

Cross-Cultural Competence: Engage People from any Culture

by Louise Rasmussen - October 05, 2013

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Cross-cultural competence refers to your ability to understand people from different cultures and engage with them effectively. And not just people from the one culture that you've studied for years. Having cross-cultural competence means you can be effective in your interactions with people from most any culture.

Being able to communicate and [work with people across cultures](#) is becoming more important all the time. People are traveling, reaching out, and mixing with different others like never before. They do it for fun, but they also do it for work. In all cases, success requires developing a relationship. And doing this means bridging a cultural divide.

Cross-cultural competence helps you develop the mutual understanding and human relationships that are necessary for achieving your professional goals.

But what exactly makes up cross-cultural competence? What are the specific knowledge, skills, and attitudes that make someone cross-culturally competent?

[Louise Rasmussen](#) and [Winston Sieck](#) conducted a study to address these questions. They described their [model of cross-cultural competence](#) in an article published in the *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*. Rasmussen was also granted an award from the Defense Language and National Security Education Office to further study and validate the model, which describes 12 elements of cross-cultural competence.

Rasmussen and her team interviewed [cross-cultural experts](#) about their experiences interacting in foreign cultures. These experts were military personnel who had a great deal of cross-cultural experience. They were also nominated by their peers as being especially effective in their interactions with members of other cultures.

The researchers did not ask about the opinions of the cross-cultural experts. Instead, they asked questions to get at the interviewees' actual, lived overseas experiences. From these experiences, Rasmussen and her team uncovered the skills and knowledge the experts drew on as they interacted with people from other cultures.

Rasmussen, Sieck, and their colleagues identified 12 core aspects of cross-cultural competence. These competencies were frequently found in the thought process of the experts. They are listed here as a set of principles that can help you be more effective on your next sojourn:

1. **Stay focused on your goals:** If you're overseas for work, then building intercultural relationships is not just for fun. Building relationships will help you get your work done.
2. **Understand the culture within yourself:** Keep aware of the fact that you see the world in a

particular way because of your own background, personal history, and culture.

3. **Manage your attitudes towards the culture:** You don't always have to love the culture. But you do have to keep check on your reactions to values and customs that are different from your own. The first two principles can also help you manage your attitudes.
4. **Direct your learning of the culture:** Don't expect a book or training course to hand you the answers. Try to make sense of the culture for yourself, using the information you come across as clues.
5. **Develop reliable information sources:** Find two or three locals to get answers from about the culture. Build the relationships so you feel comfortable asking about most anything. Check with more than one and compare their answers in your head.
6. **Learn about the new culture efficiently:** You can't learn everything about the culture before your trip. It's unrealistic. Focus on learning a few things that fit your interests, and use those to make connections and learn more while you are abroad.
7. **Cope with cultural surprises:** No matter how much you prepare in advance, you will find yourself faced with people acting in ways that you find puzzling. When you do, try to find out why. Doing so will often lead to new insights.
8. **Formulate cultural explanations of behavior:** Routinely try to [explain to yourself](#) why people act as they do in this culture, differently from your own. Using things you know about the culture to explain behavior will help you build a deeper understanding of the culture overall.
9. **Take a cultural perspective:** Try to see things from the point of view of the people from the other culture. By [taking a cultural perspective](#), you may create a whole new understanding of what's going on around you.
10. **Plan cross-cultural communication:** Think ahead of time about what you have to say and how you want the other person to perceive you. Use what you know about the culture to figure out the best way to get that across.
11. **Control how you present yourself:** Be deliberate about how you present and express yourself. Sometimes you'll be most effective if you're just yourself. Other times you have to adapt how you present yourself to the culture you are in to be most effective.
12. **Reflect and seek feedback:** Continue to reflect on and learn from your interactions and experiences after they occur. After an interaction you can think about whether you got the messages across you intended. You can even ask a local how they think you did.

These twelve principles give you some pointers about *how* to think about the experiences you have in new cultures. They are essential to cross-cultural competence.

Reading through the principles you may be asking yourself "*do I really need to do this much thinking when I go abroad?*"

Rasmussen consistently found this thoughtful approach among those with high cross-cultural competence. Keep these principles in mind and use them. You will be more capable and confident engaging people from any culture.

Rasmussen, L. J., & Sieck, W. R. (2015). Culture-general competence: Evidence from a cognitive field study of professionals who work in many cultures. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 14(3), 75-90. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2015.03.014>

Retrieved: 01-24-2018
Updated: 01-23-2018
Published: 10-05-2013
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