



Becoming Culturally Competent

by Anna Katrina Davey

“Never ascribe to malice that which can adequately be explained by incompetence”

Attributed to Napoleon Bonaparte, this epigram holds true today in many cross-cultural interactions. We can, in fact, generally assume that intercultural misunderstandings are the result of cultural myopia rather than the lack of good intentions.

The antidote is called cross-cultural competence, i.e. the ability to communicate effectively with people from cultures different from our own. This is not a quick buy-off-the-shelf kind of remedy but rather a process in which we can identify at least 3 components or stages:

- **AWARENESS** of our own cultural conditioning, cultural biases, blind spots and hot buttons
- **KNOWLEDGE** about other cultural systems and most importantly about how our own culture is viewed by members of other cultural groups
- **SKILLS** acquired through cross-cultural training workshops, real-life interactions and experience.

Much like learning to play a musical instrument or a sport, cross-cultural competence can only be achieved through continued practice.

In the end, our goal is to achieve effective intercultural communication while developing and maintaining successful relationships. And effective communication means nothing less than for the original message - intended, encoded and sent by the transmitter – to coincide with the message decoded and interpreted by the receiver.

Furthermore, for as much as there is such a thing as one-way communication, it is no doubt desirable to focus on a more constructive form of information transfer involving an exchange and progression of ideas as a two-way process.

Communication is no simple endeavor. As George Bernhard Shaw once put it,

“The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place”

We notice how difficult it is to convey and interpret messages as they were originally intended. This holds particularly true when communicating across cultures in as much culture directly impacts the way we send and receive information.

Bearing this in mind, when engaging in communication with someone from a culture different from our own, **we should assume our counterpart’s good intentions, practice empathy and trust our intuition.** At the same time, conscious of the common mental pathway of increasing abstraction (known as the ladder of inference) that so often leads us to take wrong actions on the basis of false conclusions we’ve drawn, we need to constantly remind ourselves to **avoid assumptions and suspend judgment.**

Enjoy the adventure. Cultural competence fosters understanding, mutual growth and gain, while bestowing us with the incommensurable pleasure of expanding our horizons.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born and raised in Italy, Anna Katrina has extensive international living and work experience on three continents, has traveled 40 countries, and is fluent in German, English, Italian and versed in Spanish as well as in Vietnamese. Anna Katrina earned a Master's degree in Geography, Ethnology and European Cultural Studies, from Albert-Ludwigs Universität in Freiburg, Germany. She received further professional training in Intercultural Communication from InWEnt, the German government's organization for human resources development, further training and dialogue.

