

## LESSON

# 4

# Cross-cultural Communication & Interaction

### Gaian Culture Observation

This activity will help us think about observing and evaluating another culture. Write your observations in the space below.

### Causes of Miscommunication

#### EVALUATING CULTURE

##### Norms vs Stereotypes

Every culture has certain ways of thinking, behaving, or communicating which fall into patterns. We call these patterns “norms”. A norm is a not a hard-and-fast pattern, but simply the way that a majority of people behave a majority of the time. Thinking about another culture in terms of their norms is appropriate even if we recognize that norms will not apply to every person from that culture or every situation a person might encounter in that culture.

When we take a norm and try to apply it to everyone or every situation in a culture in a rigid way (“All Japanese people...” or “Japanese people always...”), we have moved from a norm to a stereotype.

Norms can be helpful when discussing cultural differences, but stereotypes are not helpful.

##### Conclusions vs Caricatures

When looking at another culture or sub-culture, we have to take what we observe and evaluate it to try to understand that culture. As we do this, we draw conclusions (decided pieces of information in our minds). Drawing conclusions is not bad as long as we are open to changing or updating those conclusions as we gain new information or make new observations. We must also remember that our conclusions likely do not include all the nuance and detail that is actually present in that culture.

When we take the conclusions we have drawn and decide that they are a complete depiction of that culture or explain everything about that culture, we have moved from a conclusion to a caricature.

Saying “Japanese people like rice.” is a helpful conclusion. Saying “Japanese people are all just a bunch of rice lovers.” is an unhelpful caricature.

Sub-culture is a specific segment within a larger cultural grouping. For example, American college students would be a subculture of Americans. American college athletes would be a subculture of American college students.

## Causes of Miscommunication

### **Speculation vs Assumption**

If we know things about the norms in another culture, we can use that information to help us know what to do when interacting with that culture. Many times, however, we must add our own reasoning / guesses to the information we have. Making decisions in this way is called speculation and is a necessary way of acting. However, we must remember that decisions made in this way are never certain, so it is better to let speculation guide our preparation rather than our execution. When we make a speculative decision and tell ourselves the other person is certain to act according to our speculation, we have moved from speculation to assumption. People who assume fail to confirm their speculation by communicating with the other person, which often results in misunderstanding, embarrassment, and offense.

*Adapted from Janet & Milton Bennett, 1998*

## PRIMARY SOURCES OF CROSS-CULTURAL MISCOMMUNICATION

### **Assumption of Similarities**

Unless we have been taught or had experience otherwise, most of us assume our culture's communication styles and ways of behaving are how everyone communicates and behaves.

### **Viewing Differences as Right and Wrong**

We tend to interpret things through our own cultural norms. When people act according to those norms, we think of them positively or we don't give it much thought. When someone acts differently from our cultural norms, we judge them negatively.

### **Language Differences**

When comparing different languages, very few words have an absolute correlation (i.e. mean exactly the same thing). When speaking a foreign language, it can be easy to think of a word in terms of how it's used in our language instead of in the other person's language.

### **Nonverbal Communication**

Controlling this can be one of the most difficult parts of cross-cultural communication because so much of nonverbal communication is done unconsciously. Body language, facial expression, eye contact, etc. can communicate the wrong thing to someone from another culture.

### **High Anxiety**

Not knowing what is appropriate or expected in a certain situation causes high anxiety. Unfortunately, this high anxiety can sometimes cause us to lean more heavily on our own cultural norms and view other's differences as negative.

*Adapted from LaRay Barna, 1997*



## Communication Norms

## LOW CONTEXT

## HIGH CONTEXT

Analytical

The speaker makes their case or conveys information by sharing principles, & data (facts, figures, and dates), with an emphasis on the theoretical and general information.

*The principle here is...  
Just give me the facts.*

Detached

Issues are discussed “calmly” & “objectively,” conveying the speaker’s ability to weigh all factors impersonally.

*Let’s look at this objectively.  
Don’t allow your emotions to skew your thinking.*

Intellectual

The issue and the relationship between the parties discussing it is disconnected. The assumption is that the idea is being critiqued in isolation.

*It’s just a disagreement – don’t take it personally!  
The truth is the truth.*

Sequential

Discussion is conducted in a straight line, developing logical connections among subpoints toward a main point, which is stated explicitly at either the beginning or the end of the discussion.

*Get to the point.  
Where are you going with all this?*

Low-Scan

The listener understands when they have comprehended the speaker’s statements, which are taken at face value. The speaker is responsible for making their meaning clear.

*Say what you mean & mean what you say!  
He’s kind of an enigma.*

Direct

Meaning is conveyed through explicit statements made directly to the people involved with little reliance on contextual factors such as situation & timing. “Honesty” is preferred over “agreeableness”.

*Tell it like it is!  
Don’t beat around the bush.*

vs Experiential

The speaker makes their case or conveys information by sharing stories, metaphors, & examples, with an emphasis on personal and real-life experiences.

*A good example of this is when...  
Yes, but I know many people who...*

vs Attached

Issues are discussed with feeling & emotion, conveying the speaker’s personal connection to the issue.

*I’m sorry to get upset, but this is really important.  
This isn’t just some hypothetical issue.*

vs Relational

Issues are always connected to the relationship between the discussing them. Any critique of ideas must always prioritize the relationship of the people involved.

*We need to tread lightly  
You have to be respectful of other people’s feelings.*

vs Spiral

Discussion is conducted in a circular movement, developing context around the main point, which is often left unstated.

*You can’t understand unless you know the full story.  
There’s more than this one issue.*

vs High-Scan

The listener understands after they have evaluated multiple pieces of the context (“scanned”), which may have to be assembled intuitively. The listener is responsible for determining the intended message.

*Always read between the lines!  
He can’t read the air.*

vs Indirect

Meaning is conveyed by suggestion, implication, nonverbal behavior, & other contextual cues. If the possibility of conflict exists, communication may happen via a 3<sup>rd</sup> party.

*You don’t want to make them feel bad.  
...but then they’ll lose face.*

## Polite Replies

### Making a request

- Would you mind...
- Would you be able to...
- Could you...
- Please...

### Saying something negative

(if you can't do something, can't help with something)

- I'm afraid...
- Unfortunately, ...
- At the moment we can't...
- I wish I could... but...

### When you cannot answer right away:

- Let me check on that.
- I have to get back to you on that.
- I'll let you know if / when I find out something that.
- I'm not sure about that.

### When you disagree but want to be nice:

- I don't think that's such a good idea...
- I understand what you mean, but...
- I wonder if it would be better to...
- Yeah, or maybe instead of that you could...

### Suggestions

- Maybe you could...
- What if you...
- Have you thought about...
- How about if...

## Crossroads

The Crossroad game is originally a card game designed to simulate dilemmas people may face in an emergency situation. In this class, you will see simple YES/NO questions on the screen. Choose YES or NO and be ready to explain why you made that choice. Try to listen to people with other opinions and values.