

# Intercultural Communication: Creating Safer Spaces for Migrant Workers

*The Migration Matters: Migrant Worker Series info sheets provide information on relevant topics to enhance the capacity of organizations supporting migrant workers.*

Intercultural communication is an area of study that explores communication across different cultures and social groups and how culture affects communication. It studies the wide range of communication processes and problems that naturally appear within a work or social context made up of individuals from different race, gender, religious, social, ethnic, and educational backgrounds. In this sense, intercultural communication understands how people from different countries and cultures act, communicate and perceive the world around them<sup>1</sup>.

### Intercultural Communication Barriers

There are various barriers to effective intercultural communication, including lack of knowledge about the different communication styles in different cultures, stereotypes, unconscious bias and language barriers. As a migrant worker, employer or service provider, it is important to be a good intercultural communicator to create a smooth relationship and a safe space for migrant workers. Understanding the six patterns of cultural differences and identifying unconscious biases is a first step to improve communication with culturally diverse groups.

The table on the right describes the six fundamental patterns of cultural difference and the two interrelated major barriers in intercultural communication. These patterns describe ways in which cultures, as a whole, tend to vary from one another. These are some of the most common causes of cross-cultural communication difficulties. As one enters into a multicultural conversation, it is good to keep these generalized differences in mind. This can be helpful in seeing the situation from the other person's point of view.

### Tools to Overcome Barriers in Intercultural Communication

Understanding and acknowledging the six fundamental patterns of cultural difference helps intercultural communicators to understand and interpret situations and experiences as they are **within a particular cultural context, rather than using personal cultural norms as the only judgement criteria**. Therefore, a positive attitude towards the new culture is something

individuals should carry throughout the cross-cultural communication process in providing service or working with diverse groups of migrant workers<sup>2</sup>.

Six fundamental patterns of cultural differences <sup>3</sup>	
Different communication style	Verbal Language Across cultures, some words and phrases are used in different ways and have different meanings.
	Migrant workers have different levels of English (varies from fluent to minimum)
Different attitudes towards conflict	Nonverbal Age, hierarchy or view of authority Facial expressions and gestures; seating arrangements, personal distance, and sense of time; appropriate level of assertiveness in communication
	In some cultures, it is common to deal directly with conflicts that arise, for example in a face-to-face meeting. In contrast, in many cultures, open conflict is experienced as embarrassing or demeaning; as a rule, differences are best worked out quietly or using a mediator.
Different approaches to completing tasks	In some cultures, establishing relationships comes first in the collaboration and others focus immediately on the task at hand. Also, the notion of time can vary.
Decision making styles	Collective vs individual decision making
Different attitudes toward disclosure	To be frank about emotions, about the reasons behind a conflict or a misunderstanding, or about personal information is appropriate in some cultures and inappropriate in other cultures.
Different approaches to knowing	How we acquire knowledge can vary depending on the culture, for example, library research or gathering information from people's experiences.

<sup>1</sup>Milton J. Bennett, Intercultural Development Research Institute; Intercultural Communication Extended Encyclopedia Entries in C. Cortes(Ed) multicultural America: A multimedia Encyclopedia, accessed at <https://www.idrinstitute.org/resources/intercultural-communication/#:~:text=Intercultural%20communication%20is%20the%20study,with%20nationality%20or%20world%20region.>, September 22, 2020.

<sup>2</sup>Ana Maria Fantino, Cultures at Work: Intercultural Communication in the Canadian Workplace, 2006; accessed at <https://www.muttart.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Cultures-at-Work-Ana-Maria-Fantino-2006.pdf>, September 22, 2020

<sup>3</sup>Marcelle E. DuPraw and Marya Axner, Working on Common Cross- cultural Communication Challenges, accessed at <https://www.pbs.org/ampu/crosscult.html>, November 25, 2020.

<sup>4</sup>Unconscious Bias Stereotypes and Microaggressions: How to Prevent These Subtle Forms of Discrimination from Affecting Your Workplace, accessed at <https://www.bnl.gov/diversity/files/pdf/resources/unconscious/WPA-Unlawful-Harassment-Discrimination-Ebook.pdf>, December 3, 2020.

<sup>5</sup>Vanderbilt University, Unconscious Bias, accessed at [https://www.vanderbilt.edu/diversity/unconscious-bias/#:~:text=Unconscious%20bias%20\(or%20implicit%20bias,that%20is%20usually%20considered%20unfair.](https://www.vanderbilt.edu/diversity/unconscious-bias/#:~:text=Unconscious%20bias%20(or%20implicit%20bias,that%20is%20usually%20considered%20unfair.), November 27, 2020.

## Interrelated Major Barriers

Stereotypes	A fixed, over generalized belief about a particular group or class of people. This is an expectation that people might have about every person of a particular group <sup>4</sup> .
Unconscious biases	Prejudice or unsupported judgements in favour of or against one thing, person, or group as compared to another in a way that is usually considered unfair <sup>5</sup> .

The other major barrier for intercultural communication is unconscious bias. Unconscious bias can lead individuals to make decisions based on flawed stereotypes or attitudes that have developed over time<sup>6</sup>. For example associating crime with certain ethnicities or thinking that people from a certain culture are uneducated puts unconscious bias in our mind<sup>7</sup>. **Bias can be triggered and can have a devastating impact even when we are not aware of it, even when it is our intention to be fair<sup>8</sup>.**

Identifying stereotypes both positive and negative and working to reduce its impact helps us become better intercultural communicators.

**Individuals can overcome unconscious bias and stereotypic behaviors by:**

### Identifying Stereotypes

Most of us are unaware of the stereotypes that shaped our unconscious bias. The first step to being a better intercultural communicator is to start monitoring our own actions and attitudes when hearing an ethnic last name, interacting with people of different skin colors, hearing an accent, seeing a disability, etc.<sup>9</sup> Analyzing ourselves in these interactions can help us become aware of the unconscious bias that might exist in our minds.

### Looking for Consistency

It is important to monitor unconscious bias by monitoring its consistency. One way of monitoring consistency is asking: “Do I have the same reaction to members of a given group each time I encounter them?” If the answer is yes, this is a red light for unconscious bias. The other question that can be asked to monitor consistency of action is “Do I have these reactions before or after I have a chance to know the individual?” If the answer is before

I have the chance to know the individual, this is another red light<sup>10</sup>.

Recognizing these automatic responses and labeling them as stereotypes is a good first step. Reminding ourselves that stereotypes are poor indicators of an individual’s character, skills or personality also helps override unconscious bias.

### Pushing Stereotypes Aside

After identifying the stereotypes that cause the unconscious bias and monitoring its consistency the next step is pushing the stereotypes aside. This helps individuals to see other individuals for who they are instead of labeling them by their culture, country of origin, skin color or sex<sup>11</sup>. Stereotyping is a habit that can be learned unconsciously through repetition and can be consciously unlearned through identifying it, monitoring its consistency and practicing putting it aside.

### Language as a Barrier

Besides the cultural differences in verbal and non-verbal language, the individual’s English level can also play a role in intercultural communication. When interacting with someone who does not speak English fluently, it is important to not get frustrated or raise one’s voice. Some tips to improve communication are speaking slowly, simply and politely, avoiding slang and jargon, learning key phrases in the other person’s language, using body language to convey information, and identifying or hiring an interpreter or a staff person who can speak the other person’s language fluently<sup>12</sup>.

It is important to take into account that intercultural communication involves more than learning to identify different communication styles and approaches. Intercultural communication also entails creating culturally safe environments. This means creating an environment that is spiritually, socially, emotionally and physically safe for people; where there is no denial of their identity, of who they are and what they need. It is about shared respect, shared meaning, shared knowledge and experience of learning together<sup>13</sup>.

**This Migration Matters info sheet accompanies the Migrant Worker Hub webinar recording: [Intercultural Communication Creating Safer Spaces for Migrant Workers](#)**

<sup>6</sup>Hudson, accessed at <https://au.hudson.com/insights/article/4-ways-to-reduce-unconscious-bias>, September 22, 2020 and Duranti, G. (2008). Globalization: eyeball to eyeball. Paper presented at PMI® Global Congress 2008—North America, Denver, CO. Newtown Square, PA: Project Management Institute, accessed at <https://www.pmi.org/learning/library/cross-cultural-communication-twelve-guidelines-6961>, September 23, 2020.

<sup>7,8</sup>The National Academies of Sciences Engineering Medicine, Sara Frueh, Uncovering Unconscious Racial Bias: Lecture Examine Stereotypes and Their Impacts; accessed at <https://www.nationalacademies.org/news/2019/10/uncovering-unconscious-racial-bias-lecture-examines-stereotypes-and-their-impacts>, November 25, 2020.

<sup>9,10,11</sup>Howard J. Ross, *ReInventing Diversity: Transforming Organizational Community to Strengthen People, Purpose, and Performance*, May 30, 2013.  
<sup>12</sup>Cross-Cultural Communication, Tips for Communicating with People from Other Cultures, accessed at <https://www.goldcoast.qld.gov.au/documents/bf/CrossculturalFactSheet.pdf>

<sup>13</sup>Robyn Williams, Cultural Safety—What Does It Mean for Our Work Practice?, accessed at [https://www.utas.edu.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0010/246943/RevisedCulturalSafetyPaper-pha.pdf](https://www.utas.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/246943/RevisedCulturalSafetyPaper-pha.pdf)