



MULTICULTURAL COMMUNICATION

by Agnieszka Góra and Jacek Czaja

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

-Clyde Kluckhohn

1. INTRODUCTION

In this document, you will find exercises aimed at learning about multicultural communication created as DISCOM Project Study Materials. The study materials consist of group tasks for students as well as anyone interested in the subject matter. The exercises were designed to help learners develop 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 acquiring hands-on experience and learning cross cultural communication via 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.

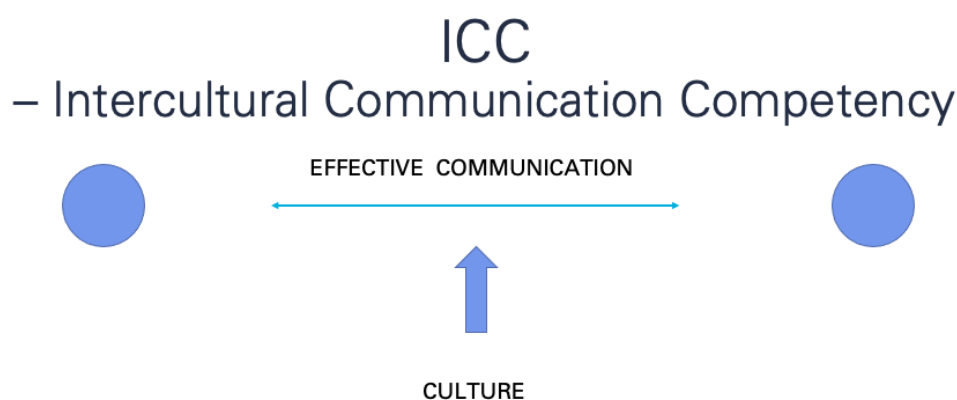
On many occasions, the cultural communication skill is enumerated as one of most needed to become a global leader, successful professional or grow as a person in general.

Every individual and every team should learn how to effectively communicate in a multicultural context with an emphasis on globalization and professional relevance.

1.3. Main goals and learning outcomes:

The ultimate goal of learning multicultural communication skills is 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 the intercultural communication competency people 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.



Ability to navigate a communication process in order to minimize the [negative] influence of culture on [the effectiveness of] communication.

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 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 extent 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 you 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 you to be able to**:

1. observe and analyze your personal and other people communication styles, as well as group cross-cultural interaction;
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.

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

Remember, while learning about multicultural communication:

- 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.

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

Below you will find two scenarios. They describe one situation with culture- elements each. All With your group pick one. Each group member is asked to read it:

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.



YOUR TASK:

- A. Each group member has 5-10 minutes to write their individual, personal response and opinion on the matter. Your statement has to be written in full sentences. Please, note it down and keep it for next steps of this exercise.

- B. Next, divide in groups of 3-4 and exchange your opinions (read out loud your individual responses as written above). The group task is to decide upon a **GROUP RESPONSE**. There are a couple of rules you need to follow while coming up with the said response:

- one group needs to prepare just **ONE** response that all group members agree on or say they could not consent on the matter;
- the response should be written in full sentences and carefully examined by all group members to ensure they all agree with the response fully;
- the group response cannot be a copy of any individual member response.

- C. One representative of each group reads out the statement mutually agreed by their groups. Follow with group discussion.

Observations and suggestions for discussions

- The goal of this task is to introduce the concepts of
 - **Ethnocentrism** – which is the tendency to look at the world primarily from the perspective of one's own culture;
 - **Cultural relativism** -which 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** – which is the opposite of ethnocentrism, and refers to the belief that another culture is superior to one's own.



D. Now, half of your group will have the task to write an ethnocentric response to the scenario you chose and the other half to write a culturally relative response to the same story. How these two responses differ?

E. Having learnt about those concepts, please brainstorm:

a. Which of the individual as well as group responses could be defined as **ethnocentric**? And WHY?

b. Which of the individual as well as group responses could be defined as **culturally relative**? And WHY?

• Discuss with the group what are the risks and positives of each of the two attitudes.

CULTURAL RELATIVISM	ETHNOCENTRISM
Positives:	Positives:
Risks:	Risks:

- a. *What is the chosen communication style of the volunteer as per their continuum worksheet?*
 - b. *Are the other students surprised of her/his responses?*
 - c. *How different is the volunteer worksheet to how he/she was described by the other students?*
- D. Ask the group members to indicate WHY -which particular behaviour of the volunteer made them assign the volunteer to particular styles._____

Remember, be kind and respectful! The purpose of this exercise is not to be judgmental, rather to learn and better understanding oneself!

Observations and suggestions for discussions

- *Do you agree 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.
- *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. True or false?
- Reflect on the importance and impact of differences in communication styles on individuals and on teams.



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.

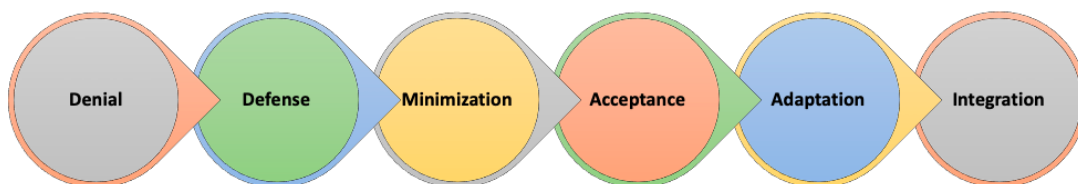
Exercise

- A. Present and discuss with the group the model on cultural sensitivity by Milton J. Bennett briefly described below:

Where there is culture (or rather- cultures!) there are cultural differences. The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (the DMIS) identifies the underlying cognitive orientations individuals use to understand cultural difference. Below you will see the simplified DMIS model by Milton J. Bennett.

DEVELOPMENTAL MODEL OF INTERCULTURAL SENSITIVITY by Milton J. Bennett

Six stages of Intercultural Sensitivity



Source: Bennett, Milton J. (1986). "A developmental approach to training for intercultural sensitivity". International Journal of Intercultural Relations.

The first three stages are ethnocentric as one's own culture is central to the perception of reality. Moving up the scale, an individual/group develops a more and more culturally relative point of view. The experience shifts to experiencing one's own culture as in the context of other cultures.

The stages provide a good framework for outlining a possible way to work with and improve the capacity for intercultural sensitivity and collaboration. Both leading to development of the Intercultural Communication Competency.

STAGE	CHARACTERISTICS	SKILLS NEEDED?
DENIAL	no recognition of cultural differences.	<i>Recognize</i> - choose to see differences!
DEFENSE	recognition of some cultural differences, but negative perception of those	<i>Tolerate</i> - Become more tolerant of differences and see basic similarities among people of different cultures!
MINIMIZATION	attempt to avoid stereotypes and even appreciate differences in language and culture, but own values are deemed universal and superior (unaware projection of own cultural values)	<i>Learn</i> more about our own culture and avoid projecting that culture onto other people's experience.
ACCEPTANCE	able to shift perspective, while still maintaining one's commitments to values	<i>Shift</i> perspectives to understand that the same ordinary behaviour may have different meaning in different cultures.
ADAPTATION	ability to evaluate other's behaviour from one's individual frame of reference and adapt behavior to fit the norms of different culture.	<i>Learn</i> how to step into the other person's shoes - <i>Cognitive adaptation</i> and <i>behavioral adaptation</i> . Be non-judgmental and behave appropriately in other culture.
INTEGRATION	ability to shift frame of reference and also deal with (resulting identity issues)	<i>Become adept</i> at evaluating any from multiple frames of reference.

B. Next, each group member is asked 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. Also, please mark which level of Bennett model is appropriate for each of your stories.

STORY		DMIS Level
Positive memory	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	
Neutral memory	<hr/> <hr/>	

	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	
Bad memory	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	

- C. When completed:
- a. Make a poll within the group:
 - i. which of the Bennett levels was most often quoted?
 - ii. which of the DMIS levels was the source of majority of *bad memories*?
 - b. Share the group stories according to good-neutral-bad memories.

Key takeaway thoughts:

- No one is a master fully aware of other cultures!
- **RESPECTFUL CURIOSITY** as an attitude in an intercultural context - give it a try!
- Be kind and expect kindness.

Points for discussion:

- 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?

Multicultural DOs	Multicultural DON'Ts
<hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/>

There is no one universal recipe for an effective multicultural communication, however we invite you to:

1. **Positive attitude:** create an opportunity for positive communication (especially when the other person's behaviour has had a negative impact on you);
2. **Intent:** assume the other person has positive intent;
3. **Be clear:** generate as many possible explanations for the behaviour as possible;
4. **Foster open environment:** seek clarification by stating WHY (what is the intent of your behaviour - I want to understand your intention so we can ... more effectively together);
5. **Ask:** Describe the other person's behaviour and ask them to help you understand where they are coming from by sharing their intentions.



REFERENCES & FURTHER READINGS

1. Bednarz, F., (2010), *Building Up Intercultural Competences: Challenges and Learning Processes*, in *Building Intercultural Competencies: A Handbook for Professionals in Education, Social Work, and Health Care*, eds. Maria Giovanna Onorati and Furio Bednarz (Acco);
2. Bennett, M. J. (2004). *Becoming interculturally competent*. In J.S. Wurzel (Ed.) *Toward multiculturalism: A reader in multicultural education*. (Newton, MA: Intercultural Resource Corporation);
3. Dossou, K.M., Klein, G.B. (2016) *Radar Guidelines. Understanding hate-oriented communication and tools for anti-hate communication strategies in an intercultural Dimension* (Key & Key Communications);
4. Hyun, J., Lee, A.S. (2014) *Flex: The New Playbook for Managing Across Differences*, (HarperCollinsPublishers);
5. Kim H., Williams, C. P. (2021) *Discovering Intercultural Communication. From Language Users to Language Use* (Springer Link);
6. Lewis R. (2018) *When Cultures Collide: Leading Across Cultures*, (N. Brealey Publishing 4th edition);
7. McKinney, K., Beck, F.D., Heyl, B.S. (2001) *Sociology Through Active Learning: Student Exercises*, (Pine Forge Press);
8. Meyer, E. (2016) *The Culture Map: Decoding How People Think, Lead, and Get Things Done Across Cultures* (PublicAffairs, U.S.);
9. Varner, I.I., Beamer, L. (2011) *Intercultural Communication in the Global Workplace* (McGraw-Hill Higher Education).

