Trans-Atlantic Roundtable

Observations from Europe and the U.S. on international communication

By Jan Pejovic, *Senior Member,* and Marie-Louise Desfray Beaujouan

For all of our prowess as language professionals, we still may be novices when it comes to cross-cultural communication. We may not even be aware of the *faux pas* we make in our communication with professionals from other countries.

We collected advice from travel-savvy professionals in many disciplines to help technical communicators and international project managers steer clear of intercultural pitfalls and successfully communicate in their multicultural projects. We chose friends and colleagues from the United States and Europe, but their advice spans the globe!

United States

Kamakshi Mallikarjun
General manager for technical initiatives
SunGard Higher Education
Malvern, PA

Working on a team with members from different cultures? Mallikarjun offers this advice to managers: Encourage team members from different parts of the world to play an active role. "Be aware of the strengths that people from another country can bring to the table," she says. "You may have to help people from certain cultures feel comfortable in expressing an opposing viewpoint. Explain to the team why it is important for everyone to contribute at meetings."

Jane Hyan
Author, *Breaking the Bamboo Ceiling: Career Strategies for Asians*
(HarperCollins Publishers, Inc.)
New York, NY

Hyan observes that "Often, in meetings, Asians will not speak up. Unfortunately, this reticence gets mistaken for aloofness or arrogance or inattention, when it is usually just the Asian habit of respecting authority. We wait for our turn to speak—and often our turn just never comes."

Shelly deFosset
Associate director of the National Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center at the University of North Carolina and Consultant to the Soros Foundation
Chapel Hill, NC

Shelley deFosset has worked with countries in Eastern Europe, the Pacific Rim, Russia, and Mongolia on education and human services systems change. "It's important to realize that interactions are going to go differently than you planned," she says. "Be slow to judge and do not react emotionally. Keep checking others' perceptions. Assume that what you are saying is not being heard exactly in the way that you meant it. Restate what is really important."

Winston Ghany
Award-winning steelpan player, originally from Trinidad and Tobago
Philadelphia, PA

Ghany says that cross-cultural aware-ness is a lifelong learning process: "It is sometimes the simple mistakes we make when dealing with different cultures, a spontaneous gesture like giving a thumbs up—what appears to be a polite gesture in one country may mean something totally different and even offensive in another—that can impair a relationship."

The possibility of being misunderstood exists in any type of interaction. "Whether you are meeting, entertaining, or negotiating with clients from different cultures, communications can backfire. Even one misunderstanding can delay months of work," Ghany cautions. While Ghany believes that people from different cultures are inherently the same, "Make sure that you understand their basic customs and show an interest and willingness to learn the contrast between your cultures." In Ghany's typically poetic prose, he says, "Culture is a thin but important veneer that we must be careful not to scratch."

Nancy Settle-Murphy
Cross-cultural consultant with Chrysalis International
Boxborough, MA

Settle-Murphy has written a wonderful series of articles about of the dynamics of global teams. The cultural differences that most affect a team's ability to collaborate, according to Settle-Murphy, are summarized in Table 1.

Europe

Patricia Mengel
Coordinator, North Carolina Technical Assistance Project
Former Trainer, Soros Foundation
Chapel Hill, NC

Patricia Mengel, who has lived in Italy and worked in Russia and Eastern Europe, says, "Humor does not translate well across cultures. Avoid using cartoons—especially political cartoons—in your presentations. What starts out as an attempt at humor often turns out to reveal your cultural insensitivity and could have very negative results. Being able to share humor can bring people closer together, but first there must be a sense of trust," says Mengel.

Allan Stokke
Independent telematics (electronic communication systems for vehicles) consultant
Oslo, Norway

Stokke advises, "We leave our own ideologies, standards, and biases at home and earn the respect of people whose values and beliefs may contradict our own." From personal experience he notes that success in the international business arena requires corporate governance–vision, policies, and adaptable procedures specific to the international project. Stokke says, "It is really about accepting cultural and national differences, and it all begins at the top level of any organization." He has seen examples of U.S. corporate management styles that don't work in Europe and whose customer approach is misunderstood by local clients. "Americans often think of Europe as one homogeneous business arena, but each country has its own cultural and business identifiers," he adds.

Stokke offers the following essential points:
- **Prepare and research:** Get to know your international client. Ask yourself, "What changes do I have to consider in my own performance to meet the local requirements?"
- **Performance:** Listen and observe. Some clients may begin to discuss a topic in their own language. Accept it—more often it is to your advantage as it levels out the arena.
- **Policies:** It is a corporate responsibility to motivate employees to multicultural behavior, but an individual responsibility to carry it out.

Geert Hofstede
Professor Emeritus, University of Limburg at Maastricht, the Netherlands
Founder, Institute for Research on Intercultural Cooperation

In addition to cross-cultural training from companies like Chrysalis International, the *Culture in the Workplace Questionnaire*™, derived from the work of Geert Hofstede, a Dutch social scientist, helps organizations understand the business impact of cultural assumptions and helps global teams improve performance by leveraging their cultural

global perspectives

Table 1. Cultural Differences

Category	Cultural Differences
Big picture vs. details	People from "high-context" cultures tend to derive their most valuable information from the context that surrounds words rather than the actual words. Precise details may be less important than the broader context. People from "low-context" cultures pay more attention to the words and details than to the overall context. They see the trees, but may not always see the forest.
Order vs. chaos	"Monochronic" cultures are more comfortable taking one thing at a time. Following the correct order or using the right process can seem almost as important as achieving the desired outcome. Unstructured conversations and interruptions can be unsettling. "Polychronic" cultures cope well with simultaneous activities and see interruptions as a necessary and natural way of doing business.
Formal vs. informal	Some cultures have a more compartmentalized communications flow, where information is parceled out on a need-to-know basis, usually top-down. In other cultures, people share information more freely among all levels, back and forth and up and down, and maintain multiple channels of communications, both formal and informal.
Motivations and rewards	In some cultures, achieving personal recognition or widespread popularity may be the chief motivators. People from other cultures may be more motivated by their contributions toward building a stronger company or a more harmonious organization. Financial rewards are less important to some than to others.
Quality vs. quantity of decisions	People from certain cultures like to make decisions only after they have carefully solicited input and gained buy-in from multiple perspectives. Such a methodical process may take more time up front, but once decisions are made, results are usually achieved quickly. For others, speed trumps quality, even if it means that hurried decisions are eventually revisited and work must be redone.
Giving and receiving feedback	People from some cultures seek constant validation for the quality of their work, and may assume that the absence of feedback signals at least mild disappointment. These same people tend to provide frequent unsolicited feedback. Others assume that unless they hear otherwise, the quality of their work is just fine. Some feel a need to lead with the positive before delving into the negative when giving feedback, while others regard "sugarcoating" as confusing and unnecessary.
Expressing opinions	In some cultures, people tend to break in frequently to ask questions, pose challenges, or openly disagree, while others prefer to maintain group harmony by never openly disagreeing, especially in front of a group. Some tend to allow others to speak before voicing their own opinions, while others speak over others' voices if that's what it takes to get heard. Some need silence to think (and to translate into their native language and back again), and others are uncomfortable with silence, rushing in to fill a pause.
Role of managers	In cultures where egalitarianism is prized, team members tend to have equal say when making decisions and setting priorities, regardless of seniority. Managers are seen as organizers and enablers, helping to set strategy, remove roadblocks, and otherwise grease the skids for moving in the right direction. In cultures where hierarchy is important, managers typically make decisions and pass them down to team members, who implement the decisions and report back to management.
Willingness to sacrifice personal time	Some cultures abhor the notion of giving up personal time for work. Weeknights, weekends, holidays, and vacations are sacrosanct. People from other cultures quite frequently, though not necessarily happily, forgo personal time if needed.

preferences. The questionnaire describes and interprets the following areas:

- **Individualism:** The degree of individual or group orientation.
- **Power distance:** The level of preference for equality or inequality within groups.
- **Certainty:** The preference for risk vs. structure.
- **Achievement:** The relative degrees of relationship vs. task orientation. This area also tracks the relative masculine and feminine influences in the workplace.

Amber Callahan-Bedworth
Proposal writer
Rochester, NY

"Lack of understanding and familiarity creates barriers and prejudices," says Callahan-Bedworth, who has lived in both the U.S. and the U.K. "Managers can encourage members of a diverse group by reminding them that everyone is in the same situation and that there is no hierarchy of race, culture, or gender; all people are equal," she says.

Marie-Louise Desfray Beaujouan
Senior translator, SunGard Higher Education
Rijswijk, the Netherlands

Beaujouan (co-author of this article) has lived in the U.K., Spain, and the Netherlands for the last ten years. She believes the key thing to keep in mind when working abroad is that English is not the native language. "In Europe, most people's English skills are at the high school level, unless they've been working in an English-speaking environment for a few years. Be patient. Give them time to express themselves," she says. "Remember that someone's ability to speak English is not related to the relevance of the individual's contribution. When a foreigner has trouble expressing an idea in English, don't tune out and dismiss the person's comments. Take the time to listen and ask questions for clarification." Put yourself in their place—how easily could you converse in your high school second language?

"You can avoid translation disasters by staying away from slang and idiomatic expressions," recommends Beaujouan. "For example, would 'to put one's feet in the plate' (*mettre les pieds dans le plat*) mean anything to you? It is the French equivalent for 'putting one's foot in one's mouth,'" she explains.

When planning meetings that cross national boundaries, Beaujouan provides the following practical considerations:

- Time zones are the most important factor; if people have jet lag, give them time to rest before the meeting.
- Check for local bank holidays or celebrations; it may be inappropriate to ask a person to travel abroad on certain weekend days.
- Learn about the relativity of time: arriving fifteen minutes late may be considered anywhere from downright insulting to normal behavior, depending on the country.
- Spell out the month to avoid misunderstanding a date written as 10.06.2006 (June 10, 2006).
- Specify the type of currency: USD, CAD, EUR, JPY, HKD, etc.

Cultural differences don't necessarily have to be a communications roadblock on global teams. According to Beaujouan, there is truth in the saying, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." If you are unfamiliar with the dos and don'ts of a particular culture, ask a representative to describe a typical business day or meeting. "I have found that people are usually happy to explain how things are done locally," she says.

When dealing with other cultures in general, Beaujouan provides the following potpourri of advice:

- Keep your eyes and ears open for different habits and try to mimic them; for example, having a casual conversation with the English before talking business will help them to feel at ease and work better with you.
- Assess what topics should remain in the private sphere; for example, talking about how much you earn is taboo with the English and French.
- Do not presume that foreigners will understand the context within which you are speaking. Spell out any assumptions you make.
- Ask for feedback. In some cultures, an employee would not speak up unless specifically asked to do so.

- Learn to pronounce your teammates' names correctly.
- Familiarize yourself with the geographic area where your team members live and work.
- Share pictures, recipes, and favorite holiday traditions.
- Keep a list of the international time zones close by.
- Read online newspapers from the cities in which your team members live.
- Sharing a language does not necessarily equate to sharing the same habits or cultural values, such as the U.S. and the U.K., for example.
- Better to be too polite than not polite enough.

Conclusion

Understanding and appreciating multicultural differences promotes clearer communication, builds trust, and strengthens relationships. In international projects, cultural diversity creates an additional layer of complexity. While each person is certainly unique, take the time to learn about the culturally specific beliefs and values of your project team. Take advantage of cultural diversity to improve the success of your international team. ❶

SUGGESTED READINGS

Bing, John W. "Hofstede's Dimensions: A High-Level Analytical Tool for Working Internationally." ITAP International, *www.itapintl.com/index.htm.*

Settle-Murphy, Nancy. "Collaborating Across Cultures: Key to Success for Global Projects." Chrysalis International Inc. Visit her Web site at *www.chrysalisinternational.com* for related articles and tips.

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