

Fundamental Patterns of Cultural Differences

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Communication practices vary between and within cultures. By recognizing patterns related to culture and communication, individuals can better anticipate reactions of people from other cultures, and more effectively interact with them.

Presentation Style

Across cultures, the meaning of "yes" varies from "maybe, I'll consider it" to "definitely so," with shades in between. Different norms regarding the appropriate degree of assertiveness can also cause cross-cultural misunderstandings. Some Americans, for example, consider raised voices to indicate that a fight has begun, while in certain cultural groups an increase in the volume of a discussion indicates an exciting conversation among friends. Thus, Americans from different cultural backgrounds may react differently to a loud discussion.

Perceptions of Conflict

Different cultural perceptions of conflict can similarly lead to intercultural confusion. In the U.S., conflict is not usually desirable, and people are often encouraged to deal directly with conflicts that do arise. Face-to-face meetings are recommended as the best way to work through whatever problems exist. In many Eastern countries, however, open conflict is considered embarrassing or demeaning, and differences are best worked out privately with written exchange often being the preferred way to resolve a conflict.

Working Together

Cultural differences can affect ideas of how people can best work together effectively on a task. For example, high-context cultures lean toward attaching great value to developing relationships at the start of a project, and emphasize task completion toward the end of the time frame. This difference has little to do with being relatively more or less committed to accomplishment, or placing different value on relationships. Rather, the difference demonstrates that goals are pursued differently.

Decision Making Practices

Decision-making practices also vary along cultural lines. In the U.S., the person "in charge" often delegates or assigns responsibility for a particular matter to a subordinate. In some Southern European and Latin American countries, however, strong value is placed on maintaining control of decision-making. In such cultures, managers tend to maintain control over most aspects of a project. Additionally, when decisions are made by groups of people, majority rule is a common approach in the U.S., while group consensus is often preferred in many Asian societies.

Approaches to Knowledge

The ways people come to know things also differ considerably according to culture. Low-context cultures (for example, the United States) tend to place a higher value on information acquired through objective means such as counting or measuring, than on information acquired in other ways. A high-context African culture, however, may prefer and more highly regard, affective ways of knowing such as symbolic imagery (recognition of masks is an example), and rhythms. These different approaches to knowing can affect ways of solving problem or discovering paths

to resolutions. Recent interest in Asian cultural practices and religion, including Feng Shui and Buddhism, demonstrate that people are paying more attention to previously overlooked ways of knowing.

The elements mentioned here form a pattern of differences that exist across cultures. Communicators must pay attention to these elements to solve problems and to reach goals when working with individuals from other cultures.

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