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Communicating Across Cultures

Bob Dignen

跨文化商务沟通



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剑桥商务英语沟通技能

跨文化商务沟通

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刘力 陆瑜 策划

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Preparing to communicate across cultures



You don't need me to tell you that business is international. But what impact does the globalisation of business have on the way we use English to communicate? Well, what it means is that speaking 'good English' is not good enough any more. We have also to understand and engage with the challenges of working across cultures. We have to become more aware of the differences between ourselves and people from other cultures. And we have to adapt, and communicate and use English in a way that is sensitive to these differences.

Bob Dignen, York Associates

Welcome to *Communicating Across Cultures*, one of a new series of courses from Cambridge University Press designed to develop excellence in business communication in English. The complete training package includes this book and an Audio CD, an accompanying DVD with worksheets and a dedicated website with full trainer's notes including extension activities. You can access this material at: www.cambridge.org/elt/communicatingacrosscultures.

The secret of communicating successfully across cultures

Whether you are receiving clients from abroad, visiting potential overseas suppliers, working in international teams, presenting, negotiating or just socialising after a hard day's work, you need to be able to do three things to communicate effectively:

- 1 You need to have an understanding of your own culture and the target culture you are dealing with. This means researching and analysing the national, regional and corporate cultures of the people you are dealing with.
- 2 You need to be flexible in the way you communicate with people from other cultures. This means adapting your style of communication to fit the situation.
- 3 You need to develop an international style of communication that will enable you to get your message across effectively in all business and social situations.

Each unit in the book begins with clearly stated aims to develop relevant skills which can improve your performance at work. A short 'Can do' statement at the end of each unit confirms which new skills you have learned and helps you track your progress.

As you work through the 12 units of this course, you should always be thinking how to make the skills and techniques your own. Working across cultures is a rewarding and enjoyable experience; this course is designed to give you the means to make the most of that experience.

I hope you enjoy the *Communicating Across Cultures* experience!

Communicating Across Cultures and you

Take a few moments before you begin the course to think about your own needs and experiences. Tick the comments below that apply to you and see how *Communicating Across Cultures* can help you to improve.

- I would appreciate practical advice on how to be successful in different cultures.
- Sometimes I get frustrated when people do things differently. I need to be more patient and tolerant.
- I need to be able to build strong relationships in my international role.
- I need to be able to deal with different styles of communication.
- I wish I could make my international meetings more productive.
- I don't feel comfortable with the idea of changing my personality to fit into different cultures.
- I sometimes have to deal with emails that seem impolite.
- I need to ensure that cultural differences don't lead to conflict.
- I need to work with people from different cultures in international teams.
- I would like to know how interculturally competent I am.

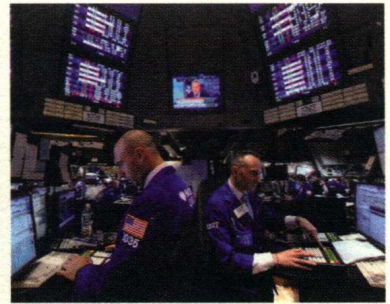
- This course contains interviews with professional business people working all over the world. They talk about their experiences of working internationally and how they solve intercultural challenges on a daily basis. Their experience will help you with your own challenges.
- Managing yourself is as important as managing others. Unit 1 enables you to think about how flexible you really are and to develop a more tolerant thinking style that will help you to cooperate with others more effectively.
- Most experienced international professionals say that the ability to build strong relationships is one of the biggest success factors for working across cultures. Unit 2 looks at the social skills needed to develop rapport with individuals across cultures.
- Units 3, 4, 5 and 8 analyse different communication styles and encourage you to develop a range of speaking and listening strategies which you can use in different contexts to get your message across while presenting, participating in a meeting or negotiating.
- Everybody wants to make meetings more productive! Unit 4 looks at how to take decisions more effectively and how to manage different types of communicator in international meetings.
- Being effective across cultures is not about changing personality. However, it is about flexibility and understanding how some of your own behaviours might confuse others. Unit 6 helps you to tailor your message for your international partners so that you can understand each other and work together effectively.
- Unit 7 looks at effective email practice and gives practical tips and tricks on writing and reading emails positively and professionally.
- Unit 9 is dedicated to the issue of conflict across cultures: the causes of conflicts and strategies to solve them. The unit will give you great ideas on how to avoid and manage conflicts that arise in your work environment.
- Units 10 and 11 give practical tips on how to manage diversity in teams to innovate more effectively.
- In Unit 12 there is a questionnaire you can use to analyse your own international working style and develop an action plan to improve your skills for the future.

Developing intercultural skills


Aims

To understand what culture means


To learn ways to describe culture



- 1 Look at the pictures of professionals working in different areas.
 - What do you think the culture is like in these organisations?
 - Would you like to work there? Why / Why not?

- 2  2 Bo Græsberg is Danish but lives in Germany where he works for a multinational retailer of electronic goods. He talks about the challenges of working across both national and corporate cultures. Listen to the first part of the interview.
 - 1 What does Bo define as 'the key point about understanding culture'?
 - 2 For Bo, how useful are checklists on national culture (*dos* and *don'ts*) as a method of learning about national cultures?
 - 3 Bo works in a retail organisation which sells electronic goods. How does he describe the culture of his company and the retail sector?
 - 4 What causes 'big misunderstandings in communication' in his company, according to Bo?
 - 5 Do you disagree with any of Bo's opinions? Why?

- 3 Bo says that '*... at the headquarters here we have at least 20 cultures*'.
 - How many different cultures do you have in your organisation, e.g. Human Resources, IT?
 - How are the cultures different? What communication problems can this create?

- 4  3 Listen to the second part of the interview in which Bo describes two examples of cultural misunderstanding in his organisation.
 - 1 The first example involves the construction department and which other department?
 - 2 Why does this other department see itself as 'the kings of the company'?
 - 3 What is the main difference in approach to store design between the two departments?
 - 4 What does Bo say can be the result of the cultural differences between departments?
 - 5 In the second example, which part of the company does Bo describe first? What is the problem with this part of the company, according to Bo?
 - 6 What is the second part of the company? What is the problem?
 - 7 How does Bo summarise the differences between the cultures of these two departments?
 - 8 What does Bo describe as the 'simple solution' to dealing with these cultural differences?



- 5 Do you agree with Bo's solution to working with different cultures? What else do you think is important to work effectively across cultures?
- 6 Read the description of a company's culture and complete the sentences with phrases from the box.

project-driven we value generally, we try to take care we see ourselves as
 the focus is on the leadership style trusting people a lot of time is given to

We're a small consulting company and the culture and (1) is relatively informal in general. (2) flexible, not too over-structured. (3) satisfying customers so we tend to adapt to what they need. (4) creativity so people have a lot of freedom to innovate and come up with new ideas. Relationships are really important here and so (5) talking to customers who visit the company. (6) of people inside the organisation and we have weekly team meetings where people can talk about problems and get support. We're quite a (7) organisation but there's a fairly relaxed attitude to time and schedules and decision making: for us, people come first. It's seldom that people are put under a lot of pressure with strict deadlines. (8) to get the job done is better than monitoring them all the time. And we definitely don't have an email culture. We communicate just by picking up the phone!

- 7 Look at these words and phrases which we can use to describe organisational culture.
- 1 Match up the opposites. Can you think of any more?
 - 2 Which of these adjectives does Bo use to describe his organisation?

top-down	task-oriented
people-oriented	individualistic
risk-focused	cost-driven
quality-focused	action-oriented
team-oriented	bottom-up

- 8 In pairs, describe the culture of your own organisation(s) using some of the vocabulary from exercises 6 and 7. Think about these concepts.

Leadership Decision making Information Communication Relationships
 Time Quality Customers Cooperation

- Say which parts of the culture you like, and which you would like to change and why.
- Then think about other organisations which you know and describe the main differences between their cultures and that of your own organisation. Which of these differences do you think could be a problem if the different organisations did business together? Why?

Cultural tip

Describe and discuss your own cultures and the cultures of others. This will help you and your business partners to develop clear strategies to communicate effectively across the different cultures.

Can do I can describe my own organisational culture.

1B

Developing intercultural skills

Aims

- To develop flexible thinking
- To learn strategies for supporting more flexible thinking in others

- 1 People working across cultures need to become more sensitive to possible misunderstandings and to handle them effectively. Read the introduction to the case study and the email below. Then answer the questions.

Jack is a financial controller based in New York. He has asked Akash, a colleague in India, several times over the last ten days to email him some local budget figures which are needed to create a central report. However, despite a recent phone call from Akash promising to send the report the next day, Jack has not received any budget figures. He decides to send this email about the problem to two colleagues with experience of working in India.

Hi

How goes it? Hope you're busy. Look, sorry to trouble you but I have a bit of a challenge with Akash in Bangalore. I keep requesting figures, getting a promise to deliver, but then I never get anything. To be honest, I'm getting annoyed because this whole style of promising and then not delivering is just unprofessional. I'm also worried because I need the figures for my own report in the next week – if I don't get that, I'll miss one of my key targets. I'm thinking of escalating the problem and writing a very direct email to Akash's boss and copying in my boss. What do you think? Any advice would be much appreciated!

Best regards

Jack

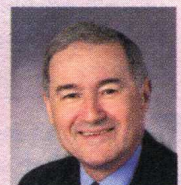
- 1 What is the problem from Jack's point of view?
- 2 How well do you think Jack understands the reasons for Akash's behaviour? What other cultural, personality and business reasons could there be?
- 3 What is Jack's proposal to 'solve' the problem? What other solutions could there be?

- 2 **PW** Work in pairs. Read the emails which Jack receives from his colleagues with advice on dealing with the problem. Student A: read email 1 on page 76. Student B: read email 2 on page 78.

Tell each other what the emails recommend and decide what would be the best thing for Jack to do. Then compare your recommendations with the rest of the class.

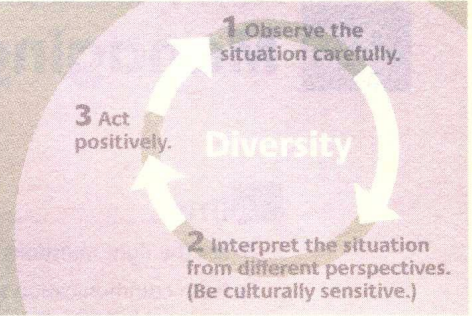
- 3 Read what Craig Storti in his book *The Art of Crossing Cultures* says about flexible thinking, and the 'flexible thinking' model that follows. Then answer the questions.

The ability to interpret situations, problems, practices – the way we do things – from multiple perspectives, from the way other people see them, is a tremendous benefit to you and your company. You begin to understand that behaviour that makes no sense to you might make perfect sense to others. You're not so quick to judge any more ... you give the benefit of the doubt.



Flexible thinking model

Flexible thinking stops people judging others' behaviours negatively too quickly. It makes people more open and interact more positively with each other and creates a stronger foundation for cooperation and mutual learning – all with the simple step of trying to understand the world from the other person's point of view.



- 1 Which ability does Storti say can produce real benefits for those working internationally?
- 2 What does flexible thinking stop people doing, according to Storti?
- 3 How can flexible thinking improve cooperation between people?
- 4 Study the language you can use to exchange opinions, and to encourage others to think more openly and 'flexibly' by considering alternative perspectives. Match each heading to the expressions. What phrases can you add to say the same things?

Evaluating different perspectives Asking for the opinion of others Giving an opinion
Generating multiple interpretations Deciding what to do

1

*I tend to think that ...
From my perspective ...*

2

*What do you reckon?
How do you see it?*

3

*Could we look at it another way and say that ...?
Just putting myself into her shoes, maybe ...?*

4

*This makes a lot of sense if we assume that ...
If this is the case, then you're right that ...*

5

*Given what has happened, I think it would be best if ...
In the circumstances the best thing to do is to ...*

- 5 **6** Discuss one of two case studies of intercultural misunderstanding. Group A, turn to Case A on page 76. Group B, turn to Case B on page 78. Consider the following questions.

- What do you think is happening in each case?
- Which cultural, personality and business factors could be important?
- How are the people involved seeing things? Are they thinking flexibly or inflexibly?
- Decide on a recommended course of action to move each case forward in the best way possible. Present your case and recommendations to the other group.
- Compare your recommendations with the short case summaries on pages 64–65.

Cultural tip

Try to keep an open mind if communication breaks down with international colleagues. Think flexibly and try to imagine others' motivations based upon an understanding of their culture, their personality and their work pressures. Then choose a constructive course of action to solve the misunderstanding.

Can do I can think flexibly when interpreting the behaviours of people from another culture.