Intercultural Communication Skills

Intercultural communication skills are those required to communicate, or share information, with people from other cultures and social groups.

While language skills may be an important part of intercultural communication, they are by no means the only requirement.

Intercultural communication also requires an understanding that different cultures have different customs, standards, social mores, and even thought patterns.

Finally, good intercultural communication skills requires a willingness to accept differences these and adapt to them.

A Starting Point for Intercultural Communication

**A desire for intercultural communication starts from the point of view that communication is better if it is constructive, and does not suffer from misunderstandings and breakdowns.**

Intercultural communication requires both knowledge and skills. It also requires understanding and [empathy](https://www.skillsyouneed.com/ips/empathy.html).

Effective intercultural communication is a vital skill for anyone working across countries or continents, including those working for multinational companies either in their home country or abroad (expatriates).

It is also crucial for anyone working with people from other cultures to avoid misunderstandings and even offence. Those studying languages often encounter issues of intercultural communication.

Knowledge for Intercultural Communication

**Key areas of knowledge for those wanting to improve their intercultural communication are:**

* Some knowledge of the cultures, organisations and institutions, history and general way of living of different communities and nations.
* Recognition that these aspects affect behavioural norms. For example, there is considerable ‘history’ between the Greeks and Turks, and therefore it may be considered potentially a problem to serve Turkish food to a Greek person.
* An understanding of how culture can affect communication and language. For example, people from Nordic countries are often said to speak more directly than native English speakers who tend to use more ‘polite’ language. Scandinavians in the UK have reported causing offence to English people by failing to say ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ enough.
* Some understanding of the conventions that may govern behaviour in certain specific intercultural environments, such as views on the role of women, or the licence (or otherwise) permitted to children.
* Crucially, awareness of your own and other people’s beliefs and values, and a willingness to recognise when these may clash.
* Sensitivity towards cultural stereotypes that may affect and interfere with intercultural communication.

Applying Your Knowledge

**Once you have developed this knowledge and understanding, you can start to apply it to your communications across cultures and even languages.**

**Some useful starting points may be:**

* **Demonstrate your willingness to meet others at least halfway by learning a few phrases in their language.**

This is easy if you know that you’re going on holiday somewhere, but it’s also important for expatriate assignments and other business trips. A few phrases, even if it’s only ‘*Good morning*’, ‘*good evening*’, and ‘*thank you*’, will go a long way.

There are plenty of free language resources available on the internet so there is no excuse for ignorance.

If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart.

Nelson Mandela

* **Talk to people who know the culture about common traps and problems.**

Before you go, find people who know the region to which you’re travelling, and ask their advice. Ask your co-workers what people commonly do that’s just ‘wrong’, or what problems they have encountered, and learn from it. Listen carefully to their answers, including what they don’t say, as this can tell you a lot.

For more about this, see our pages on **[Questioning](https://www.skillsyouneed.com/ips/questioning.html)** and **[Listening](https://www.skillsyouneed.com/ips/listening-skills.html)**.

* **Adapt your behaviour, and don’t always expect others to adapt to you**

This includes not being offended if someone unwittingly does something that you find difficult to accept. You don’t have to accept it, but it’s best to explain politely why you find it hard, not just go off in a sulk.

You may also want to read our page on the **[Ladder of Inference](https://www.skillsyouneed.com/ips/ladder-of-inference.html)** to be aware of some of the traps and miscommunications that are potentially possible.

* **Check your understanding and that of others**

The best way to avoid misunderstandings is to listen carefully and check understanding regularly in the course of a conversation. Ask questions to make sure that you have understood, and ask others to recap what you have said to ensure that they have understood you.

For more about this, see our pages on **[Active Listening](https://www.skillsyouneed.com/ips/active-listening.html)** and **[Clarifying](https://www.skillsyouneed.com/ips/clarification.html)**.

* **Don’t be afraid to apologise**

You can usually see quite quickly if you have caused offence. The fastest way to manage that is to apologise, and ask what it was that you did. A confession of total ignorance will often go a long way to mitigate offence. Ignoring it will just offend further.

See our page: **[Apologising | Saying Sorry](https://www.skillsyouneed.com/ips/apologising.html)** for more.

* **Use local television to learn about behavioural issues and norms**

You wouldn’t want to rely on television dramas as your only source of information, but they can provide useful insights. In the UK, for instance, *Coronation Street* or *EastEnders* could give you an idea of what’s considered acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. Comedies are perhaps less reliable as they often use communication difficulties to generate laughs.

* **Reflect on your experience**

As with so many aspects of life, a little reflection about your experience can help you to put it in context, especially if you are able to discuss it with someone else in a similar position.

For more about this, see our page on **[Reflective Practice](https://www.skillsyouneed.com/ps/reflective-practice.html)**.

An Understanding of Difference

**Good intercultural communication fundamentally requires [intercultural awareness](https://www.skillsyouneed.com/ips/intercultural-awareness.html), an understanding that different cultures have different standards and norms. But more, it requires an understanding that individuals are shaped, but not bounded, by their cultural background and that, sometimes, you have to meet people more than halfway.**