

1.6.21: Countries

Learning Objectives

- Discuss how cultural differences among individuals from different countries may influence communication



With the possible exception of math, there is no universal language. Each country—and, in some cases, regions of countries—has different languages, business practices, and social customs. What is a common or established communication behavior or business practice in the United States cannot be assumed to be appropriate behavior or communication elsewhere. And, as we will see in the next section, the expectations of other cultures can have a significant impact on how American businesses communicate and operate not only abroad but at home.

Differences in business etiquette and nonverbal communication account for the majority of culturally-related communication errors. In her “[Cross-Cultural Business Etiquette](#)” article for Chron.com, Lisa Magloff highlights the five primary areas of difference and potential miscommunication:

1. **Clothing:** managing the first impression
2. **Conversation:** appropriate business and ice-breaker conversation
3. **Greeting:** local customs and expectations, including greeting style—the distinctions that inspired the title of the best-selling guide to business etiquette and practices, *Kiss, Bow or Shake Hands*
4. **Forms of address:** level of formality and use of titles and degrees
5. **Time and Space:** interpretations of “on time,” personal space, and physical contact.^[1]

Different countries may also have different interpretations of nonverbal communication. Non-verbal communication includes gestures; body movement, including eye contact; and decorative and functional objects, from clothing and equipment to furniture and furnishings. To illustrate the differences, let’s focus on gestures. The relative brevity of a gesture as communication belies its potential impact.

For many Americans, gestures are a cross-cultural communication blind spot. For example, flashing a peace sign, a benign gesture meaning “peace” or “goodbye” in the United States is perceived as insulting and a provocation in Australia, New Zealand and the UK.^[2] Another translation failure: the thumbs up sign. In America, “thumbs up” is a positive gesture, conveying “good job!” or agreement. In a number of countries and regions including Greece, Latin America, Russia, Southern Italy, and West Africa, the thumbs up gesture is tantamount to giving a person the middle finger.

As Jolie Tullos concludes “as a form of language, a gesture can be just as if not more powerful than words themselves” [and] the miscommunication of hand gestures can be the difference between a greeting or the invitation to a fight.”^[3]

1. Magloff, Lisa. “[Cross-Cultural Business Etiquette](#),” *Chron*. Web. 26 June 2018.
2. Tullos, Jolie. [Hand Gestures and Miscommunications](#), 13 Jan 2014. Web. 26 June 2018.
3. Ibid.

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