

CROSS-CULTURE COMMUNICATION

GESTURES

When you're unfamiliar with a spoken language, you may resort to hand signals as a form of communication. However, if misinterpreted, those hand signals may cause disastrous results.

For example: In the Western culture, the "V-for-victory" sign performed with the palm outward is viewed as a symbol of peace; but, if done with the back of the hand outward, it's equivalent to a middle finger in Great Britain.

Some consider ignorance of cultural norms to be the primary barrier to cross-cultural communication. The following are the areas where cross-cultural communication barriers are most likely to occur:

EYE CONTACT

If you're traveling abroad, be wary of eye contact. Some cultures may view it as impolite, rude, or even flirtatious.

In the U.S., eye contact is often portrayed as a form of honesty and alertness. Yet, in many Hispanic cultures, eye contact is often avoided as a sign of respect for someone in a position of authority, such as a law enforcement officer.

COMFORT

Comfort zones are a big part of non-verbal communication. A comfort zone is the distance that is maintained between people while they communicate. This distance will vary from culture to culture.

For example: Americans usually maintain an arms-length distance during a conversation, while Hispanics tend to be more comfortable at a closer distance. Those from Arab cultures are comfortable much closer still.

TOUCH

Touch can be used to convey compassion and understanding. In some cultures, it's fundamental to communication. In others, it can be perceived as inappropriate – especially between opposite genders.

Arabs, Hispanics, and Turks tend to use a larger amount of personal contact during conversation. Cultures where there is less contact include most Northern European cultures and many Asian cultures.

DIRECTNESS

Americans think of themselves as honest and frank by being direct. Some Asian cultures may find too much frankness rude and offensive. They may use words like "maybe" or "perhaps" to avoid offending others when they really mean "no."

- YES
- NO
- MAYBE

TIME

The mainstream U.S. population tends to admire promptness and tight schedules. Time is money, they say.

Slower-paced cultures, for example Island time, do not seem too concerned about schedules and timeliness. In some Hispanic cultures, the relaxed "mañana" attitude prevails; things will get done when they get done – no rush!

