is that we are people that are adaptive to change.

William MacKinnon
Scotland
Scots are famous for… probably the two biggest things are tartan, as I mentioned the kilt earlier, and whisky. But Scots are also famous for inventing things.

Fabiola Araya
Peru
I’d say Peruvians are famous for food or for Machu Picchu.

Hakan Herman
Turkish Australian
Oh. Baklava, Turkish coffee, Raki – which is called ouzo in other parts of the world, and a whole range of other things.

Peter Khalil
Australian Egyptian
Egyptians are famous for lots of things. The pyramids, but also a very ancient culture, a very ancient history that has existed for thousands of years and has given the world so many different things including architecture, writing, and art and mathematics - even although the Greeks might argue about that.

Xavier Villagonzalo
Philippines
Filipinos are famous for singers; Lea Salonga from Les Misérables, and Charice Pempengco. When you go karaoke, you never trust the microphone to a Filipino - you’re never going to get it back.
Cultural Themes

Culture is about non-biological or social aspects of human life and since culture is “basically anything that is learned by humans” the number of ways it can influence behaviour is almost infinite. Yet clearly some cultures have similarities, which permit them to be grouped together.

We interviewed people from a range of cultures and found numerous similarities and differences around culture. Here we will talk about only a few themes which emerged from the interviews - time, communication, and the importance of family.

Before you can effectively deal with people from a range of cultures you need to achieve an understanding of how your own culture influences your thoughts and behaviour at both a conscious and an unconscious level. In a way, the first culture you need to understand is your own. We have designed some questions to help you start thinking about your own cultural influences. In completing the questions please take the time to really think through the question and what your answer implies about your own attitudes, values and behaviours.

Stories: Time

Fabiola Araya
Peru

We are usually famous for not being on time. Yes that is right. Actually if you arrive in a business meeting on time, it is not appropriate either. It is one of the business etiquettes.

Peter Khalil
Australian Egyptian

Cultures do have different attitudes to time - in fact the Egyptian culture is well known for being, let’s say, lacking punctuality.

Adam Manovic
Croatian Bosnian Aboriginal Australian
There is this thing we like to talk about called ‘Koori Time’ or ‘Blackfella Time’ and that means show up when you want to show up and leave when you want to leave. Cause life should be laid back man. That’s basically what it should be like. I struggled with this in my work career because I’m generally more of an ‘on time’ person.

Albert Maina Mwangi
Kenya

Is it important to be on time in Kenya? Not really. I don’t know if you’ve all heard about African timing - it spans through a lot of Africa and Kenya in particular. That is one thing that really surprised me that Australians are very on time, and I had to adapt to that. As I said with the house inspection, I’d get there 30 minutes late and I’d be shocked that someone would react and say “It’s not the right time”, because in Kenya if I came 30 minutes late the person might not even be ready, you know. Most of the times I’d come 30-45 minutes late.

Linda Karlsson
Sweden

In Australia, working late is seen as a positive thing, whilst in Sweden if you work late it means you did not actually achieve everything you were given to complete within your work hours. It is thus a negative thing.

Xavier Villagonzalo
Philippines

There is always a saying that goes, “Filipino time is never on time”, so that’s one thing that I wanted to change.

**Time**

It is clear that different cultures can have differing attitudes towards time. For example in Australia, time is often considered something you can save or waste, and like in many Western European countries time is viewed in a linear fashion. There is a focus on doing one major activity at a time, concentrating to finish it within a scheduled time. Punctuality is seen as important and a lack of punctuality may be considered rude. Communication is direct and time-saving.
Some other cultures such as Southern European or South American cultures view time more flexibly, and working on several activities simultaneously is seen as normal. Taking a phone call whilst in a conversation with someone is not considered rude, and is regarded as effective. Communication builds relationships and strict time schedules and time frames will be relaxed rather than threaten those relationships.

Still other cultures see time as cyclical - it is not the human being that controls time but the cycle of life itself that controls people and human activity. Many African countries and Asian countries such as Korea, Japan and China see time as cyclical. In these cultures, decisions are usually made only after a significant amount of time spent on contemplation and reflection. Communication focuses on building long-term relationships and the long-term effect of the intended result of a conversation.

**Time and Cultures Activity**

How do you view time in everyday life?

In this activity we ask 5 questions about time e.g. “Do you think time can be wasted?” We want you to self-reflect and express your answers on a sliding scale ranging from 0 (“Never”) to 100 (“Always”).

Compare your result with other people’s answers. See how your answers differ from theirs, and analyse how this might impact your everyday work.

**Question 1**

Do you often wish there was more time?

Give your answer as a number from 0 (“Never”) to 100 (“Always”).

The average answer by other users is 70.

“And then one day you find ten years have got behind you, no one told you when to run, you missed the starting gun” (Time by Pink Floyd)

Does the above song lyric sound familiar to how you view time? Does every year feel like it is getting shorter? Do you always find the time to do everything you want to do? Music is one of the most visible layers of culture but it can also give good insights into what is valued in a culture.

“Running out of time” is a common expression in a linear time culture (Australia is one of them). What differences/similarities can you identify in the above answers?.
**Question 2**

Do you think time can be wasted?

Give your answer as a number from 0 ("Never") to 100 ("Always").

The average answer by other users is 60.

Cultures view the concept of time differently which can cause confusion in the workplace.

To what extent do you think your workplace reflects a linear culture and is it different from your concept of time? Do you sometimes find yourself in situations where the other person values time differently? Does your company engage with clients who might focus more on relationship building than closing business deals quickly?

**Question 3**

Do you strive to schedule your time?

Give your answer as a number from 0 ("Never") to 100 ("Always").

The average answer by other users is 66.

In cultures where time can be wasted, it is common to schedule time. Each task has its own specific time frame and interruptions are discouraged. In contrast, cultures viewing time flexibly tend to easily change/interrupt schedules and appointments and multitasking is common practice.

These differences can cause tension in the workplace. Compare the answers above - how can differences in understanding time be negotiated?

**Question 4**

Do you think punctuality is important?

Give your answer as a number from 0 ("Never") to 100 ("Always").

The average answer by other users is 78.

In linear cultures where time is measured and scheduled, it is also considered important to be punctual.

If you fail to be punctual, you’ll be considered to be wasting the other person’s time and disrupting their schedule. Do you think your answer is any different from your colleagues’?
**Question 5**

Do you prefer to finish one task before going on to another task?

Give your answer as a number from 0 (“Never”) to 100 (“Always”).

The average answer by other users is 58.

It is considered effective to do one thing at a time in linear cultures. It means you start and finish a project before taking on another task.

In contrast, cultures with flexible time often multitask. Imagine the misunderstandings this can cause in teamwork and international business settings!

Which one of the two approaches do you think you and your co-workers prefer? Bring up the topic and discuss it with them next time you meet.

**Summary**

Time is viewed differently across cultures. It impacts how we act and communicate as well as interpret other people’s behaviour.

Understanding different views on time and time management will help you manage cross-cultural relationships better.

You have now completed this activity.

**Stories: Communication**

Adam Manovic

Croatian Bosnian Aboriginal Australian

Everyone on my dad’s side of the family - the Croatian side - is so direct. E.g. “I’m just going to tell you what to do and you do it” or “I’m just going to say hey what about this?” and you will say “Yes” or “No” and then we’ll have an argument about it and then we’ll find like a common ground. So everyone on my Croatian-Bosnian side are all really direct people and I think it is a Slavic thing.

Xavier Villagonzalo
Philippines

Most Filipinos, when it comes to communication, they may be direct sometimes similar to other cultures, but generally I would say they would be indirect since they do not want to hurt people. So they always want to be polite.

Fabiola Araya

Peru

I’d say we go around in circles. You don’t often say yes or no.

Arfa Noor

Pakistan

In a lot of ways indirect communication is the norm. In some ways it’s not. I think it depends on situation. There are some things that Pakistanis are quite blunt about. But most things we are a little bit more diplomatic, and we play around things a little bit. We beat around the bush before we get to the point. I think not just in terms of jobs, but saying no to people in Pakistan, like a blunt no, is considered quite rude. One of the words we use is “inshallah”, which means “God willingly”. It’s a great kind of soft, diplomatic word. It doesn’t mean a “Yes”, it doesn’t mean a “No”. It means “We’ll see how this goes”. So in Pakistan the concept of “No” is considered too blunt, so you have to be very careful. You don’t have to say yes, but be careful about how you say no.

Jing Han

Chinese

So I asked, “How do you deal with swearing?”. She said, “That’s easy, because in Japanese we don’t really swear at all. Probably the rudest word is ‘No’”.

Maurizio Pascucci

Italian

For some cultures in East Asia it appears to be pretty difficult to say “No” to your face. I do interpret that as a form of respect towards me, because they feel that they offend me by saying “No”.
Linda Karlsson
Sweden

So in Sweden, the way we communicate is very direct. It’s even more direct than the way Australians communicate that I’ve come across. The way I experienced this is by having been told by other Australians that I come across as very rude. Obviously I’m not trying to be rude to anyone and I don’t want to come across as rude. So I kept asking why you consider me being rude, and I found out the mistake I was doing was not adding “please” to my sentences.

**Direct or Indirect?**

Different cultures communicate in differing ways. One key aspect is how direct their communication is.

In more direct cultures, people commonly prefer to:

- Get straight to the point
- Openly confront issues or difficulties
- Engage in conflict when necessary
- Express opinions frankly and
- Say things clearly, not leaving much to interpretation

In indirect cultures, people prefer to:

- Focus not just on what is said, but how it is said
- Avoid difficult or contentious issues
- Avoid conflict if possible
- Express opinions and concerns diplomatically

Edward T. Hall provided an explanation of why some cultures are more direct than others in his seminal work where he defined cultures along a spectrum from “high context” to “low context”

In high context cultures the members share and require a deep, complex body of ‘understood’ values and experiences. Many aspects of living and communicating are assumed. High context cultures communicate in an indirect way, understanding the context in which a conversation is taking place is important in order to interpret the message correctly. Direct communication may be regarded as rude and disrespectful. The concept of ‘Face’ - important to many Asian cultures - is an example of high context culture.

High context cultures tend to be the older, more traditional societies such as China, Japan, Africa, the Middle East and Australian Aboriginal cultures.
In low context cultures the members have and require less shared knowledge to co-operate. They rely more on defined roles and written codes than assumptions. Communication is direct, and the saying, “Say what you mean and mean what you say” reflects what is valued in a low context culture.

Low context cultures tend to be younger societies such as Western Europe, Canada, USA and Australia.

**Direct vs Indirect Communication Activity**

How do you communicate at work?

In this activity we ask questions about your preferred communication style at work, e.g. “Do you prefer to communicate in a frank and direct way at work?”. We want you to self-reflect and express your answers on a sliding scale from 0 (“Never”) to 100 (“Always”).

Compare your result with other people’s answers. See if your answers differ significantly or not, and analyse how this it might impact your everyday work.

**Question 1**

Do you prefer to communicate in a frank and direct way at work?

Give your answer as a number from 0 (“Never”) to 100 (“Always”).

The average answer by other users is 63.

Low context cultures, like Australia, usually communicate in a direct and explicit way with little left to interpret (a typical answer to the above question would be on the “Always” side). To someone from a high context culture, the direct style can sometimes come across as somewhat rude or even impolite. It is important to understand if a person is used to high or low context communication. Which one are you and do you think it sometimes differs from your co-workers or people you meet?

**Question 2**

If you say “Yes” to take on a task at work, does it mean you will complete it?

Give your answer as a number from 0 (“Never”) to 100 (“Always”).

The average answer by other users is 81.
In Australia, yes generally means yes. If you agree to take on a task it usually means you commit to complete a task within a certain time frame.

However, many cultures can find it disrespectful to say “no” and will prefer to say “yes” even though they may mean no. For example the concept of face (common in many Asian cultures) requires individuals to avoid contradicting their boss in front of others. A direct “no” is unlikely to be expressed.

**Question 3**

Do you try to point out mistakes of others to make sure they correct them?

Give your answer as a number from 0 (“Never”) to 100 (“Always”).

The average answer by other users is 51.

In an Australian work context, it is commonly considered appropriate to give positive and negative feedback and find areas of improvement in performance. When working in a culture where the concept of ‘face’ dominates business relationships, pointing out the mistakes of others can have negative consequences.

**Question 4**

Do you prefer communication that gets straight to the point?

Give your answer as a number from 0 (“Never”) to 100 (“Always”).

The average answer by other users is 71.

“Straight to the point” is a communication style referred to as low-context. In Australia, this is the common communication practice. It is considered effective and efficient as you are not wasting other people’s time.

On the other hand, when communicating with a person from a high-context culture, this style can unintentionally come across as rude and insensitive. This common misunderstanding can sometimes hurt business relationships across cultures.

What conclusions can you draw from comparing your answer with the other users? Can you think of any work communication situations where you may need to adapt your style?

**Summary**
The way we communicate is influenced by culture. Understanding different communication styles as well as how others might interpret your communication style will help you immensely at work as well as in general life.

You have now completed this activity.

Stories: Family

Arfa Noor
Pakistan
Family is very important in the Pakistani community. It’s considered the cornerstone of society. Anything that you do that would disrupt the family structure is considered going against the whole culture itself. Pakistan has a big concept of joint family system, where all the siblings or at least all the brothers and their wives live under one roof. Pakistan has a concept of big family structures, everyone getting involved in everyone else’s business, everyone annoying everyone, and children being raised by not just their parents, but aunts and uncles as well.

Fabiola Araya
Peru
Family is very important to me. When I left home I really felt the need to talk to my parents. Even now I ‘Skype’ with them very often or I call them. I would say we are very close. Some families even live together until they get engaged or get married. We are used to living together.

Adam Manovic
Croatian Bosnian Aboriginal Australian
Family is really important to us because no one knows the struggles that you have been through but your family. We have a shared history in terms of having Aboriginal Australia but we have an even more precise shared history within our family.

Albert Maina Mwangi
Kenya
In Kenya family is very important. Most people live with their family until they are 25 or 26 - some even longer.

Linh Dao

In my culture - in Vietnamese culture - the family is really important. For me as well, family is the most important priority. Without family, without feeling - you may die.

**Find Similarities**

When we asked about the importance of family, we got the same answer - over and over. Family is important, or even, family is the *most* important thing in their lives and in their culture. To many of you this may seem like a statement of the obvious - so why mention it?

At the heart of cultural competence is the ability to respect people from diverse backgrounds and respect that they may have a different way of thinking, communicating or doing things. However, also at the heart of cultural competence is recognising the similarities between cultures, between people. And in a practical sense, finding the similarities - the points of common interest - between you and the cultures you are dealing with. For most cultures, a conversation about family is not a bad place to start.

**Further Reading**

**The Cultural Atlas**

The Cultural Atlas is a free online resource that provides comprehensive information about Australia’s migrant populations as well as the world’s diverse cultures. It provides information on cultural attitudes, practices, communication and business skills. The Cultural Atlas is an educational resource providing explanations of the world’s diverse cultures and religions. Find comprehensive cultural information all in one place.

**Culture and Time**

The understanding and use of *time* is culturally specific. This difference in the perception of time is an impacting factor in the ability to effectively interact across cultures. It effect how we communicate and interpret what is being communicated.
Hall (1959) categorised cultures’ conception of time as either monochronic or polychronic.

- Monochronic cultures experience time as a dividable, measurable commodity. Schedules are favoured to allocate how much is spent on activities. In these cultures, “time is money”.
- Polychronic cultures see time in a less rigid form and prefer to avoid definite schedules. Time and context can play out its own role. People ‘pass time’ instead of ‘spending time’.

Further Reading

Read more about the conception of time and culture in the following literature:


Communication

Hall (1959, p.186) famously said “*culture is communication and communication is culture*”.

High/Low Context

Messages are communicated and interpreted differently between high and low context cultures. This concept of high/low context was originally introduced by the anthropologist Edward T. Hall and is commonly used to distinguish different communication patterns. These two different communication styles are defined by how much context is relied on to convey a message (i.e. to what extent you rely on other factors that are not explicitly expressed in your speech).
As described in the video, high context cultures tend to be dependent on non-verbal cues, indirect messaging and implicit meanings to distinguish between what is actually said and what is meant. In these cultures, communication is less about what is said and more about what is not said as the implied message. The context holds the true meaning and it is important to be aware of this if you are to interpret the message correctly. In low context cultures people’s position or intentions are not easily distinguishable by their appearance or status. Therefore, they need to be more explicit in their communication. In these cultures, people openly say what is meant and little to no interpretation is needed to understand the message.

Direct/Indirect Communication

Direct communication involves explicit communication patterns that do not rely on the surrounding context to give meaning. The message is rarely encoded in understatements, body language or speech style, rather the entire meaning is apparent through the precise words chosen by the speaker. A cultural factor that can effect communication is the conception of time. If time is experienced as something scarce that can be wasted (e.g. America, Germany) then ‘getting to the point’ in your communication will be considered important and direct communication will be favoured. There seems to be a correlation between low context cultures and direct communication as, with less context to draw upon, people have to be more explicit in their point.

On the other hand, indirect communication is a form of communication that tends to rely less on words and more on nonverbal behaviours to draw meaning. It is used in high context cultures where people’s position or intentions in society are easily distinguishable by their appearance or status. In indirect communication, what is said is often an understatement on what is meant. Messages can be laced in ambiguity and implicit meanings. Therefore, attention is paid to the speaker’s posture, expression, gestures or tone of voice to draw further meaning. Being implicit instead of explicit has the purpose of maintaining harmony throughout the conversation and preventing offence or confrontation.

Further Reading

Culture and Family

The notion of the family unit and family relationships is a concept familiar to individuals across all cultures. However, “family” means different things to different cultures. To give an overview of the studies the following material is suitable:


References


Neuliep, J. (2012). *Intercultural communication*. Los Angeles [u.a.]: SAGE.
