

## Skills for Success Curriculum Resource Cover Page

### Organization

College Sector Committee for Adult Upgrading (CSC)

### Resource Title and Description (for Supporting Underrepresented Groups theme)

*Developing Cross-cultural Communication Skills for Work, Learning and Life*

This resource provides information on cross-cultural communications skills and offers tips and tools about how to become more aware when communicating with people of diverse cultures.

### OALCF Alignment

Competency	Task Group	Level
Competency A - Find and Use Information	A1. Read continuous text	3
Competency B - Communicate Ideas and Information	B2. Write continuous text	2
Competency E - Manage Learning	N/A	3
Competency F - Engage with Others	N/A	N/A

### Goal Paths (check all that apply)

- Employment
  Postsecondary  
 Apprenticeship
  Independence  
 Secondary School Credit

### Embedded Skills for Success (check all that apply)

- Adaptability
  Numeracy  
 Collaboration
  Problem Solving  
 Communication
  Reading  
 Creativity and innovation
  Writing  
 Digital

### Notes:

The opinions expressed in this document are the opinions of the College Sector Committee for Adult Upgrading. The Government of Ontario and its agencies are in no way bound by any recommendations contained in this document.

# Developing Cross-cultural Communication Skills for Work, Learning and Life



## Introduction

---

In the workplace, in learning environments and in life, we meet many people who are not from our own culture. Our background and/or culture affects everything we see, do, understand, and communicate. So, it is easy to miscommunicate if we do not understand each other's ways.

Clear and comprehensive communication is key to your own success as well as an organization's, or a business' success.

The purpose of this module is to provide information on cross-cultural communications skills with respect to the following:

- Defining the terms related to cross-cultural communication.
- Understanding why these skills are important.
- Acquiring tips and tools to help develop these skills.

**NOTE:** The answer keys for the exercises in this resource are found at the end of this resource.

## Highlighting various cultural groups and defining cross-cultural communication

Before defining the term, *cross-cultural communication*, let us begin by first highlighting some of the various cultural groups. Then, we will explain what the term culture is all about.

Cultural groups are diverse and include, but are not limited to groups defined by:

- Ethnicity
- Religion
- Generations
- Gender
- Sexual orientation
- Social classes
- Education

Within these groups, people are taught different patterns, beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors, all of which make up **culture**.

This is important to know, “because group differences are often what make us feel uncomfortable in interactions and can lead to miscommunication and conflict” (Gerber, P.J, Murphy, H. 2021). Therefore, by recognizing these differences, we can improve on our cross-cultural communication skills.

Cross cultural communication is being able to recognize differences and similarities between cultural groups to communicate with them clearly. It refers to the ways in which people from different cultural backgrounds adapt and modify their behavior and ways of communicating orally or through writing to improve communication with others. (Stobierski, 2019).

*Fact: In Canada, as in many countries, nodding your head up and down signifies “yes” when you are asked a question requesting a yes or no answer. Nodding from side-to-side mean “no”. However in Bulgaria, it is the opposite. Up and down nodding signifies “no” and side-to-side signifies “yes”.*

### Exercise A

Take this mini quiz to evaluate your knowledge of culture:

1. Which of the following is judged to be good etiquette in Japanese culture?
  - A. Placing your chopsticks upright in your food
  - B. Keeping your shoes on when entering someone’s home
  - C. Offering a gift with two hands
2. In which country is the number 8 considered lucky because it signifies prosperity?
  - A. Mexico
  - B. China
  - C. Russia
3. When communicating with colleagues whose first language is not the same as yours, what is the best practice?
  - A. Try to find a translator to make sure your message is understood
  - B. Speak slowly and loudly, making sure to articulate
  - C. Speak naturally but avoid using slang words, metaphors or idioms that may not be properly interpreted.
4. Giving a thumbs up (👍) is equivalent to giving the middle finger to a/an:
  - A. Iranian
  - B. Italian
  - C. Jamaican
5. True or false: All French Canadians greet friends, family, and clients with a kiss on each cheek:
  - A. True
  - B. False

## Why cross-cultural communication is important

---



When your environment includes various cultures, it can be easy to insult, patronize or frustrate others because of how we communicate. Good cross-cultural communication skills are important to:

- ✓ Create a healthy and successful work environment.
- ✓ Prevent conflict.
- ✓ Improve productivity.
- ✓ Develop an appreciation and tolerance of diversity.
- ✓ Make you a more competent communicator in cross-cultural settings.

## Tips for improving cross-cultural communication skills

---

### 1. Be Adaptable:

Get out of your comfort zone to try new ways of doing things. Can you see a different perspective? Doing something differently does not make it wrong.

### 2. Practice active listening skills:

- Listen intently.
- Do not plan your response while a person is speaking. Just listen.
- Summarize what they said.
- Watch their body language as they speak. It will give you an idea of their comfort level.
- If necessary, compose a follow up email summarizing the content of your discussion. This makes sure that both parties heard and understood the same message.
- Do not interject when someone is speaking or finish a person's sentence.
- Pay attention to your own body language to make sure it is open.

### 3. Pay attention to your word choice, tone, and pace.

When speaking to individuals who may still be struggling with your language, speak using your regular tone of voice. Shouting or speaking louder will not make someone understand you better. You can slow your pace somewhat, but not too much. Rather, make sure you articulate your words and speak clearly. You will get better results than if you purposely speak very slowly and you may offend someone if you do so.

Find out how a person prefers to be addressed. People would much rather be asked how they wish to be addressed. Do not assume. Use inclusive vocabulary.

Always consider who you are speaking to and choose vocabulary that they will understand. Even people whose first language is the same as yours may not understand your local expressions or slang words. It is best to avoid using them.

Also, when individuals are learning a new language, they may not understand any figurative language you use; therefore metaphors and idioms should be avoided.

Similarly, when you are communicating in writing, e.g. when you send someone an email or a workplace text, use shorter sentences. As in oral communication, avoid figurative language. Make sure to punctuate and use capital letters correctly, and use the long form of words instead of contractions. For example: **do not** vs **don't**, **would not** vs **wouldn't**, **I will** vs **I'll**, **it would** vs **it'd**, etc.

### Exercise B

Below are sentences in which idioms and metaphors have been used. Re-write the sentence to eliminate the figurative language to make the sentence clearer.

Figurative Expression	Literal Meaning
Jessica <b>spilled the beans</b> about Frank's surprise birthday party.	Jessica <b>gave away the secret</b> about Frank's surprise birthday party.
When Raj had to choose between two friends it put him <b>in a sticky situation</b> .	
<b>Time flies</b> when you are having fun.	
A person may get <b>cold feet</b> when addressing an unfamiliar crowd.	
People do not always <b>see eye to eye</b> when discussing politics.	
(There are 3 ) Negotiating a new contract is always <b>a hot potato</b> , but one cannot <b>zip their lip</b> in doing so, or they may <b>miss the boat</b> and get a poor deal.	

#### 4. Do your research.

Take the initiative to prepare for and learn about the cultures which you or your organization deals with. When you know you will be meeting new members of your team, a new boss, or clients, research what you can about them. “Many cultures expect a degree of formality at the beginning of the interaction. (...) You, as an individual, should be aware of this and be ready to respect this” (UOTP Marketing, 2022).

#### 5. Be aware of your body language.

Communication is not limited to speaking. Our body has its own language, and it becomes important to have open body language that encourages communication. For example, crossing your arms during a conversation can be perceived as being closed to what another person is saying, or as defensive.

Below is a chart that provides examples of open and closed body language movements. Try to practice using open body language the next time you meet someone.

Open Body language examples	Closed Body language examples
Maintaining eye contact.	Shifty eyes; looking everywhere except at the other person
Arms on the side of your body	Crossed arms, or a hand on your hip
Positive facial expressions like a smile, nodding in agreement	Rolling eyes, smirking
Standing with feet more than shoulder width apart.	Crossed legs
Facing the person throughout the conversation.	Turning your body position so that it does not face the person, pacing.

In adopting open body language, you are also encouraging the other person to do so, as people tend to imitate what others do while in conversation. This is also a tactic used to show that you are actively listening and are aware of your own body language.

#### 6. Ask open-ended questions.

What is the difference between an open-ended sentence, and a close-ended sentence?

Open-Ended Questions	Close-Ended Questions
Open-ended questions require an answer with details. They are broad and may contain many elements.	Close-ended questions often require a one-word answer (often yes or no). They limit what a person can answer.
<p>Examples:</p> <p>Can you explain what happens when you try to mix oil and water in a container?</p> <p>What are your thoughts on the outcome of this business deal?</p> <p>What can be done to improve your work/life balance?</p>	<p>Examples:</p> <p>Will oil and water mix well if put together in a container?</p> <p>Are you satisfied with the outcome of this business deal?</p> <p>Is your work/life balance meeting your needs?</p>

As mentioned, close ended questions usually force a person to answer yes or no. They require a specific answer. In some cultures, it is deemed unacceptable to answer a question negatively; therefore, you may force a person to say yes, even if the answer is really no. As such, practise asking open-ended questions. An open-ended question permits a person to answer with information and details versus yes or no.

### Exercise C

Rephrase the following closed ended questions so they become open-ended:

1. Is it cold outside?

\_\_\_\_\_

2. If I set up a meeting for 2 p.m., will you be available?

\_\_\_\_\_

3. Was there one concept that you preferred over another during the meeting?

\_\_\_\_\_

4. Did you finish the report I requested?

\_\_\_\_\_

### 7. Distinguish acceptable vs intrusive behaviours.

Before you do or say something that relates to your culture ask yourself if it is acceptable in other cultures or if it is mostly only practised in yours. If you are not sure that your actions or words would offend a person, avoid doing or saying it.

## 8. Observe your own biases, preconceptions and stereotypes.

We judge others based on our own culture and experience. Just because we do something one way, does not mean that doing it a different way is wrong. Do not be offended if someone does something that is unfamiliar to you. Also avoid judging a person who acts or does something that is out of your ordinary. Instead, ask questions. It is acceptable to ask why such a gesture or action was performed, or what it means.

Also, most of us have had or still possess predetermined beliefs and stereotypes about other cultures. These were probably taught to us or embedded in us through media. Expecting someone to act a specific way because of their culture is a display of closed mindedness. When you catch yourself being closed minded, try to get to know the individual. Also, remind yourself: you would not want to be stereotyped a certain way; neither do others.

### Exercise D

Greetings from around the world. Have a little fun! Match the form of greeting with the culture from which it originates.

India, Tibet, Thailand, USA, Zimbabwe, Greenland, France

A. Performing the Wai: a person places their palms together to their chest. Then they bow their heads until their thumbs touch their chin and their fingers touch their forehead. \_\_\_\_\_

B. Air kisses: Two people touch cheeks and kiss the air.  
\_\_\_\_\_

C. Fist Bumping: Bumping fists together as a greeting. Originated between motorcycle gangs in the 1940's.  
\_\_\_\_\_

D. Sticking out your tongue.  
\_\_\_\_\_

E. The Kunik: placing nose and top lip on the forehead of another person and breathing in.  
\_\_\_\_\_

F. The Pranama: Touching elders' feet to show respect.  
\_\_\_\_\_

G. Clapping hands: the first person claps once, the other twice.  
\_\_\_\_\_



## Summary

Cross-cultural communication is being aware of each other's differences and taking a moment to think before acting and speaking. Though we cannot be expected to know everything about every culture, we should have an openness to getting to know another person and their culture.

Be respectful. Be mindful.

Thank you, merci, miigwech, gracias, xiè xiè, danke, grazie, spasiba, sukran, mahalo, kiitos. 😊



## Answer Key

### Exercise A

1-C; 2-B; 3-C; 4-A; 5-B

### Exercise B (answers may vary slightly)

Figurative Expression	Literal Meaning
Jessica <b>spilled the beans</b> about Fank's surprise birthday party.	Jessica <b>gave away the secret</b> about Frank's surprise birthday party.
When Raj had to choose between two friends it put him <b>in a sticky situation</b> .	When Raj had to choose between two friends it put him <b>in a bad predicament or bad situation</b> .
<b>Time flies</b> when you are having fun.	<b>Time goes by quickly</b> when you are having fun.
A person may get <b>cold feet</b> when addressing an unfamiliar crowd.	A person may get <b>nervous or anxious or hesitate</b> when addressing an unfamiliar crowd.
People do not always <b>see eye to eye</b> when discussing politics.	People do not always <b>agree</b> when discussing politics.
Negotiating a new contract is always a <b>hot potato</b> , but one cannot <b>zip their lip</b> in doing so, or they may <b>miss the boat</b> and get a poor deal.	Negotiating a new contract is <b>always awkward or unpleasant or controversial</b> , but one cannot <b>remain quiet</b> in doing so, or they may <b>miss their chance</b> and get a poor deal.

### Exercise C (answers may vary slightly)

- Is it cold outside?  
**Possible answer:** What is the weather like today?
- If I set up a meeting for 2pm, will you be available?  
**Possible answer:** What time would you be available for a meeting?
- Of the concepts discussed during the meeting, was there one that you preferred over another?  
**Possible answer:** Of all the concepts discussed during the meeting, which one did you prefer and why?
- Did you get the report I requested done?  
**Possible answer:** When will the report I requested be done?

### Exercise D

- A. Thailand, B. France, C. USA, D. Tibet, E. Greenland, F. India, G. Zimbabwe

## References

- Acutrans19. (January 11, 2021). *5 Surprising Greetings from Cultures Around the World*. Acutrans. Retrieved from [5 Surprising Greetings from Cultures Around the World - \(acutrans.com\)](#)
- Ciulli, C. (April 8, 2020). *Beyond the Handshake: How People Greet Each Other Around the World*. AFAR. Retrieved from [10 Different Greetings from Around the World - AFAR](#)
- Baker, C. (June 3, 2022). *Cross-Cultural Communication in the Workplace*. Leaders. Retrieved from [Cross-Cultural Communication in the Workplace \(leaders.com\)](#)
- Duncan, E. (February 23, 2022). *How to Say Thank You in 45 Different Languages*. Busuu a Chegg Service. Retrieved from [How to Say Thank You in 45 Different Languages – Busuu Blog](#)
- Gerber, P.J, Murphy, H. (September 6, 2021). *2.1 Defining Culture and Intercultural Communication*. Retrieved from LibreTexts Social Sciences. [2.1: Defining Culture and Intercultural Communication - Social Sci LibreTexts](#)
- Graber, J. (2023). *15 Different Greetings from Around the World*. Go World Travel. Retrieved from [15 Different Greetings Around the World | How to Greet Others \(goworldtravel.com\)](#)
- Movilla, E. (November 3, 2021). *10 Ways for Leaders to Improve Cross-Cultural Communication Skills*. The Content Mix. Retrieved from [10 ways for leaders to improve cross-cultural communication skills | The Content Mix \(veracontent.com\)](#)
- Stobierski, T. (November 12, 2019). *How to Improve Cross-Cultural Communication in the Workplace*. Northeastern University. Retrieved from [How to Improve Cross-Cultural Communication in the Workplace \(northeastern.edu\)](#)
- UOTOP Marketing. (July 10, 2022). *How to Improve Cross-Cultural Communication in the Workplace*. University of the Potomac. Retrieved from [How to Improve Cross-Cultural Communication in the Workplace \(potomac.edu\)](#)
- Wilshire, J. (September 15, 2021). *How Do People Develop Cross-Cultural Communication Skills?* One Education. Retrieved from [How Do People Develop Cross Cultural Communication Skills? \(oneeducation.org.uk\)](#)
- What is Open Body Language (Posture)*. (2022). Body Language Matters. Retrieved from [What Is Open Body Language \(Posture\) \(bodylanguagematters.com\)](#)