

Module 1 Unit 2

This is a **OPTIONAL READING**.

Ford, C.W. (2000). Develop cross-cultural communication skills. In *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*. New York, NY: Routledge. [3 p.]



Develop Cross-Cultural Communication Skills

Clyde W. Ford

We ordinarily assume that most people are “just like us.” While this is true for many aspects of being human, culture and ethnicity demonstrate human uniqueness and difference. When we expect others to be “just like us,” and they aren’t, we can get caught in a cultural gap: something is said that offends us; someone acts in a way that shocks or angers us; another response causes us fear. One reaction is to pull back and withdraw into what is familiar and acceptable. This reaction, however, does not further communication; instead, it often gives rise to racist attitudes, actions, and beliefs. Discovering that others are “not just like us” can create a boundary between “them” and “us.” Across this boundary, stereotypical labeling is substituted for real communication; honest human interchange is replaced by reactions based on anger, fear, and unresolved emotions.

There are other options when we come upon unexpected cultural interchanges. We can simply become aware of our reaction, whatever that reaction is: fear, anger, frustration, being offended. Without withdrawing we can observe our reaction and its source—

our preconditioned expectations and beliefs. This awareness can lead us to change how we interact with others; and we can develop more realistic expectations about communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds.

But awareness does not come without work. Since it runs against what we have been taught throughout our life, we have to cultivate the art of being aware in the process of communicating with others. In other words, awareness of our reactions to others is something we need to practice. Through this awareness we can readjust how we interact with others. We can accept others because we can accept ourselves. We can honor human differences through our awareness, and through our ability to change how we interact with people from other cultures and ethnic groups.

Did You Know

In one study a group of African Americans identified seven major determinants of satisfying communication with whites:

- The degree of *negative stereotyping* involved in conversations. This included forms of “indirect stereotyping” like talking about “black topics” (such as music or sports) or assuming that any African American represented the views of all African Americans. Minimal negative stereotyping was more satisfying.
- How much *acceptance* they felt for their expressed feelings and opinions.
- The amount of *emotional expressiveness*. Greater emotional expressiveness was linked to more satisfying interethnic communication.
- *Authenticity*, or the degree to which these African Americans could “be themselves” in conversation with whites. Satisfying communication went along with higher degrees of authenticity.
- *Understanding*. When respondents felt understood, good communication was reported.
- *Goal attainment*. Satisfactory communication frequently resulted in problem solving, information exchange, or the completion of a project.
- *Powerlessness*. When respondents felt controlled, trapped, or manipulated, poor communication was described. Some examples: when the conversation was “hogged” by the other person; when someone attempted to persuade them through aggressive or subtle tactics; when they were repeatedly interrupted.

Steps to Communicating Cross-Culturally

- *Build mutual understanding* rather than trying to understand where another is “coming from.” No one is really able to “walk in another person’s shoes.” When we try to understand where someone is “coming from,” we end up superimposing our life experience on theirs.
- *Be open-minded*. Accept your views as just one of many possible filters on reality, while accepting someone else’s views as just another filter on reality.
- *Bridge differences* rather than insist on similarity of views.
- *Seek agreement through synthesis* rather than taking sides. Instead of giving up your views, or asking others to give up theirs, find a third position that offers common ground between differing views. This results in a cocreated, or shared, reality.

- *Focus on the relationship* rather than the individual parties to the relationship. Instead of being concerned with “what I said” and “what was said to me,” be aware of the quality of the communication that takes place. In other words, move beyond “self” and “other” and focus on the interaction that takes place while communicating.
- Learn to hold the parties you communicate with in the *highest positive regard*. You may not agree with or fully understand the other person, but you can allow him or her to be with whatever feeling or thought is present in the moment—confusion; resentment, anger, courage, or love. This is holding someone in the highest positive regard. You accept and respect whatever he or she communicates without trying to change, control, or alter that communication.