



## **Twenty Strategies for Successful Cross-Cultural Interaction: Competencies of the Interculturally Effective Business Person**

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Culture matters more, not less, in the “borderless” global economy.

Whether you are a Human Resources manager of German heritage leading the staffing function of a multinational company based in Silicon Valley, or an Indian woman manager experiencing sex discrimination on returning to work in your native country after years of managing and studying in the United States, or a Dane relocating to Japan and working with Asians for the first time, your competencies must include those of leading in the multinational or multicultural context.

Of all the *cultural literacies* to develop, building effective relationships with diverse employees, collaborative alliances with suppliers, and strong connections with customers are among the most challenging.

The following twenty strategies for successful cross-cultural interaction are among the most important competencies that can enable you to build trust and gain respect, cooperation and influence. Global managers need a global mindset, reflected by a broader repertoire of interpersonal skills because the behaviors constituting these skills vary across cultures. For example, Westerners become much more effective and gain more respect when they learn to think and act in terms of saving face with most Asians - whether in making introductions and exchanging business cards appropriately, or interpreting “I’ll try.” as a polite “no” to an invitation.

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## Twenty Cross-Cultural Strategies for Effective Intercultural Interaction

Interculturally effective persons:

1. **Have a concept of culture and are aware of the pervasive influence it has on human interaction.** They recognize that every cultural custom, whether they can accept it or not, has cultural integrity.
2. **Are aware of their own cultural beliefs, values, and attitudes.** The more they understand their own culture and cultural identity, the more they can perceive their own perspective, their interpretation of other cultures through their cultural lens from cultural conditioning, and their reactions to others' behavior and events. Example: the North American tendency to "get down to business" or the Latin American tendency to establish relationships first. They recognize also how others may view them as a "product" of their culture.
3. **Have knowledge of other countries and cultures and demonstrate the curiosity to expand that knowledge.** Expatriate and transferred managers especially understand the history, geography, social mores, customs, political system, and socio-economic conditions relevant to living in the host country and how these factors impact their assignment and goal achievement. For example, a manager from Europe working in the USA is able to understand the American custom of displaying the national flag both before and since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks without judging this phenomenon as good/bad, right/wrong.
4. **Practice empathy:** The ability to see reality as others experience it in their respective cultures. We tend to prefer to work with leaders who give the impression that they understand things from our own perspective.
5. **Show respect in their attitudes and behavior for other cultures and customs.** Examples: making the effort to pronounce someone's name correctly, learning a few key words of the language(s) of a country where one is doing business, and following social protocol such as respecting hierarchy. In much of Latin America, for example, the manager will develop a close, even protective relationship with employees who may expect him or her to understand their family situation and how family life impacts their jobs.
6. **Know their threshold of tolerance for ambiguity and have strategies to deal with it,** such as taking time to reflect or asking questions before reacting to something new, confusing, or uncomfortable.
7. **Listen and observe. They can listen for what they don't expect to hear or what is beyond their range of normal assumptions.** They are able to go beyond the literal content of the discussion and observe meanings in silence, in the unstated, and in posture, gestures, and dress style.
8. **Quickly learn from their interactions and develop informed judgment.** They make an effort to quickly read and assess people in other cultures by that culture's standards. For example, they learn to ask for a local manager's assessment of an employee who may seem competent and friendly, but may be less regarded by peers or customers. In turn, culturally literate managers are also able to adjust their own behavioral style according to others' reactions to them.
9. **Practice patience with another's communication style, limited language competence, and with different business practices,** such as decision making by

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consensus. Patience takes time, but is worth it to build trust and relationships, and to earn the respect of others.

10. **Win the trust of people of other cultures** by being genuine, easily approachable, open and inclusive, by understanding employee allegiances and loyalty to local reporting structure, and by demonstrating cultural savvy - such as following rules of social and business protocol.
11. **Create climate conducive to achieving tasks** by: facilitating cross-cultural communication for multinational, co-located staff; bringing about shared understanding of roles and responsibilities of everyone; preventing and resolving interpersonal conflicts that are cultural in origin; and operating from a global vision that includes everyone. For example, culturally effective managers help those managers and employees accustomed to a more hierarchical structure feel safe in taking initiative and speaking up in meetings when held in a more egalitarian organization or setting.
12. **Give feedback appropriately:** Be direct or indirect, depending on the culture of the person receiving the feedback. Give negative feedback privately and constructively, recognizing that in many cultures criticizing a person's idea or work is the same as criticizing the person.
13. **Are able to manage the complexity of the global business context** by creating organizational practices that reconcile the various cultural perspectives present. For example, a global HR director must manage outsourcing of technical knowledge workers with vendors in other countries, taking into account labor laws with legal requirements and ramifications. He or she must find competent attorneys in countries of operations and coordinate with the company's legal department and sometimes with a translation service as well.
14. **Develop a flexible outlook and behaviors.** Global managers do not get stuck in "right or wrong" thinking about other cultures' and individuals' ways of doing business. They cultivate a range of options for culturally appropriate solutions to problems with a multicultural perspective.
15. **Leverage cultural differences for mutual gain** by finding a third way beyond the Their Way vs. Our Way compromise. Effective global managers intentionally look for what's unique and for unique contributions, such as using cross-cultural negotiation skills to help other international teams in the company negotiate contracts.
16. **Understand the experience of both "culture shock" and "culture barriers".** Culture shock is an *internal* response to being in a "strange" culture with no cultural guideposts or familiar cues of ones' personal, social, cultural, physical and business environment. We don't know how to respond or behave in these instances and feel anxious, stressed and inadequate. A culture barrier is *external* and is encountered when two or more people experience a difference of values, assumptions, or expectations of appropriate behaviors or methods to do a task. Culture barriers contribute to culture shock. They can also occur without culture shock, such as in transcontinental telephone discussions and e-mail correspondence.
17. **Express a strong interest in people from different cultures.** They get to know their backgrounds and discover their uniqueness.

18. **Let everyone know the rules:** Help a diverse group feel comfortable by telling them where telephones and restrooms are, cell phone etiquette, smoking policies, protocol for meetings and training sessions - including expectations of participation - brainstorming (not a universal activity), tipping and seating practices in restaurants, etc.
19. **Say “maybe” and ask questions.** Culturally effective people say “maybe” to attribute cause for some event or unexpected behavior and ask questions to check the viability of their own assumptions to prevent making faux pas. They recognize that unexpected behaviors and strong emotional reactions are often signs of language and culture barriers. Instead of anger or impatience, they ask questions to clarify, check and learn. Example: When deadlines are missed, a culturally effective person will say that maybe it’s due to the notion of time in that culture or that the importance of the deadlines to customers hasn’t been shared; or maybe this person recognizes that not having a strong relationship with the persons missing the deadlines influences the task priority for them. Then he/she will ask a trusted person to help interpret the situation.
20. **Above all, culturally effective people communicate well in a diverse environment.** To minimize miscommunication, they tend to:
- Find out the cultural norms for communicating in other cultures.** For example, is a direct style frequently used, as in Israel, Germany, and France? Or is an indirect style more appropriate, as in Japan, Indonesia, and the Philippines? Is it acceptable to ask direct questions when getting acquainted, such as the United States custom of saying “What do you do for a living?” Or, is such a question considered impolite or too personal?
  - Check for understanding when interacting with people who have limited fluency in the language being spoken** – effective speakers don’t assume that what they meant was understood nor that what they understood was the intended message.
  - Are consistent, repeating with their exact words when not understood or asked to repeat.**
  - Speak international English as a lingua franca, avoiding idioms** that come from British, Canadian, Irish, Australian, American or other cultures. For example, instead of *We tend to feel uncomfortable when people “toot their own horn” or act like “tall poppies”*, say: *We tend to feel uncomfortable when people brag about themselves.*
  - Pay careful attention to humor**, which is nearly always culturally based and doesn’t translate well. They avoid sarcasm or jokes based on local cultural values and points of reference (such as TV shows) if these are not shared by everyone in the group. They explain the punch line when people don’t “get it”.
  - Learn to interpret others’ nonverbal communication accurately and pay attention to their own and how it may be interpreted.** For example, many Westerners may have to tolerate more frequent silence in conversation with Japanese and some Finnish speakers and vice versa.