Intercultural Communication

A Reader

Ninth Edition

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Understanding Intercultural Communication: An Introduction and Overview

Larry A. Samovar
Richard E. Porter

Human beings draw close to one another by their common nature, but habits and customs keep them apart.

CONFUCIUS

THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

The need for intercultural communication, as you might suspect is as old as human kind. From wandering tribes to traveling traders and religious missionaries, people have encountered others different from themselves. These earlier meetings, like those of today, were frequently confusing and quite often hostile. The recognition of alien differences, and the human propensity to respond malevolently to them, was expressed more than two thousand years ago by the Greek playwright Aeschylus, who wrote, “Everyone’s quick to blame the alien.” This sentiment is still a powerful element in today’s social and political rhetoric. For instance, it is not uncommon in today’s society to hear people say that most, if not all, of the social and economic problems of the United States are caused by minorities and immigrants.

Although intercultural contact has a long history, today’s intercultural encounters are far more numerous and of greater importance than in any previous time in human history. So you might appreciate the significance of the study of intercultural communication, we will pause for a moment and briefly highlight the widespread nature of cultural interaction.

New technology, in the form of transportation and communication systems, has accelerated intercultural contact. Trips once taking days, weeks, or even months are now measured in hours. Supersonic transports now make it possible for tourists, business executives, or government officials to enjoy breakfast in San Francisco and dinner in Paris—all on the same day.

Innovative communication systems have also encouraged and facilitated cultural interaction. Communication satellites, sophisticated television transmission equipment, and digital switching networks now allow people throughout the world to share information and ideas at the same time. Whether it be via the Internet, the World Wide Web, or a CNN news broadcast, electronic devices have increased cultural contact. For example, the world now has 1.2 billion television sets, which allows people, regardless of their location, to perceive the same image and message (Higgins, 1995, p. 6). As U.S. News & World Report noted, “Television’s impact on the world community cannot be overstated” (1996, p. 48).

Globalization of the economy has further brought people together. At the conclusion of World War II, the United States emerged as the only military and economic superpower. Most of the rest of the world’s economy was in disarray. Because industry in the United States was not damaged during World War II, it was the dominant economic force in the world. However, this preeminence in business is not the case as we enter the twenty-first century. For example, according to Harris and Moran (1996), there are now “more than 37,000 transnational corporations with 207,000 foreign affiliates” (p. 18). This expansion in globalization has resulted in multinational corporations participating in various international business arrangements such as joint ventures and licensing agreements. These, and countless other economic ties, mean that it would not be unusual for someone to work for an organization that does business in many countries.

Changes in immigration patterns have also contributed to the development of expanded intercultural contact. Within the boundaries of the United States, people are now redefining and rethinking the
meaning of the word American. Neither the word nor the reality can any longer be used to describe a somewhat homogeneous group of people sharing a European heritage. We have now become, as the author Ben J. Wattenberg (1989) tells us, “the first universal nation, a truly multi-cultural society marked by unparalleled diversity” (p. 31).

The last few paragraphs have told us that, with or without our desire or consent, we are now thrust into contact with countless people who often appear alien, exotic, and perhaps even wondrous. Whether we are negotiating a major contract with the Chinese, discussing a joint venture with a German company, being supervised by someone from Mexico, counseling a young student from Cambodia, or working alongside someone who speaks no English, we encounter people with cultural backgrounds that are often strikingly different from our own. Understanding these backgrounds is essential if we want to be successful in both our social and professional lives.

**COMMUNICATION AND CULTURE**

Concern about cultural diversity has given rise to the marriage of culture and communication and to the recognition of intercultural communication as a unique field of study. Inherent in this fusion is the idea that intercultural communication entails the investigation of those elements of culture that most influence interaction when members of two or more cultures come together in an interpersonal setting. To better understand that influence we will first examine the essential elements of culture and then explain how these elements modify the communication process.

**UNDERSTANDING CULTURE**

People in Paris eat snails, but people in San Diego put poison on them. Why? People in Iran sit on the floor and pray five times each day, but people in Las Vegas stand up all night in front of slot machines. Why? Some people speak Tagalog, others speak English. Why? Some people paint and decorate their entire bodies, but others spend millions of dollars painting and decorating only their faces. Why? Some people talk to God, but others have God talk to them. Why?

The general answer to all these questions is the same. It is our culture that supplies us with the answers to these and countless other questions about what the world looks like and how we live and communicate within that world. From the instant of birth, a child is formally and informally taught how to behave. This omnipresent and commanding power of culture leads Hall (1977) to conclude that “there is not one aspect of human life that is not touched and altered by culture” (p. 14). In many ways Hall is correct: Culture is everything and everywhere. And, more important, at least for the purposes of this book, culture and communication work in tandem—they are inseparable. In fact, it is often difficult to decide which is the voice and which is the echo.

Culture helps govern and define the conditions and circumstances under which various messages may or may not be sent, noticed, or interpreted. Our entire repertory of communicative behaviors depends largely on the culture in which we have been raised. Remember, we are not born knowing how to dress, what toys to play with, what to eat, which gods to worship, or how to spend our money and our time. Culture is both teacher and textbook. From how much eye contact we make to explanations of why we get sick, culture plays a dominant role in our lives. It is the foundation of communication; and when cultures are diverse, communication practices may be different. This important point is clearly illustrated by Smith (1966), who wrote:

In modern society different people communicate in different ways, as do people in different societies around the world; and the way people communicate is the way they live. It is their culture. Who talks with whom? How? And about what? these are questions of communication and culture. A Japanese geisha and a New England librarian send and receive different messages on different channels and in different networks. When the elements of communication differ or change, the elements of culture differ or change. Communication and culture are inseparable. (p. 1)

**The Basic Function of Culture**

The anthropologist Haviland (1993) suggests that “[p]eople maintain cultures to deal with problems or matters that concern them” (p. 29). It is believed
that our ancestors created cultures for the same reasons. Both then and now, culture serves the basic need of laying out a predictable world in which an individual is firmly oriented. Culture enables us to make sense of our surroundings. As the English writer Thomas Fuller wrote two hundred years ago, “Culture makes all things easy.” Although this view might be slightly overstated, culture does ease the transition from the womb to this new life by giving meaning to events, objects, and people in the environment. In this way culture makes the world a less frightening and mysterious place.

A Definition of Culture

It should be clear to this point that culture is ubiquitous, multidimensional, complex, and all-pervasive. Because culture is so broad, there is no single definition or central theory of what it is. Definitions range from the all-encompassing (“it is everything”) to the narrow (“it is opera, art, and ballet”). For our purposes we shall define culture as the deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, social hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relationships, concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving.

Characteristics of Culture

Regardless of the definition employed, there is general agreement about the major characteristics of culture. Examining these universal characteristics will help us understand this nebulous concept called culture, and also enable us to see how these characteristics influence communication.

Culture Is Not Innate; It Is Learned. We begin with the single most important characteristic of culture, and the one that is hardest to explain. It is the most important because it goes to the heart of what is called culture.

Without the advantages of learning from those who lived before us, we would not have culture. Therefore, you can appreciate why we said that learning was the most important of all the characteristics of culture. Babies cut off from all adult care, training, and supervision would instinctively eat, drink, defecate, urinate, gurgle, and cry. But what they would eat, when they would eat, where they would defecate, and the like would be random. What we are saying is that all of us are born with basic needs—needs that create behavior. But how we go about meeting those needs and developing other coping behaviors are a matter of learning. As Bates and Plog (1990) note:

Whether we feed ourselves by growing yams or hunting wild game or by herding camels and raising wheat, whether we explain a thunderstorm by attributing it to meteorological conditions or to a fight among the gods—such things are determined by what we learn as part of our enculturation. (p. 19)

Enculturation usually takes place through interaction (your parents kiss you and you learn about kissing—whom to kiss, when to kiss, and so on), observation (you watch your father do most of the driving of the family car and you learn about sex roles—what a man does, what a woman does), and imitation (you laugh at the same jokes your parents laugh at and you learn about humor—it is funny if someone slips and falls but doesn’t get hurt).

Most of us would have a difficult time pointing to a specific event or experience that taught us about such things as direct eye contact, our use of silence and space, the concept and importance of attractiveness, our view of aging and the elderly, our ability to speak one language over another, our preference for activity over meditation, or why we prefer one mode of dealing with conflict over another. All of our examples show us that learning the perceptions, rules, and behaviors of cultural membership usually go on without our being aware of it.

One thing that should be clear to this point is the idea that we learn our culture in a host of ways. As many of our examples have noted, most of what we learn is communicated through our interactions with other people. Early in life we receive normative instructions from family and friends. There are, however, numerous other “teachers” that pass on the messages of culture. Let us pause a moment and look at just a few of these “instructors” and the “instructions” they offer.

A very powerful set of instructions comes from proverbs. Proverbs are found in nearly every culture.
Often called maxims or adages, these sayings create vivid images that are easy to learn and difficult to forget. They are repeated with such regularity as we grow up they soon become part of our belief system. Let us look at a few proverbs from various cultures and note how the specific proverbs are linked to a cultural value or belief.

“One does not make the wind blow but is blown by it.” This Asian view implies that people are guided by fate rather than by their own devices.

“Order is half of life.” This is a German view that stresses the value of organization, conformity, and structure.

“The mouth maintains silence in order to hear the heart talk.” This Belgian saying implies the value of intuition and feelings in interaction.

“He who speaks has no knowledge and he who has knowledge does not speak.” This saying from Japan demonstrates the value of silence.

“How blessed is a man who finds wisdom.” This Jewish expression states the importance of learning and education.

“A zebra does not despise its stripes.” From the Maasai of Africa, this saying expresses the value of accepting things as they are, of accepting oneself as one is, and of avoiding the envy of others.

“Loud thunder brings little rain.” This Chinese proverb teaches the importance of being reserved instead of being boisterous.

“A man’s tongue is his sword.” Arabs are taught to enjoy words and use them in a powerful and forceful manner.

“A single arrow is easily broken, but not in a bunch.” This proverb is found in many Asian cultures as a means of stressing the group over the individual.

“He who stirs another’s porridge often burns his own.” The Swedish are a very private people, and attempt to teach this value through the preceding proverb.

“The duck that quacks is the first to get shot.” The Japanese proverb stresses the importance of silence.

We also learn our culture from folk tales and folklore. Whether it be ancient myths of our culture or current popular culture, folklore is value-laden and teaches and reinforces what a culture deems important. The story might be about the tough, independent, fast-shooting cowboy of the Old West or how Pinocchio’s nose grew larger when he lied. Whether it be glorifying Columbus because he was daring, Abraham Lincoln learning to read by drawing letters on a shovel by the fireside, or the Saturday morning cartoon characters defending democracy and fighting for what is “right,” folklore constantly reinforces our fundamental values.

We are not the only culture that “teaches” important values through folk tales. The English have their Canterbury Tales, which stress proper manners, courtly behavior, and dignity. The Japanese know the ancient story called The Tale of the Forty-Seven Ronin, which teaches them the importance of duty, obligation, and loyalty. And for the Sioux Indians, the legend of “Pushing Up the Sky” teaches what people can accomplish if they work together.

People learn about their culture even from sources as subtle as art. The anthropologist Nanda (1994) points out the link between art and culture when she writes: “One of the most important functions of art is to communicate, display, and reinforce important cultural themes and values” (p. 403). In Asian cultures most art depicts objects, animals, and landscapes. It seldom focuses on people. American and European art, however, emphasizes people. These differences reflect the Asian view that nature is more powerful and important than a single individual, and the American and European views that people are the center of the world.

As we conclude this section on learning, remember that large numbers of people, usually living in the same geographic area, share the experience and behaviors we have been discussing. It is this sharing that makes a culture unique. Polish poet Stanislaw said it far more eloquently when he reminded us that because of culture, “All of our separate fictions add up to a joint reality.”

Culture Is Transmitted from Generation to Generation. The American philosopher Thoreau once wrote, “All the past is here.” He, of course, could have been talking about culture. For cultures to exist, endure, and perpetuate, they must make sure the crucial “messages” and elements of the culture get passed on. According to Brislin (1993), “If there are values considered central to a society that have existed for many years, these must be transmitted
from one generation to another" (p. 6). This characteristic adds credence to the idea that culture and communication are linked. It is communication that makes culture a continuous process. For once cultural habits, principles, values, dispositions, and the like are "invented," they are communicated to each individual within that culture. The strong need for a culture to tie each generation to past and future generations is demonstrated by Keesing (1965), who tells us, "Any break in the learning chain would lead to a culture's disappearance" (p. 28).

**Culture Is Based on Symbols.** The first two characteristics—that culture is learned and passed from generation to generation—leads us directly to the next idea that it is our symbol-making ability that enables us to both learn and pass on our culture from individual to individual, group to group, and generation to generation. Through language, be it verbal, nonverbal, images or icons, it is "possible to learn from cumulative, shared experience" (Smith, 1986, pp. 1–2). An excellent summary of the importance of language to culture is offered by Bates and Plog (1990):

Language thus enables people to communicate what they would do if such-and-such happened, to organize their experiences into abstract categories ("a happy occasion," for instance, or an "evil omen"), and to express thoughts never spoken before. Morality, religion, philosophy, literature, science, economics, technology, and numerous other areas of human knowledge and belief—along with the ability to learn about and manipulate them—all depends on this type of higher-level communication. (p. 20)

The portability of symbols allows us to package and store them as well as transmit them. The mind, books, pictures, films, videos, computer disks, and the like enable a culture to preserve what it deems to be important and worthy of transmission. Hence, each individual, regardless of his or her generation, is heir to a massive "library" of information that has been collected in anticipation of his or her entry into the culture. In this sense, culture is historical as well as preservable. Each new generation might "write" more, but the notes from the past represent what we call culture. As the French novelist Proust wrote, "The past remains the present."

**Culture Is Subject to Change.** Cultures are a dynamic system that do not exist in a vacuum, and therefore are subject to change. From the wandering nomad thousands of years ago, to CNN's news in the 1990s, cultures are constantly being confronted with ideas and information for "outside" sources. This contact has the potential to bring change to any culture. This characteristic of change through contact is yet another example of how communication and culture are alike—both are dynamic, and both are constantly changing.

We must make two points about cultural change. First, cultures are highly adaptive. History runs over with examples of how cultures have been forced to alter their course because of natural disasters, wars, or other calamities. Events in the last few hundred years have scattered Jews throughout the world, yet their culture has adapted and survived. And think for a moment about the adjustments made by the Japanese since the end of World War II. Their government and economy were nearly destroyed during the war, yet because they could adapt, their culture endured. They are now a major economic force in the world.

Second, we would be remiss if we did not once again remind you that although many aspects of culture are subject to change, the deep structure of a culture resists major alterations. That is to say, changes in dress, food, transportation, housing, and the like, though appearing to be important, are simply attached to the existing value system. However, values associated with such things as ethics and morals, work and leisure, definitions of freedom, the importance of the past, religious practices, the pace of life, and attitudes toward gender and age are so deep in a culture that they persist generation after generation. Barnlund (1989) clearly makes this point when he writes: "The spread of Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, and Confucianism did not homogenize the societies they enveloped. It was usually the other way around: Societies insisted on adapting the religions to their own cultural traditions" (p. 192).

**Culture Is Ethnocentric.** The disposition toward ethnocentrism might well be the characteristic that most directly relates to intercultural communication. The important tie between ethnocentrism and communication can be seen in the definition of the term itself. Sumner (1940) is generally credited with the
introduction of the term to the study of group relations and culture. He defined ethnocentrism as "the technical name for the view of things in which one's own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it" (p. 13). In other words, ethnocentrism becomes the perceptual prism through which cultures interpret and judge all other groups. The power and impact of ethnocentrism is clearly noted by Keesing (1965): "Nearly always the folklore of a people includes myths of origin which give priority to themselves, and place the stamp of supernatural approval upon their particular customs" (p. 45). These priorities and judgments include everything from what the "out-groups" value to how they communicate. Feelings that "we are right" and "they are wrong" cover every aspect of a culture's existence. Examples range from the insignificant ("People should paint their bodies, not only their faces"), to the significant ("We must fight and die for what is right").

Our discussion thus far should not lead to the conclusion that ethnocentrism is always intentional, for it usually is not. Like culture itself, ethnocentrism is mostly learned at the unconscious level. If, for example, our schools are teaching U.S. history, geography, literature, and government, they are also, without realizing it, teaching ethnocentrism. The student, by being exposed only to this single orientation, is therefore developing the view that the United States is the center of the world, as well as learning to judge that world by North American standards—the standards he or she has been taught. If most of the authors, philosophers, scientists, composers, and political leaders you have studied are white males, then you will use the values of white males to judge other cultures. The omission of African Americans and women from most textbooks is, in a very real sense, teaching ethnocentrism.

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THE ELEMENTS OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Culture, as we have presented the concept, is a complete pattern of living. It is elaborate, abstract, and pervasive. Countless aspects of culture help determine and guide communication behavior. Three cultural elements have the potential to affect situations in which people from different backgrounds come together: (1) perception, (2) verbal processes, and (3) nonverbal processes.

Perceptual Elements

The German novelist Hermann Hesse wrote, "There is no reality except the one contained with us." This essay has been about the manner in which our cultures help create and shape our realities. In its simplest sense, perception "is the process by which an individual selects, evaluates, and organizes stimuli from the external world" (Singer, 1987, p. 9). In other words, perception is an internal process whereby we convert the physical energies of the world outside of us into meaningful internal experiences. Because that world embraces everything, we can never completely know it. As Singer (1987) notes, "We experience everything in the world not as it is—but only as the world comes to us through our sensory receptors" (p. 9).

Much of what is called perception has its roots in our biology: The act of bringing the outside world to our consciousness involves a great deal of our nervous system and its complex chemistry and anatomy. Although these aspects of perception are important, for our purposes the evaluation and action dimension of perception is more pertinent. That is to say, the world looks, sounds, tastes, and feels the way it does because our culture has given us the criterion of perception.

Most communication scholars, while granting that perceptions are part of every communication event, have evolved a fairly consistent taxonomy for isolating those perceptual variables that have the potential to impede seriously the intercultural encounter. The three major sociocultural elements that directly influence perception and communication are (1) cultural values, (2) worldview (religion), and (3) social organizations (family and state).

Values. Formally, a value may be defined as an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct, or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to another (Rokeach, 1968, p. 5). They "represent a learned organization of rules for making choices and for resolving conflicts." (Rokeach, 1968, p. 161). Although each of us has a unique set of values,
there also are values that tend to permeate a culture. These are called cultural values.

Cultural values usually are derived from the larger philosophical issues that are part of a culture's milieu. Hence, they tend to be broad-based, enduring, and relatively stable. Values generally are normative in that they inform a member of a culture about what is good and bad, right and wrong, true and false, positive and negative, and the like. Cultural values define what is worth dying for, what is worth protecting, what frightens people, what are proper subjects for study and for ridicule, and what types of events lead individuals to group solidarity. Most important, cultural values guide both perception and behavior.

As we have already indicated, values are learned; they are not universal. In many Native American cultures, where there is no written history, age is highly valued. Older people are sought out and asked to take part in many important decisions. Younger people admire them and include them in social gatherings.

Cultural values, as you would suspect, go well beyond the perception and treatment of the elderly. There are literally thousands of values found in every culture. However, most scholars agree that the cultural values that most directly influence intercultural communication relate to individualism, family, religion, materialism, human nature, science and technology, progress and change, competition, work and leisure, equality, gender roles, nature and the environment, time, formality and informality, talk, silence, assertiveness, and interpersonal harmony.

Before we move from values to worldview and social organization, it might be helpful if we pause and indicate why the institutions associated with these two elements hold such a powerful sway over the members of a particular culture.

First, the institutions of church, family, and state carry the messages that matter most to people. They explain to us what we must strive for (material possessions or a spiritual life), where we fit into the grand scheme of things (what we do with the power of free choice), and what to expect from life (life will be easy or life will be difficult).

Second, these institutions are important because they endure. From the early Cro-Magnon cave drawings in southern France to the present, we can trace the strong pull of religion, family, and community.

Generation after generation is told about Moses, the Buddha, Allah, and the like. Whether it be the Eight-Fold Path, the Ten Commandments, or the Five Pillars of Islam, the messages in these writings survive. And just as Americans know about the values contained in the story of the Revolutionary War, so Mexicans are aware of the consequences of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.

Third, the content generated by these institutions is deeply and emotionally felt. Think for a moment about the violent reactions that can be produced by “taking God’s name in vain,” calling someone’s mother a “dirty name,” or by setting a match to the American flag. Countries have been able to send young men to war and politicians have attempted to win elections by arousing people to the importance of “God, country, and family.”

Finally, the deep structure of a culture is important because the institutions of family, church, and state give each individual his or her unique identity. When you think about who you are, you most likely conclude that you are a member of a family (my name is Jane Smith or Yuko Minami), that you have a religious orientation (I am a Mormon or Buddhist), and that you live in a special place (I live in the United States or I live in Japan). Regardless of their culture, all individuals perceive themselves as members of these organizations.

**Worldview.** Each group of people from the earliest origins of civilization has evolved a worldview. A worldview is a culture’s orientation toward such things as God, nature, life, death, the universe, and other philosophical issues that are concerned with the meaning of life and with “being.” The link between worldview, culture, and communication is clearly stated by Pennington (1985) when she noted, “If one understands a culture’s world view and cosmology, reasonable accuracy can be attained in predicting behaviors and motivations in other dimensions” (p. 32). In short, our worldview helps us locate our place and rank in the universe. Perhaps more than any other factor, it influences issues ranging from how we view other people to how we spend our time. Olayiwola (1989) argues that worldview even influences the social, economic, and political life of a nation (pp. 19–26). Reflect for just a moment on how your concepts of death, illness, and the envi-
The family is also important because by the time the other major cultural institutions can influence the child, the family has already exposed the individual to countless experiences. From our introduction to language to our ways of expressing love, the family is the first teacher. Just think for a moment of some of the crucial attitudes, values, and behaviors that the family first initiates. Any list would have to include self-reliance, responsibility, obedience, dominance, social skills, aggression, loyalty, sex roles, age roles, and the like. Keep in mind that at the moment of birth, a human being's development can take any number of paths. A child born in India perceives many people living together in one house and is learning about extended families. By being in the same house with elderly people, the child is also learning to value the aged. In most of Africa the entire village raises a child, and the child thus learns about the extended family.

A simple Swedish proverb and a well-known one from the United States offers us an excellent summary of the link between family and how we communicate with other people: “Children act in the village as they have learned at home,” and “The apple does not fall far from the tree.”

When we speak of formal and informal government as a social organization, we are talking about much more than a culture’s political system. The Cuban brand of communism or the autocratic governments in some Arab countries, of course, produces a different individual than does North American or Norwegian democracy. And China’s long continuous history as a country and culture will have a profound influence on the character of people raised in this country. Hence, the term government, as it is used in this context, also refers to one’s community as well as the history of that community. The importance of government, state, or community is clearly marked by the words of historian Theodore Gocherou, who wrote, “The cultural traits of people are rooted in the history which has molded them.” This observation could also serve as a definition of culture.

The history of any culture serves as the origin of the cultural values, ideals, and behaviors. History can help answer such questions as why one type of activity evolved over another. The value Mexicans place on “talk,” for example, goes back in part to the socializing that was part of the marketplace during the Aztec period.
We can find countless instances of how the history of a culture determines its view of the world. For example, to comprehend the modern-day Jew, and his or her way of perceiving events and people, you would have to realize what the historian Van Doren (1991) attempted to point out when he wrote, “The history of Judaism and the Jews is a long and complicated story, full of blood and tears” (p. 16). Because of this long history of discrimination and persecution, when Jews make fundamental choices about education, freedom, war, civil rights, and the like, they rely on their history.

Japan is yet another country that vividly reflects the links between history, culture, and behavior. Because it is a series of islands, Japan has a history and character not only molded by isolation but also strongly influenced by an almost constant seismic activity and its consequences. According to Reischauer (1988), this isolation and separation “has produced in the Japanese a strong sense of self-identity and also an almost painful self-consciousness in the presence of others” (p. 32). Reischauer (1991) continues: “[I]solation has caused the Japanese to be acutely aware of anything that comes from outside” (p. 32).

As we conclude this section on the impact of history, we again remind you that thousands of examples can be found of the tandem relationships between history, worldview, and family. We have offered a handful of those as a means of demonstrating that by knowing the deep structure of culture you can better understand how that structure influences perception and communication. And we submit that the most compelling problem associated with intercultural communication is cultural diversity in perceptual processes.

**Verbal Language**

The importance of language to the study of intercultural communication is clearly captured in Ralph Waldo Emerson’s simple sentence, “Language is the archives of history.” What Emerson is telling us is that it is impossible to separate our use of language from our culture for language is not only a form of preserving culture, but also a means of sharing culture. In its most basic sense, language is an organized, generally agreed-upon, learned symbol system that is used to represent the experiences within a geographic or cultural community.

Culture teaches us both the symbol (dog) and what the symbol stands for (a furry, domesticated pet). Objects, events, experiences, and feelings have particular labels or names solely because a community of people (a culture) has arbitrarily decided to so name them.

If we extend the above notion to the intercultural setting, we can observe how different cultures can have both different symbols and different responses. Culture even influences the unadorned word *dog* we used in the last paragraph. In some areas of the world, such as Hong Kong and Korea, dogs are considered a culinary delight and often are eaten. In the United States, dogs sit on the family couch and are not cooked; hence, the word *dog* conveys a quite different meaning in the United States than it does in Hong Kong. If you take our superficial example and then apply it to every word and meaning you know, then you can begin to visualize the influence of culture on how we send and receive messages. Think for just a moment about the variety of meanings various cultures have for words such as *freedom, sexuality, trespassing, birth control, social security, leadership, assertiveness, affirmative action,* and *AIDS.*

Even the way people use language shifts from culture to culture. In the Arab tradition, “verbal language patterns that emphasize creative artistry by using rhetorical devices such as repetition, metaphor, and simile are highly valued” (Lustig, 1988, p. 102). Yet Japanese culture encourages minimum verbal communication. A Japanese proverb gives credence to this outlook by offering this advice: “By your mouth you shall perish.” By multiplying this example across the countless cultures you may come into contact with, you can see how differences in language reflect differences in culture.

People living within the same geographic boundaries can also use language in ways that differ from the dominant culture. We should all be aware of the rich examples that can be drawn from African American communication. And most women, because they are raised to be polite and to focus on the other person, use language in a unique manner. They will ask more questions than men and consciously or unconsciously let men control the flow of conversation.
Nonverbal Language

As we have indicated, the ability to use words to represent feelings and ideas is universal. All human beings also use nonverbal symbols to share internal states. Although the process of using our actions to communicate is universal, the meanings for those actions often shift from culture to culture. Hence, nonverbal communication becomes yet another element that one must understand to interact effectively with people from different cultures.

We will briefly introduce you to three important nonverbal categories (bodily behavior, time, and space) that are reflected during intercultural interaction. We remind you before we begin, however, that we do not intend to expose you to the literally thousands of nonverbal behaviors found in nearly every culture, but rather, with just few simple examples, make you aware of the role of nonverbal message in the study of intercultural communication.

Bodily Behavior. Most scholars agree that other people can attach meaning to our movement (kinesics), facial expressions, eye contact and gaze, touch, concepts of time, and space. Let us briefly offer one or two examples for each element.

Body Movements. When we speak of “body movements,” we are talking about both posture and specific gestures. A culture’s use of both of these forms of movement can offer considerable insight into its deep structure and value system. For example, in many Asian cultures the bow is much more than a greeting. It signifies a culture’s concern with status and rank. In Japan, for example, low posture during the bow indicates respect (Ishii, 1973, pp. 163–180).

The manner in which we sit also can communicate a message. In Ghana and Turkey, sitting with one’s legs crossed is extremely offensive (Rich, 1989, p. 279). Thais believe that because the bottoms of the feet are the lowest part of the body, they should never be pointed at a person (Cooper & Cooper, 1994, pp. 22–23). In fact, for Thais, the feet take on so much significance that people avoid stomping with them.

Some of our most elementary gestures are culture-bound. We make a zero with our index finger and thumb as a way of “saying” everything is perfect. Yet this same gesture means money in Japan, is an insult in Malta and Greece, and is perceived as an obscene gesture in Brazil.

Even the taken-for-granted sign that we make for beckoning is culturally based. In the United States, a person who wants to signal a friend to come makes a gesture with one hand, holding the palm up and with the fingers more or less together and moving toward his or her own body. Koreans and Vietnamese express this same idea by cupping the hand with the palm down and drawing the fingers toward the palm.

Facial Expressions. Although there is general agreement that universal facial expressions do exist, cultural norms often dictate how, when, and to whom facial expressions are displayed (Porter & Samovar, 1998). In many Mediterranean cultures, people exaggerate signs of grief or sadness. It is not uncommon in this region of the world to see men crying in public. Yet in the United States, white males often suppress the desire to show these emotions. Japanese men even go so far as to hide expressions of anger, sorrow, or disgust by laughing or smiling.

There are even differences in how co-cultures employ facial expressions as a form of communication. Summarizing the research on gender differences, Pearson, West, and Turner (1995) report that, compared to men, women generally use more facial expressions and are more expressive, smile more, are more apt to return smiles, and are more attracted to others who smile (p. 123).

Touch. Instances of touch as a form of communication demonstrate how nonverbal communication is a product of culture. In Germany, both women and men shake hands at the outset of every social encounter; in the United States, women seldom shake hands. In the Arab culture, men will often greet each other by kissing and hugging. In Thailand, people do not touch in public, and to touch someone on the head is a major social transgression. Even co-cultures differ in their use of touch. In the United States, women give and receive more touch than do men; yet men tend to initiate the touch.

Concept of Time. Concepts and uses of time are also important when people of different cultures come together. Most Western cultures think of time in linear–spatial terms. We are timebound. Our schedules and our lists dominate our lives. The Germans and the Swiss are even more aware of time than Americans. Trains, planes, and meals must
always be on time. This is not true for many cultures. Activity, not a clock, determines action. Most Native American languages, for example, have no words for seconds, minutes, or hours. Hence, for American Indians, and for many other cultures, being tardy is quite different than it is for members of the dominant culture.

The pace at which a culture carries out its life also reflects its use of time. In Mexico a slower pace is valued, whether the activity be conducting a business meeting or visiting with friends. And in Africa, where a slow pace is also valued, “people who rush are suspected of trying to cheat” (Rich, 1989, p. 278).

Use of Space. We all know that Arabs and Latins tend to interact more closely than do North Americans, and we also know how uncomfortable we feel when people from these cultures get too close to us. This shows how use of space is yet another behavior that is directly related to past experience.

Distance, however, is just one aspect of the use of space as a form of communication; physical orientation is also influenced by culture. North Americans prefer to sit facing or at right angles to one another, whereas Chinese generally prefer side-by-side seating. The English and Germans are conditioned to waiting in a straight line when seeking service in public, but Arabs see nothing wrong with propelling and jostling themselves into the best possible position to secure service. This is a clear example of how the use of space can send different messages.

CONCLUSION

As our society continues to accept immigrants and refugees at a rate far greater than any other country in the world, we will only see a rapid increase in cultural diversity. If we assert the value of cultural diversity and claim to espouse and accept a multicultural global village orientation, then we must be prepared to accept and tolerate the potential conflicts embedded in cultural differences. A free, culturally diverse society can exist only if diversity is permitted to flourish without prejudice and discrimination, both of which harm all members of the village. Remember the words of Thomas Jefferson as you begin your study of intercultural communication. In just a single written sentence he was able to capture the need for all of us to be tolerant of divergent views: “It does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no God.”

Reference

Understanding Cultural Identities in Intercultural Communication: A Ten-Step Inventory

MARY JANE COLLIER

Let me begin by introducing myself and characterizing my experiences and background. We are beginning a conversation about intercultural communication, so becoming familiar with the fundamental assumptions I’m making about it will help you better understand why I’m making particular arguments, as well as help you evaluate the utility of my approach for your own views and conduct.

My orientation to intercultural communication is based on where I come from and where I have been—just as yours is. I am a European American, white, middle-class, middle-aged female, and I’ve lived on a Navajo reservation in Arizona, in small towns, and in large cities in the United States. I have been a sojourner in South Africa. I have studied national, ethnic, and gender identity and intercultural communication dealing with ethnically diverse South Africans, various British ethnic groups in England, Israelis and Palestinians in the Middle East, and African, Asian, and Latino Americans in the United States. I have participated in protests and marched for political causes. My M.A. and Ph.D. in Communication are from the University of Southern California in Los Angeles.

I have come to believe that ignoring our cultural and intercultural communication processes has profound consequences. Unless we commit our hearts, minds, and spirits to understanding what happens when people with different group identities come together, we will be doomed to approach protracted conflicts such as those in the Middle East, Bosnia, and Northern Ireland through violence and military

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Concepts and Questions

1. Samovar and Porter maintain that intercultural communication is more prevalent than ever before in recorded history. Do you believe that most people are prepared for this increase in intercultural contact? If not, why?
2. How has this increase in cultural contact touched your life?
3. Why is culture an important consideration in human interaction?
4. What is meant by the statement “culture is learned”? Can you think of examples that demonstrate this “learning” process?
5. What is the relationship between culture and perception?
6. Why is worldview important to the study of intercultural communication? How does one’s worldview contribute to how one perceives the world?
7. What is meant by the phrase “cultural values”? How might these values influence intercultural communication?
8. What is meant by the statement “culture teaches both the symbol and what the symbol stands for”?
9. What aspects of nonverbal communication must we consider during intercultural communication?
U.S. Americans and Mexicans Working Together: Five Core Mexican Concepts for Enhancing Effectiveness

SHERYL LINDSLEY

I was disadvantaged when I first came down here because I didn't have the class [intercultural training]. I'm probably still doing some things wrong now. When I go to business meetings, I was raised in a culture where you just get out your reports and start talking about them and that's not how it is here. You talk about family and other things first. I often forget this and so one of my Mexican colleagues will remind me that I'm violating this tradition by saying, 'So [name], how is your dog?' When I hear this then I know I'm not supposed to be talking about business.

LINDELY & BRAITHWAITE, IN PRESS

This account by a U.S. American who lives and works in Mexico reflects the importance of adapting cultural behaviors to achieve communication competency in organizational settings. As an administrator who was transferred to Mexico more than eight years ago without any intercultural training, he's learned the hard way that lack of cultural knowledge and skills negatively affects organizational relationships, goals, and productivity. In this account, it appears that he still struggles to put aside that U.S. American "Let's get right down to business" orientation to prioritize personal relationships in meetings with his Mexican associates. A look at the literature on U.S. American experiences abroad tells us that his problems in intercultural communication are not unique.

Although U.S. American organizations are increasingly reliant on international liaisons to compete in the global economy, many have suffered failures due to inadequate managerial training for work abroad (Albert, 1994). These problems have resulted in tremendous financial losses to organizations as well as human costs by undermining job successes and increasing personal and familial suffering (Mendenhall et al., 1987). These international experiences demonstrate that one cannot simply export U.S. American ways of doing business to other countries. Rather, it is essential that personnel in international organizations understand the histories, cultures, and languages of the people with whom they work. This essay will review recent events affecting U.S.–Mexican economic relationships and then examine five Mexican cultural concepts influencing organizational effectiveness.

The historical ratification of the North American Free Trade Agreement between the United States, Canada, and Mexico embodied both promises and problems. Government leaders who supported the bill promised increased competitiveness with other trade blocs such as the European Economic Community and the Pacific Rim nations, along with larger consumer markets for goods and services and, ultimately, increased prosperity (Weintraub, 1991). At the same time, this alliance created new problems and highlighted old ones that remain unresolved. Critics have charged that the agreement promotes the interests of only large international and multinational firms, at the expense of smaller businesses and ordinary people in all three nations (Castañeda, 1995). In the United States, domestic manufacturers have problems competing with products made with inexpensive Mexican labor, and many citizens have lost jobs when factories relocated south of the border. In Mexico, many people fear increased national dependency on the United States for employment (Hansen, 1981; Sklair, 1993) and difficulties in competing with large U.S. multinationals in many service and product sectors (Batres, 1991; Hellman, 1994). Finally, critics on both sides of the border have pointed to problems with several U.S.-owned assembly plants in Mexico that have exploited inexpensive labor, failed to provide adequate health and safety conditions for workers, and polluted the borderlands and waterways (Fernandez-Kelly, 1983).
Although a comprehensive review of international relationships between these two countries is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to understand these issues because they contribute to the conditions in which businesses operate and the way people from both countries interpret each other's behaviors in everyday work relationships.

In an environment characterized by anxiety about ongoing economic changes, the need for mutual understanding and respect is critical. One way for those who are unfamiliar with Mexican culture to begin to understand is to examine some of the core cultural concepts that guide organizational relationships. Of course, it's essential to keep in mind that there is diversity within both U.S. American and Mexican societies related to socioeconomic class, ethnic origin, regional affiliation, gender, personal ideologies, and character. Thus, when I use the term U.S. American or North American culture, I'm referring to dominant cultural characteristics—typically, middle-class, European American male. Among Mexicans, too, it's important to recognize that adherence to dominant cultural characteristics varies within the population, and although most Mexicans are mestizos, of both Spanish and indigenous origin, several ethnic groups have maintained aspects of their precolonial traditions. For example, more than 600,000 people who live on the Yucatan peninsula today speak predominantly Mayan languages among their family, friends, and community members. Because many Mayans learn Spanish as a second language to interact with other Mexicans, they often do not speak it with the same fluency as their first tongue, which likely influences satisfaction and effectiveness in interethnic work relationships (Love, 1994). Regional and ethnic differences also affect the structures of modern-day businesses. Although indigenous Mayans from Mexico's southern highlands emphasize corporate organization, northern Mexican businesses embody characteristics of traditional patronage systems (Alvarez & Collier, 1994).

Diversity notwithstanding, there are many ways of behaving that are typical of dominant cultural patterns in each country that provide a useful starting point for developing intercultural awareness. These shared cultural patterns have been referred to as core concepts. Core concepts provide us with knowledge about appropriate and inappropriate cultural interaction in specific relationships and contexts. Through an understanding of these, one can choose from a myriad of ways of behaving in order to enhance intercultural work relationships and goals. Core concepts derived from research on doing business in Mexico include: confianza, simpatia, palanca, estabilidad, and mañana. Through the discussion, it will be apparent that these are not mutually exclusive categories but overlapping concepts that reflect deeply held values for many Mexicans.

CONFIANZA

In an interview with a Mexican production manager about communication with U.S. home office personnel, I asked her what she does when she thinks someone is wrong. She responded,

Well, it's hard at first if someone is new, but after you establish trust and confidence, then it's easier. . . I just make suggestions about things, but I don't tell people they are wrong. I just give them information to make the decisions and then they are grateful and the relationship benefits from this. . . When you just make suggestions and don't tell people what to do and let them learn and make decisions for themselves, then more confidence in the relationship develops and then they owe you. You didn't confront them, you treated them well, with respect, and now they owe you (Lindsley & Braithwaite 1996, p. 215).

According to this account, indirectness is appropriate in a situation in which another's face (or self-presentation) is vulnerable. Because relationships are generally more central to Mexican than U.S. American organizations, it is no surprise that relationships are carefully nurtured and safeguarded. One of the core aspects of a good relationship is the co-creation of confianza, or "trust," which is built through communicative behaviors that adhere to cultural norms for face saving. In addition, the aforementioned production manager's account reveals cultural norms for mutual obligation. There is an explicit reference to reciprocity—each party should protect the other's positive face in interaction.
The kinds of situations in which face concerns are primary include those that could possibly be threatening to one’s own image or the other party with whom one is interacting. This means that communication of negative information (e.g., I don’t understand; I made a mistake; I disagree with you; You made a mistake) is avoided or communicated indirectly. For example, a person’s tone of voice may indicate they are reticent to adopt a new plan, even though they may not state it explicitly. Among the ways that U.S. American managers can adapt their own behaviors are avoiding displays of negative emotions, especially direct criticism, conveying receptivity to negative information, asking how they can help their employees, and paying close attention to nonverbal behaviors.

**SIMPATÍA**

In an interview with another Mexican production manager, he discussed the importance of good communication between managers and employees is not only maintaining positive working relationships, but also meeting productivity goals. He explained to me:

> When I have to discipline an employee, I start off by talking about the person’s place in the corporation and what they are there for... what their role is in the plant. Then I talk to them about what they need to do. It is important not to hurt the employee, because once you do—(he shrugs, as if to say, “it’s the end.”) (Lindsay, 1996, p. 32)

It is evident that this situation, in which the employee’s behavior was not meeting organizational standards, was potentially face-threatening. In addressing the situation, the manager demonstrated adherence to the cultural script of simpátia, which emphasizes emotional support and self-sacrifice for the good of the group (Triandis, Marin, Lisansky, & Betancourt, 1984). The effects of this cultural script on communication include culturally normative behaviors that stress commitment to harmony and cooperation. Thus, there is an emphasis on communication that stresses the positive and minimizes negative feedback. In this case, criticism is couched in terms of the individual’s importance to the group (his or her role in the organization), which is stated in positive terms, showing concern for the employee’s feelings. In Mexico, a person who is considered simpático “is sympathetic, understanding, pleasing, friendly, well-behaved, [and] trustworthy” (DeMente, 1996, p. 278). Being simpático is something to strive for in organizational relationships and is demonstrated through communication behaviors that show positive emotional connection with others.

**PALANCA**

The concept of palanca refers to leverage, or power derived from affiliated connections. It affects organizational relationships in terms of one’s ability to get things done by virtue of one’s official authority as well as through one’s contacts with extensive networks of relationships among family members, relatives, former classmates, friends, and business associates. These connections are often built over many years and enable one to obtain favors that may transcend institutional rules and procedures or overcome scarcity of resources and services (Archer & Fitch, 1994). For example, interpersonal connections may allow one to receive “special” consideration for business transactions, faster service in obtaining government services, and personal recommendations for new jobs.

U.S. Americans may tend to evaluate these practices negatively as “corrupt” without reflecting on the similarities with their own organizational behaviors, or without understanding the rationale for why these behaviors are functional in Mexican culture. It is typical in the United States for businesspeople to say, “Who you know is just as important, if not more so, than what you know,” and to rely on personal affiliations for special introductions, advice, and information to promote their business goals. In Mexico, the importance of these interpersonal affiliations in business have been described as evolving from a history in which official authority for hundreds of years was held by descendants of Spanish colonial conquerors and government that were not representative of the majority of the people, but which served the interests of a small elite. Even today, one of the challenges of President Ernesto Zedillo’s administration is to establish a true representative democracy (Castañeda, 1995). Therefore, one of the ways that
people work to protect themselves and promote their interests is through informal systems of affiliated connection. U.S. Americans often rely on a system of written laws and rules, but history has taught Mexicans that it is often more effective to rely on personal connections for social negotiation of written laws and rules to accomplish desired objectives.

Although the use of palanca is typical throughout Central and Latin America, it is important to differentiate from the mordida (paying a bribe) and to understand both Mexican laws and U.S. American international laws (e.g., the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act), which prohibit payments for certain kinds of services. Although the differentiation is murky, palanca embodies a system of mutual obligation and reciprocated favors, not necessarily money or gifts. In this matter, like all other aspects of culture, Mexican business practices are changing. In addition, there are differences among Mexicans in the way any particular behavior is evaluated. For example, some individuals perceive that giving a small fee to a government worker for processing paperwork expeditiously is something positive and similar to the U.S. practice of tipping a waiter or waitress for good service. Others might think it's inappropriate to give a “tip” but appropriate to reward good service by giving a gift afterward, or simply making a point to tell that person’s boss about how satisfied they are with the employee (Lindsay, 1995). In consideration of these issues, U.S. Americans need to be aware not only of the power of affiliated connections, but also of current laws and Mexican’s individual attitudes about special favors and consideration.

**ESTABILIDAD**

A common sentiment among many Mexicans is, “The family is our first priority and must remain so for the future stability of our country” (Kras, 1989, p. 27). The need for estabilidad or “stability” reinforces the value of personal relationships and permeates organizational behaviors. It is reflected in the tendency for Mexicans to place relationships before tasks. This is communicated through a wide range of behaviors, including asking questions about colleagues’ families, discussing personal matters before business (e.g., at the beginning of a meeting), taking action to promote employees’ personal well-being, including families in organizational activities, taking time off work to assist family members in need, and establishing, developing, and maintaining long-term interconnected networks of personal relationships.

Some of the ways that managers show responsibility for employees’ well-being may be through compadrazgo and comadrazgo systems in which they become godfathers, godmothers, and mentors for their employees’ children. This type of relationship, which dates back to the sixteenth century, is viewed as mutually beneficial, because young people can rely on their mentors for advice, guidance, and financial, spiritual, and social support. In return, mentors can count on the loyalty of the young people throughout their lives.

These types of relationships exemplify the extent to which Mexican personal and organizational roles overlap in contrast to U.S. roles that are typically more separate. The often blurred distinction between familial and organizational life also means that Mexicans may give preference to hiring relatives over strangers, helping employees get a better education, or giving them small personal loans. These favors are often reciprocated with strong employee support and loyalty to the manager. For example, during financial hardships, the employee might continue working for him or her manager without a paycheck (Alvarez & Collier, 1994). Like other aspects of culture, this is an adaptive mechanism in Mexico—building stability through interconnected networks of familial and organizational relationships provides “social insurance” against the vagaries of uncertainty in economic and political structures.

Concerns for stability are also manifest in some Mexicans’ negative attitudes about U.S. American investment in Mexico. Historically, U.S. Americans have often acted in ways that promoted their own interests at the expense of Mexicans, which has led to criticism that U.S. involvement in Mexico threatens Mexican economic, political, and cultural stability. When U.S. American organizational personnel go to Mexico with attitudes of cultural superiority (e.g., We’re going to teach Mexicans how to do business), negative stereotypes are reinforced about U.S. Americans as arrogant, exploitive, and self-centered. In this case, fear about threats to stability may
emerge when U.S. Americans are in higher power positions and try to use their authority to change Mexican culture, laws, policies, and so on. To establish positive working relationships, these stereotypes and the behaviors that reinforce them must be addressed. Although there are no guaranteed ways to combat stereotypes, a good beginning is awareness that these stereotypes exist. The next step, of course, is developing intercultural awareness and skills in order to adapt behaviors in ways that show understanding of and respect for Mexican culture and language. Mexicans and U.S. Americans can and do learn to appreciate aspects of each other's cultures, but this cannot be accomplished without mutual openness and trust based on true respect and understanding, not one-sided opportunistic motives.

MAÑANA

In intercultural interaction in organizations, Mexicans and U.S. Americans often find themselves at odds over different understandings and attitudes surrounding the concept of time. Misunderstandings may arise in intercultural interpretations of language:

Spanish language dictionaries say that mañana means "tomorrow," and that is the meaning taught to foreign students in the language. But "tomorrow" is a literal translation, not the true cultural meaning of the word. In its normal cultural context mañana means "sometime in the near future, maybe." Behind the term are such unspoken things as "If I feel like it," "If I have the time," or "If nothing unexpected happens." (DeMente, 1996, p. 183)

U.S. Americans have the tendency to think about mañana as referring to some specific time period beginning at 12 A.M. and running for twenty-four hours, due to a primarily external orientation toward time (clocks guide activities). Most Mexicans use time clocks but also consider time to be more interpersonally negotiable (relationships guide activities) and mediated by unexpected events beyond one's control. In Mexico, organizational tasks are often not accomplished as quickly as in the United States because of infrastructural conditions (e.g., telephone, roads, electricity, water, mail) and other structural elements (e.g., government bureaucracy) that slow progress. Moreover, beyond the physical world, there are metaphorical forces that influence people's lives. For example, events occur "Si Dios quiere" (God willing). Therefore, for Mexicans it's very adaptive in interaction to acknowledge that events occur that one cannot control and which influence the flow of organizational processes. In addition, Mexican attitudes toward time differ from U.S. Americans because of relatively differing values that influence how one organizes one's behaviors. One Mexican manager explained to me, "In Mexico we have a saying, 'Salud, dinero, amor y tiempo para disfrutarlos' [Health, wealth, love and time for enjoying them]." He contrasted this with such American sayings as "Time is money" (Lindsley & Braithwaite, in press). Thus, while Mexicans perceive time as functioning in a way that allows one to engage in behaviors that are part of a desirable life, U.S. Americans quantify time as a commodity that is most importantly viewed as related to profits.

These contrasts in cultural orientation toward time can exacerbate problems in intercultural interaction. When U.S. Americans do not take time to develop and maintain good interpersonal relationships in business, Mexicans may think they do not care about people, only money. Likewise, when Mexicans do not complete tasks "on time," U.S. Americans may think they're lazy. To overcome these misunderstandings, U.S. Americans need to adapt their behaviors to respond to the recognition that personal relationships are the foundation of good business in Mexico, and also adjust their attitudes to recognize that Mexicans work very hard but have other priorities in life, too.

SUMMARY

U.S. organizations often have given employees foreign assignments based on technical expertise. However, experience shows that intercultural communication competency is critical to organizational success. Through an understanding of the concepts of confianza, simpatia, palanca, estabilidad, and mañana, one can better adapt to working in Mexico. In business, cultural diversity can be a strength that managers can build on when personnel understand the
ways that culture affects organizational lives. Thus, cultural contrasts in ways of doing business should not be viewed as simply a problem but as an advantage in contributing to new understandings about ways of conducting business. Significantly, U.S. Americans who learn to adapt their behaviors have reported enjoying the closeness of Mexican relationships, their emphasis on family values, as well as their hard work ethic and employee loyalty. Mexicans working in U.S. organizations have reported enjoying their career opportunities, learning efficiency in developing schedules, and training in new kinds of management philosophies (Lindsay & Braithwaite, in press).

References


Concepts and Questions

1. Describe a few aspects of cultural diversity as it exists in Mexico.
2. How is the core value of confianza or trust manifest in Mexican human resources management?
3. How can an American manager manifest confianza when dealing with Mexican workers?
4. What role does simpatía play in interpersonal relations among Mexicans?
5. What communication behaviors must an American manager manifest to establish that he or she is simpatíco?
6. Palanca refers to one’s power derived from extensive networking among family members, relatives, former classmates, friends, and business