



EVROPSKÁ UNIE  
Evropské strukturální a investiční fondy  
Operační program Výzkum, vývoj a vzdělávání



## Potential Hot Spots in Cross Cultural Communication

This is not meant to be an exhaustive list, but when working with other people, or traveling abroad for work or pleasure, it may pay to ask some experts about the following communication styles of the area you plan to visit. A little research at the outset can stave off a host of misunderstandings:

1. Opening and Closing Conversations: Different cultures may have different customs around who addresses whom when and how, and who has the right, or even the duty, to speak first, and what is the proper way to conclude a conversation. Think about it: no matter where you are, some ways of commencing a conversation or concluding one will be considered as rude, even disrespectful. These are artificial customs, to a certain degree, and there is probably no universally right or wrong way to go about these things, short of behaviors that all cultures would likely consider to be vulgar or abusive. This topic includes modes of address, salutations, levels of deference to age or social position, acceptable ways to conclude gracefully and so on. Obviously, and to the dismay of many of us in the West, this will also cover gender differences.

2. Taking Turns During Conversations: In some cultures, it is more appropriate to take turns in an interactive way, and in others, it is more important to listen thoroughly and without comment, without immediate response, lest a response be taken as a challenge or a humiliation, particularly depending on the context of the conversation, the audience, and the levels of personal knowledge/relationship between the two people interacting. For example, a Western couple or pair of executives may feel perfectly comfortable interacting in a give and take way in a public market, but if that public market is in a part of the world where such a public display of give and take is considered to be in bad taste, then they may be giving offense without ever realizing it.

3. Interrupting: The same issues arise over the issue of interrupting. In some cultures, interruption, vocal, emotional expression, etc. are considered to be the default conversational style, particularly among those considered to be equals, or among men. Many people of Northern European or American extract might mistake this kind of conversation for argument and hostility, but that would not be the case.

4. Use of Silence: In some forms of communication, silence is to be expected before a response, as a sign of thoughtfulness and deference to the original speaker, yet at other times, silence may be experienced as a sign of hostility. In the West, twenty seconds of silence during a meeting is an extraordinarily long time, and people will feel uncomfortable with that. Someone invariably will break in to end the uncomfortable silence. But the same customs around silence are not universal.

5. Appropriate Topics of Conversation: In some places, it is considered vulgar to speak openly about money, for example, let alone about the kinds of intimate family issues that commonly form the basis of afternoon television "talk" shows in the West. Travelers or business people should learn the customs that surround the making of deals, the transaction of commerce, and the degree to which details are specified in advance and enumerated in writing across cultures (not all places are as prone hire lawyers and create detailed contracts as we are in the West).

6. Use of Humor: In the West, we often try to build immediate rapport through humor, but of course, this is not universally seen to be appropriate in all contexts. The use of laughter can be experienced as a sign of disrespect by some, and so it is important to understand that this is another area where misunderstandings can be very likely to occur.

7. Knowing How Much to Say: In some places, less is definitely more, whereas in other places, it is more valued to wrap a rather small point up in a longer preamble, followed by an extended wrap-

up. For Westerners, this can be maddening, as we tend to value speaking directly and to the point. Then again, there are clearly circumstances where Westerners say too much and lose their ability to communicate well, depending on the context. Of course, patterns around presumed areas of deference based on age and social standing can influence how much is appropriate to say, depending on the culture.

8. Sequencing elements during conversation: At what point during a conversation – or an extended conversation or negotiation – is it appropriate to touch upon more sensitive issues? Or how soon in a conversation is it appropriate simply to ask for directions? Since all cultures develop customs through which sensitive issues can be addressed in a way that connotes respect to all involved, and since those systems all can differ, it is important to understand the influence that sequence has on effectiveness. For us in the West, think about the process of asking, or being asked out on a date (a very Western process and one whose customs can be very fluid indeed). The right question, asked in the right way, but asked too soon or too late, according to custom, can connote very different things to the listener, and highly influence subsequent behavior. Sequencing and timing do matter.

Source: Schuler, A.J. (2003). [Dr. A. J. Schuler is an expert in leadership and organizational change. To find out more about his programs and services, visit [www.SchulerSolutions.com](http://www.SchulerSolutions.com) or call (703) 370-6545.]



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