

Cross-Cultural Communication: Silence, Time, Space, Formality, and Other Possible Misunderstandings (1,105 words)

Have you noticed that some people are quite chatty and others are sort of silent, or that some people arrive five or ten minutes early for appointments, or some people stand really close to each other when talking, or how informally and formally people interact with each other?

Silence Can be Golden: Silence can convey so many different messages across cultures. Silence can be used to express disagreement, surprise, sorrow, defiance, approval, embarrassment, obligation, criticism, calming, humility, regret, condemnation, consent, and many more.

Americans believe that talking is good and that rhetoric is critical to self-expression. Often believing a person has greater impact by speaking rather than listening. Most Americans are uncomfortable with long periods of silence. Americans tend to rush through pauses and quickly complete sentences. The Western tradition is relatively negative in its attitude toward silence, especially in professional and social relations. Speech has a positive connotation and silence has a negative one.

Many other cultures find that silence is a valuable component of nonverbal communication. Nonverbal communication, which includes listening behaviors, is a critical component of social currency and is very important in demonstrating caring and demonstrating understanding. The ability to substitute strong emotional reactions with polite silence is important for social harmony. The effort suggests the value of silence and its association with self-restraint.

It is important to consider cultural dynamics. Silence, to some, is golden. America is a relatively task-oriented culture, and Americans often want to get to the point. A socially-oriented culture may practice silence to build relationship. Silence demonstrates not just hearing, but real consideration and valuation of what is being said by others. Silence and listening is a key element in cross-cultural interactions and establishing trust.

It's About Time: You have probably noticed, personally and professionally, that some people arrive five or ten minutes early for appointments. Some people arrive twenty to thirty minutes later than scheduled. It could be a cross-cultural communication issue. Cultures organize time and space differently. A researcher named Edward Hall categorizes cultures as either monochronic or polychronic.

Monochronic orientations emphasize schedules, the compartmentalization and segmentation of measurable units of time. In these cultures, time is thought of as almost physical. We often hear terms like saving, spending, wasting and losing time. As we say, "Time is money." Through compartmentalizing and segmenting time, a person's day is completely planned and scheduled, including sleep, work and leisure. This is sometimes referred to as a displaced time orientation. Tardiness and missed appointments are a source of anxiety and tension.

In polychronic cultures, schedules are not as important and appointments are frequently broken. In these cultures, a person may be engaged in several activities, in the same space, and with several people simultaneously. This is sometimes referred to as a diffused time orientation. Polychronic people can do many things at once, and relationships take priority over schedules, and they can comfortably tolerate interruptions and distractions. The guiding principle, of being in the present, guides their behavior.

When it comes to time constraints, try to relax, and recognize that it could be a cross-cultural difference, and place more concern on participation rather than punctuality. Different cultures have a different orientation to time. Some cultures have a displaced time orientation; time is viewed as exact. Some cultures have a diffused time orientation; time is seen as approximate.

Give Me Some Space: Some people stand really close to each other when they talk to each other. Some people stand across the room when they chat. So, do you close the gap or ask people to back up to provide some space? Often different cultures have different orientations to social space. For some, spatial distance is just as powerful a communication component as sight, sound, smell, and touch.

There are a number of different theories when it comes to space. One is protection theory, that we establish a body space buffer zone around ourselves as protection against unwanted touch or attack. Equilibrium theory explains that intimacy and distance vary together. The greater the intimacy, the closer the distance; the lower the intimacy, the greater the distance. Finally, expectancy theory explains what happens when you increase or decrease distance between yourself and another in interpersonal interactions. Researchers, Lustig and Koester, discovered in cross-cultural studies that people in the United States prefer or expect greater distances between themselves and others than do persons living in many Latin American cultures.

People from colder climates have a tendency to use large physical distances when they communicate, whereas, people from warmer climates tend to use small physical distances. Even Northern European cultures are said to have larger personal space bubbles than southern European cultures. In some Middle Eastern cultures, people stand close enough to feel and smell each other's breath.

So, plant your feet and let the other person determine the distance that is comfortable for them. Space, sight, sound, smell, and touch all have a significant impact on your interpersonal interactions. Observe others' behaviors, monitor and manage your own, and enjoy cross-cultural spatial comfort.

It's Just a Formality: You have probably noticed a difference in how informally and formally people interact with each other. Cultures, like the United States, are sometimes called egalitarian, symmetrical, or horizontal, because we believe that humans are created equal. Interpersonal relationships follow this theme of equality. Interpersonal relationships operate on a fairly equal basis regardless of differences in age, sex, status,

or rank. In horizontal cultures, communicators frequently are informal. In North America, people tend to treat others with informality and directness. Often they skip the use of formal codes of conduct, titles, and ritualistic manners in their interactions with others. They may prefer a to be on a first-name basis and expect a direct communication style.

Some cultures are referred to as vertical or complementary, because people are assumed to be unequal or un-egalitarian. Interpersonal relationships take place on hierarchical levels that supply individuals with guidelines concerning how to behave. In vertical cultures, people believe that formality is essential. The value of formality in verbal and nonverbal styles allows for a smooth and predictable interaction. Both verbal and nonverbal communication styles depend upon the status of the other person.

Overall, the United States is quite informal. Often we use first names sooner than any other culture, even with our supervisors and managers. When it comes to other cultures, pay great attention to the way people introduce themselves, or ask how they would like to be addressed, and you should be just fine.

Kit Welchlin, M.A., CSP, is a professional speaker and author and can be found at www.welchlin.com.