Culturally-Responsive Communication

Changing Culture

Culture includes the traits and behaviors of a group of people, as defined by their language, social customs, religion, music and arts. Culture includes how people think, act and live their lives.

Understanding culture is an important part of successful communication. One should not make assumptions about a person based only on their culture. Cultures change over time when new knowledge, beliefs and norms are introduced. As a result of a growing and changing culture, know that the cultural norms discussed in this Toolkit may not apply to everyone. Do not expect people to perfectly fit the norms of their culture. Always respect and be open to each person’s knowledge and beliefs. Although you are sharing information that will be useful to your audience, you may also learn something new!

Culture and Communication

Culture is an important part of communication. It affects the words that are used to express thoughts and ideas. It also affects how information is understood.

In order to have clear and effective communication with people of a different culture, it is important to understand not only the culture of the person with whom we are speaking, but also our own culture, behaviors and biases. Always remember that the way a person communicates may be influenced by their culture. More importantly, 80 percent of communication is nonverbal. So, your actions really do speak louder than your words.

For example:

In Bangladesh the “thumbs up” is used as a hurtful expression. In North America and in many other countries, it is a symbol for “good job.” In Russia and France, this means “zero.” In Brazil, it is an insult. In Japan, it means “money.” In the U.S. and England, it means “okay.”
**Exercise**

As people with our own beliefs and experiences, we often miss information that does not fit our beliefs. As a result, we can interpret experiences, conversations and events differently than others around us. If we take time to learn about other people's experiences and beliefs, we can learn new ways of looking at the world. Sometimes, what we see can surprise us!

What do you see when you look at this picture?

![Image of a person with a fur collar and a ribbon or necklace around their neck.](image)

Do you see an older woman or a younger woman? Would you believe that this image shows both an older woman and a younger woman?

In this image, you can see an older woman, with her mouth slightly open and her chin nestled in what looks like a fur collar. You can also see a younger woman, with her head turned away and a ribbon or necklace around her neck. If you see the older woman, try to change your viewpoint to see the younger woman. If you already see the younger woman, try to find the face of the older woman.

It is important to be able to change your viewpoint and understand that there is always more than one way of looking at something. Similarly, in the communication process, it is important to understand that there are many ways to communicate a message. And, many ways a message can be understood by others.
Summary
For each of us, our beliefs are shaped by our knowledge and experiences, by our family and friends and by our culture. Being aware of our own cultural beliefs and behaviors will help:
- Explore, understand, accept and value our cultural and social background.
- Understand that we will not have the same beliefs that others do and respond to those people in ways that do not create conflict or discomfort.
- Understand and respect more deeply the culture of those we meet.

Take time to think about how your own knowledge, behaviors, attitudes, beliefs, values and norms affect how you communicate — both how you share information and how you understand it.

Communication Tips
Below are tips to guide you when you are communicating with someone of a culture other than your own.
- Be aware of differences, respect them and use them as a learning opportunity.
  - Do not assume that everyone’s beliefs and behaviors are like yours.
  - Do not push your cultural beliefs onto others.
  - Avoid making decisions about other people based only on their culture.
- Listen carefully to make sure that the person you are speaking to understands your message.
  - Try to choose the best wording and tone of voice to avoid misunderstandings.
  - Remember that English is one of the hardest languages to learn. If you are speaking in English and it is not the person’s preferred language, take your time and be patient.
- Speak openly and honestly when you sense your message is not getting across.
  - If you don’t understand, ask again, respectfully.
  - Speak with sincerity and not with jokes.
- Pay attention to body language.
  - When you are speaking, try to avoid crossing your arms or placing your hands on your hips. It can seem like you are not feeling patient.
  - Always look and listen for “hints” of frustration (deep breaths, sighs, etc.).