

How to Master Intercultural Communication

by Carol Dunitz, Ph.D.

Interacting with people from other cultures can be fascinating. Whether you are abroad or on home turf, you are often exposed to new and fascinating ways of doing things. If you are about to take a trip to another country, it is a good idea to brush up on the culture and traditions in advance of your departure. This can be instrumental in avoiding potential miscommunication. If you are dealing with people from many cultures on a routine basis, some fundamental information about value systems and how people relate in certain parts of the world can be invaluable. It will help you know how to interact in an appropriate way. Concentrating on five basic categories will give you a running start when interacting with individuals from other cultures.

INDIVIDUALISTIC and COLLECTIVISTIC CULTURES

Individualistic Cultures foster individualism and focus on individual goals.

There is a preference for 'equal' relationships, and behavior cannot be predicted from group memberships. Representative Cultures: Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, England, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, New Zealand, Sweden and the United States.

Collectivistic Cultures focus on group goals. There is strong emphasis on traditions and conformity. Representative Cultures: Argentina, Brazil, China, Egypt, Ethiopia, Greece, Guatemala, India, Japan, Korea, Mexico and Saudi Arabia.

MASCULINE and FEMININE CULTURES

Masculine Cultures have differentiated gender roles and are characterized by power, assertiveness and performance. Representative Cultures: Arab cultures, Austria, Germany, Italy, Jamaica, Japan, Mexico, New Zealand, Switzerland and Venezuela.

Feminine Cultures value quality of life and service. Sex roles are androgynous. Feminine cultures have overlapping gender roles. Representative Cultures: Chile, Costa Rica, Denmark, East African cultures, Finland, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Sweden and Thailand.

LOW and HIGH POWER DISTANCE CULTURES

With **Low Power Distance Cultures**, individuals are viewed as equals. Emphasis is placed on legitimate power. Superiors and subordinates are interdependent. Representative Cultures: Australia, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Ireland, Israel, New Zealand, Sweden and the United States.

With **High Power Distance Cultures**, individuals are seen as unequal. Subordinates are dependent on those above them. Representative Cultures: Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Malaysia, Nigeria, Panama, Saudi Arabia and Venezuela.

LOW and HIGH UNCERTAINTY AVOIDANCE CULTURES

Low Uncertainty Avoidance Cultures are characterized by low stress and anxiety. Dissent is acceptable. There is a high level of risk taking. Uncertainty is OK. Representative Cultures: Canada, Denmark, England, Hong Kong, India, Jamaica, Sweden and the United States.

High Uncertainty Avoidance Cultures are characterized by high stress and anxiety. There is a strong desire for agreement. People do not like to take risks. Representative Cultures: Egypt, Argentina, Belgium, Chile, France, Greece, Japan and Mexico.

LOW CONTEXT and HIGH CONTEXT COMMUNICATION

High Content/Low Context Messages are *direct and clear* with most of the message explicit in the code. This form predominates in individualistic cultures.

High Context/Low Content Messages are indirect and ambiguous. Most of the information is internalized in the person or his surroundings. This form is found more typically in collectivistic cultures.

Be aware of cultural differences and how they should impact your communication. When you're not sure how to proceed, be respectful. That goes a long way in successfully establishing relationships.

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