

Stumbling Blocks in Intercultural Communication

1. Assuming Similarity instead of Difference

Both the foreigner and the host can easily fall into this trap. Especially when people dress appropriately and speak some of the language, it is easy to believe that they basically have similar ways of communicating nonverbally and similar thoughts and feelings.

2. Language

This seems obvious, but language refers not only to vocabulary, grammar, idioms, slang, etc., but also to understanding meanings that are intended and implied by the words people say. For example, in some languages and cultures it is common to use sarcasm, irony, or plays on words, while in others it is not.

3. Nonverbal Misinterpretations

People from different cultures inhabit different "sensory realities;" that is, they only see, hear, feel and smell things that have meaning or are important to them. Some nonverbal signs and symbols - gestures, posture and body movements - are relatively easy to observe, and with effort, understand. Less obvious cultural meanings, values, or significance can be found, for example, in the use of time and space. These cultural differences are much harder to notice.

4. The Existence of Preconceptions and Stereotypes

Stereotypes interfere with looking at things objectively: in other words, once stereotypes or preconceived ideas are formed, we are less likely to look for clues to help us understand someone else's reality."

5. The Tendency to Judge or Evaluate

The tendency to approve or disapprove of the words or actions of another person or group is common, and this reduces a person's ability to try to understand the feelings and thoughts that are being expressed by the other person and to try to find ways to look at the world from their perspective.

6. High Anxiety

These blocks are based on the fact that people in intercultural situations are often anxious. Anxiety makes all of the other stumbling blocks worse. It is common to be tense or anxious in cross-cultural experiences because they are full of uncertainties, and this makes it necessary to constantly be alert.

Recognizing the stumbling blocks is a first step forward toward finding ways to reduce misunderstandings and increase learning. There are skills that can be improved in order to try to make cross-cultural experiences more satisfying and rewarding. An important first step is to realize that there are stumbling blocks that exist and will need some effort to be overcome.

Effective Intercultural Communication Skills

The skills that are usually listed for people who want to be able to communicate effectively in intercultural situations are:

- *open-mindedness**
- *non-judgementalness**
- *flexibility**
- *curiosity**
- *tolerance for differences and for ambiguity**
- *a sense of humor**
- *low goal/task orientation**
- *an ability to fail.**

L. Robert Kohls, in Survival Kit for Overseas Living, chooses the last three as the most important. Clearly, what seems important for each person depends on his/her situation and the kind encounters or interactions s/he faces.

Adapted by Alice Wu from an adaptation article of the same title by LaRay Barna, in Intercultural Communication: A Reader, Fifth edition, by Larry A. Samovar and Richard E. Porter, and from an article in Survival Kit for Overseas Living, second edition, by L. Robert Kohls.