

Ten Tips for Cross Cultural Communication

Communicating across cultures can be confusing and uncertain—unless you have the right frame of mind and approach. These practical strategies from Neil Payne of Kwentessential can help you prevent misunderstandings and communicate effectively across cultures.



10 Communication Guidelines

1 Slow Down.

Even when English is the common language in a cross cultural situation, this does not mean you should speak at normal speed. Slow down, speak clearly and ensure your pronunciation is intelligible.

2 Separate Questions.

Try not to ask double questions such as, "Do you want to carry on or shall we stop here?" In a cross cultural situation only the first or second question may have been comprehended. Let your listener answer one question at a time.

3 Avoid Negative Questions.

Many cross cultural communication misunderstandings have been caused by the use of negative questions and answers. In English we answer 'yes' if the answer is affirmative and 'no' if it is negative. In other cultures a 'yes' or 'no' may only be indicating whether the questioner is right or wrong. For example, the response to "Are you not coming?" may be 'yes', meaning 'Yes, I am not coming.'

4 Take Turns.

Cross cultural communication is enhanced through taking turns to talk, making a point and then listening to the response.

5 Write it Down.

If you are unsure whether something has been understood write it down and check. This can be useful when using large figures. For example, a billion in the USA is 1,000,000,000,000 while in the UK it is 1,000,000,000.

6 Be Supportive.

Effective cross cultural communication is in essence about being comfortable. Giving encouragement to those with weak English gives them confidence, support and a trust in you.

7 Check Meanings.

When communicating across cultures never assume the other party has understood. Be an active listener. Summarise what has been said in order to verify it. This is a very effective way of ensuring accurate cross cultural communication has taken place.

8 Avoid Slang.

Even the most well educated foreigner will not have a complete knowledge of slang, idioms and sayings. The danger is that the words will be understood but the meaning missed.

9 Watch the humor.

In many cultures business is taken very seriously. Professionalism and protocol are constantly observed. Many cultures will not appreciate the use of humour and jokes in the business context. When using humour think whether it will be understood in the other culture. For example, British sarcasm usually has a negative effect abroad.

10 Maintain Etiquette.

Many cultures have certain etiquette when communicating. It is always a good idea to undertake some cross cultural awareness training or at least do some research on the target culture.



Cross cultural communication is about dealing with people from other cultures in a way that minimises misunderstandings and maximises your potential to create strong cross cultural relationships. The above tips should be seen as a starting point to greater cross cultural awareness. ✧

© Kwintessential Ltd.



Following years of travelling, studying and working in the Middle East and Islamic world, Neil successfully completed a Masters at SOAS University, London in Middle Eastern Studies. Using his experiences in academia, translation, interpretation, teaching, lecturing and cross cultural training he established Kwintessential. Kwintessential was born out of the idea that the current world climate is in desperate need of cross cultural dialogue and aims to promote inter-cultural communication within communities, businesses and organizations. Visit Neil & Kwintessential at www.kwintessential.co.uk.

Email npayne@kwintessential.co.uk with reprinting requests.