

## 12.1.7: Cultural Differences

### Learning Objectives

1. Discuss cultural differences on a global team

Some cultural differences are more obvious than others. For example, if someone speaks a different language, it is obvious there are going to be some communication challenges. However, there are a larger number of more subtle cultural differences that can be harder to identify and understand. According to Art Markman's article for *Harvard Business Review*, there are three main ways to identify cultural differences on a global team: learning, listening, and asking.

Before we get started, take a moment to think about the following question. What do you think the three ways are?

### PRACTICE QUESTION

What are the three main ways to identify cultural differences on a global team?

- Observe, evaluate, engage.
- Research, review, emerge.
- Connect, communicate, interact.
- Learn, listen, ask.

### Answer

**Learn, listen, ask.** It is important to learn about the cultures of countries you will be working in prior to your arrival. It is also necessary to observe and listen to the social and physical cues of others by reading the room. Lastly, if you do not know something, ask to get clarification. These three steps help to not only identify, but also to navigate cultural differences.

### Learn

If you know ahead of time you will be traveling to a certain part of the world, it is important to do your research. It would be a challenge to memorize the cultural differences of every country, however, taking the time to learn and study cultures you plan to conduct business in, can help make your business ventures more lucrative.

### Listen

When interacting with new people, especially from different cultures, it is important to read the room. If people seem upset or confused during your interaction with them, that is a good indicator that something may not have gone according to plan. If you get the sense that something during your interaction is off, work to understand what you may have done that was interpreted differently than you intended. You can also listen to changes in the other person's tone or message to determine if you need to readdress something.

### Ask

If you don't know something, ask! In an international business setting, cultural differences may be hard to decipher. If you suspect something is off, it is okay to ask questions to understand the misstep and get back on track. Better yet, try to find an ally from the country you are visiting who can explain when and how you may have made a cultural faux pas. If you are willing to ask questions to improve the way you interact with others, you are more likely to earn their trust and respect. Putting forth effort to better understand others and their culture, is a great way to build healthy and long-lasting relationships.

### EXAMPLES OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Now that we have established ways to navigate cultural differences, let's explore some examples of cultural differences from around the world.

### Body Language

Certain forms of body language and hand gestures mean different things in different cultures. For example, in Nigeria, a thumbs up is considered extremely offensive. In Bulgaria, people shake their heads to show their agreement as opposed to nodding their head to indicate agreement like they do in America.

### Greetings

When meeting individuals from other countries, be prepared for cultural differences in the way they greet people. In some countries, bowing is the preferred greeting (e.g., Japan), whereas in other countries, a firm handshake is preferred (e.g., America). In Argentina, professionals greet people with a kiss on the right cheek. This welcoming kiss is intended to show respect.

### Workweek

Workweeks may look extremely different from one country and culture to the next. For example, in Israel, the workweek goes from Sunday through Thursday to allow people to observe the Shabbat on Friday and Saturday. In Sweden, daily coffee breaks called “fika” are taken every day at 9am and 3pm to promote team building and to provide a chance for employees to recharge.

---

12.1.7: Cultural Differences is shared under a [not declared](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.