

THE
COUNTY
OF
LOS ANGELES
COMMISSION
ON
HUMAN
RELATIONS



Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors

Gloria Molina, First District
Chair, Board of Supervisors

Yvonne Brathwaite Burke, Second District

Zev Yaroslavsky, Third District

Deane Dana, Fourth District

Michael D. Antonovich, Fifth District



Commission on Human Relations

Gerald J. Alcantar, President

Albert DeBlanc, Vice President

Lea Ann King, Vice President

David T. Lau, Vice President

Rabbi Lee T. Bycel, Secretary

Ray Bartlett

Vito Cannella

Morris Kight

Minnie Lopez-Baffo

Eleanor R. Montaño

Judy Peng Coffman

James M. Riewer

Sylvia Scott-Hayes

Catherine G. (Kate) Stern

Dr. Hay Yang

Ron Wakabayashi, Executive Director

The background of the page features a faint, line-art illustration of several diverse individuals of various ethnicities and ages. They are depicted in various poses, some with their hands raised as if in conversation or listening intently. The style is simple and sketchy, emphasizing human connection and diversity.

This Booklet Is For You If:



**You need to or want to
communicate better**

**with people from
other cultures,**

and



**You want to know
how it's done,
what to do,
and what not to do.**

“Skill in cross-cultural communication is a big plus in today's world.”

Table Of Contents

Cross-Cultural Skill - A Big Plus3

Tips #1 - 9

What To Do All Of The Time5

Tips #10 - 15

What To Do Much Of The Time8

Tips #16 - 20

What To Do Some Of The Time10

Tips #21 - 23

What Successful Communicators Never Do12

23 Tips On Cross-Cultural Communication

Skill in cross-cultural communication is a big plus in today's world, particularly in Southern California. In terms of racial, national, and ethnic background, Los Angeles County has a more diverse population than any other place on earth. We are also diverse in terms of age, gender, religion, education, mental and physical abilities, economic status, and sexual orientation.

This booklet suggests simple things you can do to bridge cultural differences. Simple, but not necessarily easy. They take practice.

We use the word "culture" here to mean group customs, beliefs, social patterns, and characteristics.

Nationalities and ethnicities have cultures. So do businesses, occupations, generations, genders, and groups of people who have in common some distinguishing characteristic or experience.

Cultures are not always apparent from a person's appearance. For example, you may not be able to distinguish on sight between an immigrant and a third-generation American, a city-dweller and a small town-dweller, a deaf person and a hearing person.

Nationalities and ethnicities differ in ways including language, non-verbal communication, views on



hierarchies (responsibilities, duties, and privileges of family or group members), interpersonal relationships, time, privacy, touching, and speech patterns.

Groups other than nationalities and ethnicities may also have distinctive verbal and nonverbal perceptions and expressions, and shared values, standards, beliefs, and understandings. Think, for instance, of how language and values usually differ depending on age and occupation.

The following tips are based on observations of successful cross-cultural communicators. Some of what they do is deliberate; some is instinctive.

We selected for this booklet those behaviors that do not take a particular personality or talent.

You can communicate well with a person of a different culture without giving up anything or pretending to be what you aren't.

Assuming that you and another person speak the same language, you can communicate. Even if there is a great difference between your English and his or hers.

You don't need to be a magician or an anthropologist to communicate across cultural differences. The basic techniques are not hard to understand. Try them.

What To Do All Of The Time



1 Remember that diversity has many levels and complexities, including cultures within cultures, and overlapping cultures.

For example: a 70-year-old female small business owner from Brazil is likely to have many cultural differences from a 26-year-old male fourth generation Angeleno government employee of Mexican descent. Yet, only age and gender differences may be apparent to the casual observer.

When you make cultural judgments, and we all do, be sure to describe as narrowly as possible the group you've reached that conclusion about. For example, say "Many of the young Black men in my church are golfers," instead of "Black men like golf."

2 Expect others to be thoughtful, intelligent people of goodwill, deserving of respect.

Don't be misled by cues such as accent, wordiness or quietness, posture, mannerisms, grammar, or dress.

Unless you guard against it, your first reactions will be culturally biased. The more conscious you are of your own biases, the more open you can be to understanding.

For instance, does a person dress down because it's more comfortable? or to fit in with less wealthy relatives? or to indicate a willingness to pitch in and do some of the dirty work? Depending on the culture and the person, it could be any of these, or perhaps another reason.

Assume that there are good reasons why people do things the way they do.

“Nationalities and ethnicities have cultures. So do business, occupations, generations, gay men and lesbians, and persons with disabilities.”

3**Be willing to admit what you don't know.**

People from other nations know a lot about American mainstream culture, as least as it is portrayed on TV and in movies. We know far less about them. Homosexuals know all about heterosexuals; few heterosexuals know much about homosexuals.

4**Listen actively and carefully.**

Careful listening usually means undivided attention. No picking lint off your jacket, no looking around to see who else has arrived at the meeting, no avoidable interruptions.

Listen not only for factual information, but also for glimpses of the other person's sensibilities and reality. Closely watch reactions. You may find, for instance, that your new acquaintance is surprised and puzzled when people such as officials, managers, or professors joke with subordinates or strangers.

Notice what the other person asks about. It usually indicates not only interest in the subject, but that the subject is not too personal or sensitive to discuss openly. For example, if a colleague asks if you refinanced your home when interest rates dropped, he or she probably is willing to talk about his or her home mortgage.

Stop talking the instant it looks as if the other person has something to say. If you don't, you may never hear it. This, of course, does not apply if the other culture is an assertive one.

5**Accept responsibility for any misunderstanding that may occur, rather than expecting the other person to bridge cultural differences.**

This is easy to do by saying something like: "I'm sorry that I didn't make it clear..." or, "When you weren't eating lunch, I thought you were dieting. Now I realize that you're observing Ramadan."

- 6 Notice and remember what people call themselves, e.g. African American or Black, Hispanic or Chicano, Iranian or Persian, Korean or Asian, and use those terms.**

If, however, a group of immigrants uses the term “American” to mean White native-born Americans, you could introduce them to a more inclusive definition of “American.”

- 7 Give nonjudgmental feedback to be sure you heard what you thought you heard.**

For instance, “Joe disagreed with his father and your cousins thought Joe was disrespectful. But Joe did not raise his voice or argue. He just said that he did not agree, right? And that was because in your culture a person must not openly disagree with his parent even when he is an adult?”

- 8 Remember that you are an insider to your culture, and an outsider to other cultures.**

Be careful not to impose. Showing off your knowledge of someone else’s culture, for example, might be considered intrusive.

- 9 Look for aspects of the other culture that are admirable.**

When you identify such a characteristic, you may want to adopt it, or somehow indicate your appreciation of it. For example, you might say, “I think it’s great when young people value old things. When I was your age, I had no use for anything except the latest fashion.”



“You can communicate well with a person of a different culture without giving up anything or pretending to be what you aren’t.”

What To Do Much Of The Time



10 Expect to enjoy meeting people with experiences different from yours.

We put this tip in the “much of the time” section and not in the “all of the time” section, because, although getting to know other cultures is stimulating and gratifying, it can take energy. There are times when each of us seeks out familiar things and people.

11 Be a bit on the formal side at first in language and in behavior.

After you get acquainted, you might choose to be more casual. Even then, remember to use what have been called the “magic words.” “Please,” “thank you,” and “excuse me,” are universally appreciated.

Use formal terms of address unless and until the other person indicates a preference for the informal. This is especially important with people who have a history of being denied respect, including African Americans. Most of the world’s cultures are more mindful of titles than we are. On the other hand, many people from other countries welcome informality as a sign of friendliness and equality.

12 Be careful about how literally you take things, and how literally your statements might be taken.

“Let’s have lunch soon” or “Make yourself at home” are two examples of easily misunderstood courtesy phrases. It is usually a good idea to hesitate a bit before accepting offers, of refreshments for instance. An immediate response may seem too eager.

13 Accept silence as a part of conversation.

This is particularly difficult for enthusiastic extroverts.

Silence can mean that the person you're talking to is not interested, or defers to you on the subject, or thinks that the subject is none of his or her business. Or silence can mean that she or he is thinking over what you said before answering.

14 If it appears to be appreciated, act as a cultural guide/coach.

Explain what the local custom/practice is, e.g. "Some people dress up for the holiday luncheon, but most people wear ordinary work clothes."

You might help out when the other person is struggling to express a thought but can't find the words to say it. "Perhaps he's the first openly Gay person you've met socially." But don't be too quick to help out. Most of the time people prefer to say things in their own way.

15 Look for guides/coaches to other cultures, someone who can help you put things in perspective.

"I've been invited to a bar mitzvah. I know that there will be a religious service followed by a big party, but I've never been to one. What should I do during the service? Should I sit at the back and just observe? Or should I do what I see the other people doing? What sort of gift is appropriate? Is it likely to go on into the evening?"

“Expect others to be thoughtful, intelligent people of goodwill, deserving of respect.”

What To Do Some Of The Time



16 Ask questions.

Most people appreciate the interest in their cultures. Each person can speak of his experience, and some will speak in broader terms.

Ask yourself if there is a reason to think that this person would be knowledgeable about this subject. For example, is it reasonable to ask this woman what feminist activists think of some new item? Maybe. Maybe not. It all comes down to respecting people as individuals and not making assumptions.

Be careful about asking “why.” It frequently has a judgmental tone to it, implying that the thing you ask about is not acceptable.

When you are asked questions, take care that your answers aren’t too short. Make your answers smoother and gentler than a plain “yes” or “no,” or other short answers. Most cultures are less matter-of-fact than that.

17 If there is a language difference, use the techniques found in the Commission’s booklet on *How to Communicate Better With Clients, Customers, and Workers Whose English Is Limited*.

18 Reduce behavioral contrasts.

If someone speaks more loudly than you, or stands more still, adjust your behavior. Sometimes it is appreciated. Other times it may not be – some immigrants, for example, expect Americans to be whatever they are, and may think that your natural self is most genuine.

Let the other person be the first to say that you are friends. Some cultures make attachments quickly, some only after long experience. Rather than taking the chance of moving too quickly, you might say, instead, "Linda and I started working on the festival five years ago, when we had a budget of only \$20 from our own pockets."

19 Watch cultural groups interacting among themselves; learn what their norms are.

E.g. do they urge their views on one another? Do they flatter one another? defer to one another? Do they touch frequently? Do they maintain eye contact? How do they behave toward elders? Children? Women?

20 To open a subject for discussion without putting the other person on the spot, think aloud about your experiences and your culture.

"My mother was proud to say that she never ate meat with her fingers, but I always thought that was snobby. I enjoy eating some foods like fried chicken and barbecued ribs with my fingers."

Thinking aloud is one way of interpreting your culture without talking down or assuming that the other person is ignorant. It also makes it safe for him or her to ask questions because you have been the first to reveal yourself.

“ Watch cultural groups interacting among themselves; learn what their norms are. ”

What Successful Communicators Never Do



21 Never make assumptions based on a person's appearance, name, or group.

Never expect people of a population group to all think alike or act alike.

22 Never show amusement or shock at something that is strange to you.

23 Never imply that the established way of doing something is the only way or the best way.

We're not talking here about rules and regulations, of course, but about lifestyles.

The tips given here are not unusual, certainly not original. But they work. They can be used with any cultural difference and with anyone, including friends and acquaintances, bosses, clients, customers, employees, coworkers, and neighbors.

If you already practice some of the tips, congratulations, you have a good start. When you practice all of the tips you'll understand all sorts of people better, and they will better understand you.

**Other Commission Publications on
Cross-Cultural Communications**

**How to Communicate Better With Clients,
Customers, and Workers Whose English Is Limited**

**No Offense Intended:
A Guide for Anyone Who Writes Anything**

Acknowledgments

This second printing is made available
as a public educational service by:

Southern California Edison Company

and

**The County of Los Angeles
Commission on Human Relations
320 West Temple Street, Suite 1184
Los Angeles, CA 90012
(213) 974-7611**

The Commission gratefully acknowledges the contribution
of Transamerica Life Companies, which designed the
booklet and sponsored the initial printing.

The text was developed and written by Carole Chan
and prepared for publication by Sharon Williams.

Both are members of the Commission staff.

The Commission thanks individuals who shared with us
their perceptions and experiences, reviewed drafts,
and suggested changes.