

## **Tips for Innovative Meetings and Events (T.I.M.E.)**

**Topic: Multicultural Meetings**

**March 2002**

**Written and Published by Sue Tinnish, 847.394.9857, [stinnish@ameritech.net](mailto:stinnish@ameritech.net)**

**U. S. Library of Congress ISSN: 1539-1833**

---

### **WELCOME**

This issue addresses multi-cultural communication. I will be discussing considerations in planning global meetings and even domestic meetings with multiple cultures. There is also a section on the Euro, the new currency for doing business abroad.

With the US's own populations of Asian, Hispanic and other cultures rising dramatically, all of us can benefit from learning more about how other cultures "see" communication.

Most of the readership of T.I.M.E. is US-based. However, we do have several subscribers who hail from the U.K., Australia and South Africa to name a few additional countries we reach. It is difficult to "look" outside one's own cultural biases – the topic of this issue. My apologies in advance for any oversimplifications or errors that are included and I welcome any clarifications, examples or help from our international readers.

---

### **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

1. The TIME Is Now
  2. Culture: Can't See It But You Sure Can Feel It
  3. 10 Ways We are Different
  4. Successful Global Meetings
  5. You're Paying in Euros
  6. When Going Abroad...
  7. Humor & Freebies
  8. T.I.M.E. Gone By
  9. Future T.I.M.E.
- 

### **1. THE TIME IS NOW**

As the world gets more global, a seemingly smaller place, it is crucial to do business outside one's own culture. For people in the United States, our own population mix continues to become more diverse resulting in the need for more cultural understanding and better multicultural communication.

The topic of multicultural communication has focused on doing business and managing people in cultures other than one's own. Meetings represent a microcosm of business and business relationships.

In a meeting you need to communicate effectively and build interpersonal relationships. Communication and the ways you build relationships are defined by your own culture.

We will explore the areas where cultures are different, which affects the outcomes of our meetings and relationships.

---

## **2. CULTURE: CAN'T SEE IT BUT YOU SURE CAN FEEL IT**

The challenge with culture is that it is seemingly invisible and inherent in all that we do, say, believe and act. Craig Storti in his book, [Figuring Foreigners Out : A Practical Guide](#) defines culture as:

Culture is the shared assumptions, values and beliefs of a group of people, which result in characteristic behaviors.

This definition captures 2 essential points:

Culture has an invisible dimension (assumptions values and beliefs) and a visible dimension (behavior) and these 2 dimensions relate to each other as cause and effect.

Behavior is neither arbitrary nor spontaneous. Behavior is the direct result of what people assume, value or believe. What seems so natural and right to you may be sending the totally inappropriate message to another person.

The perfect example of the influence of culture on language is vocabulary. Aspects of environment and culture that are of special importance to a society will be reflected in the vocabulary. For example, the Kog of Southern India have 7 different words for bamboo, an important natural resource yet not a single word for snow.

The Eskimos complex classification of snow is a classic example of the connection between culture and language.

---

## **3. 10 WAYS WE ARE DIFFERENT**

Researchers, sociologist and others have advanced differing ideas for analyzing culture and communication. Borrowing from [Doing Business Internationally: The Guide to Cross Cultural Success](#), I have prioritized the various frameworks for understanding multicultural communication for meetings and business:

1. ENVIRONMENT – Control/Harmony/Constraints

**Control orientation** - The environment including people can be molded to fit human needs.

**Harmony orientation** - People are an integral part of nature and their actions and thoughts should facilitate harmonious relations with the world and with others.

**Constraint orientation** - From this perspective it is presumptuous to claim direct control over an environment.

2. TIME – Single/Multifocus  
Fixed/Fluid  
Past/Present/Future

**Single focus** - Places a high value to doing one task at a time and meeting set deadlines.

**Multi-focus** - Places greater emphasis on doing simultaneous tasks with a high commitment to relationship building rather than just task completion or meeting arbitrary deadlines.

**Fixed** – Time is a valuable quantity not to be wasted.

**Fluid** - Time is defined in looser terms; delays are expected, deadlines and other commitments are not written in stone.

**Past oriented** - These cultures place a high value on the maintenance of historical sensibilities.

**Present oriented** – The aim is for quick results and the emphasis is on the here and now.

**Future oriented** – These cultures demonstrate a willingness to trade short-term gains for long terms results.

2. COMMUNICATION STYLES - High context/Low context  
- Direct/indirect  
- Expressive/Instrumental  
- Formal/Informal

**High Context** - In high context cultures, contextual information is needed about an individual before business can be transaction. Business is personal and trust is critical to the relationship.

**Low Context** - In low context cultures, the communication is task centered. Business is impersonal; trust and compatibility are not primary considerations. Meaning is communicated directly and explicitly.

**Direct** - Direct cultures meet conflict right on.

**Indirect** - Indirect cultures use a mix of conflict avoidance and third parties to handle conflict. There is a strong desire to save face, protect honor and avoid shame.

**Expressive** - Expressive cultures are not shy when comes to displaying emotions.

**Instrumental** - In these cultures the communication is problem centered, pragmatic, impersonal and goal oriented. What is said is placed above how something is said. Stress in on accuracy of the communication rather than its appropriateness or style.

**Formal** - Formal cultures place a high value on following business protocol and social customs.

**Informal** - Informal cultures stress informality.

## 5. SPACE

Ed Hall coined the term proxemics to address how different cultures use space. People have different space needs in different settings. Hall defined four types of distance:

- Intimate
- Personal
- Social
- Public

In North America, the normal social distance is 4 feet to 12 feet used in business communication and meetings. Public distance ranges from 12 to 25 feet. In some cultural groups in South American and the Caribbean, the normal conversation distance is 14 -15 inches. And for certain cultures in the Middle East that distance is as small as 9 to 10 inches. For example, in Saudi Arabia if you were to stand 20 inches from a Saudi Arabian although normal by North America, it would communicate reserve, unfriendliness and a sense of superiority.

## 7. COMPETIVENSS – Competitive/Cooperation

**Competitive** - Competitive cultures place a high value on ambition, decisiveness, initiative, performance, speed and size.

**Cooperative** - Cooperative cultures stress the quality of life, sympathy, nurturing and relations. They utilize consensus decision-making.

## 7. INDIVIDUALISM – Individualistic/Collective/Universalistic/Particularism

**Individualistic** - Individualistic cultures high value on independence and social bonds between people are relatively loose and flexible

**Collective** – These cultures subordinate individual interests to group interest. Cohesive groups protect their members in exchange for loyalty and obedience.

**Universalistic**- Universalistic cultures stress consistent application of rules, procedures

**Particularism** – In these cultures generalization is of limited value; uniqueness is celebrated . Special circumstances and unique relationships are recognized.

## 3. ACTION – Doing/Being

**Doing** - Doing cultures emphasize achieving external measurable accomplishments, achieving goals and improving standards of living.

**Being** - Being cultures stress affiliations, character and personal qualities. There is a premium placed on nurturing, caring and relationships

#### 6. POWER – Hierarchical/Equity

**Hierarchical** - In Hierarchical cultures, power and authority are centralized and organization structure is tightly controlled.

**Equality** - In equality cultures, inequality is considered an unsatisfactory condition.

#### 8. STRUCTURE – Order/Flexibility

**Order** - Order cultures seek to reduce ambiguity and uncertainty. Conflict and change are perceived as threatening.

**Flexibility** - Flexible cultures tolerant unknown situations, people and ideas. These cultures have a greater willingness to take risks.

#### 9. THINKING - Deductive/Inductive - Linear/Systemic

**Deductive** - Deductive thinking emphasizes abstract thinking and the reality of ideas moral values, theories and the principles that can be derived. The influence of past and future is greater in this type of thinking.

**Inductive** - Inductive thinking derives principles and theories from the analysis of data.

**Linear** - Linear thinking cultures dissect information into small chunks that can be linked in chains of cause and effect. Emphasis on detail, precision and pragmatic results.

**Systemic** - In systemic cultures, the thought process seeks an integrated or holistic approach integrating viewpoints and focusing on relationship between parts and their connections.

---

## 4. SUCCESSFUL GLOBAL MEETINGS

Catherine Popowits of Diversity Training & Consulting, Inc. (Email: [catherine@diversitytraininginc.com](mailto:catherine@diversitytraininginc.com), website <http://www.diversitytraininginc.com/>, telephone 773.288.5232) assembled these tips for global meetings.

The United States along with Swiss German, German, Scandinavian cultures are considered low context cultures where effective communication is explicit, direct and unambiguous. In high context cultures (for example Asian, Latin American, African and

Middle Eastern cultures) they rely on contextual cues and have more implicit indirect communication patterns.

Here are 7 areas that need to be taken into consideration in planning a meeting in a high context cultures:

1. Relationships are more likely to be based on family connections and develop more slowly. Therefore:
  - **Plan time for participants to make personal connections** - Plan time in your conference or meeting that is not task focused, but rather for participants just to get to know each other. Discuss your family, interest in the local culture, and personal interests.
  - **Rely on local expertise to plan meeting logistics** - Not only do local employees or companies know the best hotels and how to get the best rates, local employees may have a friend or family member who can arrange special rates or occupancy even if the hotel is full. There may be exceptions to policies and business practices for people who have personal connections.
2. Communication is seen as an art form and there is a higher use of non-verbal communication.
  - Build rapport by using non-verbal – animated body language, smiling, more continuous eye contact and varying your voice tone can demonstrate a personal interest in the individual you are speaking with.
  - Be flexible about proceeding through your meeting agenda. Be aware that some of the points on the meeting agenda may not be addressed individually or sequentially, but the end result of the meeting will be an understanding of all points discussed and decisions made. To make sure everyone is on the same page, at the end of the meeting, review what was accomplished and restate next steps.
3. Space is communal.
  - Expect people to stand closer to you than in the U.S - Expect people to stand 12 rather than 18 inches from you, and to have your hand warmly shaken. In the workplace, you may also see men who are friends pat each other on the back or give each other a hug, and women kiss each other.
4. Time is more flexible.

- Plan more time for meetings – Individual meetings may take longer because they include social and task conversations. However, in the long run, projects are accomplished within the same timeframe as separating conversations over the course of the day.

5. Hierarchy is valued.

- **Address managers and executives respectfully** - Older and more senior people are often called by their last names or titles (Mr. Sanchez or Mr. Director), rather than by their first names.
- **Plan idea-generation activities that encourage participation** – Reverence for experience, age and job level may make speaking out, challenging authority and participating on equal terms in decision making uncomfortable. Therefore, build in brainstorming sessions, small group discussions among employees of the same level and a suggestion box to solicit ideas.

6. People's identity is rooted in groups: family and work.

- Check before scheduling working lunches or dinners – In some countries, meals are inappropriate times to schedule meetings as they are designated as family time. It is appropriate, however, to invite the spouses to social dinners sponsored by your company.
- Recognize group, as well as individual accomplishments – Some individuals may prefer to be recognized as members of outstanding teams rather than individually. Ask local management the most appropriate way to reward individual and team accomplishments. In cases where individual recognition is inappropriate, acknowledge individual accomplishments in the context of excellent teamwork.

7. Disagreement and negative feedback is personalized.

- Communicate disagreement indirectly and impersonally – Rather than saying, “I disagree that we should do X.” Try, “Another way to approach this would be for us to consider doing Y.”
- When mistakes are made, allow people to save face - Avoid finger pointing or blaming. Reinforce the message that “we are all in this together” and ask the entire group to support the approach you prefer.

Catherine provides organizations with a variety of training on workplace diversity. Contact her directly for more information on how she might help your organization. ([catherine@diversitytraininginc.com](mailto:catherine@diversitytraininginc.com) or 773.288.5232)

---

## **5. YOU'RE PAYING IN EUROS**

Marie Hollein, a former customer and valued associate of mine, contributed her expertise on the Euro. Marie has worked for Westinghouse, Citicorp and ABN Amro Bank and is a recognized expert on the Euro. She now consults on financial, treasury and banking issues and is available to T.I.M.E. subscribers if they want to contact her. You can reach Marie through Oakwood Enterprises at 847.382.6538 or through email at [mhollein@net56.net](mailto:mhollein@net56.net)

On January 1, 2002, the introduction of the single European currency, the euro, was completed with the launch of euro bank notes and coins as legal currency within the 12 countries of the euro-zone: Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain.

The arrival of the euro means much more than exchanging one currency for another. It involves individuals and businesses not only in the countries that have joined the single currency, but all over the world. The introduction of the euro created a huge domestic market that has transformed the trading and operational landscapes for all organizations and businesses.

The implications for anyone planning global meetings with the introduction of the Euro are:

- It is easier to identify the best price for goods and services among the 12 countries.
- The risk management is simplified – you do not need to protect against changes in the value of multiple currencies.
- The budgeting process is easier – again you only need to be concerned about the dollar's movement against the Euro.
- If your meetings crossed multiple borders, all money-related transactions are simplified with a single currency.

---

## **6. WHEN GOING ABROAD...**

After researching the topic, here are our recommendations for website, books and resources:

For news use the FBIS Daily Report compiled by the Foreign Broadcast Information Services.

International Trade Administration (ITA) offers advice in a variety of areas including shipping, documentation requirements, trade exhibitions, tax advantages and legal counseling. Their website also provides a database of Foreign Trade Offices, foreign custom authorities by country, and all offices/organizations listed by country. Go to <http://web.ita.doc.gov/ticwebsite>

Here are some other excellent resources for the Global Planner or Global Traveler:

Kiss Bow or Shake Hands: How to do Business in Sixty Countries by Terri Morrison, Wayne Conawa and George Borden. This book provides an overview by country including business practices, cultural orientation and protocol. Click here to see this book [\*\*Kiss, Bow, or Shake Hands: How to Do...\*\*](#)

Dunn & Bradstreet guide to Doing Business Around the Globe. This book provides an overview by country including religious and societal influences on Business, the workweek, holidays, and economic overview. To order or review click here [\*\*Dun & Bradstreet's Guide to Doing\*\*](#)

Gestures: The To Do's and Taboos of Body Language Around the Country by Roger Axtell. This is your source to make certain you don't make that inappropriate gesture (like the common O.K. sign in the United States) . Click here to order [\*\*Gestures: The Do's and Taboos of Body\*\*](#)

Managing Across Cultures: A Learning Framework by Meena Wilson, Michael Hoppe and Leonard Sayles. This is a short concise guide using 7 dimensions to differentiate between cultures. [\*\*Managing Across Cultures : A Learning...\*\*](#)

Multicultural Manner by Norine Dresser. This book is organized by topic including gifts colors, clothing, body language, rime and verbal expressions. [\*\*Multicultural Manners: New Rules of...\*\*](#)

If you are interested in self assessment tools and the broader context of diversity, I would recommend [\*\*Cultural Diversity in the Workplace\*\*](#) by George Henderson.

[\*\*Doing Business Internationally: The\*\*](#) Guide to Cross Cultural Success by Terence Blake, Danielle Walker and Thomas Walker offers the 10 dimensions I utilized for analyzing culture.

Other books on the subject:

Edward Hall examines the role of culture in communication in [\*\*Beyond culture.\*\*](#)

American Cultural Patterns a Cross-Cultural Perspective by Edward Stewart and Milton Bennett, [American Cultural Patterns : A...](#)

[The Cultural Dimension of International Business](#) by G.P. Ferraro

And if you want to learn more in a seminar format, join Sue Tinnish at the ITME Motivation Show in Chicago on Thursday – September 26, 2002, tentatively scheduled for 11:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. where she will be addressing “Communicating Effectively Across The Globe”.

---

## **7. HUMOR & FREEBIES**

In addition to the well-known business blooper where an US automaker tried to sell the Nova car in Mexico only to later learn that Nova translates into Spanish as No Go, there are many instances when language does not translate perfectly.

One of the secrets to successful multicultural communication is to have a sense of humor. These translations show why:

A sign in a Paris Dress shop: Come in and have a fit.

A sign in a Romanian Hotel: The lift is broken. We apologize for any inconvenience over the next days while you are unbearable.

An ad for cigarettes with the words low asphalt instead of tar

Another ad for computer underwear instead of software

A technical manual specifying wet sheep instead of hydraulic rams.

For additional hints on planning global meetings, please email us with the words MULTICULTURAL MEETINGS in the subject line. Or just click here [stinnish@ameritech.net](mailto:stinnish@ameritech.net). Tips assembled by Catherine Pop, Nico Stanculescu, and Sue Tinnish. Here is one to start you off: Meeting participants who keep kosher cannot drink from coffee cups that are washed in communal, commercial dishwashers used in hotel kitchens. Keep a supply of disposable cups or cups that have never been used ready and accessible.

---

## **8. T.I.M.E. GONE BY**

Past issues of T.I.M.E. can be downloaded as a MS Word document. Here is an index of topics and “freebies” offered in the past:

- May 2000: Teambuilding and (freebie) New York Times reprint and summary on why teambuilding programs miss the mark. [May](#)
- June 2000: Green Meetings and (freebie) list of books that have 20-30 minute exercises for meetings and events. [June](#)
- July 2000: American (Values) and (freebie) Meeting Analysis, a 1-page document that will outline the scope and needs analysis for your next meeting. [July](#)
- August 2000: Minimum/Minimal Meetings and (freebie) Web Winners (web resources to make you and your meetings more productive). [August](#)
- October 2000: Evaluations and (freebie) sample evaluation questions. [October](#)
- November 2000: Politics and (freebie) on-line experiences. [November](#)
- December 2000: Toys and (freebie) brainstorming ideas. [December](#)
- January 2001: Sales, Award Presentations and (freebie) sales tips. [January](#)
- February 2001: Change, Change Management and Communicating change and (freebie) Change Bombs (reasons change management fails). [February](#)
- March 2001: Open Space Technology. [March](#)
- April 2001: Adult Learning Styles and (freebie) Learning Style Questionnaire [April 2001](#)
- May 2001: Trade Shows and (freebie) Trade Show timeline [May 2001](#)
- June 2001: Emotional Intelligence and (freebie) EI quiz [June 2001](#)
- July 2001: Presentation Skills and (freebie) Speaker Introductions [July 2001](#)
- August 2001: Ice Breakers and (freebie) Resource List [August 2001](#)
- September 2001: Facilitation and (freebie) Problem Personalities in a Meeting [September 2001](#)
- October 2001: Humor and (freebie) The Benefits of Laughter [October 2001](#)
- November 2001: Customer Care and (freebie) Complaints [November 2001](#)

December 2001: Slack and (freebie) Quiet Time [December 2001](#)

January 2002: The many faces of teambuilding and (freebie) [January 2002](#)

February 2002: Promotional Products and (freebie) Case Study Results [February 2002](#)

---

## **9. FUTURE T.I.M.E.**

You are Invited! Please join us for an outdoor teambuilding experience. We will be offering a session of outdoor teambuilding on a low ropes course in June. Please mark your calendar for Wednesday, June 5 in Northbrook, Illinois, when we will offer people an opportunity to experience first hand the teambuilding fun of a low ropes course.

I would really appreciate it if you would forward T.I.M.E. onto your colleagues, associates, and clients. Just press the forward button

---

Copyright© 2002, all rights reserved. You may copy or distribute T.I.M.E. by including this copyright notice and including full information on contacting the author, Sue Tinnish. Contact her at 847.394.9857 or [stinnish@ameritech.net](mailto:stinnish@ameritech.net).

We support a spam-free Internet. You may have received this issue based upon a recommendation from a colleague or associate. To unsubscribe, send a request (simply type UNSUBSCRIBE in the subject line) to [stinnish@ameritech.net](mailto:stinnish@ameritech.net) and your address will be immediately and permanently removed.