**Intercultural Communication**

Overcoming the barrier

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The ability to communicate effectively is probably the single most important skill required in order to be successful in our professional as well as our personal lives. As individuals, we need the assistance, cooperation and support of others in order for us to develop, grow and achieve in all areas of our lives. We cannot do this on our own. Therefore, the quality of our interactions with others directly affects our success and our wellbeing. The messages we convey via our words, actions, appearance etc. largely determine how others respond, and if we want them to respond in a particular way, we need to communicate accordingly.

***Culture is often a significant barrier to effective communication***

The rise of globalisation and the rapid growth of multiculturalism in our society result in the need for us to communicate more and more with people from different cultural backgrounds. These people may be colleagues, customers, suppliers, team members, managers, community members etc. Their background affects the way they see the world, their attitudes, values, behaviours and thought patterns. All communication is filtered by these attributes, and as they can be very different to ours, culture is often a significant barrier to effective communication.

Effective communication occurs when the message received is exactly the same as the message intended. This is reliant on all of the communication elements used being the most appropriate and the receiver is interpreting these to mean what the sender interprets them to mean. These communication elements can be many and can include both verbal and non-verbal elements such as the choice of words, the tone and volume of our voice, silence, actions, mannerisms, gestures, facial expressions, appearance, possessions, personal space and others. The receiver therefore interprets all of the elements present by going through a decoding process for each of them, and then using their understanding of each individual element and combining them to arrive at an overall interpretation of the message. The more elements present the greater the chance of accurate understanding, as it is more likely that there will be more that point to the intended message that are consistent with and support each other. For example, an email is more likely to be misunderstood because it uses words alone whereas a face-to-face conversation uses other elements such as facial expressions, tone of voice etc. These all combine to contribute to the message being understood as intended.

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The decoding process used by the receiver is reliant on their understanding of the meaning of each of the elements present which is determined by how this person thinks. This in turn is shaped by what makes this person an individual i.e. their background, experiences, education, age, gender, personality, environment, current circumstances and so on. At least some, if not many, of these are likely to be different from those of the message sender and therefore there is the potential for the communication to be misinterpreted. The greater the differences between the sender and the receiver, the greater the potential for misunderstanding and ineffective communication.



One of the biggest mistakes we tend to make is that we assume that others think the same way that we do and therefore we expect their attitude, values and behaviours to be similar, if not the same, as ours. We communicate based on these assumptions. When the other person belongs to the same culture as ours then these assumptions are not quite as dangerous as when the other person belongs to a different culture.

If we really want our communication to be effective then we need to discard these assumptions and be very aware that their differences will greatly affect how they interpret the messages we are sending, and how they believe we are interpreting their messages. We need to understand that their interpretation of not only the words, but also of the other communication elements being used, can be quite different to ours.

However, awareness is not enough; it is just the first step. We also need to make an effort to try and understand the person themselves and how they are likely to interpret the combination of elements that make up the message. This applies whether they are the sender or the receiver. For example, nodding and saying “yes” does not necessarily signify agreement. Poor eye contact does not necessarily point to disrespect or that they are not paying attention. Silence does not necessarily mean disagreement or disinterest.

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Because the interpretation of communication elements is largely determined by culture, we therefore need to understand the cultural characteristics of the people we are communicating with in order to overcome the communication barriers and reap the benefits of communicating effectively. Developing rapport, building relationships, gaining agreement as well as cooperation and support with a diverse range of people is vital to our professional and personal success. Therefore the development of cross-cultural competencies is essential.

Sebastian Ioppolo has a wealth of experience in business having spent over twenty-six years in management and leadership roles in the corporate world. He is the author of two top selling books on International Business: *‘Import/Export: A Practical Guide for Australian Business’* and *‘Importing and Exporting: 24 Lessons to Get You Started’.* He now shares his knowledge and experience by conducting seminars, facilitating short courses and consulting throughout Australia via his business Mondiale Learning and Development.

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