

Communicating Across Cultures

Pat Gustin

Would it be safe to say that communication affects almost all of life? Think about it. Virtually everything one does involves some form of communication, and when we are able to communicate well, life usually goes more smoothly. Failure to communicate well, on the other hand, creates most of the challenges people encounter—between family members, between friends or colleagues, between strangers, and even between nations.

We all struggle at times to communicate well in our home language and culture, but for people considering cross-cultural work or travel, the challenge is increased exponentially. We face the challenge of communicating with people whose languages, culture, worldviews, logic systems, beliefs, and values are vastly different from our own.

The Beginning of the Problem

These cross-cultural challenges of communication go back at least to the Tower of Babel when God introduced the phenomenon of different languages and then scattered people around the world. This led to the development of vastly different cultures. Genesis 11 marks the beginning of the need for cross-cultural communication. It didn't go well then, and, unfortunately, it often doesn't go well now.

Where do we begin communicating across cultural barriers?

The Communication Process

It might initially seem that communication begins with the speaker. If the speaker does her job well, good communication will take place. Right? How often have we heard some variation of the statement, "Just say what you mean. Be clear."

However, it can't be denied that the listener/receptor is also extremely important. If the hearer/listener focuses and listens well, then good communication will take place. "Pay attention better and you'll understand what I'm saying," puts the pressure for good communication on the listener.

In reality, for most people communication really begins with neither the speaker or the hearer. It begins with WHAT needs to be communicated. The Message. What am I going to say? What point do I want to make? What do I want the other person to hear/learn/understand? As a result, teachers spend a lot of time planning their lessons or lectures so they are confident that the *content* is correct. Preachers take time to prepare their *message* by doing hours of study and practice so they can present it accurately and clearly. Lawyers practice their opening and closing *arguments*, thinking through each detail so as to present it with the greatest clarity and power. The message is of utmost importance.

Then what?

The *who* (both speaker and listener) and the *what* (message) are obviously all very important factors in good communication. Let's analyze them briefly.

The *message* is a combination of thoughts, ideas, facts, and emotions that one person wishes to convey to another. This message can be written or spoken, but for the purpose of this course, we are primarily concerned with spoken communication. It can also be either direct (face to face) or indirect (electronic.)

The *speaker's* challenge is to turn those ideas and thoughts into something that can be transmitted to someone else. To do this, the message will be processed through a particular language, culture, world view, and logic system.

Then, after all that preparation and polishing of the content, the *hearer* is listening in a different language and filtering every word through his worldview and cultural experience that do not include the concepts and the background or experience of the speaker. As a result, he may not be able to understand what is being said, no matter how well-prepared and polished the speaker and the message are.

The reality is that communication does not begin with the *what*. Neither does it begin with the *who* (speaker/communicator or listener/receptor). Communication happens at the intersection of all three of these factors—speaker, listener, and message. The most effective communication takes place when there is an awareness on the part of the speaker of what the hearer will be able to hear and understand. All good communication, but especially cross-cultural communication, begins not with what the speaker knows or thinks or understands or wishes to communicate, but with an understanding of the hearer and what he/she will be able to process and understand.

This is called receptor (listener)/oriented communication.

Filters

Let's examine three additional elements from the communication diagram in more detail, especially thinking about the implications for cross-cultural communication.

Filters: Filters primarily include *internal* factors that will affect communication--such things as language, worldview, experience, education, temperament, logic system, and prejudices. Everything the *speaker* wishes to say, must pass through her own filters as her ideas are translated into speech or action.

In all communication, the filters of the *receptor* will be somewhat different from that of the speaker; however, in cross-cultural communication, the challenge is greater because on the listening end, the receptor will often process everything through a vastly different set of filters--language, culture, worldview, experience, education, temperament, logic system and prejudices. With these differences on both ends of the communication process, the chances for miscommunication are enormous.

We sometimes refer to the filters as each person's "frame of reference." The area of overlap between the filters (frame of reference) of the speaker and the filters (frame of reference) of the receptor is called a *shared frame of reference*. The smaller the shared frame of reference, the less true communication takes place. And

the greater the shared frame of reference, the more likely it is that meaningful communication will happen.

Static and Other Factors

Static: Another key factor in communication is static. This is the *external* factors that affect communication—external distractions such as noise, weather, health issues, disturbances and annoyances.

As a result of all these factors, what the speaker thinks she says is probably not at all what the listener actually hears and understands. True communication doesn't happen primarily in what is said; as stated previously, it only happens in the interaction between the speaker, the message, and what the receptor understands. Ultimately, meaning is in people, not in words.

The responsibility for dealing with all of these factors rests with the one who desires to communicate. To communicate well, he needs to make every effort to increase the shared frame of reference, speak the language, understand and appreciate the worldview, respect different logic systems, appreciate the uniqueness of all aspects of the culture and their influence on the communication process.

Communicating without Words

Not all of communication is in words, however. The majority of communication is non-verbal. In fact, it constitutes more than 50 % of all communication. Body language, facial expressions, tone of voice, and inflections, are equally, if not more, important than words. This non-verbal communication can change a negative into a positive and visa versa. Rolled eyes, shrugged shoulders, a sigh, raised eyebrows, a wrinkled brow, hands on the hips, a clenched jaw—all speak volumes! Even these aspects of communication, however, are not universal. The same gesture may have totally opposite meanings in two different

languages/cultures. Good cross-cultural communicators, therefore, will be perceptive observers of “how” people speak the language as well as “what. This is especially true of communication of emotions.

Form and Meaning

In addition to all of these various elements in the communication process itself, good communication is also affected by the fact that words are simply abstract symbols for concrete realities. The words *tree* (English), *arbol* (Spanish) and *tone mai* (Thai) are simply symbols standing for a tangible object—a tall woody plant with a lot of leaves on it. Words are just symbols or forms that a culture has given meaning to. The challenge when it comes to communication is that one symbol (word or form) may have many different meanings—even in the same language! Take the word “red,” for instance. It’s literal meaning in English is a specific bright color. However, think about it. There are many additional meanings for the same word. In business being “in the red” means being in debt. In many parts of Asia, red is the symbol for good luck, prosperity, and happiness. Red has meant “communism”, “prostitution,” “embarrassment,” and “anger,” to name but a few. White indicates purity or innocence in many countries. In others, the same word/color means death. Same form, different meaning. Churches learned the hard way that painting a hospital white was not a good idea in some places, communicating that it was a “house of death.” And insisting that a bride wear white, the color of widows, did not communicate what was intended. Same form, different meaning.

Form and meaning differences relate to non-verbal communication, as well. In much of the western world, looking someone directly in the eyes communicates honesty and sincerity. In other parts of the world, the exact same action indicates disrespect and “cheekiness.” An innocent hand motion in one culture can be very vulgar or rude in another.

Meaning and Form

Not only can one form have many meanings, but the same meaning can be communicated with different forms. The way one communicates “reverence” in one part of the world can be by removing one’s shoes before entering a house of worship. In another place it is by wearing your best, well-polished shoes. A welcoming, “Happy to meet you,” can be communicated with a handshake, a bow, or spitting on someone’s chest. Same meaning, different form.

What is important to remember is that the form by which a particular meaning is communicated is not as important as the meaning itself. An important “meaning” can be conveyed in many different ways.

This aspect of communication is of utmost importance. A particular form (word, action, even a ritual) may communicate something very meaningful in one culture, but have no meaning or even a negative meaning in another culture. It therefore may be necessary to find a new form that will convey an important meaning in a way that is relevant to a different group. In the world of religions, praying with upraised hands or by kneeling or standing or bowing prostrate on the floor are simply different forms. The meaning and purpose of each is to prepare one to communicate with God in a reverent way.

Communicating on Different Levels

To further complicate the communication process, everyone communicates on three levels.

- Cognitive
- Affective
- Evaluative

The one we are most familiar with is the cognitive. This is the one that we generally think of as most important (the *what*.)

Equally important, however, is the affective level. This level has to do with feelings and emotions. Cultures vary in their concepts of beauty and aesthetics as well as how emotions are experienced and expressed. Learning to value, appreciate, and identify with these various aspects of the culture are essential to communicate on the affective level. There is no communication without identification.

Lastly, communication is also on the evaluative level. Every culture has certain values and standards by which they judge all of life. Actions, words, and non-verbal language may unintentionally communicate negative judgments or morals and values that are very different from what is acceptable.

Learning to communicate well on all three of these levels is not easy. Like many other aspects of cross-cultural living, it requires time, patience, and a willingness to study, learn, understand, and adapt in ways that will communicate to the receptors, the true meaning we wish to share.

Some Challenges

One major challenge in cross-cultural communication is that everything we do communicates. Language, both verbal and non-verbal, is just the tip of the communication iceberg. Communication also takes place in the way we live our lives—interactions with family or fellow workers, how to deal with conflict—everything becomes a part of the communication process.

Unfortunately, because we often don't know the culture, we can easily communicate things we don't intend to. Westerners coming from cultures that place a high value on task-focused use of time, may discover that what they have really communicated by their constant busy-ness and focus on finishing tasks efficiently and on time, is that they don't care for people. They don't take the time to sit around and talk to them, enjoying the fellowship. What one culture sees (and values) as efficiency is interpreted by another culture to be uncaring and even un-Christian.

Another challenge grows out of the fact that there is usually not a 100% identical word-for-word translation from one language to another. Simply substituting a word in the local language for its apparent counterpart in another language is fraught with danger. Translations of words such as "God", "gods," "love," "sin" "salvation," etc. can be dangerous, since the nuances of meaning given in the local language/culture/religion may not be at all the biblical meaning we intend. Using these words without understanding the differences in meaning can be very misleading.

So What?

The bottom line in cross-cultural communication is that the receptors (hearers) will always process everything that is said and done *through their language and culture*. They do this to make sense of it, in their own context. Our task is to learn how to communicate in receptor-friendly ways.