



Global Communication Styles

By Kari Heistad, CEO, Culture Coach International

Clear and effective communication is always important, but it is particularly so when communicating in a multi-cultural environment. Cross-cultural interactions are filled with cultural nuances that can impact communication at all levels. Richard Lewis in his book *When Cultures Collide* explains how research has shown that cultures can be divided into three main groups – Linear, Multi-linear and Reactive. These broad groupings can be used as a foundation for starting to understand communication styles while acknowledging that cultural and personal variations exist.

Linear cultures (North America, Western and Northern Europe, S. Africa, New Zealand and Australia) are very direct in their communication styles (illustrated as a straight line between points A and B). They tend to be punctual for meetings, very bottom line in their communications and they dive into the business at hand very quickly. In contrast, Multi-Linear cultures (Southern and Eastern Europe, Africa, Central and South America, and the Middle East) have a more divergent communication style (illustrated by a zig-zaging line). They place much more emphasis on the personal relationship and their immediate interactions rather than set meeting times and future appointments. Their conversations will include personal inquiries and world topics and they want to stand closer to people than the linear cultures. They will often reach out to touch the person they are talking with.

Reactive cultures (most of Asia) are more reflective in their communication styles (illustrated by an inward spiral). They are superb at reading non-verbal communication cues, they have a much stronger group thinking style, and they typically take longer to make decisions. They place a high value on the personal relationship between the communicators, and they will want to know a great deal about who the people are when negotiating.

Given the different communication styles, here are a few tips to keep in mind when communicating in a multicultural setting:

1. Don't ask yes-no questions or make assumptions about what people understand. Ask open-ended questions to ensure understanding and reiterate important details.
2. Ensure that your verbal and non-verbal messages are congruent, particularly when interacting with Asian counterparts.
3. Adapt your communication style to match the people you are communicating with. They will feel that you understand them better and it will improve the overall tone of the interaction.
4. Many cultures place a strong emphasis on spending a few minutes chatting before getting down to business. Make a few minutes of personal chit-chat before starting meetings. This acknowledges the people you are speaking with on a personal level.

Keeping your communication style and these tips in mind will help your interactions to flow more smoothly and it will allow you to focus more on the important business topics at hand.

Kari Heistad is the CEO of Culture Coach International. Her work focuses on helping companies to turn their multicultural workforces from a liability into an asset. Additional articles and a Cultural Quick Tip Newsletter can be found at: www.CultureCoach.biz.