

Communicating Across Cultures

by Essential Skills

During a commencement speech at Northwestern University, then-senator Barack Obama asked the graduating class of 2006 to reflect on America's "empathy deficit," the growing inability "to put ourselves in somebody else's shoes, to see the world through those who are different from us—the child who's hungry, the laid-off steelworker, the immigrant woman who's cleaning up your dorm room."

The soon-to-be president implied that this deficit had formed because empathetic understanding is difficult to practice. This is no less true in the workplace, where empathetic understanding can be difficult for a variety of reasons.

Empathetic understanding means being able to put yourself in someone else's shoes. In other words, it means that you can understand the thoughts and feelings that someone shares with you. It doesn't mean that you have to agree with those ideas and feelings; the goal is simply to understand where another person is coming from.

Being able to empathize with someone allows you to discuss ideas without getting defensive, which goes a long way toward enabling communication. However, there are many obstacles to empathetic understanding. Empathy is easier to practice with those most similar to ourselves, so anything that heightens an awareness of our differences can be a barrier to understanding.

Cultural differences can also make empathetic understanding difficult, often because certain gestures and situations mean completely different things depending on what culture someone comes from.

A custom that's shared between two cultures can mean totally different things. In the business culture of the United States, it's the norm to shake hands while being introduced to someone, but in Japan, as in some other Eastern cultures, it's customary to bow. These culture-specific habits not only make basic communication difficult, they also emphasize our differences, making empathy harder.

Because human beings eat differently, speak differently, worship differently, dress differently, and do much else differently, it can be tempting to think that these differences are too great to overcome. But the reality is that any member of the human species is overwhelmingly similar to any other; in fact, the genetic differences between human beings amount to only 0.1% (Human Origins Project, n.d.). Besides, history offers many cases when different cultures learned to communicate and coexist with one another. In the modern workplace, cultural differences are more easily accommodated than we may first imagine, especially when those involved practice active listening.

Dig Deeper

For practical strategies and tips on communicating across cultures, visit the following resources:

Successfully Communicating Across Cultures

Strategies For Effective Cross-Cultural Communication Within The Workplace

Strategies to Improve Intercultural Communication



THINK ABOUT IT

Observe the communication practices in your workplace. How does workplace culture change how people engage verbally and nonverbally?