



COMMISCEO GLOBAL

Cultural Awareness
A free manual

About this Manual

The manual is 100% free to use. However, if any of the material from this manual is used then Commisceo Global Ltd must be referenced and copyrights respected. HR or training departments are encouraged to use it as part of any internal training.

The aim of the manual is to give a basic introduction to communication and tips on improving communication for people working within an international or multicultural environment. It is not by any means meant to be an all-encompassing guide. We have focused specifically on communication as this is one of, if not the, most fundamental aspect people must get right when working cross-culturally.

Through using this manual, you will learn to:

- ➔ **Become more self-aware of your own communication style**
- ➔ **Communicate clearly, and**
- ➔ **Act appropriately with people from different countries/cultures**

How to use this Manual

The manual can be used in a number of ways. You can use it for self-learning or it as the basis for internal group training. It follows a very simple logic; a question is presented to set the scene. Guidance is then given on how to overcome certain challenges and an exercise always follows to help consolidate knowledge learned.

Support

Any questions can be emailed to info@commisceo-global.com

Should you decide your company could use more training, please refer to the 'Further Training' section at the back of this manual.

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01 Communicating Clearly

I work with a lot of different cultures. How can I possibly learn about them all?

You don't have to. There are a number of generic things you can do to communicate more effectively with people from other cultures.

Below are some simple points to help you communicate with people no matter what culture or country they come from:

Know yourself

Try to understand how and why you communicate the way you do. This will help you appreciate others' styles and how you may need to adapt to them. Pay attention to how people react and respond to you by looking for subtle changes in facial expressions and posture.

Be curious, with respect

If you work closely with people from a particular country, learn about the people and how they like to communicate - from greetings to gestures to non-verbal behaviour. Build your know-how by observing, asking questions, watching movies, reading current affair articles and researching online.

Clarify your intentions

Explaining what you mean can save lots of trouble. For example, it can be helpful to explain to someone, "I tend to be very direct with people,

but I don't mean to cause offence." It tells people you don't mean to offend and makes them feel more comfortable asking you to explain something again.

Take a step back from the situation

Whenever you find yourself in a confusing situation, get into the habit of asking, 'Could this be a cultural difference?' If so, the person's intentions are probably good ones. Knowing this can help you not to take things personally.

Put yourself in their shoes

We all have preferences as to what we like and dislike when it comes to communication and we tend to make quick judgments about people based on these preferences. The challenge is to stay open to other ways of communicating. One of the best ways to do this is simply to ask yourself, 'What would I be thinking if I were



the other person right now?' This will help prevent your personal preferences from overly influencing the situation.

Do not stereotype; read individuals

Do not stereotype; read individuals. It can be easy to find yourself treating someone as if they are a member of a cultural group (e.g. I'm talking to an Arab man) rather than as an individual (e.g. I'm talking to Abdullah). Knowing a person's cultural background provides interesting clues about how that person may behave, but we are all complex human beings. If you find yourself treating someone as if they are typical of a group, try to think of that person as an individual, just like you.

Keep trying and don't give up

We change the way we communicate on a frequent basis depending on who we are talking to (a friend, a family member, a colleague). Communicating effectively with people from other cultures just means being conscious and sometimes making a few more changes. At first, we have to work hard to change our natural way

of communicating, but with time and practice it becomes much easier.

Be patient with yourself and don't be afraid of making mistakes

Few mistakes damage or threaten relationships. As you develop your intercultural skills you will learn how to do things better next time.



Exercise 01

Building your Cultural Knowledge

Pick a country or culture that is important to you or your work. This can be the country of a favourite client or perhaps representative of your largest foreign market. How can you find out more about their culture, customs, traditions and practices?

Here are a few ideas:

- **Talk to a colleague or friend from that culture**
- **Use the Internet - www.kwintessential.co.uk**
- **Look at newspapers and/or magazines**
- **Watch foreign films**
- **Visit cultural centres**
- **Eat at restaurants**

Once you have chosen your culture, spend a few minutes every week building your cultural knowledge. Here are a few suggested topics. You don't need to cover them all, just choose the things that will be most helpful/interesting:

<p>1</p> <p>Gestures Holidays & Traditions Special Occasions</p>	<p>2</p> <p>Religious Practices Food Topics of conversation</p>	<p>3</p> <p>Family Life History Political Systems</p>	<p>4</p> <p>Current Issues Popular Sports Leisure Activities</p>
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Now that you have gathered all this information, how can you share it with someone else?



02 Acting Appropriately

I get confused how to act around so many cultures. How do I know what is right and wrong?

Good news! You don't have to learn all the rules of every culture to be effective. If you focus on the tips presented, you will learn how to act with different individuals and be more successful when you communicate across cultures.

Watch what other people do

If you are at a formal dinner and don't know which spoon to use first, what do you do? Always watch others and where appropriate mimic what they do. Look for possible differences in non-verbal behaviour (for example, eye contact, speaking distance, and physical contact) and think about why the other person may react and behave in that way.

Be aware of your own behaviour

Pay attention to how people react to you. Have you ever caused offence without meaning to? How? When you make a mistake, which will happen now and again, make a mental note of it and try not to repeat it.

Mirror the behaviour of others

Learn to copy the behaviour of others for things like touch, eye contact and speaking distance. It may mean:

- You do not step back when you feel someone is standing 'too' close to you; or
- You do not step forward into someone's personal space when they seem 'too far away'.

- You notice and respect when others choose not to make physical contact with you (e.g. shaking hands); or
- You do not react if someone seems to stare or look away as this may be a cultural difference in eye contact.

Remember this is not about changing your communication style completely. That is wrong and would be confusing. Being aware of differences can help you to understand difficulties, make changes and provide solutions. Trying to respect and adjust to the way another person communicates will help put them at ease and help you to avoid miscommunication.



Exercise 02

Adapting Communication Style

As you would have noticed from the tips above, to be effective in cross-cultural situations you are often required to change the way you communicate. It's all about being flexible and understanding how to adapt.

Look at the scales below. These show some of the different ways people communicate. For example, the Germans are known for being very direct so below would be on the 9 or 10 mark. Indians are indirect, so would be around 2 or 3.

1. Place yourself where you believe you sit on the scales below:

Direct ← Communication Approach → Indirect



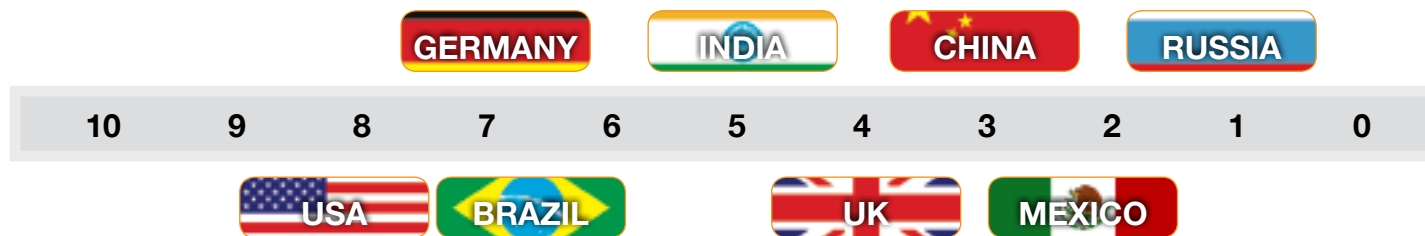
Clear language is priority
 Emphasis on making tasks clear
 Values honesty

VS

Leaves room for interpretation
 Emphasis on relationship
 Values tact and diplomacy



Informal ← **Communication Style** → Formal



Uses first names with most people
 Emphasis on friendliness
 Relaxed tone and stance

VS

Uses titles such as Mr, Mrs, Dr
 Emphasis on politeness
 Formal tone and stance

Specific ← **Communication Focus** → Wide



What is said is most important
 Looks to words to understand meanings

VS

How it is said is most important
 Looks to context and non-verbal language to understand meanings

2. Choose a country

Think about what you can do to communicate more clearly with someone who has different communication preferences to you. For example:

"If I am communicating with someone who is more indirect than me, I must stop and remember that this person may":

1. Be giving me hints rather than explaining clearly what he/she wants
2. Not appreciate a very direct answer as this may be interpreted as rude

Things I can do to overcome this include:

- ➔ Paying more attention to how I phrase things
- ➔ Softening my style to ensure facts don't come across too directly
- ➔ Considering speaking to this person in private to avoid embarrassment
- ➔ Looking out for non-verbal clues as to what they are trying to express

Now, it's your turn:

"If I was communicating with someone who is more focused on conveying an idea by carefully choosing his/her words rather than looking at body language , I must stop and remember that this person may":

1. _____

2. _____

Things I can do to overcome this include:

➔ _____

➔ _____

➔ _____

➔ _____

03 Making Yourself Clear & Checking for Understanding

Foreigners simply don't understand me. It's not my fault. How can I stop this?

Changing just a few things about how you communicate can make a big difference to how others understand you. The following should help you speak more clearly when communicating with people from other cultures.

1. Focus on key areas of speech that can make your message clearer:

Speed

Pace yourself - don't talk too fast, especially when speaking with people who do not speak English as a first language.

Pronunciation

Make an effort to pronounce words clearly and distinctly. Native and non-native speakers may have an accent that is difficult to understand.

Clear meaning

Aim for clear meaning when you speak. If you say something and think it was not clear enough, try to use different words to say it again.

Words and phrases

We often use words and phrases that only first language speakers or people from the same region as ourselves understand. Try to use common, everyday language that can be understood by people from different parts of the country and different parts of the world.

2. Say the same thing in a number of ways

If needed, try to support what you are saying and doing through the use of other forms of communication such as writing or even body language and gestures.

3. Be aware of how you speak

Do you know how you sound to others? Can you identify why people from other cultures may find you difficult to understand? Do you speak too fast sometimes? Have you been told that you can be vague? Do you speak very quietly?

4. Check for understanding

For some cultures it is more important to focus on agreement rather than understanding. To check for understanding you must learn to do three things:

Read body language

While people may say they mean one thing, their body language may tell you something completely different.



- Remember that different cultures may show confusion and misunderstanding in different ways, so it can take time to learn what to look for.
- Start by observing other people, then think of the ways they might show they are confused.
- Pay attention to signs of confusion such as a slightly tilted head, furrowed eyebrows or a slight hesitation in their voice.

Check for understanding by asking different questions:

- Ask open-ended questions. Ask questions so that people will demonstrate that they have understood when they answer the question. When talking to a supplier, for example, it may be better to ask, "Please could you clarify when you plan to deliver and whether you need any further information?" rather than "Do you understand you need to deliver before 10am?"
- Think about differences between groups and individuals. Some people may not be comfortable asking or answering questions in front of others. You may need to approach certain people on a one-to-one basis, especially when trying to resolve conflict.

Encourage feedback

- Let people know how you communicate. Being open about how you communicate will help others to be open with you. Use the feedback you've received from friends and close colleagues in the previous exercise to identify what you might need to tell others.
- Be open to feedback. People will be more ready and willing to tell you they don't understand if you show you are open to their feedback. Consider how you might show this in the exercise on the following page.



Exercise 03

Receiving Feedback on Being Clear

You may already have a good idea about your strengths and weaknesses when it comes to communication, but why not get a second opinion? Ask three people you know well to give you feedback about the way you speak. If possible, ask people from different cultural backgrounds - especially if they do not speak the same first language as you. Use these questions as guidelines and record their feedback below. Once you have their feedback, try to work on your weaknesses.

Questions to ask

1. What is it about how I speak that makes me easy to understand?
2. What is it about how I speak that makes me hard to understand?
3. How would you rate my:
 - speed
 - pronunciation clear meaning
 - typical English expressions and vocabulary

Person 1	Their feedback



Person 2	Their feedback

Person 3	Their feedback

Top 3 points for me to keep in mind when communicating across cultures:

- ➔ _____
- ➔ _____
- ➔ _____

04 Writing Notices

What can I do to improve written communication?

Translating notices etc. is great if you have the time and budget. If not, having clearly written notices and circulars is even more important. After all, many people will be reading them in a second language rather than their native language.

Below are some tips about writing notices that are clear and easy to understand.

- Use the same tips as we've provided for spoken communication. Use plain English wherever you can.
- Give people more time. Give instructions and agendas for meetings in advance, so customers have time to read them properly and know what they need to do.
- Make sure terms are clear. You may need to explain acronyms, e.g. B&B for Bed and Breakfast, or words and expressions that newcomers to your organisation may not understand. You can explain them in written materials, or create a brief company dictionary that includes all the terms that newcomers need to know.
- Keep it simple. Think about who will be reading the notice and remove unnecessary details.
- Pictures speak louder than words. Use diagrams to further detail your instructions. For example, you could put a picture of a mobile phone with a red line through it to show that people are not allowed to use them.



05 Communicating with the English

Some say the English are hard to understand. How can we speak English any better than we do?

By now you should have learnt that it's all about how you say it not what you say. Foreigners often comment that they find the English are sometimes difficult to understand, simply because they do not say what they mean.

Many foreign people say that English people:

- Don't always say what they mean
- Appreciate communication that is indirect and that requires some interpretation
- Try to show modesty by using humour
- Try to be polite by using words that minimise a message (also called understatement). For example, someone might say that a task is 'a bit difficult' when they really mean it is 'impossible'
- Make jokes to 'break the ice' and make people feel at ease
- Think that it is a good thing to be self-controlled and reserved

Think about it! Do you think this describes the way most English people communicate?



Exercise 05

What do the English really mean?

This exercise will help you to identify common phrases used by the English and better understand what they really mean.

Some phrases used by the English can be easily misinterpreted. Before looking at our humorous example on the next page, try and identify any possible phrases that you have heard in your workplace environment:



What the English say:	What the English mean:

Now, have a look at the phrases on the following page – do these sound familiar? Have you heard them before? Have you experienced their true meaning?





What the British say	What the British mean	What others understand
I hear what you say	I disagree and do not want to discuss it further	He accepts my point of view
With the greatest respect...	I think you are an idiot	He is listening to me
That's not bad	that's good	That's poor
That is a very brave proposal	You are insane	He thinks I have courage
Quite good	A bit disappointing	Quite good
I would suggest...	Do it or be prepared to justify yourself	Think about the idea, but do what you like
Oh, incidentally/ by the way	The primary purpose of our discussion is...	That is not very important
I was a bit disappointed that	I am annoyed that	It doesn't really matter
Very interesting	That is clearly nonsense	They are impressed
I'll bear it in mind	I've forgotten it already	They will probably do it
I'm sure it's my fault	It's your fault	Why do they think it was their fault?
You must come for dinner	It's not an invitation, I'm just being polite	I will get an invitation soon
I almost agree	I don't agree at all	He's not far from agreement
I only have a few minor comments	Please re-write completely	He has found a few typos
Could we consider some other options	I don't like your idea	They have not yet decided

Further Training

Commisceo Global specialise in cultural awareness and global skills training.

If you or your organisation need training of any sort please contact us to arrange a consultation.

Once we know a bit more about your needs, we can send a proposal of our ideas.

Simply send an email to info@commisceo-global.com

