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Culture and Communication

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We have learned that a break down in communication is one of the root factors in many incidents. Knowing this, we try to improve our ability to communicate with others. But what if we THINK we are communicating well, but really aren't understanding each other?

When I was a young exchange student in Japan, I went to live with a Japanese family that did not speak any English. But our communication problems started before we began speaking. I arrived at the train station, saw my family holding the sign with my name and walked toward them. One of them took my bag and then waved at me in a way that, where I came from, meant, "Go away!"

I paused, confused and then started to follow them as they were walking away because I had nowhere else to go. The mother turned around and very insistently waved for me to go away. So I turned around and started walking away.

She ran after me, grabbed by arm and pulled me after her, then waved me away again! We finally managed to get home and weeks later a friend explained that the gesture I interpreted as "Go away!" is the same gesture Japanese use to mean "Follow me."

Cultural differences can often lead to miscommunication— even among people who speak the same language. It is said that 80% of communication is non-verbal. So even the way we stand, our expression or how we look at the other person can be misinterpreted to mean something we didn't intend.

Working on ships at sea is a multicultural environment. It always has been and always will be.



In the following article, a French Canadian who moved to Norway explains how understanding cultural differences can increase the effectiveness of any multicultural team and why they are more effective than teams without cultural diversity.

Do recognize the cultural differences on board your vessel? Do you try to understand the different cultural behaviors or avoid them? Do you try to get to know members of the other culture or stay with your own? How could the team benefit from improved communication among all of the crew?



Studies suggest that people from different cultures read facial expressions differently. East Asian participants focus on the eyes as indicators of emotion, but participants from the West focused on the mouth. Perhaps that explains why in Manga and Anime the characters have huge eyes and tiny mouths.

Even our emoticons are different...

Happy Face:	
West →	
Asia →	(^ _ ^)
Shock/ Surprise:	
West →	
Asia →	(o.o)

TOP Safety Card Hits
(Fleetwide last month)

Housekeeping 11
Safety Attitude 5
PPE 5

Culture Drives Behavior

When you encounter another culture you can confront, complain or conform. To confront is to believe that your behavior is right and the others are wrong (even if you are the visitor). When you complain, you will isolate yourself within cultural groups and remain apart from the local culture. When you conform, which is observing, learning and understanding the different behaviors of that culture, then you can begin to benefit from diversity.

We all see the world through cultural glasses. The lens through which your brain sees the world shapes your reality. If you can change the lens, not only can you change the way your brain perceives behaviors but you can change the way you relate to cultural differences.

Studies show that decision making teams composed of both genders will perform 15% better than teams of a single gender. However, studies also show that **teams composed of different cultures work 35% better than those of a single culture.**

Cultural diversity increases problem solving ability, creativity and innovation. The challenge is to get people from different cultures to communicate well with each other.

Most people are raised with the idea that they will be part of a group and will need to contribute to that group in order to thrive. In western culture, we raise our children to be independent and self-reliant. How we were raised to relate to others determines our behaviors and how we interpret the behaviors of others.

How you are raised sets your expectations of how a friendship works. In group themed cultures, the friendship will be much stronger. It will be very interdependent and a person in that friendship will expect to be invited to every social event of the other person or they would be deeply insulted.

For others friendship is much more distant. A Scandinavian defined a friend as a person that he could sit in a quiet room and be comfortable with. People from a very expressive verbal culture, would have no understanding of that definition.

So it's not about what you actually see or hear, it's about what you think you understand.

