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CROSSCULTURE DIFFERENCES IN NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Cross-cultural communication is a field of study that looks at how people from differing cultural backgrounds communicate, in similar and different ways among themselves, and how they endeavor to communicate across cultures. With increasing globalization and international trade, it is unavoidable that different cultures will meet, conflict, and blend together. People from different culture find it is difficult to communicate not only due to language barriers, but also are affected by culture styles.

As Psychology Today reports, more than half of all information communicated in conversation is done so in nonverbal form. Types of nonverbal communication vary considerably based on culture and country of origin. For individuals working in the realm of international business, understanding how to effectively communicate with peers from across the world is a key competency for their professional wheelhouse.

So, what is nonverbal communication? Nonverbal communication describes the way people send and receive information to each other beyond words. According to Dr. Charles Tidwell, the concept serves a number of functions: to accent the meaning of verbal messages (such as pointing while stating directions); to complement or contradict verbal messages (such as indicating sarcasm using verbal tone); to regulate interactions with others (such as using nonverbal cues to indicate when people should and should not speak); to substitute for verbal messages (such as nodding instead of saying “yes”).

Although nonverbal communication is a universal phenomenon, meanings of nonverbal cues are not, in fact, universal. They vary tremendously across cultures and are often ambiguous. Because of this fact, it is crucial for those who work in international business settings to have at least a rudimentary understanding of the ways nonverbal cues are communicated across and within foreign cultures.

There are several forms of nonverbal communication such as eye contact, touch or gestures. Whether or not eye contact is made, who makes it and how long it lasts vary tremendously in meaning. A great number of cultural expressions are achieved through touch. There are also a wide range of cultural viewpoints on the appropriate rules regarding physical contact between both similar and opposite genders.

Gestures can convey wildly different meanings. For example, the Ok. Individuals in the United States use the “OK” sign to convey that something is acceptable. In Japan, the same hand symbol means “money.” Argentinians, Belgians, the French and the Portuguese all use the symbol to mean “zero” or “nothing.” Still other countries in Eastern Europe consider that same sign an offensive swear.

Physical space is of great importance, too. Countries that are densely populated generally have much less need for personal space than those that are not. As identified by scholar Edward T. Hall, there are four communication distances: intimate, personal, social, and public. Intimate space ranges from 0 to 18 inches. Personal space ranges from 18 inches to 4 feet. Social space ranges from 4 feet to 12 feet. Public space includes 12 feet and beyond.

Some facial expressions or other body language phenomena as well as postures are often misunderstood because they differ in different parts of the world: in USA, standing with hands on the hips may suggest power or pride, but in Argentina, it may suggest anger or a challenge. Many cultures also frown upon showing the bottom of the shoe, something that is considered dirty.