

Facilitating a Multicultural Meeting

By Glenn Parker

Among the things that today's facilitators do a lot more often than their predecessors is working with groups across space and across cultures. Meetings with multiple cultures represented can bring to special communications challenges.

The benefits of clear communications are legion. Clear communication in a multicultural meeting will lead to:

- Participatory consensus decisions
- Clear communication of facts and opinion
- Effective use of team resources
- Practical conflict resolution
- More efficient time management
- Higher levels of trust among team-mates
- Increased morale

When people don't understand each other fully in meetings, resources are wasted, decisions aren't of the quality they could be, opportunities may be missed, and conflict that could have been avoided is likely. The fact that most business people speak at least some English, doesn't make clear communication inevitable.

Here's a list of suggestions for those who lead or facilitate cross-cultural meetings.

When Your Primary Language Is English

Speak clearly. It's important to slow down a bit, and enunciate. Many Americans speak too quickly to be easily understood by people whose primary language is not English. Avoid long, complicated statements. Get to the point directly and state it clearly. Minimize long and convoluted prefaces. It can also be helpful to use highlighting phrases like "The key point here is," or "There are three issues in this," which help people to follow your thoughts.



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Avoid colloquial expressions. Idiomatic expressions like "heard it through the grapevine," "cut to the chase," "tackle the issues head on," and "beating around the bush" may not improve communication. People unfamiliar with the expressions will translate the words literally, slowing down their understanding of the communication, or stopping it altogether. For example, it can be confusing to non-Americans to hear that something is "way off base," or "not in the ballpark," or a "slam dunk."

Don't tell jokes. Jokes rarely translate well since the premise is often culture and language specific. If you have to explain a joke, the humor is lost. On the other hand, it is not necessary to eliminate all fun from meetings. A humorous remark about a project or situation that is easily understood by all team members can contribute to a relaxed, informal atmosphere.

Practice good active listening skills.

Allow other people to finish their thoughts before you respond.

Pause and give other

members some time to process what has been said and formulate a response. Paraphrase what the other person has said before you respond. Ask questions or ask for clarification when you do not understand or disagree with what has been said.

Use multi-channel communications. You increase the possibility that your intended message will be accurately received if you support your verbal comments with a written document that presents the same information. For example, a list of bullet points on the screen or in a handout provides other members with an alternative method of receiving the same information

Continued on next page

Multicultural Meeting, continued

Continued from previous page

you present verbally. And, of course, it is helpful to send the presentation or document out to all members in advance of the meeting so it can be reviewed quietly and carefully. (Not that this means you should just read your bullet points.)

Learn as much as you can about communication patterns of other cultures. For example, in some cultures in Latin America and the Far East, it is not acceptable to disagree with someone holding a higher rank in the organization. But be careful. Assuming individuals will act in a certain manner simply because they are from a specific country can be a mistake. The best advice: get to know your specific teammates and develop sensitivity to how they communicate.

For Non-Primary English Speakers

Ask for what you need. Being assertive about your communication needs is important, no matter how difficult it can sometimes be. Why? Your colleagues may assume that if you say nothing, you both understand and agree with everything that is being said.

Before the meeting, review all the documents sent in advance and note items that are not clear or complete. Seek clarification from colleagues in your area about words or phrases that are not clear. Formulate your questions for the meeting. It is also helpful to let the meeting leader or facilitator know before the meeting that you have questions or require clarification about a particular agenda item or document. The leader can then ensure that you are included in the discussion.

Check your understanding. Ask questions if you do not understand what has been said. If another person uses a word, phrase, or some form of jargon or slang that you do not understand, ask for clarification. Ask questions if you believe you disagree with what you're hearing.

Use your active listening skills to rephrase and ensure that you understand what has been said. You

might say something like, "Erika, if I understood you correctly, you are proposing that we change the release date for XK7." In meetings where asking questions or seeking clarification is difficult, speak to a fellow participant, the facilitator or leader at a break or after the meeting.

For Facilitators and Meeting Leaders

Help maintain verbal clarity. Stop members when they use a colloquial expression, unusual jargon, or slang. Ask for an explanation—despite the advice to members to speak up, you cannot assume that everyone will do so. Gently interrupt members who are making a long statement and paraphrase the key portion of the statement. This will make it easier for other participants to understand their point.

Summarize frequently. Periodically summarize key agreements and action items. Doing this a bit more often than usual will help make sure that everyone understands and agrees with what has been decided. Don't simply ask, "Do you understand?" People rarely like to admit they do not understand; it implies they are incompetent. Instead, paraphrase what has been said with words that are more easily understood.

Watch for clues of confusion. Observe members of the group for nonverbal signs of lack of understanding (such as frowns or furrowed brows). If you sense that some key points are being missed, ask the speaker to review the items or summarize the points yourself.

In addition, you can stop the discussion or presentation at key points and facilitate a discussion using some open-ended questions like these:

"Hans has covered a number of important issues. I thought I sensed some question about this area. What questions or comments do you have on what he has said so far?"

Continued on next page

Multicultural Meeting, continued

Continued from previous page

“Let’s stop at this point and review the key points of our plan. Now, how do the rest of you feel about what is being proposed?”

“There is a good deal of new and complex information in this report. Before we move forward, what items require further clarification?”

“Set aside some time for a discussion of ways to improve cross-cultural communication...”

Promote participation. Observe members of the group for nonverbal signs that someone has something to contribute but is taking some time to formulate thoughts on the matter (for example, leaning forward, or leaning back and looking up). It may require that you slow down a member who speaks quickly and then wants to get right into a discussion or reach a decision. You can say something like “Jonathan, we have heard a great deal from you today on this topic. Let’s hear

from some other people.” Then you could intervene with something like, “Barbara, it looks like you would like to comment on this point.”

Set aside some time for a discussion of ways to improve cross-cultural communication, if you suspect that the issue may be interfering with productivity. The outcome of the session should be some

norms or guidelines for communication.

The result of doing everything you can to promote clear communication will be increased effectiveness, and better relationships, in all your meetings. ☞

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