

Intercultural Communication Competence: It Takes Two to Tango

by Louise Rasmussen - November 21, 2013

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You've probably heard the saying "It's all about the people you know."

Relationships can help you get things done. The more people you know around the world, the wider your reach.

But, in order to make connections with people—you have to not only talk to them, you have to persuade them you're someone worth knowing.

Intercultural communication is what you do when you talk to someone from a different culture.

Intercultural communication competence is how you engage someone from another culture well.

If intercultural communication isn't currently one of your strengths, don't despair. Change is possible.

Intercultural Communication Competence

Richard Wiseman from California State University has discovered some features of effective intercultural communication that you can use to improve. He has studied intercultural communicators for many years and provides a crisp review of what it means to be [good at communicating across cultures](#) in his [chapter](#) on intercultural communication competence.

Wiseman's basic recipe is fairly simple. You have intercultural communication competence if you can communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations. It's a key aspect of [cultural competence](#).

The key lies in understanding what it means to be *effective* and what it means to be *appropriate*.

Effective Intercultural Communication

Your intercultural communication is effective when it allows you to achieve a goal that you care about. This is the first part of intercultural communication competence.

Wiseman describes the components of effective intercultural communication strategies. Based on this description, these are 5 steps you can use to increase how effective you are in intercultural interactions:

1. **Think about what your goals are for an interaction before you engage the other person.** Your goal may be to find out if you can trust the other person, or it may just be to get invited to a party.

2. **Think about what you need to do to achieve your goals.** If you're trying to find out if you can trust someone, one way might be to ask them a question you already know the answer to. If you want to get invited to a party, you might say "I heard there's this special drink people have at parties around here. It sounds fantastic. I'd love to experience that before I go home."
3. **Try to predict what the other person's responses will be to things you might say or do.** This is where [knowing the culture comes in handy so as to accurately take their perspective](#). If you ask a question that is considered very personal where the other person comes from in your quest to figure out if you can trust them, you could inadvertently lose their trust. And, it's possible that by showing that you know and appreciate something about another culture's customs you will inspire people to invite you to a party.
4. **Pick a communication approach and try it out.** This is the part where you have to 'pull it off', so to speak. If you've come up with a communication approach that you're not sure you can pull off, then you may want to try to generate some alternatives. Other people know when you're being genuine and when you aren't. In that regard it doesn't matter what culture they come from.
5. **Reflect back on how effective your approach was after the interaction.** This means thinking of each interaction you have as a learning experience. If it didn't go as you expected, you may want to try to figure out why. This can help you come up with a better approach next time.

Appropriate Intercultural Communication

But, achieving a goal you care about is not enough. According to Wiseman, intercultural communication competence also means you must communicate appropriately.

Intercultural communication is appropriate when you achieve your goals through the use of messages and actions that are expected in the situation. This means that the actions and communication you use to achieve your goal are interpreted as meaningful by the other person you're interacting with.

To make that happen, Wiseman contends, you need a trifecta of knowledge, skills, and motivation.

- **Knowledge** – You must have information about the people, the rules for communication used within their culture, the context, and the expectations members of the other culture have for interactions.
- **Skills** – You must be able to engage in a different style of communication than you're used to. This could mean saying things that you may not truly believe in and behaving in ways that may feel 'unnatural' at first.

- **Motivation** – You have to be motivated to interact with people who are different than you. This means being able to let go of any misgivings or negative emotions you may have towards them.

It Takes Two to Tango

Communicating effectively *and* appropriately is a recipe for building lasting relationships across cultures.

Now, the following may seem counterintuitive, but, to fully achieve these goals you may have to let go of the idea that intercultural communication is something *you* do and something *you* have to be successful at.

You could instead think of intercultural communication as a tango. A tango is something two people do together. To determine whether or not a tango is ‘successful’ you have to look at the whole picture.

Thinking of intercultural communication as a dance makes it easier to remember to think about what the other person is getting from the interaction at each turn.

If at any point it appears that your actions or messages are not making sense to the other person—then you have started to step on each other’s toes.

That is your cue to apply your knowledge and skills to get the interaction back on track.

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