

Title

What Did You Say? Cultural Influences on Communication and Understanding.

Topic Area

Communication

Main presenter

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MS Physics

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Frederick has lived and worked in the USA, Germany, Switzerland, Libya, Argentina, India, and Israel and visited many, many other countries for business and pleasure. Both as an individual contributor and as a manager, he has more than 25 years experience in business and software development at companies ranging from Seismograph Service Corporation in Libya, to Siemens-Albis in Switzerland, to Novell in the USA, to an internet startup in Utah USA, and to Planman Consulting, an Indian outsourcing firm.

Frederick has presented a similar tutorial at ICGSE 2007 and at the 2008 74th IFLA General Conference in Quebec as well as to companies in Germany, India, Singapore, and the USA. Recently he co-chaired the Virtual Global Teams track at the 42nd Hawaii International Conference on Systems Sciences. Frederick has taught workshops about personal development and communications since 1988. He has also served as Business Director and on the Board of Directors of a private, non-profit educational corporation specializing in individualized curriculum and instruction for kindergarten, elementary, and secondary students for 10 years.

Abstract

What one says to compatriots in face-to-face conversations is often misunderstood; imagine the possibilities for misunderstandings with someone halfway around the world, natively speaking a language different from your own, and living in a different culture! In such circumstances how can you be sure that the person with whom you are communicating has understood you in face-to-face (hard), telephone (harder), and email (hardest) communication? As a participant in this tutorial, expect to take away practical tools to mitigate your own cultural biases and to boost your abilities in intercultural communication. In addition, you will learn conceptual frameworks for understanding other cultures based on the presenter's own experiences and on work by Geert Hofstede, Richard Lewis, Fons Trompenaars, and others.

Tutorial Level

Anyone can benefit, especially those new to global software development and virtual teams.

Prior knowledge required

None, although experience with other cultures is helpful.

Suitability of this tutorial for ICGSE

Clear communication is fundamental for the success of any project whether it is done by a small co-located group or by a globally dispersed team. While the ubiquity of English facilitates basic communication, its use as a common language disguises cultural differences and expectations. This tutorial describes frameworks useful in understanding cultural differences and gives real-life examples of misunderstandings due to cultural differences, and in-class practice in how to avoid them.

Five things to consider:

1. A recent survey of 752 IEEE members conducted by IEEE Spectrum and The New York Times discovered that "just 9 percent of 133 respondents whose organizations currently offshore R&D reported 'No problem'. The biggest headache was 'Language, communication, or culture' barriers, as reported by 54.1 percent of respondents." (<http://www.spectrum.ieee.org/feb07/4881>)
2. In a March 2007 web poll conducted by the Computing Technology Industry Association "nearly 28 percent of the more than 1,000 respondents singled out poor communications as the number one cause of project failure". (http://www.comptia.org/pressroom/get_pr.aspx?prid=1227)
3. Nilay Oza et. al. in their study *Critical Factors in Software Outsourcing: A Pilot Study* of top Indian outsourcing firms named cultural differences and language as the 2 most difficult among the 5 difficulty factors identified in outsourcing relationships.
4. In their 2006 study presented at the International Conference on Software Engineering *Critical factors in establishing and maintaining trust in software outsourcing relationships*, Nguyen, Babar, and Verner identified communication and cultural understanding as the 2 factors most critical to maintaining trust relationships.
5. Huang and Trauth identified three themes as major cross-cultural challenges: "...the complexity of language issues in global virtual work, culture and communication styles and work behaviors, and cultural understandings at different levels." ([Cultural influences and globally distributed information systems development: Experiences from Chinese IT professionals](#))

Can you afford not to learn about cultural differences and how they affect communications? The tutorial will not make you expert at cross-cultural communication, but it will make you aware of factors affecting it and give you simple ways to obviate intercultural communication difficulties.

Tutorial outline

Times are for a half day tutorial and approximate depending on class participation and questions. A projector and whiteboard is required.

1. Examples of differences in perception and communications (15 – 20 min)
 - 1.1. Visual examples with class participation
 - 1.2. Verbal examples with class participation
 - 1.3. Examples of communications difficulties with class participation
2. Overview of four human nature basics and four basic human activities (15 – 20 min)
3. Overview of how perception works with examples (10 - 15 min)
4. Influence of parents and family on personality and perception (15 - 20 min)
5. Culture, software of the mind (15 – 20 min)
 - 5.1. Influence of culture on perception with examples
 - 5.2. Class participation
6. Cultural differences in the abstract (30 – 45 min)
 - 6.1. Geert Hofstede's 5 dimensions of culture with country-by-country examples
 - 6.1.1. Power distance
 - 6.1.2. Masculine and feminine cultures
 - 6.1.3. Long-term and short-term orientation
 - 6.1.4. Individualism and collectivism
 - 6.1.5. Uncertainty avoidance
 - 6.2. Richard Lewis's cultural categories
 - 6.2.1. Linear-active
 - 6.2.2. Multi-active
 - 6.2.3. Reactive
 - 6.3. Fons Trompenaar's 6 cultural dimensions

- 6.3.1. Universalism versus particularism
- 6.3.2. Individualism versus communitarianism
- 6.3.3. Specificity versus diffusion
- 6.3.4. Achieved status versus ascribed status
- 6.3.5. Inner direction versus outer direction
- 6.3.6. Sequential time versus synchronous time
- 7. The fundamentals of good communication (30 – 40 min)
 - 7.1. Respect for yourself and for others
 - 7.2. SALT: Basic communications principles for face-to-face, telephone, email
 - 7.3. Humor across cultures
 - 7.4. Act, don't react!
 - 7.5. Class participation
- 8. Specific cultural differences (the actual countries used will depend on the nationalities of the participants) (approximately 3 – 5 min per culture, minimum 4 different cultures)
- 9. In class practice drawn from real-life examples (duration is variable, can be expanded or contracted in real-time)