

30 Tips on How to Learn Across Cultures

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The art of learning across borders cannot be governed by simple recipes or ready-made principles.

Yet a few guidelines can be useful in order to keep in mind some important reference points. This is the idea of the following list of 30 tips, where the author has tried to summarize in a simple way some key requirements for effective international cooperation.

1. Be aware of your own very special culture as a unique peculiarity. When working across cultures you will often be the “stranger” – perceived by others as being “strange”
2. The culture that you ignore most – in terms of its shaping power on yourself – is obviously your own culture. It is very difficult to look at oneself from the outside. We can make interesting observations and comments about other cultures. But we often remain blind to your own.
3. Intercultural situations offer the unique opportunity to reduce our blindspot. Other cultures act as privileged mirrors in which we can see more of our own cultural make-up as a result of being confronted and challenged by other cultural models. This leads to greater understanding of the peculiarities of our own culture.
4. Don't expect others to think and act as you do. Your culture – and therefore your own preferred way of getting things done – is just one among many. Expect others to think and act differently. Recognize that your way can be the exception rather than the norm.
5. If you are convinced that your ways of managing, motivating, making decisions, running meetings, etc. are the best, avoid working across cultures. It would be a painful experience for everybody involved, including yourself.
6. Respect local customs, adapt your behavior to local norms and expectations, but don't try to imitate. Clowning is not expected. It would be seen as phony and would not be respected.
7. Watch for the illusion of similarity. “We are from the same industry”. “We are all engineers”. “We share the same language”. “We are from the same company united by a strong corporate culture...”. We are all human beings too. Such statements often hide a desire to avoid confronting the reality of cultural differences.
8. Beware of excessive politeness. It is another strategy contributing to the denial of differences. It often leads to superficiality, low risk taking, avoidance of productive confrontation and achievement of the smallest common denominator.
9. The most negative outcomes in across-cultural collaboration typically occur when the partners hold radically different assumptions about the situation (objectives, task, resources, etc.) and fully unaware that this is the case.
10. Whenever possible, check your assumptions and expectations with your partners.
11. Everybody holds some stereotypes about other cultural groups. Acknowledge you own stereotypes about other cultures. But try to use them only as prototypes ready to be updated and changed on the basis of your own experience.

12. Don't confuse the individual and his/her culture. Confusing these two units of analysis leads to sterile stereotyping. Both the individual and his/her culture are real but different entities. Culture is obviously not an individual property. It is a group attribute. Individuals carry culture. They don't own it.

13. Every individual is unique. Every culture is unique. Understanding individual differences and understanding cultural differences are equally important. It is not one or the other, it is both.

14. Across cultures, attribution errors occur in both directions: genuinely individual characteristics are wrongly labelled as cultural, and conversely cultural patterns are wrongly attributed to an individual to an individual's personality.

15. To avoid wrong attributions, a paradoxical strategy is needed. When dealing with people from other cultures, as a starting point, make every effort to forget everything about culture and cultural differences. Try to meet the individual and its uniqueness first. Avoid categorizing. Concentrate on the individual. The cultural dimension will come and soon anyhow.

16. Remember that cultural differences go much beyond differences in management of communication styles. These are interesting artifacts but they only represent the tip of the iceberg. The deepest and most challenging aspects of cultural differences lie in the fact that different cultures define and the construct reality differently. So what is a decision for culture A may not be one for culture B. And the same for contract, commitment, agreement, performance, etc.. Across cultures, do not assume that your definition of effective action is shared by others.

17. Listen, observe and try to understand before judging and evaluating.

18. Accept the fact that your conception of time may be shared. You can only win through understanding and negotiating.

19. Be patient. Accept the fact that it may take a much longer time to get results.

20. If you like to make jokes, watch out for those that do not fly so well across cultures. Although humor can sometimes be an effective lever in cross-cultural situations, it is also one of the most culturally sensitive aspects of social life.

21. One of the problems across cultures is that we naturally tend to interpret and evaluate behaviour on the basis of our own cultural values. We apply our standards where they may not apply. This leads to misunderstanding. Behaviour does not talk for itself. Trusting behaviour per se can be highly confusing. What matters is the actual meaning of behaviour which is embedded in different values across different cultures.

22. When you encounter some "strange" behaviour that looks bizarre, ineffective, meaningless, crazy or even stupid from your point of view, suspend your judgment and make every effort to understand where this behaviour comes from, what it means. If you work hard enough at this, you may end up with the conclusion that this behaviour makes a great deal of sense. You may even discover that you can learn something from it.

23. Learning across cultures can only occur when differences are not only understood but truly appreciated. Appreciation feeds the motivation to learn. Lots of people are aware of cultural differences. Some people understand. Few people really appreciate. Positive appreciation of cultural differences is a requirement for effective collaboration.

24. When working across cultures, do everything to build, develop and maintain trust. Trust is the essential foundation for effective cross-cultural collaboration. But remember that different cultures may define trust as differently and may favor different ways of promoting it.

25. Face-to-face relationships is a prerequisite for developing trust across cultures. Don't rely on e-mail only.

26. Working effectively across cultures is not a natural act. It requires specific action and investment.

27. Cultural diversity can only become a source of synergy or competitive advantage when differences are recognized, understood and discussable. Whenever possible and in a timely fashion, bring differences into the open where they can be discussed and worked through.

28. Cultural differences can be so deep and challenging that it is over-optimistic to expect people to work effectively through such differences in the sole context of action. Experience shows that there is often a need to "stop the music" and design a special off-site event – typically a workshop – a "transitional space" where the agenda is to develop awareness, understanding and appreciation of cultural differences between the partners. In such settings, participant are encouraged to bring forward a number of cross-cultural issues that never get openly discussed in the context of action. "Transitional spaces" are designed to promote cross-cultural understanding as an investment into more effective collaboration.

29. "Transitional spaces" – like any other action program – reflect particular cultural values on effective action and intervention. Such values may not be shared by your partners from other cultures. Keep only the basic idea of time-off which is likely to be widely accepted and co-design the workshop with your partners.

30. Whenever challenged by cultural differences, think about how boring the world would be with a global, uniform culture. Keep that thought in mind when initiating or designing so-called global processes in organisations.