Our values, priorities, and practices are shaped by the culture in which we grow up. Understanding other cultures is crucial if you want to sell your products to other cultures in our country, sell to other countries, manage an international plant or office, or work in this country for a multinational company headquartered in another country.

The successful intercultural communicator is

   Aware of the values, beliefs, and practices in other cultures.

   Sensitive to differences among individuals within a culture.

   Aware that his or her preferred values and behaviors are influenced by culture and are not necessarily “right.”

   Sensitive to verbal and nonverbal behavior.

   Flexible and open to change.

The first step in understanding another culture is to realize that it may do things very differently, and that the difference is not bad or inferior. The second step is understanding that people within a single culture differ.

When pushed too far, the kinds of differences summarized in this chapter can turn into stereotypes, which can be just as damaging as ignorance. Psychologists have shown that stereotypes have serious consequences and that they come into play even when we don’t want them to. Asking African American students to identify their race before answering questions taken from the Graduate Record Examination, the standardized test used for admission to graduate schools, cut in half the number of items they got right. Similarly, asking students to identify their sex at the beginning of Advanced Placement (AP) calculus tests, used to give high school students college credits, lowered the scores of women. If the sex question were moved to the end of the test, about 5% more women would receive AP credit.[1](http://e.pub/cn24ensy73kf2r5d5428.vbk/OEBPS/Notes.html#ch5-fn1)

Don’t try to memorize the material in this chapter as a rigid set of rules. Instead, use the examples to get a sense for the kinds of things that differ from one culture to another. Test these generalizations against your experience. When in doubt, ask.

**Microsoft in China**

To succeed in China, Microsoft had to drastically alter its business practices.

Probably the most obvious change was pricing strategy. Microsoft found many Chinese using its expensive software— for free, thanks to pirated versions. Bill Gates argued that if the Chinese were going to pirate software, he wanted it to be Microsoft’s. Accepting the piracy turned out to be a smart move; about 90% of China’s 120 million PCs use Windows. And Microsoft has dropped the price for legal copies; packages of Windows and Office sell for $3 for Chinese students.

Microsoft also had to learn how to collaborate with the Chinese government instead of fighting it. It offered China the right to substitute some of its own software in the Windows source code so that sensitive political and military offices can install their own cryptography. In return, the government is requiring central and provincial governments to begin using legal software.

Adapted from David Kirkpatrick, “How Microsoft Conquered China,” *Fortune*, July 23, 2007, 78–84.

**Global Business**

As we saw in [Chapter 4](http://e.pub/cn24ensy73kf2r5d5428.vbk/OEBPS/Chapter04.html), exports are essential both to the success of individual businesses and to a country’s economy as a whole. Most major businesses operate globally, and an increasing share of profits comes from outside the headquarters country:

Page 127   McDonald’s has restaurants in over 100 countries and earns more than 66% of its income outside the United States.

   3M has 63% of its sales internationally.

   Procter & Gamble has $20 billion of sales in developing countries.

   Unilever and Colgate-Palmolive have 40% of their business in developing countries.

   Starbucks is expanding into Brazil, Egypt, and Russia, giving it sales in 40 countries. Eventually the company plans to have half its stores outside the United States.

   Wal-Mart’s international stores earn “only” 20% of the company’s total sales. However, if the international operations were an independent chain, it would be the world’s fourth-largest retailer.[2](http://e.pub/cn24ensy73kf2r5d5428.vbk/OEBPS/Notes.html#ch5-fn2)

Many companies—even service businesses—depend on vendors or operations in other countries. These international operations help companies spend more time with customers, focus more on innovation, and fund projects that otherwise would have been unaffordable. IBM has 43,000 employees in India staffing data centers, call centers, software development, and research. Over a billion dollars of finance and accounting jobs were performed by India’s Genpact for Wachovia Corporation. Eli Lilly does 20% of its chemistry work in China and is performing clinical trials in Brazil, Russia, China, and India.[3](http://e.pub/cn24ensy73kf2r5d5428.vbk/OEBPS/Notes.html#ch5-fn3)

**Communicating with Subsistence Consumers**

Subsistence consumers may earn little money, but they still need to buy necessities. Corporations are learning how best to communicate with them.

Many of them lack basic reading skills, so visual cues are important. Cues such as store layout, package design, and brand logos need to remain consistent for them. Many buy products that look attractive because of packaging colors or pictures. They also tend to buy only brands they recognize by appearance, so changes in colors or visual design have negative impacts.

To better serve these customers, stores need to

   Price products in whole or half numbers, and display these prices graphically— such as a picture of the money needed to buy the product.

   Display pictures of product categories, so shoppers can find the goods they need.

   Train store personnel to form relationships with consumers and offer friendly, individualized assistance.

Adapted from Jose Antonio Rosa, Madhubalan Viswanathan, and Julie A. Ruth, “Emerging Lessons: For Multinational Companies, Understanding the Needs of Poorer Consumers Can Be Profitable and Socially Responsible,” *Wall Street Journal,* October 20, 2008, R12.

**Local Culture Adaptations**

As they expand globally, US retailers are catering to local tastes and customs. When expanding to China, Wal-Mart enraged consumers when they sold dead fish and meat packaged in Styrofoam, which shoppers saw as old merchandise. Wal-Mart quickly learned to compensate by leaving meat uncovered and installing fish tanks to sell live fish. They also sell live tortoises and snakes; Johnson’s Baby Oil is stocked next to moisturizers containing sheep placenta, a native wrinkle “cure.” Wal-Mart lures customers on foot or bikes with free shuttle buses and home deliveries for large items. Perhaps the biggest change is Wal-Mart’s acceptance of organized labor in China; in July 2006 it accepted its first union ever into its stores.

Tommy Hilfiger made different changes as it opened its high-end stores in Europe. The company’s signature cotton knit sweaters don’t sell well in Europe, where men prefer wool sweaters, so Hilfiger began offering lamb’s wool sweaters. Underwear packages received more seductive pictures. Baggy jeans, popular in the United States, were replaced with slimmer silhouettes to cater to European tastes.[4](http://e.pub/cn24ensy73kf2r5d5428.vbk/OEBPS/Notes.html#ch5-fn4)

**International Career Experience**

When plants, stores, and offices move overseas, people follow—top executives as well migrant workers. After the 2000 dot-com crash, many companies outsourced departments such as software development, data analysis, and research. Now top executives are also being relocated. Cisco Systems, a 50,000-person employer, seeks to locate 20% of senior managers at their Globalization Center in Bangalore, India, by 2010. The executives will represent the best talent from San Jose, California, and Bangalore. IBM currently has 150 executives working and living overseas including 35 in India and 89 in China. At Procter & Gamble, 17 of the top 30 executives have had international assignments. Such assignments give companies a pool of executives with intercultural skills and global awareness.[5](http://e.pub/cn24ensy73kf2r5d5428.vbk/OEBPS/Notes.html#ch5-fn5)

For their own careers, managers often find they need international experience if they want top-level jobs. A survey of multinational companies by Mercer Human Resource Consulting found that firms were increasing international Page 128assignments, and that more of those assignments were going to women. Cross-cultural training for the assignments was provided by 60% of the companies, but once abroad employees generally had to fend for themselves, including finding their own housing.[6](http://e.pub/cn24ensy73kf2r5d5428.vbk/OEBPS/Notes.html#ch5-fn6)

The executives join a host of migrant workers already abroad. Migrant workers benefit the economies of both host and home countries. The money sent home by expatriate workers, more than $160 billion a year, is far more than the total aid spent by the developed world for developing countries (about $100 billion a year). Thus the money sent home is one of the major drivers of international development. India and China provide one-quarter of the global migrant population, and their contributions are significant. Indian managers and accountants are increasingly running businesses in the Gulf. The Chinese are a particularly strong presence in Africa.[7](http://e.pub/cn24ensy73kf2r5d5428.vbk/OEBPS/Notes.html#ch5-fn7)

Thomas Friedman, Pulitzer Prize author and *New York Times* columnist, uses the metaphor of a flat world to describe the increasing globalization. In *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century,* he says,

What the flattening of the world means is that we are now connecting all the knowledge centers on the planet together into a single global network, which—if politics and terrorism do not get in the way—could usher in an amazing era of prosperity, innovation, and collaboration, by companies, communities, and individuals.[8](http://e.pub/cn24ensy73kf2r5d5428.vbk/OEBPS/Notes.html#ch5-fn8)

**Marketing Disney to China**

Only six months after Hong Kong Disneyland opened, Disney officials were scrambling to understand why attendance was so low at the new park. They turned for answers to Chinese travel agents who book tours. Some of these agents believed Disney officials had not tried to understand the local market and Chinese culture.

After the disappointing start at the Hong Kong park, Disney officials were anxious to learn and ready to make changes. Using the travel industry feedback and other market research, Disney developed a new advertising campaign. Original ads had featured an aerial view of the park; new TV spots focused on people and showed guests riding attractions. A new print ad featuring a grandmother, mother, and daughter showed that Disneyland is a place where families can have fun together.

Disney also worked to make visitors more comfortable inside the park. At an attraction offered in three different languages, guests gravitated toward the shortest line—usually the line for English-speaking guests. Now, three separate signs clearly mark which language will be used to communicate with guests in that line. Greater use of Mandarin-speaking guides and materials helps guests better enjoy shows and attractions. Also, additional seating was added in dining areas because Chinese diners take longer to eat than do Americans. Disney is hoping such changes will attract more guests to the Hong Kong park.

Source: Merissa Marr and Geoffrey A. Fowler, “Chinese Lessons for Disney,” *Wall Street Journal,* June 12, 2006, B1, B5.

**Diversity in North America**

Even if you stay in the United States and Canada, you’ll work with people whose backgrounds differ from yours. Residents of small towns and rural areas may have different notions of friendliness than do people from big cities. Californians may talk and dress differently than people in the Midwest. The cultural icons that resonate for baby boomers may mean little to members of Generation Y. For many workers, local diversity has become as important as international diversity.

The last two decades have seen a growing emphasis on diversity. This diversity comes from many sources:

   Gender.

   Race and ethnicity.

   Regional and national origin.

   Social class.

   Religion.

   Age.

   Sexual orientation.

   Physical ability.

Page 129Many young Americans are already multicultural. According to 2005 US census figures, almost 40% of Americans aged 15 to 24 are African American, Latino, Asian, or Native American.[9](http://e.pub/cn24ensy73kf2r5d5428.vbk/OEBPS/Notes.html#ch5-fn9) Some of them are immigrants or descendants of immigrants. In recent years, the largest numbers of immigrants to the United States have come from Mexico, India, China, Philippines, Cuba, Vietnam, Dominican Republic, and Korea.[10](http://e.pub/cn24ensy73kf2r5d5428.vbk/OEBPS/Notes.html#ch5-fn10) In 2002 Latinos became the largest minority group in the United States. The US Census Bureau predicts that by 2042, the non-Hispanic white population will be less than 50% of the country’s total population.[11](http://e.pub/cn24ensy73kf2r5d5428.vbk/OEBPS/Notes.html#ch5-fn11) The change is occurring rapidly: in 10% of US counties, whites are already in the minority.[12](http://e.pub/cn24ensy73kf2r5d5428.vbk/OEBPS/Notes.html#ch5-fn12)

Bilingual Canada has long compared the diversity of its people to a mosaic. But now immigrants from Italy, Greece, and Hong Kong add their voices to the medley of French, English, and Inuit. Radio station CHIN in Toronto broadcasts in 32 languages.[13](http://e.pub/cn24ensy73kf2r5d5428.vbk/OEBPS/Notes.html#ch5-fn13)

According to 2000 US census figures, about 4.6 million people identified themselves as belonging to more than one race.[14](http://e.pub/cn24ensy73kf2r5d5428.vbk/OEBPS/Notes.html#ch5-fn14) US Census figures also show that 19.7% of the population nationally and 42.5% in California speak a language other than English at home.[15](http://e.pub/cn24ensy73kf2r5d5428.vbk/OEBPS/Notes.html#ch5-fn15) In cities such as Los Angeles and San Jose, over half the population speaks a language other than English at home; in El Paso, that percentage is 74.3%.[16](http://e.pub/cn24ensy73kf2r5d5428.vbk/OEBPS/Notes.html#ch5-fn16)

Faced with these figures, organizations are making special efforts to diversify their workforces. Nike recruits minority students on college campuses and offers them summer internships; Clorox partners with professional organizations like the National Black M.B.A. Association. Microsoft has 44 different diversity advisory councils (DACs). The oldest, BAM—Blacks at Microsoft—has 500 members. Four are for employees with disabilities; still others are for employees from specific international regions. In addition to supporting the group members, DACs help recruit and integrate new employees and help Microsoft adapt their communications and products for diverse segments of the global economy.[17](http://e.pub/cn24ensy73kf2r5d5428.vbk/OEBPS/Notes.html#ch5-fn17)

These companies are smart; new evidence shows that diversity can improve business. Research analyzing the relationship between diversity levels and business performance of 250 US businesses found a correlation between diversity and business success; companies with high levels of racial and ethic minorities have the highest profits, the highest market shares, and highest number of customers. On the other hand, organizations with low levels of diversity have the lowest profits, the lowest market shares, and the lowest number of customers.[18](http://e.pub/cn24ensy73kf2r5d5428.vbk/OEBPS/Notes.html#ch5-fn18)

**Beyond Stereotypes**

Learning about different cultures is important for understanding the different kinds of people we work with. However, leadership coaches Keith Caver and Ancella Livers caution that people are individuals, not just representatives of a cultural group. Based on their work with African American executives and middle managers, Caver and Livers have found that coworkers sometimes treat these individuals first as representatives of black culture, and only second as talented and experienced managers.

As an example, Caver and Livers cite the all-too-common situation of a newly hired black manager who participates in a management development activity. The new manager is prepared to answer questions about her area of business expertise, but the only questions directed toward her are about “diversity.” African American clients of Caver and Livers have complained that they are often called upon to interpret the behavior of famous black Americans such as Clarence Thomas or Jesse Jackson, and they wonder whether their white colleagues would feel their race qualifies them to interpret the deeds of famous white Americans.

In this example, stereotypes make well-intentioned efforts at communication offensive. To avoid such offense, consider not only culture, but also people’s individual qualities and their roles and experiences. A person who communicates one way in the role of son or daughter may communicate very differently as engineer or client.

Adapted from Keith A. Caver and Ancella B. Livers, “Dear White Boss,” *Harvard Business Review* 80, no. 11 (November 2002), 76–81.

**Ways to Look at Culture**

Each of us grows up in a **culture** that provides patterns of acceptable behavior and belief. We may not be aware of the most basic features of our own culture until we come into contact with people who do things differently. In India, children might be expected to touch the bare feet of elders to show respect, but in the United States such touching would be inappropriate.[19](http://e.pub/cn24ensy73kf2r5d5428.vbk/OEBPS/Notes.html#ch5-fn19)

As anthropologist Edward Hall first described, we can categorize cultures as high-context or low-context. In **high-context cultures**, most of the information is inferred from the social relationships of the people and the context of a message; little is explicitly conveyed. Chinese, Japanese, Arabic, and Latin American cultures are high-context. In **low-context cultures**, context is less important; most information is explicitly spelled out. German, Scandinavian, and North American cultures are low-context.

High- and low-context cultures value different kinds of communication and have different attitudes toward oral and written communication. As [Figure 5.1](http://e.pub/cn24ensy73kf2r5d5428.vbk/OEBPS/Chapter05.html#ch5-fig1) shows, low-context cultures like those of the United States favor direct approaches and may see indirectness as dishonest or manipulative. The written word is seen as more important than oral statements, so contracts are binding Page 130but promises may be broken. Details matter. Business communication practices in the United States reflect these low-context preferences.

Views of Communication in High- and Low-Context Cultures

*Source:* Robert T. Moran, Philip R. Harris, and Sarah V. Moran, *Managing Cultural Differences: Global Leadership Strategies for the 21st Century,* 7th ed. (Boston: Elsevier, 2007), 49–52.

The discussion that follows focuses on national and regional cultures. But business communication is also influenced by the organizational culture and by personal culture, such as gender, race and ethnicity, social class, and so forth. As [Figure 5.2](http://e.pub/cn24ensy73kf2r5d5428.vbk/OEBPS/Chapter05.html#ch5-fig2) suggests, all of these intersect to determine what kind of communication is needed in a given situation. Sometimes one kind of culture may be more important than another. For example, in a study of aerospace engineers in Europe, Asia, and the United States, researchers found that the similarities of the professional discourse community outweighed differences in national cultures.[20](http://e.pub/cn24ensy73kf2r5d5428.vbk/OEBPS/Notes.html#ch5-fn20)

**Does the Glass Ceiling Exist?**

“**The news:** Men and women have different views on whether women face a ‘glass ceiling’ in financial professions, according to a survey of 363 financial executives by *CFO* magazine.

**“The numbers:** In the survey, 40% of women said they perceive limits to how far women can rise; only 10% of men believe women face a glass ceiling.

**“The differences:** Two-thirds of women, 66%, said women face one or more obstacles to success in finance, such as a lack of operational experience or an inability to negotiate effectively. But only 38% of men said women face such difficulties. Five times as many women as men said female executives have more trouble gaining the respect and trust of the CEO.

**“The background:** Few women hold top financial jobs in major U.S. corporations, even though women earn more undergraduate business degrees than men. Just 7% of Fortune 500 companies have female CFOs, according to recruiters Heidrick& Struggles International Inc.”

Quoted from JaclyneBadal, “Surveying the Field: Cracking the Glass Ceiling,” *Wall Street Journal,* June 19, 2006, B3.

**Values, Beliefs, and Practices**

Values and beliefs, often unconscious, affect our response to people and situations. Most North Americans, for example, value “fairness.” “You’re not playing fair” is a sharp criticism calling for changed behavior. In some countries, however, people expect certain groups to receive preferential treatment. Many people in the United States value individualism. Other countries may value the group. Japan’s traditional culture emphasized the group, but there is evidence that this cultural value is changing.

**Figure 5.2** National Culture, Organizational Culture, and Personal Culture Overlap

Page 131**Figure 5.3** A Sampling of International Holidays

Religion also affects business communication and business life. Observant Muslims, Jews, and Christians observe days of rest and prayer on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, respectively. During the holy month of Ramadan, Muslims fast from sunup to sundown; scheduling a business luncheon with a Muslim colleague during Ramadan would be inappropriate. A sampling of international holidays, including Ramadan, appears in [Figure 5.3](http://e.pub/cn24ensy73kf2r5d5428.vbk/OEBPS/Chapter05.html#ch5-fig3).

Even everyday practices differ from culture to culture. North Americans and Europeans put the family name last; Asians put it first. North American and European printing moves from top to bottom and from left to right; Arabic reads from right to left, but still from top to bottom. The Chinese language is traditionally written using characters signifying ideas, rather than letters signifying sounds. Opening the Internet to Chinese readers has been challenging because of the need to use the Chinese characters. Internet portal Yahoo Page 132gained access to the Chinese market by purchasing Zhou Hongyi’s keyword-search firm called 3721 (the name represents ease of use, in the sense of being as easy as “3 times 7 equals 21”). Companies pay 3721 to register their Chinese names as keywords.[21](http://e.pub/cn24ensy73kf2r5d5428.vbk/OEBPS/Notes.html#ch5-fn21)

**HBR on Chinese versus Russian Entrepreneurs**

As business opportunities continue to expand in China and Russia, the *Harvard Business Review* offers this summary of the differences between entrepreneurs in the two countries:

   Chinese tend to think concretely and appreciate harmonious and balanced ideas. Russians tend to think abstractly and tolerate contradictory positions.

   Chinese networks tend to be small and close knit: family, friends, and colleagues. Russia’s institutional chaos has hastened the formation of new, loosely knit networks.

   Members of Chinese networks exhibit higher levels of trust, Russians lower levels.

Because of these characteristics, Chinese networks are harder to enter than the more fluid Russian networks. However, once you are in, you will be more trusted in a Chinese network than in a Russian one.

However, HBR notes that Americans will always be expected to be different and that trying too hard to fit in will undermine trust.

Adapted from Bat Batjargal, “The Difference between Chinese and Russian Entrepreneurs,” *Harvard Business Review* 86, no. 10 (2008): 32.

In today’s electronically connected world, cultural practices can change swiftly. For instance, in China, where age has traditionally been revered, few political or business leaders turn gray, even those who are in their fifties or sixties. Workers are also becoming less group oriented and more individualistic.[22](http://e.pub/cn24ensy73kf2r5d5428.vbk/OEBPS/Notes.html#ch5-fn22) In such fluid contexts, communication becomes even more important. If you don’t know, ask.

**Nonverbal Communication**

[Chapter 4](http://e.pub/cn24ensy73kf2r5d5428.vbk/OEBPS/Chapter04.html) discussed the significance of nonverbal communication in interpersonal communication. **Nonverbal communication** is also important in inter-cultural settings. Be aware of usage differences in such areas as body language, touch, space, and time.

**Body Language**

Just as verbal languages differ, so body languages differ from culture to culture. The Japanese value the ability to sit quietly. They may see the US tendency to fidget and shift as an indication of lack of mental or spiritual balance. Even in North America, interviewers and audiences usually respond negatively to nervous gestures such as fidgeting with a tie or hair or jewelry, tapping a pencil, or swinging a foot.

People use body language to signal such traits as interest, respect, emotional involvement, confidence, and agreement. For example, Americans working in the Middle East are cautioned to avoid pointing their finger at people or showing the soles of their feet when seated. They also need to avoid misreading handholding among Arab men, for whom it is an expression of affection and solidarity.[23](http://e.pub/cn24ensy73kf2r5d5428.vbk/OEBPS/Notes.html#ch5-fn23)

**Eye contact**

North American whites see eye contact as a sign of attention; in fact, lack of eye contact is slightly suspect. But in many cultures, dropped eyes are a sign of appropriate deference to a superior. Japanese show respect by lowering their eyes when speaking to superiors. In some Latin American and African Page 133cultures, such as Nigeria, it is disrespectful for lower-status people to prolong eye contact with their superiors. Similarly, in the United States, staring is considered rude. For the English, however, polite people pay strict attention to speakers and blink their eyes to show understanding. In China, a widening of the eyes shows anger, in the United States—surprise. Among Arab men, eye contact is important; it is considered impolite not to face someone directly.[24](http://e.pub/cn24ensy73kf2r5d5428.vbk/OEBPS/Notes.html#ch5-fn24) In Muslim countries, women and men are not supposed to have eye contact.

Fast food chains are adapting to international cultures.

**MySpace Abroad**

As MySpace moves into more countries, it has to vary its approach.

Some places, such as India and parts of Latin America, have relatively slow Internet speeds, so MySpace is developing a version without streaming video and music. Also in India, MySpace is trying to lure Bollywood stars into creating profiles and sharing items with fans.

On the other hand, South Korea has Internet speeds faster than those in the United States. It also has a savvy Web culture, one that loves to blog. The South Korean version of MySpace is more of a blogging service.

In some countries, such as Turkey, social networking is less familiar, so MySpace needs tutorials explaining how to navigate the site and find friends.

In Japan, users were shy about listing personal interests but enjoyed joining fan groups. So MySpace increased the prominence of the groups section.

In China, MySpace needed bulletin boards where thousands could participate, and do so anonymously.

Adapted from Jessica E. Vascellaro, “MySpace Aims for Trickier Markets: In India, Israel, Turkey, Web Speeds and Culture Require Special Touches,” *Wall Street Journal,* December 13, 2007, B3; and Geoffrey A. Fowler and Jason Dean, “In China, MySpace May Need to Be ‘OurSpace,’ ”*Wall Street Journal,* February 2, 2007, B1–2.

These differences can lead to miscommunication in the multicultural work-place. Superiors may feel that subordinates are being disrespectful when the subordinates are being fully respectful—according to the norms of their culture.

**Smiling**

The frequency of smiling and the way people interpret smiles may depend on the purpose smiles serve in a particular culture. In the United States, smiling varies from region to region. In Germany, Sweden, and the “less-smiley” US cultures, smiling is more likely to be reserved for close relationships and genuine joy. Frequent smiles in other situations would therefore seem insincere. For other people, including those in Thailand, smiling can be a way to create harmony and make situations pleasant. These people might interpret a lack of smiles to signal a lack of harmony and goodwill. Thais tend to smile in most situations, so the meaning of a smile depends on the context—for example, whether the smiling person is telling a joke or smoothing over difficulties.[25](http://e.pub/cn24ensy73kf2r5d5428.vbk/OEBPS/Notes.html#ch5-fn25) Greeks may express anger with a smile.[26](http://e.pub/cn24ensy73kf2r5d5428.vbk/OEBPS/Notes.html#ch5-fn26)

**Gestures**

US citizens sometimes assume that they can depend on gestures to communicate if language fails. But the meanings of gestures vary widely in different cultures. Kissing is usually an affection gesture in the United States but is a greeting gesture in other countries. In Greece, people may nod their heads to signify *no* and shake their heads to signify *yes.*[27](http://e.pub/cn24ensy73kf2r5d5428.vbk/OEBPS/Notes.html#ch5-fn27)

Page 134**Mac and PC's Overseas Adventures**

“When Apple Inc. wanted to bring its series of ‘Mac vs. PC’ ads to international markets, it faced a difficult issue: What’s funny in one culture can seem ill-mannered in another.

“In the American ads . . . a nerdy PC guy keeps getting trumped by his hip Mac counterpart, who uses pointed banter that demonstrates how Macs are better. In one recent spot, PC is proudly having a camera taped to his head so he can do video chatting—only to discover that Mac already has a built-in camera. . . .

“But in Japanese culture, where direct-comparison ads have long been frowned upon, it’s rude to brag about one’s strengths. So for Japanese versions of the ads that rolled out last fall, two local comedians from a troupe called the Rahmens made subtle changes to emphasize that Macs and PCs are not that different. Instead of clothes that cast PC clearly as a nerd and Mac as a hipster, PC wears plain office attire and Mac weekend fashion, highlighting the work/home divide between the devices more than personality differences. . . .

“PC’s body language is a big source of the humor in Japan: Mac looks embarrassed when the PC touches his shoulder, or hides behind Mac’s legs to avoid viruses. . . .

“The international campaigns reflect a growing move by U.S. companies to refine their ad campaigns for overseas markets.”

Quoted from Geoffrey A. Fowler, Brian Steinberg, and Aaron O. Patrick, “Mac and PC’s Overseas Adventures: Globalizing Apple’s Ads Meant Tweaking Characters, Clothing, Body Language,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 1, 2007, B1. Copyright © 2007 by Dow Jones & Company, Inc. Reproduced with permission of Dow Jones & Company, Inc. via Copyright Clearance Center.

The meanings of gestures vary with cultures.

*Source:* Mike Kilen, “Watch Your Language: Rude or Polite? Gestures Vary with Cultures,” *Des Moines Register,* May 30, 2006, E1–2.

Gestures that mean approval in the United States may have very different meanings in other countries. The “thumbs up” sign, which means “good work” or “go ahead” in the United States and most of western Europe, is a vulgar insult in Iraq, Iran, and Bangladesh. The circle formed with the thumb and first finger that means *OK* in the United States is obscene in Brazil and Germany. In India, the raised middle finger means you need to urinate.[28](http://e.pub/cn24ensy73kf2r5d5428.vbk/OEBPS/Notes.html#ch5-fn28)

The V-sign is another gesture with multiple meanings. Made with the palm facing out, it was famously used by Churchill during WWII and by the hippies in the 60s and 70s. Made with the palm facing in, it is the equivalent of giving someone the finger in countries such as the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Australia. An American president made interesting headlines when he inadvertently used the V-sign on a visit to Australia.

**Touch**

Repeated studies have shown that babies need to be touched to grow and thrive and that older people are healthier both mentally and physically if they are touched. But some people are more comfortable with touch than others. Each kind of person may misinterpret the other. A person who dislikes touchPage 135may seem unfriendly to someone who’s used to touching. A toucher may seem overly familiar to someone who dislikes touch.

Most parts of North America allow opposite-sex couples to hold hands or walk arm-in-arm in public but frown on the same behavior in same-sex couples. People in some other countries have the opposite expectation: male friends or female friends can hold hands or walk arm-in-arm, but it is slightly shocking for an opposite-sex couple to touch in public.

In US business settings, people generally shake hands when they meet, but little other touching is considered appropriate. In Mexico, greetings may involve greater physical contact. Men may embrace one another, and women may kiss one another. In many European settings, business colleagues may shake hands when they encounter one another throughout the day. In countries along the Mediterranean, hugs and shoulder pats are common as well. In some European countries, greetings include light kisses. The typical pattern is to kiss the person’s right cheek and then the left (or to kiss the air near the cheek). In Italy this pattern stops with two kisses; Belgians continue for three, and the French for four.[29](http://e.pub/cn24ensy73kf2r5d5428.vbk/OEBPS/Notes.html#ch5-fn29)

**Space**

**Personal space** is the distance people want between themselves and other people in ordinary, nonintimate interchanges. Some research shows that many North Americans, North Europeans, and Asians want a bigger personal space than do many Latin Americans, French, Italians, and Arabs. Even people who prefer lots of personal space are often forced to accept close contact on a crowded elevator or subway, or in a small conference room.

Even within a culture, some people like more personal space than do others. In many cultures, people who are of the same age and sex take less personal space than do mixed-age or mixed-sex groups.

**Time**

Differences in time zones complicate international phone calls and video conferences. But even more important are different views of time and attitudes toward time. Organizations in the United States—businesses, government, and schools—keep time by the calendar and the clock. Being “on time” is seen as a sign of dependability. Other cultures may keep time by the seasons, the moon, the sun, internal “body clocks,” or a personal feeling that “the time is right.”

North Americans who believe that “time is money” are often frustrated in negotiations with people who take a much more leisurely approach. Part of the problem is that people in many other cultures want to establish a personal relationship before they decide whether to do business with each other.

The problem is made worse because various cultures mentally measure time differently. Many North Americans measure time in five-minute blocks. Someone who’s five minutes late to an appointment or a job interview feels compelled to apologize. If the executive or interviewer is running half an hour late, the caller expects to be told about the likely delay upon arriving. Some people won’t be able to wait that long and will need to reschedule their appointments. But in other cultures, half an hour may be the smallest block of time. To someone who mentally measures time in 30-minute blocks, being 45 minutes late is no worse than being 10 minutes late is to someone who is conscious of smaller units.

Different cultures have different lead times for scheduling events. In some countries, you need to schedule important meetings at least two weeks in advance. In other countries, not only are people not booked up so far in advance, but a date two weeks into the future may be forgotten.

[**https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/**](https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/) **and** [**http://countrystudies.us/**](http://countrystudies.us/) **respectively.**

*World Factbook* published by the Central Intelligence Agency and *Country Studies* published by the Library of Congress are good starting points for learning about the people of another country. Extensive country-by-country information includes languages spoken and communications technology available.

Anthropologist Edward Hall distinguishes between **monochronic cultures**, which focus on clock time, and **polychronic cultures**, which focus on relationships. Page 136People in monochronic cultures tend to schedule their time and do one task at a time; people in polychronic cultures tend to want their time unstructured and do multiple tasks at the same time. When US managers feel offended because a Latin American manager also sees other people during “their” appointments, the two kinds of time are in conflict.[30](http://e.pub/cn24ensy73kf2r5d5428.vbk/OEBPS/Notes.html#ch5-fn30)

**Thinking Outside the Time Line**

To organize a convincing argument, the typical European or North American will develop several points and present a case for them one by one. Negotiating a contract, this person might present a list of terms, such as price, quantity, and delivery date, expecting to discuss each one in turn, moving down the list. This approach seems obvious to a Westerner, because Westerners tend to think sequentially—that is, with ideas moving from a beginning to an end.

The typical Chinese negotiator, in contrast, rarely thinks in terms of a sequence or time line. Rather, the Chinese are more likely to engage in holistic thinking, considering all the details as part of a whole. They want to see a proposal in its full context and are likely to reconsider individual details repeatedly, as part of studying the entire proposal from various angles.

As a result of this difference, Americans negotiating with Chinese often doubt they are making progress. Worse, if they follow a Western-style negotiating strategy, they may make costly concessions. In a negotiation between Tandem Computers and China Telecom, the Tandem sales manager offered to reduce the price by 5 percent in exchange for China Telecom’s commitment to sign an order for delivery within one month. The purchasing manager responded that there was no need to rush, but since the price was flexible, the price reduction would be acceptable.

Adapted from John L. Graham and N. Mark Lam, “The Chinese Negotiation,” *Harvard Business Review,* October 2003, 82–91.

Eating pizza with chopsticks illustrates how new cultural values interact with native culture to constantly create hybrid cultures.

**Other Nonverbal Symbols**

Many other symbols can carry nonverbal meanings: clothing, colors, age, and height, to name a few.

**Clothing**

In North America, certain styles and colors of clothing are considered more “professional” and more “credible.” Some clothing denotes not only status but also occupational group. Cowboy boots, firefighter hats, and judicial robes all may, or may not, signal specific occupations. Tool belts, coveralls, hard hats, and stethoscopes may signal broader occupational groupings.

**Colors**

Colors can also carry meanings in a culture. Chinese tradition associates red with good fortune. Korean Buddhists use red to announce death. Black is the color of joy in Japan, the color of death in the United States.[31](http://e.pub/cn24ensy73kf2r5d5428.vbk/OEBPS/Notes.html#ch5-fn31) White is the color of funerals in eastern countries; in the United States it is the color of brides. UPS found its company color working against it when it entered the Spanish market. The brown trucks that distinguish the delivery company’s brand in the United States are not a good image in Spain, where hearses are traditionally brown. When UPS realized its mistake, it altered its uniforms and truck colors in Spain, emphasizing the company logo rather than the color brown.[32](http://e.pub/cn24ensy73kf2r5d5428.vbk/OEBPS/Notes.html#ch5-fn32)

**Age**

In the United States, youth is valued. People color their hair and even have face-lifts to look as youthful as possible. In Japan, younger people generally defer to older people. Americans attempting to negotiate in Japan are usually taken more seriously if at least one member of the team is noticeably gray-haired.

**Height**

Height connotes status in many parts of the world. Executive offices are usually on the top floors; the underlings work below. Even being tall can help a person succeed. A recent study found that white, non-Hispanic males of below-average height earned 10 percent less than males of above-average height. Each additional inch of height was linked to 2.5 percent greater income. Perhaps surprisingly, the measurement that produced this effect was the man’s height when he was a teenager. Those who grew later in life did not enjoy the income benefits of greater height. For white women in the study, actual adult height was associated with greater income. The researchers lacked sufficient data on other ethnic groups except to say that there seems to be a height–income effect for black males that resembles the effect for white males.[33](http://e.pub/cn24ensy73kf2r5d5428.vbk/OEBPS/Notes.html#ch5-fn33)

**Oral Communication**

Effective oral communication requires cultural understanding. As [Figure 5.4](http://e.pub/cn24ensy73kf2r5d5428.vbk/OEBPS/Chapter05.html#ch5-fig4) suggests, even an act as specific as a business introduction may differ across cultures. These are general patterns, not absolutes, but they help communicators stay alert for audience preferences.

During business meetings, even words as distinct as *yes* and *no* may cause confusion. In some cultures where saying *no* is considered rude, a *yes* may mean merely “I heard you.”

Learning at least a little of the language of the country where you hope to do business will help you in several ways. First, learning the language will give you at least a glimpse into the culture. In English, for example, we say that a clock “runs.” The French say “ *Ilmarche* ”—literally, “It is walking.” Second, learning some of the language will help you manage the daily necessities Page 138of finding food and getting where you need to go while you’re there. Finally, in business negotiations, knowing a little of the language gives you more time to think. You’ll catch part of the meaning when you hear your counterpart speak; you can begin thinking even before the translation begins.

Frequently you will need good translators when you travel abroad on business. Brief them with the technical terms you’ll be using; explain as much of the context of your negotiations as possible. A good translator can also help you interpret nonverbal behavior and negotiating strategies. Some translators can help their clients establish trust and credibility with international businesses.

**Figure 5.4** Cultural Contrasts in Business Introductions

*Source:* Adapted from FaridElashmawi and Philip R. Harris, *Multicultural Management 2000: Essential Cultural Insights for Global Business Success* (Houston: Gulf, 1998), 113.

**Intercultural Doctors**

Latin American medical schools graduate more doctors than they have room for in residency training, while US hospitals and clinics are struggling to serve their Spanish-speaking patients. UCLA has started a program to span the gap.

The program, funded by private foundations, provides prep courses for US licensing exams, hospital observations, and help in applying for a US medical residency. Upon completion of the residency, participants serve three years in a “medically under-served area,” usually in a large city or rural area.

The new doctors help eliminate the communication problems that cost millions of dollars in unnecessary tests and emergency room visits and cost patients inaccurate or delayed diagnoses and confusion about medications.

For example, “once” in English means “eleven” in Spanish. Some Spanish-speaking patients have taken “once a day” medicines eleven times; for some medications, this increased dosage could be fatal.

In addition to language fluency, the new doctors grasp cultural nuances, such as herbal medications, that may be relevant.

Adapted from Miriam Jordan, “Pilot Program Aims to Train Spanish-Speaking Doctors,” *Wall Street Journal,* December 12, 2007, B1.

**Understatement and Exaggeration**

To understand someone from another culture, you must understand the speaker’s conversational style. The British have a reputation for understatement. Someone good enough to play at Wimbledon may say he or she “plays a little tennis.” In many contexts, Americans accept exaggeration as a way to express positive thinking. Particularly in advertising, Americans expect some hype. Germans, in contrast, generally see exaggeration as a barrier to clear communication. German customers are likely to be intolerant of claims that seem logically unsupportable. An American writing for a German audience should ensure that any claims are literally true.[34](http://e.pub/cn24ensy73kf2r5d5428.vbk/OEBPS/Notes.html#ch5-fn34)

**Compliments**

The kinds of statements that people interpret as compliments and the socially correct ways to respond to compliments also vary among cultures. Statements that seem complimentary in one context may be inappropriate in another. For example, women in business may be uncomfortable if male colleagues or superiors compliment them on their appearance: the comments may suggest that the women are being treated as visual decoration rather than as contributing workers.

**Writing to International Audiences**

Most cultures are more formal than that of the United States. When you write to international audiences, you may need to use titles, not first names. Avoid contractions, slang, and sports metaphors.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Not: | Let’s knock these sales figures out of the ballpark. |
| But: | Our goal is to increase sales 7%. |

Page 139Do write in English unless you’re extremely fluent in your reader’s language. Be clear, but be adult. Don’t write in second-grade English.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Not: | We will meet Tuesday. Our meeting room will be Hanscher North. We will start at 9:30 AM. |
| But: | We will meet Tuesday at 9:30 AM in Hanscher North. |

The patterns of organization that work for United States audiences may need to be modified in international correspondence. For instance, most North Americans develop an argument linearly; points in a contract such as price, quantity, and delivery date are presented in order, one at a time. However, business people from other cultures may think holistically rather than sequentially, and the business relationship may be far more important than the actual contract, which may not even be considered binding.

[**http://www.cyborlink.com/**](http://www.cyborlink.com/)[**http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/**](http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/)

[Cyborlink.com](http://www.cyborlink.com/) and Kwintessential.co.uk provide information on business communication in various countries. On both sites, choose a country to explore and you will get general information on topics such as negotiations, gift giving, personal space, and much more.

In other documents, negative messages may need more buffering and requests may need to be indirect. A junior manager in a financial firm caused hard feelings when he e-mailed a direct question to a colleague at the Manila office: “Were the deal numbers checked against the source?” This question was taken by the employee in Manila as an accusation.[35](http://e.pub/cn24ensy73kf2r5d5428.vbk/OEBPS/Notes.html#ch5-fn35)

As Figures [5.5](http://e.pub/cn24ensy73kf2r5d5428.vbk/OEBPS/Chapter05.html#ch5-fig5) and [5.6](http://e.pub/cn24ensy73kf2r5d5428.vbk/OEBPS/Chapter05.html#ch5-fig6) suggest, the style, structure, and strategies that would motivate a US audience may need to be changed for international readers. Relationships become more important, as do politeness strategies. The information in the figures suggests general patterns, not definitive delineations, but such suggestions help communicators look for ways to be more effective. Most writers will benefit from researching a culture before composing messages for people in it.

**Figure 5.5** Cultural Contrasts in Written Persuasive Documents

*Source:* Adapted from FaridElashmawi and Philip R. Harris, *Multicultural Management 2000: Essential Cultural Insights for Global Business Success* (Houston: Gulf, 1998), 139.

**Figure 5.6** Cultural Contrasts in Motivation

*Source:* Adapted from FaridElashmawi and Philip R. Harris, *Multicultural Management 2000: Essential Cultural Insights for Global Business Success* (Houston: Gulf, 1998), 169.

Response time expectations may also need to be modified. US employees tend to expect fast answers to e-mails. However, other cultures with hierarchical organization structures may need extra response time to allow for approval by superiors. Pressing for a quick response may alienate the people whose help is needed and may result in false promises.[36](http://e.pub/cn24ensy73kf2r5d5428.vbk/OEBPS/Notes.html#ch5-fn36)

In international business correspondence, list the day before the month:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Not: | April 8, 2008 |
| But: | 8 April 2008 |

Spell out the month to avoid confusion.

Business people from Europe and Japan who correspond frequently with North America are beginning to adopt US directness and patterns of organization. Still, it may be safer to modify your message somewhat; it certainly is more courteous.

**Multicultural Diabetes Education**

New York City’s 11 public hospitals are tailoring diabetes education for different cultures.

The programs start with communications in the patients’ native tongues. Handouts come in 11 languages, from Albanian to Urdu. Phone-based translation services allow medical staff to communicate in still more languages. If patients miss their appointments, phone calls and letters in their native language remind them.

Correct portion sizes are illustrated with photos of plates of lamb *korma,* fried plantains, and General Tso’s chicken. Cooking classes for Caribbean emigrants demonstrate flavoring rice with fresh herbs and spices rather than tripe or pig snouts. An online guide for Indian foods lists nutritional information for classic dishes such as *roti* (flat bread) and *dal* (bean or pea dishes).

The goal of the program is to make good health care more accessible.

Adapted from Theo Francis, “Treating Diabetes and Understanding Cultures: With Minorities at Risk, Doctors Work to Make Diet Advice Hit Home,” *Wall Street Journal,* October 23, 2007, D2.

**Learning More about International Business Communication**

Learning to communicate with people from different backgrounds shouldn’t be a matter of learning rules. Instead, use the examples in this chapter to get a sense for the kinds of factors that differ from one culture to another. Test these generalizations against your experience. Remember that people everywhere have their own personal characteristics. And when in doubt, ask.

You can also learn by seeking out people from other backgrounds and talking with them. Many campuses have centers for international students. Some communities have groups of international business people who meet regularly to discuss their countries. By asking all these people what aspects of the dominant US culture seem strange to them, you’ll learn much about what is “right” in their cultures.

**Summary of Key Points**

**Culture** provides patterns of acceptable behavior and beliefs.

   The successful intercultural communicator is

   Aware of the values, beliefs, and practices in other cultures.

   Sensitive to differences among individuals within a culture.

   Aware that his or her preferred values and behaviors are influenced by culture and are not necessarily “right.”

   Sensitive to verbal and nonverbal behavior.

   Flexible and open to change.

   In **high-context cultures**, most of the information is inferred from the context of a message; little is explicitly conveyed. In **low-context cultures**, context is less important; most information is explicitly spelled out.

**Nonverbal communication** is communication that doesn’t use words. Nonverbal communication can include body language, space, time, and other miscellaneous matters such as clothing, colors, age, and height.

   Nonverbal signals can be misinterpreted just as easily as can verbal symbols (words).

Page 141   No gesture has a universal meaning across all cultures. Gestures that signify approval in North America may be insults in other countries, and vice versa.

**Personal space** is the distance someone wants between him- or herself and other people in ordinary, nonintimate interchanges.

   North Americans who believe that “time is money” are often frustrated in negotiations with people who want to establish a personal relationship before they decide whether to do business with each other.

   The patterns of organization that work for North American audiences may need to be modified in international correspondence.