

Intercultural communication – you, as a future expat, might hear this phrase and go: “Intercultural communication? What’s that exactly? And why should I care?” At first glance, your reaction is entirely understandable... but InterNations tells you why intercultural communication matters!

Prior to their assignment, most expats will be busy preparing for the “hard facts” of expatriate life, so to speak: They are busy filling in visa application forms for the entire family, labeling boxes and crates for the relocation company, or negotiating some last clauses in their new employment contract. There is not much time left for thinking about the “soft skills” of an expat life-style. Soft skills like intercultural communication...

Intercultural Communication: An Introduction

Others, who are slightly less stressed out, might already be taking language classes for their new home country, thinking that speaking a foreign tongue is what intercultural communication is all about. Of course, speaking the native language in a foreign country is a big part of intercultural communication. However, intercultural communication doesn’t stop at the verbal level.

Obviously, as the very phrase suggests, intercultural communication is about cross-cultural competency rather than about language only. So what *does* it mean? And why indeed should you care?

Intercultural Communication: A Basic Definition

Inter-, as you’ll probably know, comes from the Latin word for “between”, and the dictionary defines “communication” as “exchanging information”. Therefore, it’s easy to draw the conclusion that intercultural communication simply refers to exchanging information between two cultures. Sounds very easy, doesn’t it? But it’s the “culture” part of this basic definition where things start getting a tad complicated.

Academic researchers in the field of intercultural communication often start out with the observation that “culture” is a word with a very vague meaning. Or rather, a word with lots of different meanings. A ground-breaking study by two anthropologists in the 1950s found that there were no less than 164 (!) definitions of the word “culture”. To understand what intercultural communication is all about, you first need a good grasp of what “culture” refers to.

Intercultural Communication: What’s Culture Anyway?

When talking about culture in everyday conversation, completely unconnected with intercultural communication, the word might refer to high-brow culture: intellectualism, literature, the fine arts etc. “My cousin Peggy’s a real culture vulture. She goes to the opera every Sunday, and loves spending her free time at the museum!” Or, to get back to the expat context, a globe-trotting friend might chat with you about various national cultures. “I love

the Italian culture,” he would say. “Their food is excellent, and they are so much nicer to kids than us back home.”

One mistake that many a traveler or expatriate makes is to assume that a foreign country’s national culture is just this: its heritage and arts, food and table manners, visible social customs and family life, festivals and rituals. In fact, experts in intercultural communication call this false assumption one of the most dominant myths about culture.

Actually, in intercultural communication, what you can see and touch is only the smallest part of a foreign culture. Some teachers of intercultural communication like using the “iceberg model” in their lectures. The culture of any country is like an iceberg. 7/8 of an iceberg are hidden from your view. So, if you want to avoid ending up like the *Titanic* during your time as an expatriate, it’s best to familiarize yourself with some basic principles of intercultural communication.

Remember a time when you went abroad and made some faux pas that caused amusement or dismay among the locals? Knowing what exactly went wrong in this situation could help you understand cultural awareness. InterNations tells you more about cultural awareness and why it is so important for you.

You may not be able to explain what went wrong or, to ask an even more difficult question, why a certain type of behavior would be considered wrong in your host country. You did, however, notice that “normal” interaction and “common sense” seemed to fail you. Perhaps you even ended up upsetting others.

Cultural Awareness: First Steps

Now go a step further in your quest for cultural awareness: Start reading a brief “how to” guide or “dos and don’ts” list for tourists, expats, or immigrants coming to your country. You may be surprised or entertained by the descriptions of your own culture and its basic etiquette.

If you talk to foreign visitors and expatriates whom you know already well, they may share their thoughts on living in your country with you: the stereotypes they had before coming here; their first impressions; what confuses them; what they find great; what they don’t like at all... Again, the answers might astound you and won’t fail to increase your cultural awareness.

Of course, clichés, personal impressions and random bits of advice will only get you so far. Now’s the point when you might want to dive a little deeper into the theoretical background of intercultural competence, intercultural communication and cultural awareness. (The first two articles explain these theories in greater depth, so you might want to read them first before continuing here.)

Cultural Awareness: Culture – a Basic Definition

First of all, in the context of cultural awareness, we have to understand what culture refers to. For this purpose, let’s simply define culture as all the (often unspoken) standards and (mostly unwritten) rules that guide a certain group’s behavior. Such a group can be a sub-set of the

general population (a sub-culture) or an entire nation – the culture of Hong Kong or Italian culture.

Culture, in this specific sense, is often compared to an onion with several layers. The outermost layer of the “onion”, i.e. of a foreign culture, is what you can see, hear, and touch: its artifacts, products, and rituals. The next layer of a culture consists of its systems and institutions. Systems and institutions, in turn, are based on certain beliefs, norms, and attitudes. These beliefs then stem from the core of the “onion”, the most basic values of any culture.

Cultural Awareness: Getting to the Core

It’s that core that is both the hardest to get at and the most influential element of all. And yet it’s to understand this core that cultural awareness is all about. It’s very common to classify this core according to several dimensions, e.g. the prevailing cultural attitude towards hierarchy and authority (called “power distance”).

Cultural differences – which begin at the core of the onion and spread upwards and outwards through the various layers – mean that the hidden rules of everyday behavior may change as soon as you set foot on a distant country’s soil. In seminars on cultural awareness, coaches like illustrating the emotional effect of such a drastic change with the so-called Barnga simulation.

Cultural Awareness: Playing the Game

The participants of a Barnga simulation sit down at several tables in several small groups and start playing a simple card game with a certain set of rules. Once they have learned the rules at their table, they mustn’t speak anymore. As soon as they know their rules and have played a few rounds, two people from each table move over to another one.

What they don’t know, though, is the fact that the rules at every table are slightly different. So when they start playing elsewhere, it will soon cause confusion and irritation, even frustration and helplessness among the players. This is what immersing oneself in another culture may feel like – the disorientation of culture shock. Being exposed to these feelings in such a context may help participants to appreciate the importance of cultural awareness.

Cultural intelligence is an important step towards cultural competence. Developing cultural intelligence and acquiring intercultural skills can help you develop a successful career abroad. InterNations teaches you how to acquire cultural intelligence in order to become a better global mind.

Intercultural knowledge may help you decrease your initial disorientation. You can try to learn at least some of the rules of your host country before leaving home. However, in a smooth transition from the phase of cultural awareness to the second step of acquiring cultural intelligence, you should try to analyze your relationship to your own culture first.

This article on cultural intelligence is closely interwoven with other articles in our Cross-Cultural Communication and Culture Shock sections. It treats cultural intelligence as an

important second step towards cultural competence for people living and working abroad. cultural awareness being the first step.

Cultural Intelligence: Home Country

- What products are considered typical of my home country? Which rituals are widespread and popular?
- How do some of its most important systems and institutions work? (A system or institution can be something as powerful as the role and status of the French President in the national government – or something as seemingly small and personal as the “average” family in Nigeria.)
- Do you know some norms and attitudes that influence the origins and workings of such institutions? For example, if it’s common in a “typical” family to discipline the children severely, it suggests that younger people should always obey their (clearly superior) elders.
- And which basic values do these beliefs reveal? The attitude towards filial obedience would imply that power and hierarchy are extremely important to such a culture.

Once you have asked yourself these questions about the culture you come from, you can try finding some possible answers about the new culture you are soon going to live in and thus start acquiring your necessary cultural intelligence.

Cultural Intelligence: Clichés

In all likelihood, you will probably start out with some disjointed clichés and stereotypes about other countries and cultures. That’s not what you’d call cultural intelligence, but it’s not necessarily all bad either: Stereotypes come into existence because they are very simple to understand and easy to remember.

“All Germans are hard-working and over-punctual” is a far shorter statement than, “generally speaking, Germans tend to live in an achievement-oriented culture with a mono-chronic approach towards time management.”

Reflecting on your own culture and gathering information on your host culture should help you understand where such stereotypes come from and how they can be replaced by true cultural intelligence.

Cultural Intelligence: Host Culture

The following action points are useful steps on the way towards acquiring cultural intelligence.

- Start taking language classes. Even though non-verbal communication often transmits a more powerful message than the mere words that are spoken, language skills are greatly beneficial. They help you to be more communicative in everyday life, to access more factual knowledge about living in that country, and to address intercultural misunderstandings more effectively.
- Meet other expats who have already lived in this country for a while and ask them about their “best-practice” tips.

- Immerse yourself in your new country's rituals and products. You could, for example, read travel guides on local traditions and festivities, try cooking some recipes, or consume a bit of contemporary popular culture. What could such things reveal about deeper cultural issues and how could they further your cultural intelligence?
- Do research online to acquire cultural intelligence on your host country or buy a few books on expat living. The materials should explain some hard facts (e.g. history, politics, economy), give you concrete advice on everyday situations (e.g. table manners, etiquette in business negotiations) and address some of the underlying cultural values.
- Take seminars on cultural intelligence. However, please exercise some caution here. There are no specified qualifications for intercultural trainers, so always ask them for references from previous participants. Everything that promises you miracles and perfection should be treated with caution.

Always remember: Even interculturally effective persons sometimes make clumsy gestures, especially in the beginning. However, your chances of avoiding them increase the higher your level of cultural intelligence is.

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