DIGITAL CHAPTERS

HARVARD BUSINESS PUBLISHING

BK0005
August 1, 2009

CHAPTER FIVE

Communicating, Negotiating, and Resolving Conflicts Across Cultures

From *Cultural Intelligence: Living and Working Globally, Second Edition*, by David C. Thomas and Kerr Inkson

Published by Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

CHAPTER 5

Communicating, Negotiating, and Resolving Conflicts across Cultures

COMMUNICATION FAILURE

Consider these four vignettes of cross-cultural living, all of them authentic experiences involving Americans.[1]

- An Australian woman, flying aboard Sky West Airlines from Atlanta to Pittsburgh, asks a flight attendant if she can have a pack of pretzels instead of crackers. When the attendant says they don't have any pretzels, she replies, ''Fair dinkum?'' But before the Australian can say anything more, a second attendant asks for her passport and copies down her name. Her local colloquialism has sparked a security scare, her common Australian phrase apparently being misinterpreted as an act of aggression.
- An American student shares a dormitory room with a Thai. They get on well. Then, after they have lived together for several weeks, the Thai abruptly announces that he has applied for a transfer to another room. The American is surprised and upset and asks the Thai why he wants to move. The Thai is reluctant to speak but eventually says that he can't stand the American's noisiness, loud stereo, late visitors, and untidiness. The American is even more surprised: all this is new to him. "Couldn't you have

told me this sooner?" he says. "Maybe I could have done something about it."

- A newly qualified American community counselor is assigned as a client a Malaysian man who suffers from low energy and poor concentration. In their first interview, the Malaysian is very quiet and withdrawn. The counselor is used to silences in counseling sessions, as clients reflect and analyze, but this client does not seem to want to communicate at all. So the counselor takes time to try to persuade him of the nature of the counseling process. At the end of the session, the client does not seek any further counseling. The counselor is disappointed: he has learned almost nothing about his client. Has he done something wrong?
- An American economist is on a study tour in China. He visits an economic planning institute where a Chinese economist, who is interested in the American's economic forecasting techniques, invites him to spend two months in China giving seminars. The American is very interested in the offer, and says so, but he adds that he has to check with the administration of his U.S. institute to get their approval. Back in the United States, he is granted the necessary clearance and sends a message to China indicating that he is definitely available. But the Chinese never contact him again.

These cases, to which we will return later, demonstrate communication failures that led to the breakdown of relationships, and all have cultural origins.

Communication—the interchange of messages between people—is the fundamental building block of social experience. Whether selling, buying, negotiating, leading, or working with others, we communicate. And although the idea of communicating a message seems simple and straightforward—"You just tell it straight. And you listen."—when it comes to figuring out what goes wrong in life, "communication failure" is by far the most common explanation.

Communication operates through *codes*—systems of signs in which each sign signifies a particular idea. Communication

also uses *conventions*—agreed-upon norms about how, when, and in what context codes will be used. If two people do not share the same codes and conventions, they will have difficulty communicating with each other. And codes and conventions are determined mainly by people's cultures. The most obvious example of unshared codes is different languages.

Each communication breakdown in our opening set of vignettes can be explained in terms of cultural differences:

- In the first case the expression "fair dinkum" is a common Australian phrase that is used to refer to something worthwhile or reliable. As a question, it can mean "Really? Is that right?" and this is most likely the sense in which the passenger used it. However this term was not in the vocabulary of the American flight attendants. And they drew a wrong conclusion. This is an example of different *codes*.
- In the case of the student whose Thai friend moved out, culture and custom interfered with communication. In their upbringing, Americans are encouraged to be active, assertive, and open, and to expect the same in others. In *their* upbringing, Thais are encouraged to be passive and sensitive, and they too expect the same in others. The Thai expected the American to be sensitive to his feelings; the American expected the Thai to say what his feelings were. When neither behaved as expected, the relationship broke down. This is an example of different *conventions*.
- The counselor whose client wouldn't talk failed to appreciate the meaning of an important part of the communication—the silences! Silences are not always absence of communication; they are often *part* of communication. Asians tend to wait longer than Westerners before speaking, especially to authority figures. To some extent long silences are a sign of respect. The counselor might have been more patient. Also, the Malaysian may not have been assertive enough to seek another appointment

without being invited. So the whole situation was mismanaged. This is an example of different *codes* AND *conventions*.

- The economist whose invitation to visit China was never followed up failed to appreciate the meaning of his own communication in Chinese culture. A Chinese saying that he had to check with his office before accepting the invitation might have been communicating two things: first, that he was a relatively low-status person who had to check everything with bureaucrats; second, that he was not really interested in visiting. So in this case the Chinese may have made these same assumptions about the American and concluded he was not really interested in visiting. Chinese people seldom say "no" even when that is what they mean. Instead, they have numerous polite ways—including the one in this story—of courteously indicating it. This is another example of different *codes* AND *conventions*.

How Cross-Cultural Communication Works

In communication, the communicator transmits messages to others ("receivers") who interpret them. The process is shown in figure 5.1.

When the receiver in turn becomes the communicator, the process is reversed. The channel may be spoken words, written words, or nonverbal behavior such as gestures or facial expressions. Face-to-face conversations, meetings, telephone calls, documents, or e-mails may all be used. Successful communication occurs when the message is accurately perceived and understood. Skills of communicating and listening, selection of an appropriate channel, and the absence of "interference" from external factors are all important. Cultural differences threaten communication because they reduce the available codes and conventions that are shared by sender and receiver.

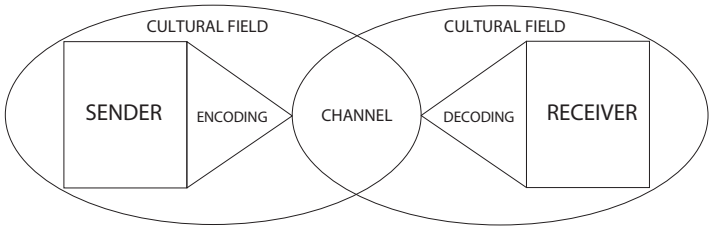

FIGURE 5.1. Cross-cultural communication process
Source: Based on Schramm (1980)

The cultural field shown in figure 5.1 represents culturally based elements in the sender's and in the receiver's background, such as their language, education, and values.[2] The cultural field creates the codes and conventions that affect the communication process.

Language

Language is the most obvious code for communicating. In language, combinations of sounds represent elements of meaning and can be combined to represent complex messages. Most languages contain speech conventions, subtleties, and figures of speech of which only experienced speakers may be aware.

The essence of language is that sender and receiver should share the code. But the development and mobility of humankind has left us with thousands of different languages, plus different dialects and adaptations of many of them.[3] Most people have only one language, which they have learned and spoken since early childhood, and even accomplished linguists are usually fluent in only a few. Moreover, psychologists have determined that the best time to acquire new languages is before the age of ten, after which we become progressively less able to adapt.[4]

A complicating factor is that whatever the language, its

everyday use normally goes beyond any simple single code such as that in a dictionary. Languages are living entities that grow and change to accommodate the widely different groups who use them and the changes in the social circumstances in which they are used. For example, among young speakers of English, language is becoming more direct and dramatic, so that

> "She accused me of breaking the window. I said I hadn't."

has become:

> "She's like, 'You trashed the window!' I'm like, 'No way it was me!'"

In most cultures, different groups have their own vocabularies, slang, accents, and idioms. Sometimes the differences are so strong and systematic that we say they have a different dialect. Technical or social groups may develop their own jargon and may use the jargon to distance themselves from outsiders. Another common linguistic convention is euphemism, when words with sexual or other potentially impolite connotations are replaced with less explicit words. For example, in some English-speaking cultures it is common to say that someone has "passed away" rather than "died."

Finally, most of us would be surprised at the extent to which we mindlessly use proverbs, maxims, and even slogans or catchphrases heard on television as part of our day-to-day conversation. Examples are the Anglo-American expressions "it's a no-brainer," "yadda yadda yadda," and "it's not rocket science." Such expressions are in good English but may genuinely puzzle outsiders.

Finding Common Language Codes

While language is a wonderful tool for communication, it is also fraught with difficulties. Two people seeking to communicate with each other who do not have any overlapping

language codes face a major barrier. They can, of course, employ translators. But translation is time-consuming and expensive. It also complicates the communication process and potentially distorts the message by requiring a further transformation.

People who choose to learn and use a foreign language find benefits beyond simply overcoming the language barrier. Most people appreciate the efforts that others may have made to learn their language. So even though your fluency in another language may be limited, the fact that you have made the effort may generate goodwill.[5] In addition, language conveys many subtleties about a culture that a person with high cultural intelligence might notice and use.

However, learning a new language carries major costs. Becoming fluent in another language takes substantial study and practice, particularly if that language is unlike your own in pronunciation, grammar, and conventions. Language learners expend considerable time and effort in learning, and find that when using the language they feel stressed and may even be distracted from other aspects of the situation. Also, lack of fluency may unfairly undermine credibility in the eyes of fluent speakers. In contrast, fluency may lead to the speaker being perceived, sometimes mistakenly, as being competent in other areas, such as overall cultural intelligence.[6]

Second-Language Use

One by-product of the Anglo-American economic dominance of the twentieth century and the relentless unwillingness of British and American people to learn languages other than their own has been to make English increasingly the accepted common language of business. Worldwide, the learning of English to facilitate international communication has become a major activity. This change facilitates international business communication. Those who speak English as their only language owe a debt to the millions of people around the world

who have gone out of their way to learn to understand, read, speak, and write in the English language.

Learning English as a second language (ESL) is full of challenges. The language's richness of vocabulary and its numerous synonyms can cause ESL speakers great difficulty. Take the simple word "fly." It can mean an annoying insect, a means of travel, or an important part of men's trousers.[7]

A person fluent in English who is communicating with a less skilled English speaker has an obligation to communicate in relatively standard terms, to avoid jargon and obscure language, and to avoid assumptions about comprehension by the other person. Culturally intelligent people will consciously adapt their language to be in harmony with the vocabulary and style of the other person.

Some ESL speakers—particularly those from cultures that set high store by not losing face—pretend to understand when they really do not. In these situations there is a special onus on the parties to be aware of barriers and limitations in their sending and receiving, and to check whether messages have successfully gotten through.

The following are some brief guidelines that culturally intelligent people can use to help improve communication with ESL speakers.

Second-Language Strategies

- Enunciate carefully.
- Avoid colloquial expressions.
- Repeat important points using different words to explain the same concept.
- Use active verbs and avoid long compound sentences.
- Use visual restatements such as pictures, graphs, tables, and slides.
- Hand out written summaries of your verbal presentation.
- Pause more frequently, and do not jump in to fill silences.

- Take frequent breaks, and allow more time.
- Do not attribute poor grammar or mispronunciation to lack of intelligence.
- Check for understanding by encouraging speakers to repeat concepts back to you.
- Avoid embarrassing speakers, but encourage and reinforce their participation.[8]

Conventions

Communication conventions cover the ways that language and other codes are used within a particular culture. Once again, cultural values and norms, such as those based on collectivism or individualism, are apparent.

EXPLICIT AND IMPLICIT COMMUNICATION

There is a Western view that individuals perceive something called the truth and should state it, and a convention that communication should be verbal and that verbal messages should be explicit, direct, and unambiguous. But in other cultures—for example, many Middle Eastern and Asian cultures—there is no absolute truth, and politeness and desire to avoid embarrassment often take precedence. The convention is therefore that communication is implicit and indirect. In the direct convention of communication, most of the message is placed in the *content* of the communication—the words that are used. In the indirect convention, the *context* is more important—for example, the physical setting, the previous relationships between the participants, and the nonverbal behavior of those involved.

The direct convention tends to be the norm in countries with individualist cultures, the indirect in countries with collectivist cultures. Understanding apparently indirect communication in collectivist cultures may sometimes be simply a matter of learning another code. The examples in the fol-

lowing box show a variety of ways of saying no politely and indirectly. In most cases a low-CQ individual would understandably think that the answer might be "yes."

SAYING "NO" IN RESPONSE TO "HAS MY PROPOSAL BEEN ACCEPTED?"[9]

Conditional "yes"	If everything proceeds as planned, the proposal will be approved.
Counter-question	Have you submitted a copy of your proposal to the ministry of . . . ?
Criticizing the question	Your question is very difficult to answer.
Refusing the question	We cannot answer this question at this time.
Tangential reply	Will you be staying longer than you had originally planned?
Yes, but	Yes, approval looks likely, but . . .
Delayed answer	You should know shortly.

The problems associated with explicitness of communication are not limited to face-to-face communication. In fact, the use of e-mail as the preferred mode of communication in many firms can make these problems even more difficult. One Dutch manager (direct convention) was so frustrated in trying to understand the real message in e-mails from his Mexican counterpart (indirect convention) that he finally jumped on an airplane and flew from Amsterdam to Mexico City just to get clarification.[10]

VERBOSITY AND SILENCE

Cultures vary in their conventions about *how much* and *how loudly* one should talk. Americans are notorious for talking a lot and talking loudly. Silence can be used deliberately and strategically in communication. Japanese negotiators use silence as a means of controlling negotiating processes, whereas Finns use it as a way of encouraging a speaker to continue. As the

counselor in one of our opening vignettes failed to note, in Malaysia silence can show respect. Interpreting silence accurately is important in culturally intelligent communication.

Nonverbal Communication

RAY MOVES TO GREECE

I had no trouble finding the café. It was picture-perfect, as many are in Athens: checkered tablecloths, white walls, nice Mediterranean atmosphere. It was morning, so there were no customers. Behind the counter, a slim woman in her forties was getting ready for the start of the day. Dimitri's mother. I'd seen her photos.

"Mrs. Theodoridis?"

She turned toward me, puzzled.

"I'm Ray. From Australia. Your son Dimitri . . . "

She smiled broadly. "Oh, Ray! Yes! You Ray! Oh yes, Dimitri write me that you come to Greece. Oh, come, come! Sit! I bring you come coffee."

She moved toward the kitchen, motioning me to sit at one of the tables. Suddenly, a worried frown spread across her features. "Oh! Maybe you no like Greek coffee? Maybe you want ouzo?"

She was fussing over me. If there's one thing we Australians can't stand, it's being fussed over. But I stayed polite.

"Coffee would be great, thank you."

She nodded and went into the kitchen. I sat down at the table. She came back with the coffee and stood opposite me. She was speaking to me in a warm, indulgent gush.

"Dimitri tell me you *so* help him when he move to Australia, with his English and everything." She put the coffee down on the table and sat down opposite me, leaning toward me. She seemed too close. I could smell her perfume. I leaned back a little. Australian guys don't like being gushed over; we like to keep our distance.

"So." Suddenly she placed both her hands over one of mine, flat on the table. She stroked my hand a little. "How you like Athens?" Before I could answer, she moved her right hand, took a gentle hold of my cheek, and shook it affectionately. "You find girlfriend, yes?"

This was not going the way I had expected. I had envisaged a

more formal conversation, at a respectable distance, about Dimitri. Instead she had her hands all over me. Her eyes seemed to be staring right through me. And she was asking about my love life, for heaven's sake! What business was it of hers?

"Well, Mrs. Theodoridis," I managed, "I . . . err . . . um . . ." She was leaning toward me, close, intense. "I've only been here a couple of months."

"Yes, Ray, that's right." She was speaking to me as to a ten-year-old child. Now she took my face in both her hands, and leaned even closer. "You find nice Greek girl, settle down." At last she took her hands off me and leaned back, considering. "Some nice Greek girls. You have good salary at Constantine Shipping, yes?" She sipped her coffee. I was thinking, what *is* it with this woman? She is altogether too familiar. Better be polite, though.

"Well, Mrs. Theodoridis, I . . . err . . . haven't really thought about settling down."

"Yes, Ray, that's right." Why was she agreeing with everything I said? "Better be careful. Some of these Greek girls, they want big diamond ring, or fancy church wedding." A thought occurred to her. She leaned toward me, put her hand under my chin, and looked at me intensely. She said softly "Are you religious, Ray?"

Bugger me, I thought, I've only known her two minutes, and already she's asking about my personal life, my money, and my religion! I felt confused, embarrassed, and hot. And her constant pawing was getting to me. What to do?

Then I had a brainwave. Play for time! "Ah, well, Mrs. Theodoridis. Maybe I will have that ouzo after all."

"Aah!" She smiled and grasped my hand in a way that said, this is our special, shared moment. Then she got up, ruffled my hair, and went into the kitchen.

I looked after her, shaking my head involuntarily. What was she about? Why was she so personal to a stranger, why so intimate? What did she *want?*

This case is a good example of poor communication due to cultural differences in conventions and body language. Greece is a collectivist culture, with a lot of emphasis on the extended

family. Mrs. Theodoridis is treating Ray like a member of that family because of his close relationship to her son Dimitri—indeed she is treating him as if he *is* her son. And like many people in Southern European cultures, Greek people have a low interpersonal distance, and touching of the type Mrs. Theodoridis is doing is not uncommon, particularly between members of the extended family. But Ray, from the more reserved, higher-distance Australian culture, sees all this as intrusive: in his culture, touching between men and women often has sexual connotations. No wonder he is confused! And, it has to be said, in failing to notice Ray's embarrassment Mrs. Theodoridis shows low cultural intelligence.

The topic of body language is popular, and most of us now realize that we communicate, often inadvertently, by such means as physical proximity and orientation to another person, body movements, gestures, facial expression, eye contact, and tone of voice. Thus, nonverbal communication supplements verbal communication a great deal.

Often, nonverbal communication is a good guide to the truth: for example, if an athlete is sitting in the dressing room after the match with shoulders slumped, arms folded, and face glum, you do not need to ask, whatever his or her culture, whether his team won or lost. Sometimes nonverbal behavior reveals the opposite of verbal, for example, when someone red in the face and making a considerable effort to control himself, tells you, "No, I'm *not* angry."

Nonverbal communication often assists cross-cultural understanding because many nonverbal signals are similar between different cultures. For example, smiling universally expresses positive feelings. But there are also subtle variations between cultures: for example, Asians often smile to conceal nervousness or embarrassment. A shake of the head means disagreement in Western cultures but agreement in some parts of India. The codes that tell us the meanings of postures or gestures, or where to stand or whether to bow, sometimes agree across cultures but sometimes disagree.

DISTANCE

How close should you stand to other people when communicating with them? Should you face people directly or stand beside them? The answer can vary according to the characteristics of the other person, for example, his or her authority, age, or gender. But there are also differences among cultures. For example, in casual conversation, Greeks stand closer than Americans, who stand closer than Norwegians, and so on. A culturally intelligent person will be mindful of the comfort of those he or she deals with and will modify his or her social distance.[11]

TOUCHING

Should you ever touch the person you are communicating with? If so, where, and how much? In most cultures, touching another person symbolizes various emotions and relationships. The most obvious example is the handshake, which in many cultures denotes a friendly relationship—"I'm pleased to meet you" or "Goodbye for now." Kissing another person's cheek is common between men as well as women in France. In some cultures, approval or support may be shown by a slap on the back or a squeeze of the arm. Soccer players worldwide hug each other fiercely when their team scores a goal.

Because of gender differences and concerns about the sexual connotations of touching, conventions are often different for men and women. There are low-touch cultures (predominantly in North America, Northern Europe, and Asia) and high-touch cultures (predominantly in Latin America, Southern and Eastern Europe, and the Middle East). A touch that is meant to be meaningful in the United States, such as a pat on the back, might not even be noticed in a high-touch culture like Brazil.

BODY POSITION

In a case in chapter 1, a Samoan job applicant sat down in the office of an American manager to show respect by positioning

himself at a physically lower level. But the gesture misfired because to Americans sitting down when others are standing shows disrespect. Polite Americans wait for others to sit down before they do, and show respect by rising from their seats when others enter the room. The way people position themselves has meaning in all cultures, but it is hard to draw up any hard-and-fast rules.

Another common body-position issue is the adoption of a position that makes one's body look big—for example a rigid, angular stance to denote aggression or a curled-up, cowering posture to indicate submissiveness.[12] Bowing to show deference is common across many cultures, but in some its use is extreme. In Japan, the (unwritten) rules about who should bow to whom and how exactly they should do it are complex, subtle, and difficult to master. In fact, the culturally intelligent person knows that a foreigner trying to imitate Japanese bowing is at best humorous and at worst offensive, and that bowing in Japan is a custom best reserved for native Japanese.

GESTURES

Hand and arm movements are often used simply as physical accompaniments to words, to supplement them or to provide a visual illustration. Often gestures are meaningless without the verbal commentary, other than as a general statement of the state of mind of the person. But there are also gestures that carry established meanings, for example pointing to indicate direction, hands held up with the palms facing upward and outward to indicate defensiveness, and a shrug of the shoulders to indicate incomprehension or lack of interest. Other signals vary across cultures. Some gestures, which are positive, humorous, or harmless in some cultures, are considered hostile, offensive, or obscene in other cultures. High-CQ people tend to avoid explicit gestures until they know what they mean.

FACIAL EXPRESSION

Facial expressions most obviously indicate the basic human emotions: happiness, surprise, disgust, fear, anger, and sadness. The facial expressions denoting these are instinctive and common across cultures.[13] However, in most cultures people have learned how to disguise their emotions by adopting an expression that does not represent how they really feel. For example, do you truly believe that the flight attendant beaming happily at every passenger she serves is truly happy to meet each one? In some Asian cultures, smiling is often used to hide displeasure, sadness, or anger.

Emotions can also be concealed by the adoption of a neutral expression. Every negotiator and card player knows the value of being able to sit with a face devoid of any expression that might indicate to others how he or she is feeling. Thus, while natural facial expressions provide a cross-cultural *code* to others' emotions, in many situations *conventions* can mean that facial cues are either absent or misleading. For example, in collectivist cultures, the open expression of individual emotion is often suppressed because it may threaten group harmony. This is one reason why Westerners often characterize Chinese and Japanese people as inscrutable.

EYE CONTACT

Making, or avoiding, eye contact is another important form of nonverbal communication. In Western countries a moderate level of eye contact during conversation is a way of communicating friendliness or interest, whereas excessive eye contact (staring) is considered rude and lack of eye contact can be perceived as hostile. Eye contact is also used in conversation as a signal: for example, making eye contact with the other person as you finish a sentence often means, "Now it's your turn to speak." But Arabs, Latinos, Indians, and Pakistanis all have conventions of longer eye contact, whereas Africans

and East Asians interpret eye contact as conveying anger or insubordination. A further complication is the fact that most cultures have different conventions about eye contact depending on the gender, status, and so on of those involved.

With all areas of nonverbal communication, the ability to observe the behavior of others, to be mindful of it, and to be skilled at modifying one's own behavior are key components of cultural intelligence.

Negotiating across Cultures

Negotiation is a special communication situation in which the objective is often for people to overcome conflicting interests and to reach an agreement that is advantageous to all. The practices of negotiation include the making of threats and promises, the use of persuasion, the signaling of concessions, and the development of compromises and creative solutions. As usual, the existence of cross-cultural differences complicates things. Most international tourists know, for example, that there are some countries in which it is accepted custom to haggle in shops over the price of souvenirs, and others where one is expected to pay the marked price without any fuss.

WHEN IS IT TIME TO DO BUSINESS?

Bill Miller, a top American salesman with a major information technology manufacturer, sits in his Mexico City hotel room, head bowed, running his hands through his hair in frustration. Two days into his trip and with only twenty-four hours left, he feels he is no closer to "closing" the sale he is trying to make than he was when he arrived.

It's not that his Mexican hosts are hostile. On the contrary, they smile broadly at him, take a personal interest in him, and certainly look after all his physical needs: the hotel, for example, is excellent. But the Mexicans show very little interest in talking business. The manager who has been assigned to look after Bill is a good host but is not party to the deal Bill wants to negotiate. On the way in

from the airport, when Bill began to talk about his carefully prepared sales presentation, the manager seemed surprised. "Plenty of time for that later," he advised. "For the moment, you must be tired from your flight. Why not relax for a day or two and do some sightseeing first? I can look after you."

So Bill spent his first day being shown around Mexico City, struggling to conceal his impatience. On the second day, however, his host invited him to an after-work meeting with the senior managers of the company. Bill prepared carefully and arrived promptly at the meeting room with his PowerPoint display. No one was there, just a table of drinks and nibbles. Gradually the executives drifted in. They engaged Bill conversationally in English and began to ask questions. But the questions were not about the equipment Bill had to sell but about his company—its history, its plans, and its future expansion in Latin America. Next, they moved on to Bill himself, his history in the company, his views of the IT industry and their own industry, even his wife, family, and hobbies.

Bill was still impatient. He wanted to get on with his presentation, but he did not want to offend his hosts. Eventually, during a pause, he said, "Thanks—I am so grateful for your hospitality. Now, I wonder if we might sit down and let me go through my presentation. I think we have a real good deal here for your company."

There was an embarrassed silence. Then the deputy CEO said slowly, "Unfortunately, I think Mr. Alvarez may already have gone home." Alvarez was the CEO, and without his signature there could be no deal. "Maybe . . ." said the deputy CEO, "maybe tomorrow? In the meantime, why not come out to dinner so we can get to know each other better?" This time, Bill pleaded fatigue.

How on earth, he wondered, did these people ever sell anything to each other, or buy anything from each other, let alone from him?

Back at his home, Juan Alvarez lit a cigarette thoughtfully. The American had looked so ill at ease that Juan just hadn't felt like sticking around. He had wanted to try to build a business relationship, a basis not just for one future deal, but for many. Miller had thrown it back in his face. Alvarez had seen it before with Americans.

How on earth, he wondered, did they ever learn to really trust each other in business?

The behavior of the different participants in the story and the reflections of Miller and Alvarez reveal distinct outlooks on business relationships and how best to pursue them. Bill, like most Americans, is concerned with the short term, with being efficient, reaching a conclusion, and not wasting time on social trivia. Juan and his staff, like members of most Latin cultures and many others, believe that good business is the result of good business relationships. Therefore, the initial effort must go into building a relationship: it is worth spending time to do so.

The result is that both Bill and Juan endanger what they value most—Bill endangers the immediate transaction, and Juan endangers the long-term business relationship. If each had been willing to accommodate, at least in part, the other's customs, a worthwhile business relationship could by now be under way and each could have secured exactly what he wanted.

Negotiating Styles

Negotiation processes typically go through different phases, and there are intercultural differences in the emphasis on each phase. The phases are:

- building a relationship
- exchanging information
- trying to persuade each other
- making concessions and reaching agreement[14]

Generally, people in Western cultures take a relatively "transactional" approach to negotiation, focusing mainly on the last two stages. Many other cultures focus on creating a background relationship that will make agreement more likely, and emphasize the social side of the situation over the task side. The case of Bill Miller in Mexico is an example of

people from two cultures not being able to negotiate with each other because each was stuck in a different part of the process. Culturally intelligent Americans learn to be sociable and patient in negotiation, and culturally intelligent Asians and Latinos learn to get to the point a more quickly.

Styles of persuasion may also differ. In political and business negotiating in Western societies, rational argument is favored, whereas in some other countries appeals to emotion or ideology may be used. Again, Western negotiators, having individualist values, are relatively competitive in their negotiating style, whereas Asians are likely to be more polite, more obscure, and more restrained. One researcher has used the metaphors of "sports" and "household" to explain the different approaches of American and Japanese negotiators. The sports metaphor of the individualist Americans suggests that they are task-oriented, accept conflict as normal, and try to conduct an orderly process with rules of procedure within which they have the chance to excel and win. The household metaphor of the more collectivist Japanese, in contrast, is focused on their relationships, their desire to avoid overt conflict and save face, and the fact that they gain satisfaction from the performance of their role rather than from winning.[15]

Another key cultural variable is power distance (see chapter 2), the extent to which people expect to see power and authority invoked to solve problems. The arbitration model of negotiation supposes that whenever there are differences of interest to be negotiated, there should be a higher-level authority figure who can resolve any problem by making a decision that is imposed on all parties. This is often observed in Japan. Another model is the bureaucratic one, which attempts to reduce the need for negotiation by specifying in advance rules and procedures suitable for solving disagreements. This model is often observed in Germany.

Again, there are differences in the details of negotiating:

for example, the level at which initial offers are made and the willingness of the negotiator to make concessions. An American negotiator might be put off by a Chinese, Arab, or Russian counterpart because these groups seem to start off with extreme positions. Russians are also reluctant to make concessions, seeing this as a sign of weakness, whereas other groups such as North Americans and Arabs will make concessions and respond to others' concessions. To complicate matters further, negotiators alter their behavior when they are negotiating with people from different countries. Finally, of course, the generalizations made above about different cultural groups' negotiating styles are subject to substantial individual differences.

In cross-cultural negotiation, it may be possible to use combinations of these different methods, but doing so requires all parties to step temporarily outside their normal conventions.

Principles for Cross-Cultural Communication and Negotiation

While plenty of information is available on cross-cultural communication and negotiation, from both everyday observation and systematic research, it is difficult to spell out hard-and-fast rules for communicating and negotiating. However, here are some broad principles.

- *Gain the knowledge to anticipate differences*. Learn what you can of the codes and conventions of groups that you plan to deal with. Be aware of all the various areas of difference in communication we have noted in this chapter—for example, verbal versus nonverbal, contextual versus noncontextual, different negotiating styles. Learn the prevailing cultural values of the country—for example, individualist versus collectivist—and think about how these may influence the process of your contacts.

- *Practice mindfulness*. Pay attention to the *context* and the *conventions* of communication. There is a tendency to focus on the code and content of messages, but you can acquire additional information by attending to *how* messages are delivered. Additionally, question attributions. In chapter 3 we discussed the process in which we go behind surface behavior of others to attribute motivation and meaning. As we have seen, the meaning we usually attribute is based on a familiar understanding of our own behavior and that of our cultural group. Practicing mindfulness helps us to see new possibilities for the meaning in the behavior of other cultural groups.
- *Develop cross-cultural skills*. How much should you adapt your behavior to accommodate the codes, conventions, and style of another culture? You and the other party have potentially conflicting goals, so this situation is challenging. Should you try to imitate them or just be yourself? Some adaptation seems to improve relationships by making the other party more comfortable, but too much adaptation can cause suspicion and distrust. Finding the optimal point of adaptation is more art than science. However, by improving your cultural intelligence, you can gain a broad repertoire of adaptive skills and the knowledge of when they are appropriate.

Summary

Communication is fundamental to all social interactions and relationships. Cross-cultural communication presents many possible barriers to shared understanding because individuals from different cultures don't share a common background, codes, or conventions. While language skills are important, cross-cultural communication involves much more than language differences. Culturally based codes and conventions of language also involve nonverbal signals and communication styles. Negotiation is a special communication situation in

which the parties have potentially conflicting goals. While all negotiations follow a similar process, the emphasis placed on each stage varies considerably across cultures. The challenging nature of negotiations makes high cultural intelligence a prerequisite for knowing when, how, and how much to adapt one's behavior to achieve the most successful outcome.