

Working with different cultures

Disasters bring people from very different cultures together in difficult circumstances. Visible differences include gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, ability, age, economic status, political allegiance, class, caste. **Invisible roots include** beliefs, values, perceptions, expectations, attitudes, assumptions.

Patterns of cultural difference

The differences below are not right or wrong – just different understandings.

How status, relationships and communication can differ

Status based on competence and position, truth based on logic	↔	Status based on personality and connections
Equitable treatment is more important than dress and conduct	↔	Dress code and conduct mark respect
Formal written communications, rules and consistent, uniform procedures	↔	Informal verbal communication, judgements based on individual circumstances not rules

How organisation and timekeeping can differ

Goal orientated	↔	Orientated to people and nature
Predictive, reasoned planning, action and system orientated	↔	Intuitive flexible planning, relationship and context orientated
Punctuality is valued and respected	↔	People are valued more than time
Knowledge, information and resources are shared	↔	Knowledge and resources used as power

How management style and performance are measured

Decisions determined through division of tasks and responsibilities	↔	Decisions made through personal interaction and 'authority' figures
Management by objectives	↔	Management through relationships
Criticism, appraisal and ideas are a part of professional conduct	↔	Criticism, appraisal and ideas are highly personal and can be taken as offensive

Consider carefully ...

Eye contact: can be important in building trust or seen as disrespectful or offensive.

Greetings: how and when to greet people appropriately e.g. shaking hands is not always appropriate, especially between men and women.

Opening and closing conversations: who addresses whom, when, and how, and who has the right, or duty, to speak first; how to conclude conversation/meetings.

Taking turns during conversations: taking turns in an interactive way or listening without comment or immediate response, can be seen as a challenge or humiliating.

Interrupting: interruption may be the norm, particularly among equals, or among men, or it might be mistaken for argument and hostility.

Use of silence: silence before responding may be seen as deference and thoughtfulness, or as a sign of hostility. Silence may signal consent, or disagreement.

Appropriate topics of conversation: speaking openly about money, politics, religion, family relations or intimate issues may be seen as inappropriate or vulgar.

Use of humour: may build immediate rapport or be seen as a sign of disrespect.

Knowing how much to say: get straight to the point, or engage in preamble and wrap-up. Age and social standing can influence how much is appropriate to say.

Sequencing elements during conversation: the right question, asked in the right way, but asked too soon or too late can highly influence subsequent behaviour.



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Tips for a culturally sensitive approach

- Get to know the culture you are working in.
- Be aware of your own culture and how that influences you.
- Listen...and watch.
- Be patient – not everything is revealed about a culture at once.
- Consider issues from the other perspective.
- Avoid value judgements.
- Use language sensitively.
- Be inclusive, collaborative and seek different perspectives.
- Ensure you dress and act appropriately and respectfully.
- Play to people's strengths and value differences.
- Avoid domination by powerful groups.

Adapted from '24 tips for culturally sensitive programming' © UNFPA 2004

Additional resources on All In Diary website

Human Rights, culture and gender in programming © UNFPA 2009
Working with Diversity in collaboration – tips and tools, © CGIAR 2003

Web links for further information

<http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/resources/country-profiles.html>: Etiquette guides