Cultural Differences

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Words do not have twins in every language. Sometimes they have only
distant cousins, and sometimes they are not even related
(Truong 2003:223).

These cultural differences do not mean that some people will be less committed to building good working relationships or to accomplishing the task at hand. Rather, it means only that working together requires acknowledging these cultural differences and responding with flexibility and respect (Du Praw & Axner 1997:3; Hall 1984).

Moreover, since we cannot think about the whole world at once, it is language, in all its forms, that allows us to organize our knowledge of the universe and our place within it. In other words, language is how humans make sense of the cultural reality they construct, by objectifying it in various kinds of knowledge that can be communicated to others: myths, drama, ritual, scientific narrative, theories, and accounts of everyday experience. Because they are shared and accepted to some degree by most members of a given society, these cultural models are assumed to be the natural order of things. Alternative views may not even be recognized, let alone considered. That is, since most of culture operates outside our awareness, frequently we don't even know what we know or how we know it. In all societies, we learn unconsciously what to notice and what not to notice, what to consider as significant or insignificant information, how to behave as adults and children, how to fulfill our roles as family members, colleagues, workers and leaders, how to handle and delegate responsibility. From the anthropological perspective of culture, there is no such thing as "human nature."

- **It will be important for conference participants to keep in mind that "no two [cultures or] languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same reality" (Duranti 1997:60).**

Cultural diversity, communicative style and social interaction

Cultures, and languages, resemble each other and differ in myriad ways. For the purposes of understanding the most general of similarities and differences in
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While miscommunication can occur in any encounter, even among people of the same culture or community, cultural differences increase the chances of divergent understandings. For example, in research on intercultural communication within multinational corporations, there are repeated references to issues that arise when non-native English speakers use English with phonetic and grammatical accuracy, but nonetheless, their speech and non-verbal communication reflect their own cultural and linguistic backgrounds and thus may be prone to intercultural misunderstandings (*e.g.,* Khann-Panni & Swallow 2003; Mendez-Garcia & Perez-Canado 2005). In fact,

> the likelihood of cultural misinterpretation actually increases with the greater linguistic fluency of non-native speakers. When conversing with someone whose knowledge of the language of discourse is clearly limited, people are more likely to make allowances for their performance, but when the interlocutor demonstrates linguistic competence, . . . [speakers of the dominant language] tend to ignore possible causes of divergent meanings (Bonvillain 2000:360).

that every person wants to claim for him or herself (Foley 1977:270). Maintaining and saving face may be accomplished by a range of strategies appropriate to cultural differences in communicative style, such as prefacing interactions with either compliments or apologies for intruding, displaying informal camaraderie or more formal distance, expressing information in a straightforward manner or indirectly so as to avoid potential insult or conflict (Lakoff 1973; Matsumoto 1988).

These strategies express one or both of two basic requirements among all humans: (1) that their actions be unimpeded by others (sometimes called "negative face"); and (2) that their positive feelings of self-esteem be reciprocated and approved of by others (termed "positive face") (Foley 1977:270). Again, it is important to keep in mind that there may be considerable overlap of face-saving strategies among cultures in response to an array of social situations.

- **Mindfulness among all participants to cultural variation in how issues of self-esteem and respect are expressed is an22indfultion in**

features such as modulating voice levels and making seating arrangements to using
appropriate language for greetings and leave-

- giving time before responding for thoughtful and open consideration of others' communicative styles;

- addressing concerns about problems and conflicting views to the whole group or sub-group rather than si

and for achieving goals. Intercultural conflict-management requires a supportive environment based on the following conditions (*e.g.*, DuPraw & Axner 1997; Gibb 1961):

- We cannot understand others if we evaluate them before we truly understand their positions. A more productive strategy is to use descriptive rather than evaluative speech that allows participants to discover how contested issues are being interpreted by everyone in the group. Descriptive speech is prefaced with phrases such as "Do you mean that . . . ?" or "I think you are saying that . . . ".

- Attempting to "out-argue" or to convince others of the rightness of one position inevitably leads to resistance. Defining a common problem and collaborating to find a common solution that is not predicated on predetermined outcomes is a more fruitful approach.

- Participants must communicate in a manner that underscores their equal status. Managing conflicts means avoiding expressions or attitudes of contempt or indifference and dismissive or disparaging remarks that may be face-threatening.

- Rather than taking a neutral stance towards other points of view, it is important to be genuinely interested in and receptive to those points of view. When interlocutors communicate that they are open to new information, that they don't have "all the answers" and that they are willing to take steps to change their behaviours if necessary, the focus will be on a process rather than a single outcome.

- **Be mindful that changing our reactions to others will change the way others react to us. The objective of change is to develop a relationship that can deal with differences. A single participant can begin this on-going transformative process (Fisher & Brown 1988 as cited in Gudykunst 1991:134).**

In conclusion, it is important to remember throughout this conference that

> what is unconscious is not within a person's control, but what is made conscious is available for human beings to understand, to change, or to reinforce (Fisher & Brown 1988:16 as cited in Gudykunst 1991:134.

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