

## Working effectively across cultures

**Level:** Upper intermediate +

**Time:** 90 minutes

**Summary:** This lesson is about intercultural communication within business. In this lesson, students:

1. study a text about successfully navigating cultural differences they will encounter in their jobs;
2. complete the text with missing words;
3. summarize the tips contained in the text;
4. write their own tips for a visitor;
5. see what the CIA World Factbook has to say about their country.

**Materials:** One copy of the worksheet per student

**Group size:** Any

**Note:** This lesson plan is for both pre-experience and in-work business students based on an original article first published in *Business Spotlight* issue 7/2018.

### Warmer

Students say which part of the world their business partners and interlocutors are from. Find out whether they work with these people on a regular basis, e.g. are they partners on an international project or cooperation, does their company have a subsidiary or its headquarters based in another country, or are they temporary partners with whom they are working, for example, on a current project? Find out, too, whether the students have visited these international partners and their countries or received visits from them.

### Missing information

a. First, ask students to read the introduction to the article. Students then read the four headings, scan the relevant tips and decide which lines to write the headings onto.

**Key:**

2. Gain relevant knowledge
4. Observe, don't judge

6. Put yourself in others' shoes
9. Neither over- nor underestimate the role of national cultures

b. Students use the words in boxes directly under tips 1, 3, 7 and 10 to complete each tip.

**Key:**

- Tip 1:** 1. enjoy; 2. keen; 3. celebrated; 4. increase; 5. effort  
**Tip 3:** 6. overgeneralized; 7. assumption; 8. trivial;  
 9. individual; 10. attractive  
**Tip 7:** 11. determined; 12. adapt; 13. assume;  
 14. automatically; 15. available  
**Tip 10:** 16. critically; 17. ultimately; 18. mislead;  
 19. thought; 20. lifelong

### Key words

Students match the key words with the definitions, then find the words in the article before reading through the article and noticing how they are used in context.

**Key:**

- |                  |               |
|------------------|---------------|
| 1. mutual        | 2. genuine    |
| 3. leveraged     | 4. tendencies |
| 5. incompetent   | 6. approach   |
| 7. rapport       | 8. empowered  |
| 9. ambiguity     | 10. volatile  |
| 11. stakeholders | 12. biases    |

### Understanding the article

Students read the statements and decide whether they are true or false according to information from the article. They should correct any that they believe to be false.

**Key:**

1. F – Cultural differences should be celebrated.
2. F – Good guidebooks are often a great start when it comes to finding out about other cultures.
3. T
4. T
5. F – You do not have to copy how people behave and dress, but you should observe how they act and dress in certain situations that you might find yourself in.
6. F – Adapt your behaviour where appropriate but stay authentic.
7. T
8. T

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### Summarizing

In pairs, students come up with and write a short summary for each of the ten tips in the article.

### Intercultural tips

In pairs or small groups, students discuss what information they would give to business people from another country and culture in order to ease their first business trip to the students' country, region or company (depending on which they chose to focus on). They should try to model their tips on their summaries of the tips in the article (see previous task).

Students then present their tips to the class, elaborating on them and saying why they think they would be helpful.

### Webquest

Students read and discuss what is written about their country, or the country they are currently living in, on the CIA World Factbook.

### Related topics on onestopenglish

The following Business Spotlight lesson plan explores the problem of culture shock and how to deal with it.

[www.onestopenglish.com/business/business-spotlight/far-from-home/551743.article](http://www.onestopenglish.com/business/business-spotlight/far-from-home/551743.article)

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### 1 Warmer

What other cultures and nationalities do you work with?

### 2 Missing information

a. Decide where these headings belong in the article and write them onto the lines next to tip numbers 2, 4, 6 and 9.

- Put yourself in others' shoes
- Observe, don't judge
- Neither over- nor underestimate the role of national cultures
- Gain relevant knowledge

b. Complete tip numbers 1, 3, 7 and 10 by writing the key words from the boxes underneath each tip onto the lines provided.

### 3 Key words

Match the key words to the definitions below. Find and underline them in the article. Then read the article and note how they are used in context.

|           |          |         |              |            |             |
|-----------|----------|---------|--------------|------------|-------------|
| ambiguity | approach | biases  | empowered    | genuine    | incompetent |
| leveraged | mutual   | rapport | stakeholders | tendencies | volatile    |

1. felt or experienced in the same way by each of two or more people  
\_\_\_\_\_ (intro)
2. real, rather than pretended or false \_\_\_\_\_ (tip 1)
3. used to benefit something or someone \_\_\_\_\_ (tip 1)
4. aspects of your character that you show by behaving in a particular way  
\_\_\_\_\_ (tip 3)
5. lacking the ability or skills to do something \_\_\_\_\_ (tip 4)
6. a particular way of thinking about or dealing with something  
\_\_\_\_\_ (tip 4)
7. a relationship in which people like, understand and respect each other  
\_\_\_\_\_ (tip 5)
8. given the authority to do something \_\_\_\_\_ (tip 7)
9. something that is not clear because it has more than one possible meaning  
\_\_\_\_\_ (tip 8)

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10. used to describe a situation that can suddenly change or become more dangerous  
\_\_\_\_\_ (tip 8)
11. people who have an interest in the success of a plan, system or organization, for example a  
worker in a company \_\_\_\_\_ (tip 9)
12. attitudes that make you treat someone in a way that is unfair or different from the way you treat  
other people \_\_\_\_\_ (tip 10)

### 4 Understanding the article

**Are these statements true (T) or false (F) according to information from the article? Correct any statements that are false.**

1. Cultural differences should be tolerated. [ T / F ]
2. Guidebooks are unhelpful when it comes to finding out about other cultures. [ T / F ]
3. It is easy to oversimplify culture differences. [ T / F ]
4. People who live and work in the culture you are interested in could help you to find out more about that particular culture. [ T / F ]
5. When visiting a country for the first time, try to copy how local people behave and dress. [ T / F ]
6. Adapt your behaviour to that of your international business partners even if this means behaving in an inauthentic way that is alien to you. [ T / F ]
7. The influence of our culture is only one aspect that affects our way of working and behaving. [ T / F ]
8. It's as useful to understand your own behaviour as it is to understand that of your business partners. [ T / F ]

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by Robert Gibson



**A lack of knowledge about other cultures is often the cause of misunderstandings between business partners from different countries. ROBERT GIBSON gives us ten things to remember when working with other cultures.**

#### Introduction

In an increasingly global business world, the need for intercultural skills is becoming more and more important for ever greater numbers of people. Intercultural competence is important not only for business travellers or those on long-term foreign assignments but also for those working in international project teams or managing global organizations.

If your customers are in different countries, a key to success is understanding how they think and what they expect; this differs widely from country to country. If you want to develop innovative products and services, you will need to form and manage diverse teams. Even if you never step outside your office, virtual communication makes it increasingly likely that you will have to communicate with colleagues, customers or suppliers from different cultures.

Intercultural competence means being able to overcome cultural barriers and build constructive relationships with partners from different cultures for mutual benefit. The aim, in the business context, is to create value from diversity.

What do you need to be able to work effectively across cultures? My key tips are taken from my experience of supporting global collaboration in an international corporation over the past 20 years. Recently, I also asked my LinkedIn connections what they thought and was pleased that my question was viewed by more than 6,000 people and generated many useful comments, some of which I have integrated into this article.

#### Ten key tips for intercultural success

##### 1 Tip 1: Be curious

Have a genuine interest in finding out about other cultures, (1) \_\_\_\_\_ intercultural encounters and be (2) \_\_\_\_\_ to learn languages. One of my LinkedIn connections called this “joyful curiosity”. Try to see cultural differences not as a problem to be tolerated

but as something to be (3) \_\_\_\_\_ and leveraged for competitive advantage. Travel abroad doesn't automatically make you intercultural, but if you approach it with an open mind and curiosity, it can be an important way to (4) \_\_\_\_\_ your intercultural competence.

You may not be able to be fluent in all the languages that you come across, but try to learn a few key phrases. Your (5) \_\_\_\_\_ will be appreciated even if you are not perfect and you then switch to English.

celebrated | effort | enjoy | increase | keen

##### Tip 2: \_\_\_\_\_

A high-quality guidebook is often a good start to finding information about other cultures. The *Lonely Planet* and *Rough Guide* series provide well-researched basic information for travellers to many countries. Basic facts can also be found in the online CIA World Factbook.

Research on cultural differences can be helpful, too. A pioneer in the field in the 1950s was the US anthropologist Edward Hall; his books are still worth reading today. Ground-breaking quantitative research was done by Geert Hofstede at IBM in the 1970s – knowledge of his cultural dimensions can help you to understand key cultural differences relevant to setting up international organizations. Fons Trompenaars has added new dimensions and done much to popularize the topic in the business world. More recently, Erin Meyer and Andy Molinsky have written some popular and highly readable introductions to the topic. When using all these books, be careful not to oversimplify cultural differences.

If you are working in global virtual teams, you may be interested in Terence Brake's book *Where in the World Is My Team?* Those managing international organizations will find Nancy Adler's work very useful.

A great source of relevant information can be local “informants”. These are people who live in, or are from, the target culture. They don't necessarily have to be high up in the hierarchy, but they need to be people you can trust and who understand not just their own culture but also yours. Experienced team assistants and interpreters can often provide this sort of information.

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#### Tip 3: Avoid stereotyping

A stereotype is a fixed, (6) \_\_\_\_\_ belief about a particular category of people. When dealing with other cultures, it is tempting to try to put people into convenient categories, but the truth is that no one wants to be put into a box. When I moved to Germany, many people offered me tea to drink, working on the (7) \_\_\_\_\_ that “the British drink tea”. In fact, I really don’t like tea very much and would have much preferred coffee. Of course, many people do drink tea in Britain, but that doesn’t mean that everyone does.

This is a (8) \_\_\_\_\_ example, but if you try to apply the data on cultural dimensions to individual behaviour, you are in danger of creating sophisticated stereotypes. While the results of the research can help you to understand tendencies, they cannot be used to predict (9) \_\_\_\_\_ behaviour. This is the problem with oversimplified lists of dos and don’ts. They may seem (10) \_\_\_\_\_, but they can give you a false sense of security.

assumption | attractive | individual | overgeneralized | trivial

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#### Tip 4: \_\_\_\_\_

When travelling abroad, take time to observe how people behave before you make a judgement or take action. What is considered to be “normal” behaviour will differ according to where you are. Observe how people dress, how they greet each other and how they behave during meetings and presentations. You don’t necessarily have to copy what they do, but you will then have a better idea of what they might expect of you. If everyone is wearing casual clothing and you turn up in a suit and tie, you – and, for that matter, the others – may feel awkward. Don’t immediately jump to conclusions about the behaviour of your business partners: if someone doesn’t do something, or does it late, it doesn’t necessarily mean that they are incompetent or lazy. Maybe they have other priorities or a different approach to time or hierarchy.

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#### Tip 5: Ask, don’t tell

It is important to communicate effectively and in a culturally appropriate way in an international environment. Rather than telling people about their culture, ask them open questions. Recently, I was running an intercultural training course and we had a guest speaker from China. When one of the participants

came into the room, I introduced the guest and he asked her where she came from. When she replied “Beijing”, he said: “Isn’t the smog terrible there?” This negative, closed question was not the best way of establishing a rapport with the visitor. It would have been much better to have asked an open question like “What do you do there?” and focus on the positive rather than the negative. Avoid controversial topics, like politics, when trying to make small talk.

#### Tip 6: \_\_\_\_\_

Show respect for and empathize with colleagues and partners from different cultures. Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another person. Respecting those feelings doesn’t mean that you have to agree with them, but at least you need to show in some way that you understand what the other person is feeling.

#### Tip 7: Be flexible and adaptable

Having understood the culturally (11) \_\_\_\_\_ behaviour of your international business partners, you may need to (12) \_\_\_\_\_ your own behaviour. Don’t (13) \_\_\_\_\_ that methods that have been successful for you in your own culture will (14) \_\_\_\_\_ work in interaction with people from other cultures. To be successful, you need to have a toolbox of techniques (15) \_\_\_\_\_ to deal with different people in different situations.

For instance, as a manager, your instructions may have to be followed in a hierarchical culture; however, you may have to change your management style when dealing with employees who are used to being empowered to make their own decisions.

adapt | assume | automatically | available | determined

#### Tip 8: Cope with ambiguity

It is important to be able to cope with ambiguity and complexity in international business situations without losing sight of your own position. This is becoming an increasingly important skill in the VUCA world (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous). Change is fast and unpredictable; to keep pace with it, you need to be able to cope with unclear and complex situations, while staying authentic.

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**9** Tip 9: \_\_\_\_\_

People are influenced by a number of cultural factors, one of which is national culture. Other cultural factors are influenced by things like regional, corporate, professional, gender, age, religious, class or tribal differences. Each individual has multiple cultural identities – to work successfully with people, you need to understand the “multicollectivity” of your stakeholders.

It is also important to remember that cultures are not static but dynamic, interactive and impure; some researchers call this “polyculturalism”. The more cultures interact, the more they borrow from each other.

Culture is not a stand-alone – our behaviour is influenced not only by culture but by individual preferences, as well as by the situation and context in which the interaction takes place. For example, your behaviour will be different in a formal business setting from what it is in an informal social setting.

The Nobel Prize-winning author Daniel Kahneman has described how the brain can (18) \_\_\_\_\_ us to make snap judgements and have unconscious biases. We can’t get rid of these biases, but we can try to become aware of them. As Richard Nisbett and others have shown, these (19) \_\_\_\_\_ patterns are culturally determined, and thinking is different in different cultures.

To work effectively across cultures, you need to reflect on your own beliefs, values and behaviour. This takes time and is a (20) \_\_\_\_\_ process. The book *The Mindful International Manager* contains many useful practical exercises to help you reflect on your cultural background.

Remember the saying from the Jewish text the Talmud: “We don’t see things as they are. We see them as we are.”

critically | lifelong | mislead | thought | ultimately

**10** Tip 10: Take time for reflection

Be aware of, and reflect (16) \_\_\_\_\_ on, your own culturally determined attitudes, beliefs and behaviour. I am convinced that, (17) \_\_\_\_\_, the key to working successfully across cultures is not so much about understanding others but about understanding yourself. What are the culturally determined triggers that make you annoyed or sad or happy?

ROBERT GIBSON has over 25 years’ experience of intercultural competence development in education and business. He was responsible for intercultural training at Siemens AG from 2000 to 2018 and is currently professor of cross-cultural management at Bologna Business School. You can contact him and join the discussion on intercultural skills on LinkedIn ([www.linkedin.com/in/robert-gibson-6a36a315](http://www.linkedin.com/in/robert-gibson-6a36a315)).

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### 5 Summarizing

Write a summary of ten words or fewer for each of the ten tips in the article.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_
8. \_\_\_\_\_
9. \_\_\_\_\_
10. \_\_\_\_\_

### 6 Intercultural tips

Write ten tips to help business people from another country and culture who are visiting your country, local region or your company (choose one) for the first time. Present your tips.

### 7 Webquest

In his second tip, the author mentions the CIA World Factbook. Visit the website below and see what information it gives about your country or the country that you are living in. Does this information reflect your own personal experience and knowledge of living in this country?

[www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/](http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/)