



# INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION – PROBLEMS in the WORKPLACE

## Lesson 2

Version without a key





## WARM UP

*“Everything that can be said can be said clearly.”*

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889 – 1951), Austrian philosopher



## Think

- How do you understand this quote?
- How true is this sentence when you think of problems in terms of intercultural communication?
- What can cause problems in a workplace, among people of different origins?



## READING

- Read the text.

Body language, verbal communication and cultural formalities vary around the world. The same word or gesture that is innocuous for some may be considered offensive by others and can negatively affect a workplace by potentially damaging relationships. Misunderstandings can occur, as workplace associates from different cultures make differing assumptions about what is meant by the eye contact, body language and unfamiliar phrases.

### ■ Inaccurate Assumptions in Meaning

Among different cultures, combinations of verbal communication and body language can have different meanings, and this can lead to misunderstandings. For example, if you ask a co-worker if he understood the report you gave him and he smiles, you may interpret his reaction as an affirmative. However, in some cultures, this is a nonverbal signal that the listener does not understand, and that he needs it explained to him.

### ■ Formality Differences in Communications

The Western cultures of America, New Zealand and Australia are informal when addressing a business associate and will usually use her first name. More formal cultures such as those found in parts of Europe use titles such as "Mr.," "Mrs." or "Dr.," along with a family name. It is considered disrespectful to use a first name without permission. In speaking with an associate of a different culture, to avoid offending her, it is best to assume a high level of formality unless you are asked to use her first name.

### ■ Misinterpretations of Body Language

In North America, eye contact in the workplace is an approved method of engaging interaction and shows confidence and authority. A person who does not make or return eye contact may be considered suspicious or insecure when, in fact, in his culture, as in Japan, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, he is showing respect. Similarly, in North America, a handshake, regardless of gender, is a common workplace gesture, if the person is known on a more intimate basis. In the Islamic culture, by contrast, touching - including handshakes between men and women -- disapproved of.

### ■ Unfamiliar Phrases in Communications

Culture-specific phrases in an intercultural workplace can be easily misunderstood. For example, in North America, baseball phrases such as "ballpark estimates", "touch base" and "out in left field," are commonly used business expressions that would be unfamiliar to members of a culture where baseball is not common. Similarly, acronyms or abbreviated terms in the workplace are difficult to understand for an associate who is not familiar with the work environment.

Source: Intercultural Communication Problems in the Workplace | eHow.com [http://www.ehow.com/info\\_7754347\\_intercultural-communication-problems-workplace.html#ixzz2JSQMf9f5](http://www.ehow.com/info_7754347_intercultural-communication-problems-workplace.html#ixzz2JSQMf9f5)



## READING COMPREHENSION

### Answer the questions:

- What aspects of communication are different around the world?
- How can a smile be interpreted by co-workers in different cultures?
- What are the differences in addressing a business associate in different cultures?
- Do unfamiliar expressions play a role in an intercultural communication process in a workplace?



## LANGUAGE FOCUS 1 – VOCABULARY PRACTICE

### Exercise 1 - Which of the words in the text have the following meaning?

Innocuous		completely harmless
Offensive		something that you accept as true without question or proof
Assumptions		having little confidence and being uncertain about their own abilities and about whether other people really like them
Affirmative		having, or being likely to cause, a very close friendship or personal or sexual relationship
Insecure		relating to a statement that shows agreement or says 'yes'
Intimate		making you feel that something illegal is happening or that something is wrong
Suspicious		causing offence, unpleasant

### Exercise 2 - Complete the sentences below with the words from the previous exercise. Some of the words have to be put in a correct grammar form.

1. There's a \_\_\_\_\_-looking van parked at the end of the road.
2. This programme contains language that some viewers might find \_\_\_\_\_.
3. He still feels \_\_\_\_\_ about his ability to do the job.
4. These calculations are based on the \_\_\_\_\_ that prices will continue to rise.
5. Some mushrooms look \_\_\_\_\_ but are in fact poisonous.
6. She answered \_\_\_\_\_.



## LANGUAGE FOCUS 2 – USEFUL EXPRESSIONS

### Comparison expressions

In the text find expressions that could be useful while making comparisons.

**Answer:**

Similarly and by contrast.

Well done! 😊

**Look at the expressions in the box. Order them in a proper column.**

comparatively / while / whereas / similarly / on one hand, on the other hand / moreover  
by the same token / on the contrary / identically / correspondingly / unlike / not alike  
coupled with / rather / together with / on the contrary / similar / however / differently / in  
the same way / nevertheless / yet / but / in contrast / likewise / conversely / still

Similarity	Contrast



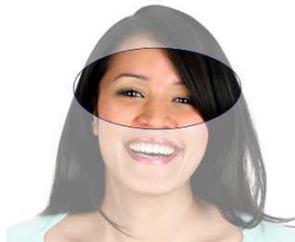
## SPEAKING EXERCISE

**Using the comparison expressions, summarize the text and say what different things can mean in different cultures.**

1. A co-worker's smile when he is asked whether he had understood a report.



2. Eye contact – in different cultures.



3. Unfamiliar phrases in different cultures.





## Case study

### Example of a miscommunication in the workplace.

#### Read the case.

To have a successful business environment it is essential to have excellent communication. “There is no better way to build trust than through communication” (Hayhoe & Grady, 2008, p.40).

Eight years ago while working for a financial institution, I had a miscommunication with a coworker. Keiko was who is originally from Tokyo and worked as a finance officer for the local branch. Although Keiko has been in the United States for several years she still had a very heavy Asian accent and was incapable of forming proper grammar, but she was an excellent worker and expert at loans. If someone could not comprehend what she said they would then ask her to say it again and she would without a problem. Well a client came in one day and asked for her because he had a question a loan for their business. I went ahead and called her over for the client to ask her a question in reference to his business loan. The client did not comprehend what she was saying and Keiko did not understand what the needs of the client were. After explaining for the third time what he wanted the client became aggravated. A bit frustrated the client exasperatingly stated, “I cannot comprehend why businesses hire people that who do not speak English. Don’t they know that they work and live in America and need to speak English! If we lived in their country we would have to learn their language.” To make matters worse, I expressed my regret to the client and told him that I would talk with the loan manager to make sure that his work with our manager and make sure that his demands were taken care. After the client left the branch, Keiko began to cry and blamed me for what had occurred. I became a little offended and did not comprehend what was happening, I was taken aback. My thoughts were what did I do and why was she upset with me? I thought I was doing her a favor by getting the client away from her. This one example of why it is important to have Intercultural Communication in the workplace. I did not think there was anything wrong with what I did think what I did was wrong; on the other hand, evidently that is not what Keiko believed.

When I talked with the loan manager and explained to her what took place, I realized that Keiko was sadden because I did not support her when the client made those malicious comments about her and she also thought I should have explained the issues the client had to her myself. I learned from her that day some Asian cultures. She explained to me that in China, Japan, and other Asian cultures it is imperative to avoid causing your counterpart to "lose face." In Asian cultures to raise your voice or shout at a person in public, or to correct them in front of their peers will cause them to lose face (Berman, 2003). I made an apology to Keiko and let her know I was trying to be helpful and that I meant no disrespect.

Source: <http://www.freeonlineresearchpapers.com/intercultural-communication-workplace>

Answer the following questions:

- Who was Keiko?
- Where was she from?
- What kind of a worker was she?
- Could she communicate in English properly?
- What happened one day?
- What was the outcome of the situation with the client?
- What did the author do in the end?



### Output 1 – A meeting

You are an HR Manager in the company where Keiko works. You were informed of the situation by Keiko, who asked you at the same time to take some precautions against such situations.

Make a meeting in your team. During the meeting discuss the following issues:

- reasons why such a situation took place,
- ways of preventing such situations in the future,
- think of rules that all employees should obey in order to avoid such situations in the future.



### Output 2 – writing exercise

Write an email to your employees informing them about new rules that are coming into force in your company.