Cross-Cultural Communication

October 9, 2018
Karen Schwelle
English Language Programs
Our plan

- Your setting and cross-cultural experiences
- A framework for discussing cultural differences
- Scenarios
- Reflections and solutions
How much time have you spent working outside the country/countries where you grew up?

- More than ten years
- Five to ten years
- Less than five years
How much time have you spent working with a multicultural team?

- More than ten years
- Five to ten years
- Less than five years

*Your settings and experiences – Framework – Scenarios - Reflections*
Have you ever experienced a miscommunication related to culture?

I know that you believe you understand what you think I said, but I am not sure that you realize that what you heard is not what I meant.

Robert McCloskey, U.S. State Dept.
How might cross-cultural communication challenges manifest themselves in a workplace like yours?

Spend two minutes writing down your thoughts based on your experiences or challenges that you can foresee.
Some challenges that might arise

Solving problems individually or as a group

Expressing disagreement/telling someone they are wrong

Conversing about non-work matters

Interacting with figures of authority

Using humor, idioms, and colloquial language

Taking and giving credit

Expressing ambition and desire to achieve

Demonstrating trust vs. ensuring accountability

And?
Cultural Dimensions
Power distance: “[T]he degree to which the less powerful members of a society accept and expect that power is distributed unequally.”
Individualism vs. collectivism: Contrast between individuals’ responsibility to and ability to depend on themselves and their immediate families vs. extended family and other in-groups
Masculinity vs. femininity: Societal preferences for either “achievement, heroism, assertiveness and material rewards for success” or “cooperation, modesty, caring for the weak and quality of life.”
Uncertainty avoidance: Level of comfort with uncertainty and ambiguity, or “rigid codes of belief and behavior” vs. “a more relaxed attitude.”
Scenarios (see handout)

**Scenario 1:** PI and postdoc: Troubleshooting independently vs. asking for help

**Scenario 2:** Resident, care team, and patients: Whose English?

The scenarios were written for the purpose of this workshop and are not based on real people or situations.
Choose one of the following scenarios to discuss, and/or discuss another scenario from your experience if appropriate. In groups of three or four, answer the following questions about the scenario(s) of your choice:

1. Describe objective facts and observations (to the extent that you can, given the limited information).
2. Interpret, considering multiple possible explanations.
3. Evaluate what the parties involved seem to feel about the incident.
4. Ask: How might the cultural dimensions fit in (Power Distance, Collectivism vs. Individualism, Femininity vs. Masculinity, Uncertainty Avoidance)? How might other factors fit in?

These scenarios were written for the purpose of this workshop, and are not based on real people or situations.

**Scenario 1:** A PI and postdoc from different cultural backgrounds have been experiencing communication difficulties ever since the postdoc joined the lab. From the PI’s perspective, the postdoc waits too long to admit when she is encountering problems with her research projects. The PI has said in lab meetings and one-on-one meetings that he wants lab members to do “a reasonable amount of troubleshooting” on their own before approaching him, but that they should not hesitate to admit difficulties if the difficulties are impeding their research process. He has also discussed his rationale and expectations with this postdoc. However, the postdoc finds that the PI reacts with impatience and frustration when she does bring issues to his attention, so she thinks his behavior conflicts with his stated expectations.

**Scenario 2:** A resident physician who attended medical school outside the United States is experiencing communication difficulties with patients and some hospital staff. The resident is
multilingual and was educated in English. Patients have complained that they cannot understand his accent, and that he did not appear to understand some of their explanations of their health issues. Other members of the care team have complained that the resident does not convey information efficiently during rounds and in other conversations about patient care. A senior resident, born and raised in the U.S., has already mentioned the communication issue to the resident. This conversation emphasized English language proficiency, and the resident was offended at the suggestion that his English proficiency is insufficient. The resident is anxious to be successful in his position and to provide good care for patients, but thinks his communication skills are being judged by unfairly narrow standards.

Another approach to thinking through these sorts of misunderstandings or conflicts is SMART Strategies¹:

- Seek help (e.g., input from a mediator or a colleague, or an unbiased opinion from another source)
- Manage your emotions
- Anticipate consequences (e.g., short- and long-term outcomes of various decisions)
- Recognize rules and context (e.g., causes of problems, ethical principles, factors that you can/cannot control)
- Test your assumptions and motives (and compare them with possible assumptions and motives of others)


Karen Schwelle
English Language Programs, Washington University in St. Louis
“What just happened?”

1. **Describe** objective facts and observations.
2. **Evaluate** what the parties involved seem to be most concerned about.
3. **Reflect on any cultural differences which might contribute to the misunderstandings** (i.e., the role of power distance, collectivism vs. individualism, femininity vs. masculinity, uncertainty avoidance)
Another approach: SMART Strategies

Seek help → Manage your emotions → Consider consequences

Test your assumptions and motives → Recognize rules and context


Your settings and experiences – Framework – Scenarios - Reflections
How to strengthen cross-cultural communication skills

Spend two minutes writing down your thoughts about how you might strengthen your cross-cultural communication skills.
Building more effective cross-cultural communication skills

1. Understand your own underlying assumptions and values
2. Adopt “cultural humility” (Hook et al., 2013) and a spirit of lifelong learning
3. Suspend judgment about individuals while you work through situations
4. Learn about the cultures important to your work life
5. Gain the communication skills to work through missteps
6. Focus on shared goals
7. Recognize that real change happens slowly
Selected references


