

How to Communicate Well With People from Other Cultures

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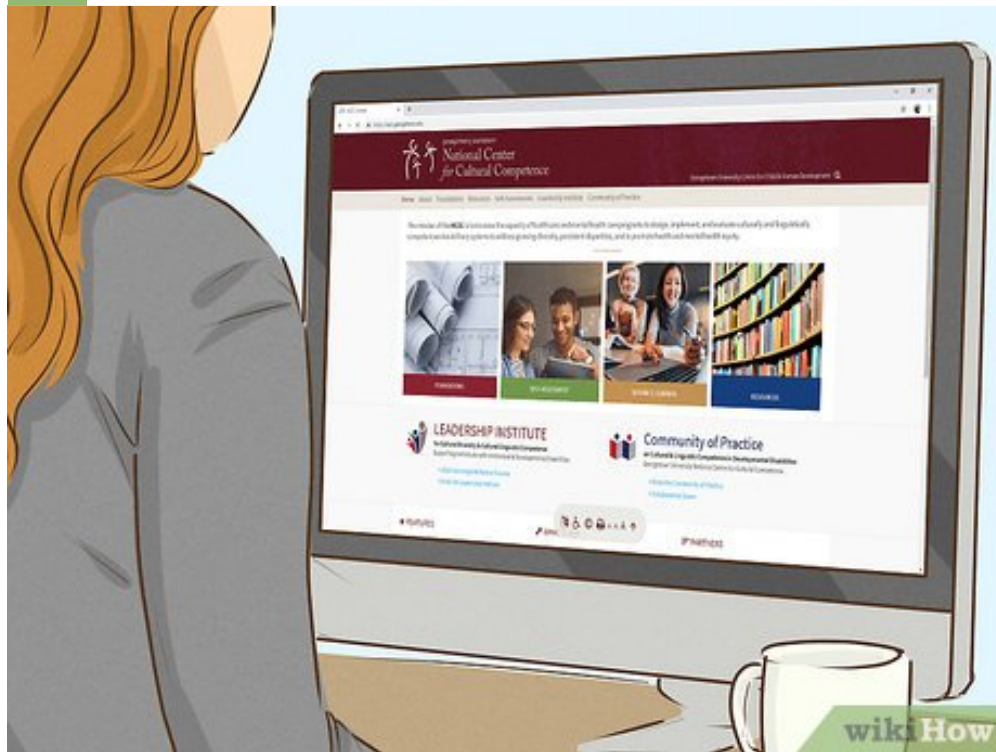
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To build good relationships with people from other cultures, it is essential to learn how to communicate with them verbally and non-verbally. You can make things easier by also learning about their culture and practicing tolerance. Armed with the knowledge of how to communicate effectively, you can learn from people from other cultures and share yours with them.

Part
1

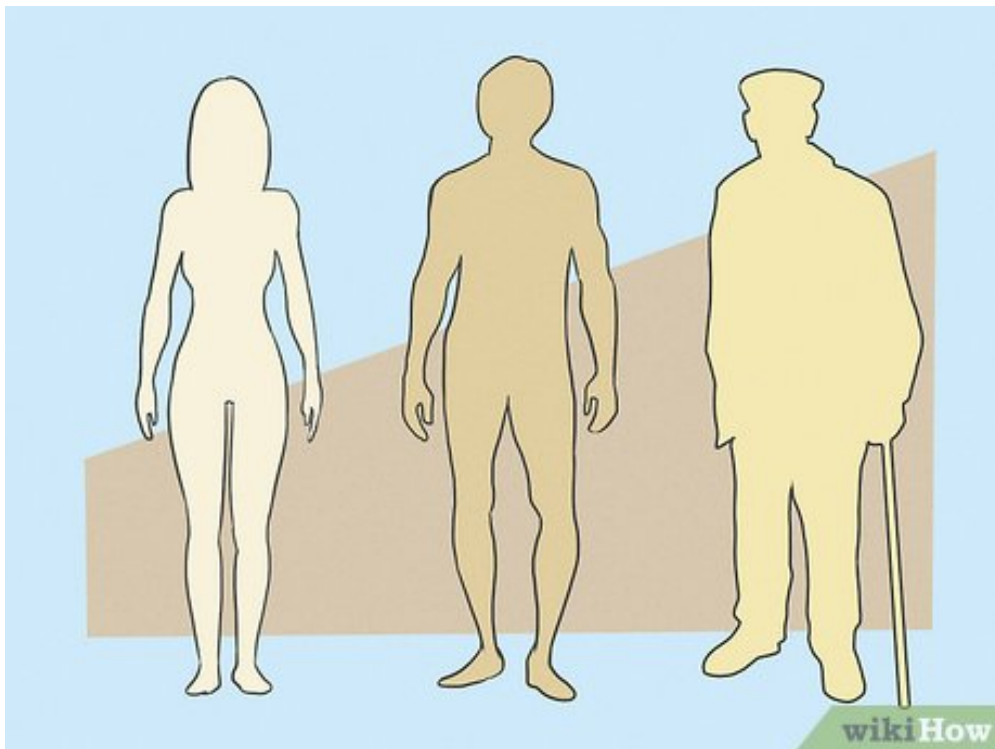
Part 1 of 3: Adopting a Flexible Attitude



1 Learn about the culture beforehand. [1] A little knowledge can go a long way. If you have time before embarking on a trip or meeting with someone from another culture, try to take time to learn the basic “do’s and don’ts” of that culture. You can find information on this from internet sources such as those provided by the National Center for Cultural Competence.[2]



2 Expect differences. Different cultures will speak at different volumes, be more or less direct in showing emotion, may or may not expect to engage in “small talk,” and exhibit other dissimilarities in communication.^[3] When communicating with people from other cultures, be prepared to encounter such differences, including ones that you were not aware of.



3 Understand hierarchies. When communicating with a different culture, there may be unwritten rules about social hierarchy that you are not used to.^[4] ^[5] For instance, you may come from a culture where men and women are expected to communicate equally with each other but may have to interact with someone from a culture where men may do more talking in mixed company. Similarly, you may be communicating with someone who expects that a younger person should let an older person do most of the talking, while you expect people across age groups to communicate equally.



4 Be upfront about difficulties in communication. If you could not understand someone or think that he or she did not understand you, say something about it. Avoid being rude or offensive, but patiently explain the problem. It's usually better to be upfront than to let a problem in communication go undressed, since there may otherwise be bigger problems later.

- If you think you did not understand what someone meant, try saying something like: "I'm not sure I understood you. Could we go over that again?"
- If you think that someone did not understand you, try saying something like: "Let's review things to make sure we're all on the same page." You can also make sure to let the person know to ask questions.



5 Be respectful and tolerant. Each culture has its own set of dominant values, beliefs, and prejudices. Signs of these may emerge when communicating with people from other cultures. Basic communication, however, it is not the time to judge people based on these differences. Instead, respect them for what they are, and tolerate them.^[6] You may even learn something new.

- Even if cultural differences come up explicitly in conversation, be tolerant and open-minded instead of argumentative. For instance, if you are American and someone comments on Americans' tendency to be work-focused, say something like: "Yes, it's true that many Americans take work seriously, and there are a lot of reasons for that. Why don't you tell me some more about how your culture thinks about work?"

EXPERT TIP

"Remember: innovation, creativity, and intelligence are **age-free, culture-free, color-free, and gender-free.**"



Maureen Taylor
Public Speaking Expert



6 Be patient. Communicating with people from other cultures can be enlightening and rewarding, but also have its difficulties. Expect that not everything will come out quite right or be fully understood. Be patient with others, and ask them to be patient with you.

Part
2

Part 2 of 3: Communicating Verbally



1 Speak clearly and slowly, if necessary. Refrain from shouting unnecessarily or treat others as though they do not understand.^[7] Raising your voice does not make you easier to understand and can be seen as rude. Likewise, even if there are difficulties in communicating with people from other cultures, do not treat other people as though they are unintelligent. Communication difficulties arise from cultural differences, not because of matters of intelligence.



2 Be proper. Be polite and use formal modes of address until it is made clear that you don't need to (such as a business contact telling you to use first names).^[8] Depending on the cultures that are interacting, this may include addressing others:

- By first and last name
- By last name alone
- With a title such as "Mr." or "sir"
- Using formal pronouns, if they exist in the language used for communicating



3 Brush up on your foreign language skills. If you will be communicating with people who speak a different language, try to learn a few basic phrases beforehand. Your situation may not require you or permit you to become fluent in a foreign language, but you can still try to learn some.

- Practice the basics, including: “Hello,” “Please,” “Thank you,” “How are you?,” etc.
- Carry a phrase book or electronic device that can help you find phrases you need and don’t know.
- Be patient when others are trying to use your language.



4 Try to use the dominant language if you are in the linguistic minority. If you are communicating with people who speak a different language, try to use their language at first, or as much as you can. Even if you can’t say much more than “hello” and “how are you?” in their language, the gesture is usually appreciated.



5 Avoid slang and profanity. This is important, unless you are absolutely sure how it is used in another culture. Using non-standard or obscene language improperly can make you hard to understand, and may be perceived as very offensive. Since a language's slang and profanity are complex and highly dependent on context, it is best to avoid them altogether unless you are absolutely sure you know to use them properly.

Part
3

Part 3 of 3: Using Non-Verbal Communication



1 Use "open-handed" gestures. In some cultures, pointing with an index finger, giving the "ok" sign, and other common gestures can be seen as offensive.^[9] Since you may not know which gestures could be mistaken in this way, stick to "open-handed" gestures.^[10] For instance, try using your whole hand if you need to point to something.



2 Assume a formal posture at first. [11] Keep your feet on the floor, sit up straight, don't use your arms too expressively, and otherwise keep your posture more or less conservative. This is because certain postures can be seen as offensive to others. For instance, showing your foot in some cultures is seen as a rude gesture, so you would not want to cross your legs in a way that your sole sticks out.[12]

- If it becomes clear that a less formal posture is acceptable, you can follow suit.



3 Understand rules regarding touching. Some cultures may expect more physical contact between people when communicating than other cultures do. For example, some cultures may shake or touch hands more willingly than others.^[13]

- Don't take it as offensive if another culture is more or less physical than you are used to when communicating. The exception is if you think you are being violated or abused. If you are uncomfortable, let others know.
- It's a good rule of thumb to be conservative with the way you touch people from other cultures when communicating with them. However, if they appear to use more physical contact, follow suit if you are comfortable doing so.



4 Know how to make or avoid eye contact. In some cultures, looking another person in the eye when you speak is seen as a sign of honesty and interest. In other cultures, however, it may be seen as disrespectful, confrontational, or a sign of sexual interest. Conversely, some cultures think that not looking at a superior person in the eye when communicating is a sign of respect.^[14]



5 Expect different facial expressions. [15] It is common for different cultures to use facial expressions differently. For instance, Americans may smile frequently, while other cultures may see excessive smiling as a sign of shallowness. When communicating with people from other cultures, you may notice that they are more expressive with their face (to show happiness, sadness, frustration, etc.) than you are used to, or you may notice that they do not show much expression at all.

- Much communication is non-verbal, no matter what the culture. However, you can focus on the content of what is being said, and ask questions to clarify if you need to. For instance, if someone reacts to something you say with an unexpected smile or laughter, you may need to say "Actually, I'm being I'm serious."



6 Respect the amount of personal space the situation requires. Some cultures may require more personal space than others. If you are communicating with people from another culture and you find they get closer to you or farther away from you than you are used to, it's not necessarily the case that they are invading your space or trying to avoid you. Just try to follow their cues regarding personal space and communicate as best you can.



Community Q&A

Question

How can I give an example of a time I had to demonstrate flexibility interacting with someone from a different culture?



Community Answer

Anytime you've had to regularly communicate with someone who didn't speak English well, observed religious traditions or ceremonies other than your own, or even attended language classes.

Helpful 34 Not Helpful 4

Question

What are strategies to assist with communication when there is a language barrier?



Community Answer

Gesturing with your hands, pointing to pictures, learning some basic words to their language, having someone to translate nearby, or having a translator app on hand.

Helpful 13 Not Helpful 2

Question

Was German ever considered a first language in America?



Donagan
Top Answerer

No, although many German-speakers have immigrated into the U.S.

Helpful 7 Not Helpful 12

Question

When communicating with people from other cultures, why is it important to treat them with respect and sensitivity?



Galasy4969
Top Answerer

We live in a global civilization, which by its nature requires global civility. Things that may not seem important to you may be taboo or sacred to others. Remember the golden rule: treat others the way you wish to be treated. If you can observe certain cultural practices, you'll find that nearly everyone you meet will be friendly and helpful.

Helpful 8 Not Helpful 3

Question

How do I find information about other people's cultures?



Galasy4969
Top Answerer

Wikipedia will be your best overall source for unbiased information.

Helpful 5 Not Helpful 5

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About This Article



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This article was co-authored by **Maureen Taylor**. Maureen Taylor is the CEO and Founder of SNP Communications, a leadership communications company based in the San Francisco Bay Area. She has been helping leaders, founders, and innovators in all sectors hone their messaging and delivery for almost 30 years, and has worked with leaders and teams at Google, Facebook, Airbnb, SAP, Salesforce, and Spotify. This article has been viewed 465,747 times.

★★★★☆
60 votes - 82%

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