CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

DESCRIPTION

Effective cross-cultural communication is an important part of the ***Communication Strategy*** for each site, and a critical component of the ***Community Involvement Plan***. This tool provides recommendations for communicating verbally and non verbally with different cultures identified by demographic research through ***LandView*** and other methods. It is designed to alert you to cultural differences that affect communication. This tool provides general information and specific resources to help you observe and understand the behaviors of different cultures and to follow their lead in your interactions with them.

While one culture may interpret eye contact, laughing, smiling, personal space, touching, punctuality, and emotional responses in a certain way, another culture may interpret a totally opposite meaning from the same behavior. As CIC, your job is to know your own cultural norms, understand cultural differences in affected communities, acknowledge them, and modify your interactions accordingly. This tool is designed to help you fashion understandable messages to all groups and to avoid *cultural conflict*. C*ultural conflict* can occur when two or more groups with different cultural behaviors clash. The resulting confrontation may lead the groups to differentiate themselves from each other even more. During cultural conflict, the community perceives itself as divided between "us" and "them," with the federal government (EPA) seen as "them." The results of cultural conflict vary in degree of intensity, from initial miscommunication after the site is listed on the National Priority List (NPL), to reinforcement of false perceptions and hostile eruptions at public meetings.

REQUIRED ACTIVITY?

No.

MAKING IT WORK

WHEN TO USE

As soon as the site is listed on the NPL, you should research demographics and understand differences in behavior. Your team needs to learn how different language, religion, family patterns, gender roles, education, and aspirations affect behavior. Only then can you successfully analyze how to adapt your message, tone, and distribution.

Researching demographics and learning about the differing behaviors of other cultures will not necessarily foster effective cross-cultural communication. Rather, you must know yourself and be willing and able to modify your behavior. CICs must examine their own cultural behaviors and make adjustments that will facilitate their interaction with the affected community. Your behavior regarding punctuality, personal space, smiling, and humor may fail to foster effective communication with persons from a different culture; due to the rapid increase in cultural diversity in the United States, this could result in a serious problem for EPA community involvement.

The role of the CIC is increasingly challenging as new groups of immigrants settle in the United States and exhibit different patterns of assimilation. Because of the growing number of ethnic and racial groups living in the United States, CICs must be aware of differences in behavior that affect communication. CICs are responsible for tracking of demographic trends in affected communities and developing understandable messages to *all* groups living there.

The 1990 census shows that the U.S. population changed more rapidly in the 1980s than in any other decade of the 20th century. Nearly one of every four Americans claims African,

American Indian, Asian, or Hispanic ancestry, compared to only one in five in the 1980 census. The actual rate of change may be even greater than government statistics show.

The Census Bureau admits that it vastly undercounted minorities, and has acknowledged missing 1 in 20 African Americans and Hispanics. While racial/ethnic categories were revised for Census 2000, the Bureau had previously recognized *only four* racial categories: "White, Black, Asian, and American Indian." The definition of "White" included Hispanics, many of whom objected to this definition. The census now has *five* minimum categories for data on race: "American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and White." There are two categories for data on ethnicity: "Hispanic or Latino" and "Not Hispanic or Latino."

Census figures show that in the early 1990s, the total number of minority residents was about 62 million. The official census numbers indicate the presence of more than 30 million blacks (about 12% of the population), 22.4 million Hispanics (about 9%), 7.3 million Asians (about 3%), and 2 million American Indians (about 0.8%). Whites make up more than 75% of the total U.S. population, according to the census, but that percentage is declining. The Hispanic population increased more than 50% between 1980 and 1990; the Asian population increased more than 107%.

HOW TO USE

Please note the sensitive nature of this endeavor; EPA strongly urges CICs to eschew even the appearance of stereotyping and to reach out to all people individually. It is best to observe the behaviors of different groups and follow their lead.

Refer to your **Communication Strategy** first because your demographic research in **LandView** and other methods should identify the cultural groups in your community. Even among immigrant groups from the same country, there are significant cultural variations arising from differences in education, degree of assimilation, and socioeconomic status. As well, each affected community, and the cultures of which it is comprised, must be considered individually.

Note that hidden cultures of poverty and illiteracy also exist within communities and must be addressed when planning **Community Interviews**, **Community Involvement Plans** and preparing for **Public Meetings**. Results of the government's 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey show that 46 - 51% of adults in this country, or about 90 million people, performed within the two lowest levels of functional literacy as defined by the survey. Written communication is of limited use when dealing with a community with a high rate of illiteracy. This presents a problem for communicating detailed, highly technical information at public meetings where attendees cannot read. Data is available on the Internet *http://www. fedstats.gov* and *http://nces.ed.gov* (**National Center for Education Statistics**) to assist in determining both economic and educational considerations within affected communities. Every effort must be made to reach these neglected segments of affected communities. Additionally, meetings must not be scheduled in places where people are without personal or public transportation to attend.

Observation: It is always best to observe the behaviors of the group and follow their lead.

High- and Low-Context Cultures: Communication in *high-context* cultures depends heavily on the context, or *nonverbal* aspects of communication; *low-context* cultures depend more on explicit, *verbally expressed* communication. A highly literate, well read culture is considered a low-context culture, as it relies heavily on information communicated explicitly by words.

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Nonverbal Communication: In low-context cultures, such as in academic communities, communication is mostly verbal and written. Very little information in this culture is communicated nonverbally. In high-context cultures, much of the communication process occurs nonverbally. Body language, status, tonality, relationships, the use of silence, and other factors communicate meaning. Studies show that more than 60% of communication is nonverbal and will be remembered long after your actual words. Many cultures determine the seriousness of your message by your actions and emotions during your delivery.

Eye Contact: Most U.S. children are taught to look at the teacher or parent when they are being scolded, and during interpersonal communication in general. However, in some cultures, looking down is considered a sign of respect for the person who is scolding them. Many adult Americans regard someone who does not look them in the eye as untrustworthy. However, some cultures may regard direct eye contact as confrontational. It is often considered to be rude or aggressive to look into someone's eyes for more than 4 or 5 seconds.

Smiling: Rather than being a sign of friendliness, some cultures regard smiling as false, overbearing, or worse. Smiles may disguise embarrassment, mask bereavement, and barely conceal rage, while happiness may hide behind a straight face. Do not define the acceptance of a presentation to a group that seems inexpressive as being a failure. Audiences from different cultures express acceptance in unfamiliar ways (*e.g.*, straight faced, eyes closed, heads in a bowed position). A smile and a head nod may not indicate acceptance or agreement. It is often a polite gesture, and not one of agreement or understanding.

Laughing: In some cultures, laughing is an expression of concern, embarrassment, or distress. This may lead to a false interpretation by many Americans. Do not assume someone is laughing at you; they may be expressing distress regarding the situation.

Touching: In many cultures, it is considered improper to touch a stranger. In one study, conversations in outdoor cafes in different countries were observed. The number of casual touches (of self or the other party) per hour were counted. A total of 180 touches per hour were recorded in San Juan, Puerto Rico; two per hour in Florida, and zero per hour in London. When in doubt, do not touch, other than a formal handshake. Do not touch with the left hand, which in many cultures is considered taboo.

Space: In the United States, many people unconsciously stand an arm's length apart. In some Asian cultures, people stand even farther apart. In some Hispanic or Latino cultures, people are comfortable standing closer to each other than arm's length. *As always, you should observe the behaviors of the group and follow their lead.*

Time: Different cultures have different concepts of punctuality. When some people agree to meet at a certain time, 8:00 for example, they see 8:00 as a *displaced point* in time when the meeting is scheduled to begin, and anyone who arrives after 8:00 is considered late. Other cultures see the meeting time as a *diffused point* in time, and anyone who arrives between 8:00 and 8:30 is considered punctual. However, do not interpret this as license for you or the team to be late. You must be on time, but you must also be prepared to be delayed.

Verbal Communication: Avoid use of technical phrases, jargon, and acronyms. Explain the meaning of technical language and acronyms throughout your conversation or presentation. Pause between sentences and ask, "Any questions so far?" Do not wait until the end of your presentation. Do not be afraid to use facial expressions, body language and other signs of emotion to enhance your message.

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Emotional Responses: Emotional responses will vary among different cultures. While some cultures will not react emotionally to your messages, others will. Do not become concerned if there are emotional outbursts during your presentation. Be prepared to compassionately acknowledge the emotional impact that your message may have on individuals.

Interpreters: Get to know the interpreter in advance. Your phrasing, accent, pace, and idioms are important to a good interpreter. Review technical terms in advance. Ensure a shared understanding of terms in particular and your message in general before you speak. Speak slowly and clearly. Try to phrase your thoughts into single ideas of two sentences; work this out with the interpreter in advance. Be careful with numbers. Write out important numbers to ensure understanding.

Watch your body language. The audience will be checking your body language while your words are being converted into their language. The interpreter will not be able to transmit your inflections and tone, so you must find other ways to underscore your message and why they should believe what you are saying. Watch their eyes. Watch to see if the interpreter's words seem to register with them. Avoid humor and jokes. American humor often depends on word plays that do not translate well. Rely on a pleasant facial expression.

Use visuals where possible. A picture really is worth a thousand words; the universal language of pictures can make your job easier. Spend time to let the interpreter become acquainted with your visual material.

Tips

- Communicate respect.
- Do not judge.
- Recognize your own assumptions.
- Show empathy.
- Demonstrate flexibility.
- Tolerate ambiguity.
- Value diversity.
- Be careful with humor; it may be misunderstood.

Related Tools/Resources in the Toolkit

- Community Interviews, Tab 5
- Community Involvement Plans, Tab 7
- Internet, Tab 10
- LandView, Tab 10
- Media, Tab 25
- Translation Services, Tab 43

Outside Sources of Information

- Web Sites:
  - *www.epa.gov* (environmental justice home page)
  - *www.fedstats.gov* (statistics provided by various federal agencies)
  - *nces.ed.gov* (National Center for Education Statistics)
  - *www.nativepeoples.com*
- Bibliography
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  - Axtell, Roger, ed., *Gestures.* New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1991
  - Dunung, Sanjyot P., *Doing Business in Asia: The Complete Guide.* Lexington Books, 1995
  - Kochman, Thomas., *Black and White Styles in Conflict.* University of Chicago Press, 1981
  - Morrison, Terri, *Kiss, Bow, or Shake Hands.* Adams Media Corporation, 1994
  - Rossman, Marlene L., *Multicultural Marketing: Selling to a Diverse American.* American Management Association, 1994