The key to effective cross-cultural communication is knowledge. First, it is essential that people understand the potential problems of cross-cultural communication, and make a conscious effort to overcome these problems. Second, it is important to assume that one’s efforts will not always be successful, and adjust one’s behavior appropriately. For example, one should always assume that there is a significant possibility that cultural difficulties are causing communication problems, and be willing to be patient and forgiving rather than hostile and aggressive, if problems develop. One should respond slowly and carefully in cross-cultural exchanges, not jumping to the conclusion that you know what is being taught and said. Often intermediaries who are familiar with both cultures can be helpful in cross-cultural communication situations. They can translate both the substance and the manner of what is said. For instance, they can tone down strong statements that would be considered appropriate in one culture but not in another, before they are given to people from a culture that does not talk together in such a strong way. They can also adjust the timing of what is said and done. Some cultures move quickly to the point, others talk about things long enough to establish rapport or a relationship with the other person. Effective communication with people of different cultures is especially challenging. Cultures provide people with ways of thinking – ways of seeing, hearing and interpreting the world. Thus, the same words can mean different things to people from different cultures, even when they talk the “same” language. When the languages are different and translation has to be used to communicate, the potential for misunderstanding increases.

Stella Ting-Toomey describes three ways in which culture interferes with effective cross-cultural understanding. First is what she calls “cognitive constraints”
These are the frames of reference or world views, that provide a backdrop that all new information is compared to or inserted into. Second are “behavior constraints”. Each culture has its own rules about proper behavior, which affect verbal and nonverbal communication. Whether one looks the other person in the eye – or not, whether one says what one means overtly or talks around the issue; how close the people stand to each other when they are talking – all of these and many more are rules of politeness which differ from culture to culture. Ting-Toomey’s third factor is “emotional constraints”. Different cultures regulate the display of emotion differently. Some cultures get very emotional when they are debating an issue. They yell, they cry, they exhibit their anger, fear, frustration, and other feelings openly. Other cultures try to keep their emotions hidden, exhibiting or sharing only the “rational” or factual aspects of the situation. All of these differences tend to lead to communication problems. If the people involved are not aware of the potential for such problems, they are even more likely to fall victim to them, although it takes more than awareness to overcome these problems and communicate effectively across cultures.

*How to speak your mind.* It’s hard to overcome the fear of speaking freely for what you believe. But speaking your mind is a skill that is used in many areas of life. Here’s how to conquer that shy, sinking feeling. Don’t worry about how people might react to you speaking your mind. Understand that you have the right to say what you want to say. You have the freedom of speech, and nobody can take that away from you.

*Don’t let aggressive people intimidate you.* When somebody glares at you, glare right back at him and say what you have on your mind. Nobody owns you or your right to express yourself, so don’t let anyone force you into silence. Bullies rely on the expectation that others will be intimidated by their aggressive attitudes, but it is almost always a bluff that can be easily reversed; standing your ground against them throws them off guard.

*Remain calm.* It is very important not to let your emotions take over entirely. Remember that this is just a conversation, and people will think better of you if you
speak calmly and slowly. Acting calm makes you seem collected and in control, especially if other people are freaking out around you.

*Don’t shout.* Yelling do not make people hear you any better. In fact, it can cause them to tune you out. Speak clearly and make yourself heard, without having to yell. Speak just loudly enough so that people can hear your voice, and your opinion. Practice speaking your mind around your friends and family. They are the first people you should start openly speaking your mind to. Even for discussions that seem small or important, like where you and your friends should go to eat for lunch, let your opinion be heard. Be part of the group decision-making process.

*Believe in yourself!* If you believe what you have to say is important, others will too. Even when you are feeling confident, acting self-assured makes you appear cool and in control of things. Stick you your guns and express yourself in ways that let others get to know the real you – not the quiet, introverted person that anxiety makes you out be.

References

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