

Multicultural Communication Tips

By Shari Lifland

Right now 11.5% of the U.S. population is foreign born, and the percentage is rising. In his essay "Becoming a Culturally Literate Leader in a Global World" (from the book *Partnering, the New Face of Leadership*, AMACOM 2003), Robert Rosen explains why today's managers must implement strategies that foster better cooperation among members of a culturally diverse workforce: "Corporate survival and prosperity increasingly depend on our ability to interact and manage people of different cultures, locally, regionally, nationally and globally. Today, everyone is part of the global marketplace, even though many companies don't yet realize that fact." He continues, "To thrive, all leaders must adopt a global-centric approach to business. They must develop a multicultural perspective, an international knowledge base and a global imagination—in other words, cultural literacy."

A large part of cultural literacy depends upon communicating in a way that effectively gets the message across to all team members, while excluding no one and offending no one due to unintended cultural misunderstandings.

To that end, here are some language and communication tips from AMA's new seminar [Managing Multicultural Teams for Peak Performance](#), that are of particular benefit to managers of culturally diverse teams:

- Simplify your message by using less complex sentence structures and vocabulary.
- Never shout to be understood.
- Define the meaning of critical technical words and acronyms.
- Avoid non-standard abbreviations, such as "U R" for "you are."
- Be patient and try to follow team members' ideas and logic, which may be different from yours.
- Ask people to repeat once, maybe twice, if you do not understand them. If that does not work, ask them to say it in a different manner.
- Remain cool and composed, even when you have made a mistake that results in embarrassment for you or when you feel embarrassed by others (in most cases, they did not mean to embarrass you).
- When you feel strong emotions about something said or done by someone who comes from a culturally different background than you do, clarify their meanings and intentions before you express your emotions.
- If you cannot think of any positive interpretation of someone else's actions or words, chances are you are missing something. Clarify with the person or with someone who has experience in dealing with similar cultural groups.
- Adapt your space requirements to those of your counterparts whenever possible. You can judge someone's comfort zone by the distance to which they extend their hand when shaking hands.
- When someone does or says something that seems weird and/or wrong, give him/her the benefit of the doubt. Ask yourself: "How else could I interpret these words or actions?"
- Communicate important messages via several different media to ensure that they are received. Make sure that all the messages are consistent.

Tips for Native English Speakers

- Avoid "isn't it?" questions. Because this way of formulating questions does not exist in many other languages, it can be confusing for non-native English speakers. For example, to the question, "You are coming, aren't you?" they may answer, "Yes" (I am coming) or "No" (I am coming), depending on how they interpret the question.
- Ask the person if he/she wants help with finding words that might convey their meaning.
- If you do not understand a word, ask the person to spell it, write it down, use a synonym or say the word in his/her native language and have someone else translate, if possible.
- Try to involve non-native English speakers, particularly during brainstorming sessions, by asking explicitly for their input.
- If you receive a voice mail message that you do not understand, ask another non-native English speaker from the same linguistic background to listen to it and "translate" for you.
- In continuous meetings, provide some break time so that non-native English speakers can take a rest from the concentration required to follow the conversation.
- Avoid scheduling presentations by non-native English speakers at the end of the day, when fatigue may affect their English speaking skills.
- Consider providing ESL courses to the non-native English speakers on your staff or team.
- Offer to proofread non-native English speakers' documents or presentations.
- Slow down your delivery and clearly articulate each word. Avoid contractions that are difficult for non-native English speakers to understand (i.e., "gonna," "wanna").
- In face-to-face meetings, face the people to whom you speak.

Tips for Non-native English Speakers

- If you do not mind people suggesting words so that you can communicate more quickly, say so.
- Try to participate in discussions, especially brainstorming sessions, even if you feel uncomfortable.
- If your organization offers ESL courses, take them, even if your English is already functional. Courses designed to help you modify your accent to make it more understandable by native English speakers can be particularly beneficial.
- Keep a dictionary handy and make sure the words you use mean what you think they mean.
- Ask a native English speaker for help with your documents, presentations and even sensitive e-mails or phone calls, if necessary.
- Before calling someone, think of what you want to say and look up any words that you are unsure of. If you must leave a voice mail message, compose the message on paper, then read it into the phone.
- Make sure you know and use appropriately the technical words that people in your field use. Find a native English speaker who will take the time to discuss this with you; use sketches, diagrams and pictures to ensure that you understand correctly. Use the terms repeatedly until they become second nature.
- Do not attempt to use slang and idiomatic expressions until you are quite comfortable with the language. Using these incorrectly or in the wrong situation can backfire.