



## MULTICULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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*“Every human is like all other humans,  
some other humans and no other human.”*

-Clyde Kluckhohn

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In this document, you will find a teacher’s manual designed to assist you and help you navigate the topic of multicultural communication with the use of DISCOM Project Study Materials. The study materials consist of individual tasks and group exercises for students as well as anyone interested in the subject matter. The exercises were designed to help students develop their knowledge and skills to communicate cross-culturally in a more effective way. Along with the description of theoretical concepts regarding the topic, in this document there are included materials that will be helpful in leading students through individual and group exercises as well as the debrief afterwards.

#### 1.1. Social and practical relevance of the specific topic addressed

Regardless whether you are negotiating with your clients, working in a team at work, travelling or visiting a wedding abroad - it should be stressed that almost every conversation, discussion and other form of human interaction happens in some kind of a cultural overlap. Multicultural communication is a skill which can be learnt, acquired and mastered.

Multicultural communication can be defined in many ways, typically it is said to be: a verbal and written interaction involving two or more participants who have different cultural values and beliefs. In other words, it is an interaction individuals coming from significantly different backgrounds (regardless of whether it is due to their geographical origin, gender, system of beliefs, social status etc.).

#### 1.2. Need of assessment:

Multicultural communication skills are crucial. As the world is becoming a smaller and smaller place, differences that occur on both our professional and personal paths are increasingly bigger and more noticeable. While working and living across nations and cultures, the comprehension and awareness of the intercultural competency is the survival issue. Very much needed to thrive. The importance of cultural competency is becoming more recognized and materials helping to develop such are required.

On many occasions, the cultural communication skill is enumerated as one of most needed to become a global leader, successful professional or grow as a person in general.

Students and professionals should learn how to effectively communicate in a multicultural context with an emphasis on globalization, professional relevance. Until now, however, despite the universal need for everyone to be skilled in that topic, little or no teaching at educational institutions on multicultural communication is offered.

### 1.3. Main goals and learning outcomes:

The ultimate goal of teaching students multicultural communication skills is for them to obtain Intercultural communication competency (ICC). The ICC is simply the ability to navigate a communication process in order to minimize the [negative] influence of culture on [the effectiveness of] communication.

In pursuance of mastering their intercultural communication competency students need to become aware, to transform their attitudes, develop their flexibility and adaptability as well as transform knowledge into competence – with a set of skills helpful in reaching full potential of intercultural interaction.



Intercultural Communication Competency does not require simply learning about each and every culture in the world. Moreover, it cannot be measured by the number of cultures one learnt about. Simply put, when Leslie studied 7 cultures, it does not mean they are have higher cross cultural competency than Alex who learnt 3.

Intercultural Communication Competency is adequate when cultural differences between interacting people do not hinder the outcome of the communication process. In other words, when you understand and are understood to the same extend by people of ‘your culture’ as you are understood by representatives of the ‘other culture’.

The main **goals** of the following materials are to help students understand:

1. basic concepts e.g.: communication, culture, biases, preferences as per communication styles, multicultural influence on communication;
2. factors playing important roles in the way one communicates;
3. role of importance of effective communication;
4. role of culture in communication;

In order **for students to be able to:**

1. observe and analyze their personal and other people communication styles;
2. recognize differences in communication;
3. discuss differences in communication;
4. overcome obstacles in communication;
5. adjust communication style and methods to maximize communication effectiveness.

## **2. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO SELF-ASSESSMENT BY INDIVIDUAL STUDENTS AS WELL AS GROUP EXERCISES.**

### **Teacher DO's**

One important perspective in teaching multicultural communication skills to students is to emphasize the importance of their individual efforts put into an intercultural conversation or other interaction – in other words, one needs to take the burden of communication on their shoulders. With that perspective, their self-knowledge (knowing and managing oneself in a multicultural scenario) is crucial. As well as the ability to identify which communication happens in a multicultural context – in order for students to be able to entail appropriate measures and use proper communication methods. Hence, there are two main concepts: that should be taught and explained **CULTURE** and **COMMUNICATION**.

### **Teacher DON'Ts**

However, it is extremely crucial to avoid some counter-productive attitudes in teaching about multicultural communication such as:

- Be careful to not reinforce stereotypes,
- Do not equate:
  - a country with a culture;
  - a citizen of a country with an ideal representative of a particular 'culture of a country';
  - a person with a stereotype;
- Do not generalize and regionalize – as in an era of communication geographical boundaries are becoming less *solid*.

Intercultural communication competency is not only about learning about other cultures; it is about developing mindset and instruments universal and applicable in multicultural scenarios.

*Below, you will find various exercises written on the topic of multicultural communication. Exercises for use of individual students are marked with numbers, whereas group exercises are marked with letters.*



## EXERCISE 1

### HOW MANY CULTURES?

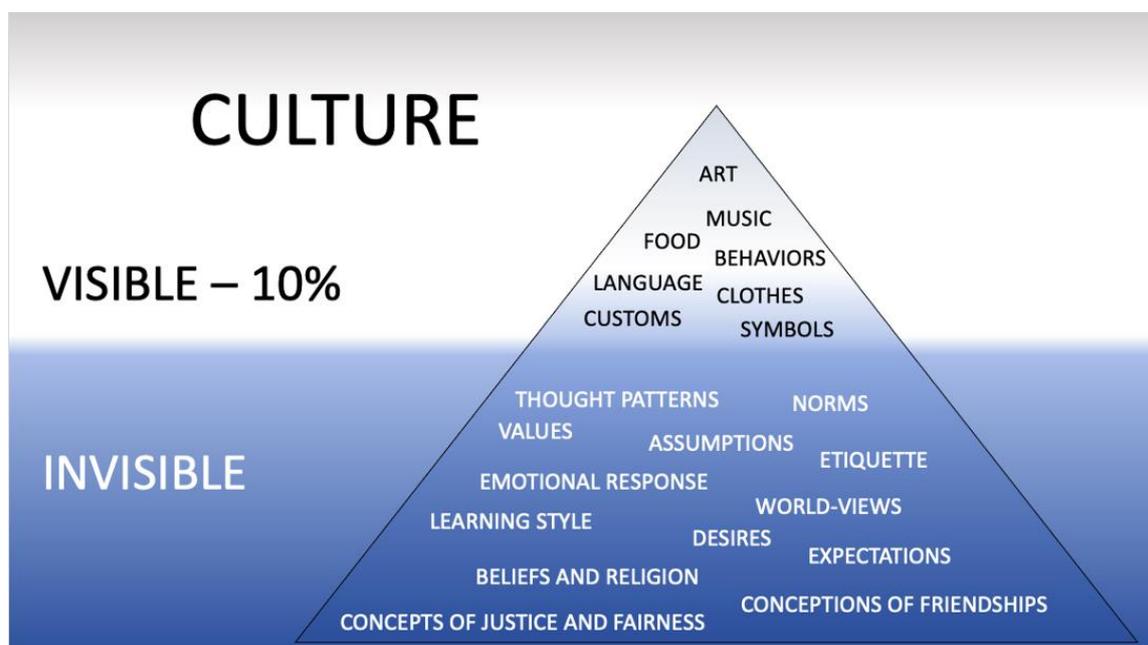
#### Introduction:

This exercise explores what is culture, how students understand culture and clarifies its visible and less visible elements.

#### Exercise

For the purposes of this exercise use Exercise 1 worksheet included in the Individual Student Exercises file.

- Ask your students to come up with and list five things that, to them, represent a culture of a person representing a different culture – it might be their international friend, famous person etc.
- Then ask your students to come up with and list five things that, **to them**, represent their own culture.
- Next, ask your students to come up with and list five more things that, to them, represent their culture. However, no outsider should be able to easily learn about/ guess those.
- When all the three categories are filled in show them the following graphic portraying culture as an iceberg. Continue with the Observations and suggestions for discussions as listed below.



- Continue this exercise with an invitation to list three elements listed below-water that your students would like to learn more about when next found in intercultural communication situation.



## Observations and suggestions for discussions

- Seeing the Culture as an iceberg graphic, which of the elements – above or below *the water* – students listed to describe another culture compared to which traits and qualities they indicated when referring to their own culture?
- Use group reflections to discuss:
  - *Who they chose to describe?* Was it someone from a different country, language, ethnicity? **Culture as a concept**- Culture does not equal nationality. The term ‘culture’ includes not only culture related to nationality, race, ethnicity, but e.g. beliefs, experiences and ways of being in the world shared by people with common characteristics- people with disabilities, people who are members of faith and spiritual communities, people of various socio-economic status etc. Conclusion: there are more cultural differences ‘near you’ and you interact cross-culturally more often than you could think.
  - Assumptions - *Beware of the assumptions that you hold about people of cultures different from your own.*
  - Stereotypes - *Are you aware of your stereotypes as they arise?*
  - Ambiguity and assessment of the limits of one’s knowledge - *Do you recognize that your knowledge of certain cultural groups is limited? How much are you committed to create opportunities to learn more?*
- F. This exercise may be expanded

## EXERCISE A

### TELL ME... WHAT DO YOU THINK?

#### Introduction:

This exercise explores the concept of ethnocentrism and cultural relativism. The purpose of this exercise is to develop an understanding of the influence of both attitudes on the communication.

#### Exercise

Read one of the following scenarios to your group:

#### SCENARIO I

*In your country, there is a pending proceeding to deprive the mother of parental rights arose from following circumstances. Monika is a single mum who moved to your country quite recently from X (X is a name of the country). One day Monika came back home after work at 22:30 and sit to dinner with her 12-year-old beloved Sara. Only 30 mins after finishing the dinner Sara’s stomach started to ache. Since it did not stop after a painkiller, Monika rushed to a hospital and described the situation to doctors. As it turned out, there was no reason to worry. At least this time. The doctors, however, got very upset about the fact that Sara was alone at home for two hours before Monika’s arrival, did not sleep till 23.00 and, last by not least, that food prepared by Monika was not appropriate for kids her age at all!*

*Monika was shocked! Sara has stayed alone at home since she was 10, as did Monika, all her colleagues, family and friends from X. Moreover, the meal which she prepared for Sara was Monika’s*



*favourite when she was her age. Of course it is quite heavy and definitely not healthy – but it is what everyone eats from time to time.... Isn't it?*

## SCENARIO II

*Tom is 17 years old citizen of your country, of Z's origin. His parents are very conservative and religious. According to both: their parents' religion and traditions of Z, gender is not fluid and there is no such thing as changing the sex. 'You are who you were born as – biologically of course!' - they say. As indicated in a custom, every kid in Z upon birth gets a tattoos depending on the gender (sun – a boy and moon – a girl). Tom was born as Ola, and this is how his parents address him. As Tom identifies as a boy and indicates that he will fully transition the day he is an adult (in 6 months according to your country's law), he wants to have his tat changed. Parents do not consent and no tat's artist agrees to do it without the parents' consent.*

Ask your students to write their individual, personal opinion on the matter. Next, divide them in groups of 3-4 and ask them to exchange their opinions and reflections (read them out loud) and then to decide upon a GROUP response. There are a couple of rules for the said group response:

- one group needs to prepare just ONE response that all group members agree on or say they could not consent;
- the response should be written in full sentences, evaluation everyone can agree upon –
- the group response cannot be a copy of any individual member response.

### **Observations and suggestions for discussions**

- Introduce the concepts o
- **Ethnocentrism** - is the tendency to look at the world primarily from the perspective of one's own culture;
- **Cultural relativism** - is the principle of regarding and valuing the practices of a culture from the point of view of that culture and to avoid making hasty judgments;
- **Xenocentrism** - is the opposite of ethnocentrism, and refers to the belief that another culture is superior to one's own.
  
- Ask one half of your group to write an ethnocentric response to the story and the other half to write a culturally relative response to the story. How these two responses differ?
- Discuss with the group what are risks and positives of each of these attitudes.



## EXERCISE 2

### WHAT IS YOUR PERSONAL COMMUNICATION STYLE?

#### Introduction:

This exercise explores communication styles and their importance in the communication process. As well as provides for self-assessment of individual preferences as to communication styles.

#### Exercise

For the purposes of this exercise use Exercise 2 worksheet included in the Individual Student Exercises file.

There are multiple styles of communication. Some possible style-pairs are listed below. It is important to note, that there are no two separate boxes for each communication style pair. It is rather a spectrum –a continuum.

Ask your students to put a mark on a graph in each pair – as they feel they communicate. E.g. Are they more indirect or direct? They can place the mark wherever they feel, there is however no possibility to put a mark in the middle (always one of the styles is prevailing over the other in the pair).

Next, present your students with definitions of each style.

Below please find some useful definitions:

<p><b>DIRECT</b> A straightforward way of expressing thoughts and feelings; Directness is equated with honesty and respect for the other person and their time; Do not create ambiguity or uncertainty by avoiding discussion on the issue (even trivial ones) – state specifics; Values time, so every communication is simple and clear to be quick.</p>	<p><b>INDIRECT</b> Meaning is conveyed in a subtle way using non-verbal cues, parables and stories; High respect for other person's emotions and feelings; Indirectness is equated with politeness and respect for the other person; Do not put the other person on a spot by being blatantly direct. Citing a mistake or voicing disapproval is deemed impolite, subtle implication allows for 'face-saving'.</p>
<p><b>FORMAL</b> Status of each person is important and acknowledged (age, topics, rituals),</p>	<p><b>INFORMAL</b> Communication is less limited by conventions, a person has more flexibility in what, to whom and under what</p>



<p>Strict communication rules apply. They regard i.a.: forms of address, ways to address persons of different age and status, topics that can and cannot be discussed; Formal communication supports the values of status and hierarchy; Communication is highly ritualized.</p>	<p>circumstances they say (e.g. the use of first name is welcome); Indirectness supports the value of fairness and equity; Communication has few rules -find out what is allowable in that particular group and follow the conventions.</p>
<p><b>DETTACHED</b> Unemotional, calm, objective, impersonal communication; Dispassionate statements are considered professional and equated with objectivism, which is valued; Focus is on objective information/data; Disagreement is with the idea, not the person – it is not seen as personal attack; Highly expressive communication is inappropriate as it is deemed biased.</p>	<p><b>ATTACHED</b> Emotional, expressive way of speaking; Strong feelings are shown and vocalized; Issues are discussed with passion and commitment, Ideas, issues and a person are not separate; There is strong personal stake in the outcome – if one cares about the idea, they show it; Sharing ones values and feelings about the issue is highly valued.</p>
<p><b>LOW-CONTEXT</b> The communication context is not assumed to be shared and known; Things and meanings are explained clearly and precisely.</p>	<p><b>HIGH-CONTEXT</b> The context of communication is assumed to be known; It is unnecessary or even insulting to overexplain and state meaning precisely, as meaning is understood from context.</p>
<p><b>TASK FOCUSED</b> Accomplishing the goals is a priority; Feelings of other people are secondary; Little or no small-talk; If there is disagreement or discontent with the work of other people, it is polite and expected to be discussed publicly.</p>	<p><b>RELATIONSHIP FOCUSED</b> Group harmony, relations are priority; The need to make everyone feel heard; Any concern for the task, does not hurt or exploit someone, their feelings and well-being; Frequent appraisals to participants for their good work; No individual criticism on a forum.</p>
<p><b>LINEAR</b> Communication is like a straight line – moving in a linear way toward the main point; ‘The point’ is stated as quick as possible; Brief and explicit communication, Lengthy deviations from the main point are considered time wasters.</p>	<p><b>CIRCULAR</b> Communication takes circular manner – ‘around the main point’; It is not necessary to state main point clearly, as verbal and non-verbal messages provides for sufficient understanding; Elegant and flowing communication full of stories and anecdotes where stories make a point; Meaning is inferred from stories and parables; Supports the values of relationships, history and group meaning..</p>



## Observations and suggestions for discussions

- Understanding one's own communication preference, while discovering the preferences of others can be a very useful mechanism to enhance the effectiveness of communication. *Communication style influences HOW one speaks, not WHAT one says.* Hence, differences in communication styles can have an impact on whether the intent of our message and the impact it has on the receiver of that message. Differences in communication styles may in some cases hinder communication and lead to misunderstandings.
- *There is no one right or universal communication style*, as each of them have their strengths and possible challenges. Ask your students to give some examples. Communication styles can be used as a profiling and analysing tool in a multicultural communication situation.
- It is crucial to remember that, each of the above-mentioned pairs is independent from other pairs. In other words 'the left column' does not always go together as well 'the right column' does not always go together either. Therefore, an individual always needs to stay alert to the other person's styles, rather than assume *formal=indirect*, etc.
- Communication styles are not separate boxes- rather a continuum, a scale. While every individual uses multiple styles, they also move on the spectrum (more towards right or left as per the graph presented in the Worksheet) dependent on the person they communicate with (e.g. in a conversation with a principal a student is more indirect, whereas at home while conversing with their siblings they may be more direct).
- Use of multiple styles is common, even though, individuals tend to have personal preference, some kind of a *default mode* they lean towards while under pressure.



## EXERCISE B

### HOW I SEE YOU

#### Introduction:

This exercise explores communication styles in depth and their impact on communication.

#### Exercise

*For the purposes of this exercise, firstly ask your students to fill in the Exercise 2 'WHAT IS YOUR PERSONAL COMMUNICATION STYLE?' worksheet included in the Individual Student Exercises file and lead the debrief as indicated in above.*

Next, ask for one volunteer (who would feel comfortable while doing so) to share their continuum with the group. Then ask the other students to fill in the worksheet for the volunteer (how they see her/him in each category). Discuss with the group (while staying cautious to not allow pointing fingers or putting anyone on the spotlight – rather facilitate the discussion in a non-accusatory direction):

- *What is the chosen communication style of the volunteer as per their continuum worksheet?*
- *Are the other students surprised of her/his responses?*
- *How different is the volunteer worksheet to how he/she was described by the other students?*

#### Observations and suggestions for discussions

This exercise shows the phenomena of the Self-Reference Criterion or SRC (Varner and Beamer, 2011). By SRC we see other cultures from our own perspective. Our own values, priorities behaviours seem accepted, familiar – NATURAL. And they serve as a reference point. For example, if someone comes from a very formal culture, that approach is normal and desirable. They will judge other people if they are more formal or less formal than them.

Such a perspective, to no surprise is very subjective. A good example may be when in a group (the more diverse group, the more differences in opinion will most likely occur) one behaviour is deemed very formal by some of group members and may be deemed informal by the others. In a communication process, it is crucial how the interacting parties are capable to adjust communication tools to the styles they use, in an effort to understand and be understood, rather than some general classification.

- Use the above-mentioned discussion questions to show that communication style of individuals is always subjective in nature. How we may think we are is not how a person we communicate with may see us, as they will use their own communication style as a reference point. It is important to always stay conscious and adapt if needed for the sake of the effectiveness of communication.
- Ask your students to reflect on the importance and impact of differences in communication styles on individuals and on teams.



- Discuss how students - as communicators – can behave in order not to harm the other persons feelings (if they present a different style) and what elements they should be alert to in order to be a considerate and respectful in a communication process.

## EXERCISE 3

### E-MAIL TIME

#### Introduction:

This exercise explores the impact of style and the need for adjustment of communication tools used in each individual communication situation in order to understand and be understood by the other person.

#### Exercise

For the purposes of this exercise use Exercise 3 included in the Individual Student Exercises file, as well as **completed** Worksheet for Exercise 2 (including Communication styles definition table).

Ask your students to list on Worksheet 3 which of the styles in all six categories is their prevailing (automatically assumed) one. Next, ask them to list the opposite styles. The task is to write an e-mail to a person who represents all the opposite styles compared to the student:

*Imagine you are a representative of a team working with a group of internationals and your task is to write an email to Jesse - the representative of the other group with an invitation to a work meeting at your headquarters. Important fact is that Jesse represents completely opposite styles to you (as A-F listed above). Note at least three elements in your email that you intentionally changed - compared to when you would draft an email to someone like you.*

#### Observations and suggestions for discussions

- Ask your students how they felt to switch to a different style? Often it is not automatic, unintuitive and even hard. Adapting to a different style requires analysis and awareness of oneself and others.
- Discuss what the students learnt from this activity. Conscious adjustments to style of the other person may help in better understanding one another.
- Ask your students what things they altered/adapted. Brainstorm with the group possible other elements/tools in written and spoken communication.



## EXERCISE C

### CROSS-CULTURAL SENSITIVITY AS A GOAL?

#### Introduction:

This exercise explores Milton J. Bennett model on cultural sensitivity - the framework describes the different ways in which people can react to cultural differences.. The goal of this task is to show the link between knowledge of cultures and the attitude.

#### Exercise

Present and discuss with your students the model on cultural sensitivity by Milton J. Bennett, for that purpose you can use information provided in the *Exercise C worksheet included in the Group Exercises file.*

Next, ask your students to write down three stories describing their cross cultural interactions. One of the three stories should be a positive memory, one a neutral one and the last one representing a bad memory. Students are asked to mark which level of Bennett model is appropriate for each of their stories. Ask your students to share stories according to good-neutral-bad memories.

#### Observations and suggestions for discussions

- No one is a master fully aware of other cultures;
- Where does knowledge of other cultures come from?
- How can we show cross-cultural sensitivity?
- What are three examples of desirable behaviours when we communicate in an intercultural context? On the contrary, what are three examples of multicultural DON'Ts?

## REFERENCES & FURTHER READINGS

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