



OFFICE OF INTERNATIONAL SERVICES

University Center for International Studies
University of Pittsburgh

Dos and Don'ts of Cross-Cultural Communication

Do: Listen

- Practice active listening. Be totally present and focus on the speaker's words and affect, without judgment or agenda. Hear what the person is really saying; not what you expect them to say.

Don't: Assume you've understood correctly or that they've understood you correctly

- Summarize important points using different words or ask them to summarize their understanding of the important point.

Don't: Use idioms, colloquialisms, or slang

- Using idioms and colloquialisms do not translate easily into other languages.
- Even among countries that use English as their native language, they don't necessarily share the same expressions.

Do: Keep it simple

- Two syllable words are much easier to understand than three syllable words, and one syllable words are better than two syllable words.

Don't: Make jokes

- Standard jokes don't communicate well across cultures. What is funny in one culture often makes no sense in another. You could easily inadvertently offend someone, make them perplexed, or convey an undesired image of yourself.
- If you do decide to use humor, make sure that it will be understood and appreciated in the other culture and not cause offence.

Don't: Use yes or no questions – instead ask open ended questions

- Open-ended questions will give you a lot more information since they will need to explain or outline their point in more detail.
- This will make it easier for you to understand and respond to them which will lead to a more open and inviting conversation.

Do: Take turns talking

- Make the conversation flow more freely by taking it in turns to speak.
- Particularly when people are speaking English as their second language it's better to talk to them in short exchanges rather than delivering a long monologue that might be difficult for them to follow.

Do: Accept that you'll make a mistake

- Don't take it personally if you make a mistake. Do your best to be self-aware and actively learn from your mistake and apologize if you offend anyone or cross boundaries.
- Mistakes will happen but it is an opportunity to learn from the mistake and improve your communication skills.

Do: Be supportive

- Effective cross-cultural communication is about all parties feeling comfortable. Do your best to communicate clearly and give encouragement when they respond.
- This will help to build their confidence and trust.

Additional Resources

- [10 Critical Cross-Cultural Communication Tips](#)
- [10 Tips for Improving Your Intercultural Communication Skills](#)
- [Top Ten Tips for... Effective Cross-Cultural Communication](#)
- [10 Lessons in Verbal Cross-Cultural Communication](#)