

---

**IN THIS ARTICLE**

*Cross-Cultural Communication, Expatriates,  
Business/Education Partnerships*

# Communicating Across Cultures

BY JENNIFER HANSON AND WANDA FOX

*A workshop conducted by  
volunteer trainers helped  
businesses in Lafayette,  
Indiana, communicate  
more effectively with  
diverse customers.*

Debbie, a 28-year-old graduate student from Taiwan, was attending Purdue University in Lafayette, Indiana, when she went nervously to a local bank to open her first account. Janet—a knowledgeable, efficient customer-service representative—explained different types of accounts and asked Debbie for her preference. Debbie hesitated, became flustered, and rushed out of the bank—without opening an account. Janet was equally upset and confused. She wondered what could have caused Debbie to flee.

Debbie never had to handle her own finances until she arrived in the United States. In Taiwan, parents manage their unmarried children's finances. After several of Lafayette's citizens heard about Debbie's experience and similar events, they met to share their concerns. People realized that Lafayette was fast becoming a

diverse community, with several international corporations, a multicultural faculty and student population at Purdue, and international owners of local shops and restaurants.

First, the concerned citizens formed a task force—the International Awareness Task Force of the Greater Lafayette Chamber of Commerce—to find ways to improve intercultural communication in the community.

From the task force grew the idea for Common Ground: A Forum for Intercultural Communication—a training program on valuing diversity and improving communication with diverse people, which is funded through a grant from the Eli Lily Endowment. The program's development and implementation has been a joint effort of Lafayette's Chamber of Commerce and business community and of faculty

members, administrative staff, and students at Purdue University.

"The initial goal was to educate the community to appreciate the diversity of cultures in its midst and to heighten awareness of the need for better communication," says Ken Ewing, founding chairperson of the task force.

Common Ground—marketed to local businesses and other organizations—aims to help people become more aware and responsive to cultural differences. Led by American

### Finding Common Ground

Here are the basic components of the Common Ground workshop. They can be adapted for other organizations and communities.

#### Part 1: Introduction

- ▶ Describe the changing demographics.
- ▶ Review workshop objectives.
- ▶ Explain rationale for becoming culturally aware.
- ▶ Share past experiences in cross-cultural communication.

#### Part 2: Cultural Comparisons

- ▶ Identify cultural values and assumptions of "mainstream" U.S. culture.
- ▶ Describe cultural patterns in people's daily lives.
- ▶ Compare U.S. values with values of other cultures.
- ▶ Develop awareness of different cultural assumptions and how they influence communication.

#### Part 3: Video Segment

- ▶ Present recognizable, relevant examples of cross-cultural communication.
- ▶ Identify problem areas in cross-cultural communication.
- ▶ Relate examples in videotape to participants' own experiences.

#### Part 4: Scenarios

- ▶ Discuss effective techniques in cross-cultural interaction.
- ▶ Teach skills in problem solving and critical thinking.

#### Part 5: Communication Tools

- ▶ Present useful techniques in cross-cultural encounters.

trainers and trainers from abroad, the program helps participants gain insight into their own cultures and become more aware of the differences among cultures. The goal is for participants to learn how to establish a common ground when communicating with others who are different from themselves.

### Planting seeds

Common Ground is made up of discussion, activities such as role play, and a videotape on intercultural issues—the program's core. The workshop lasts about two hours. "Graduates" receive buttons that show they've had the training. Businesses whose employees have completed the training receive window decals and certificates.

The major components of the curriculum appear in the box, "Finding Common Ground."

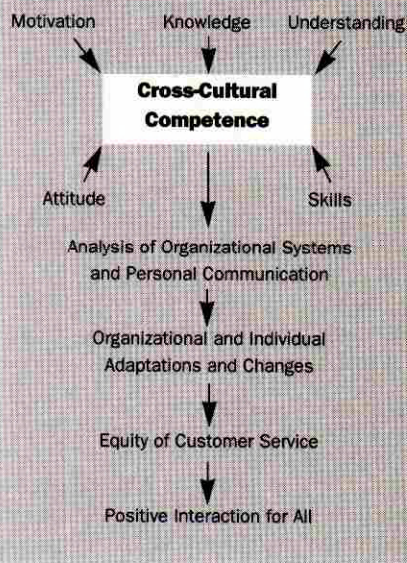
The main goal of the Common Ground workshop is to help people become proactive instead of reactive. Participants work on developing cultural sensitivity, learn how to use critical thinking, and try to become more flexible in their communication styles. During training, they may begin to understand that different communication techniques can improve customer relations and business overall. And they may begin to view the acquisition of new skills as a way to do their jobs better.

Common Ground is rooted in the theories of adult education and cross-cultural communication. The flow-chart model on this page shows how theory and application converge in the program. Common Ground is adaptable to diverse groups, organizations, and communities.

Over the first 15 months, the program was presented to more than 24 businesses and organizations in Lafayette. And the number continues to grow. At the completion of the program, many participants request further cross-cultural training. In addition, participants show positive changes in their attitudes and in their abilities to communicate with diverse people—according to evaluations using Donald Kirkpatrick's model for assessing reaction, learning, behavior, and results.

### A Model for Cross-Cultural Competence

The model shows how theory and application combine to increase awareness and improve communication in dealing with diverse people.



### Up close and personal

Perhaps the best way to assess Common Ground's impact is to look at specific cases.

Renita Shaw—an employment counselor at the Indiana Workforce Center—organized two workshops for about 40 of the center's employees. Shaw says that the sessions helped her and others realize how difficult job hunting can be for people from other cultures.

Gail Koehler—the assistant vice-president of operations at Purdue Employees Federal Credit Union—says that credit-union employees gained insight into how Lafayette's multicultural residents perceived them and their service.

Steve Belter—president of a computer-consulting company—says that the workshop helped his firm become sensitive to the customs of other cultures in which it did business.

"About 25 percent of our business is outside of the United States. Exports are important. That's where we see growth. We wanted the workshop to help us make it easy for our customers to work with us. And we wanted to get a feeling for our callers' expectations."

Overall, several of Lafayette's business and civic groups forged partnerships that have become the hallmark of the Common Ground program.

## Cures for Culture Shock

By Gary Topchik, the director of SilverStar Enterprises, 1659 Bell Air Road, Los Angeles, CA 90077; 213/654-5818. This article is adapted from the March/April 1993 issue of Perspectives On.... Copyright 1993, SilverStar Enterprises. Used with permission.

Americans tend to be direct. They strive for success and are unwilling to accept failure. Americans working with people of other cultures may find that their own values are not universally accepted. The clash of cultures can affect people's motivation and reduce their productivity, especially for a person who is working abroad.

To be successful in an unfamiliar culture, one must understand and adapt to the culture. Here are some proven strategies that can ease the impact of culture shock.

**Learn before you go.** Attend a training class or group discussion on the host culture. The library has a wealth of information on countries. Experiment with food at ethnic restaurants, and contact businesspeople or students from the area to which you are going.

**Study the language.** It is important to learn the basic language for greeting others and shopping, even if business associates speak English. Books, tapes, language schools, and

adult-education programs will help. Also learn significant gestures, customs, and expected courtesies.

**Socialize with host nationals.** Spend time both at home and abroad with people from the host nation.

**Be sensitive to cultural differences.** Be open to accepting the new culture. Do not criticize local practices and customs. Relax and pick up the rhythm of the host nation. If you are American, forget the directness that may come so easily to you. Realize that your hosts may think that being direct or authoritative is impolite and possibly even rude.

**Understand that subcultures exist.** Complex cultures are made up of different religions and ethnic groups. Do not jump to simple conclusions based on limited knowledge. The host country may be a multicultural environment. Realize that your limited interactions might not be a representative sample.

**Accept your biased view.** Remember that you are observing the culture from your own frame of reference and filtering new experiences through your own cultural biases. You bring your culture and upbringing with you.

**Be tolerant, patient, and open.** Be willing to live with inconveniences. Be patient with yourself and your hosts. Be curious and experimental. Keep an open mind; give the foreign experience time to take hold.

Participants include the local chapter of the United Way, community business leaders, retired professionals, and the city newspaper. The local cable-television station donates its services in preparing training tapes. The chamber of commerce provides a tax-exempt status, a mailing address, and financial and administrative support. University students, faculty members, and administrative staff help with the program's development, facilitation, and evaluation.

But the lifeblood of Common Ground is its volunteer trainers. Some are international students at Purdue; others are practicing or retired professionals. They are a diverse group in themselves. Their backgrounds include training, public relations, communications, human resources, education, and business. And they're different ages, genders, religions, and races.

Other volunteers—including ministers, businesspeople, educators, travel agents, and insurance salespeople—help oversee curriculum development, training, marketing, financing, and public relations.

Overall, Common Ground represents a community's cooperative effort toward understanding, appreciating, and effectively interacting with diverse people. It has been a true grass-roots campaign, waged by community residents in business and education. ■

**Jennifer Hanson** is project director for the International Awareness Task Force of the Greater Lafayette Chamber of Commerce. **Wanda Fox** is an assistant professor with the department of curriculum and instruction in the School of Education, 1442 Liberal Arts and Education Building, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN 47907-1442. Phone: 317/494-7290; fax: 317/496-1622; e-mail: wfox@vm.cc.purdue.edu on the Internet.

To purchase reprints of this article, please send your order to ASTD Customer Service, 1640 King Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313-2043. Use priority code BZM. Single photocopies, at \$6 each, must be prepaid. Bulk orders (50 or more) of custom reprints may be billed. Phone 703/683-8100 for price information.

## Resources on Cross-Cultural Training

Need more information on cross-cultural training programs and issues? Try the following articles that have appeared recently in *Training & Development*.

▶ "Making Diversity More Manageable," by Clifford Clarke. September 1994.

▶ "A Guide for Global Training," by Sylvia Odenwald. July 1993.

▶ "HRD Competencies for a Shrinking World," by Michael J. Marquardt and Dean W. Engel. May 1993.

▶ "West Meets East: Succeeding With Japanese Audiences," by Linda S. Dillon. March 1993.

▶ "Duavata: 'Working Together' in

Fiji," by Bob Leonard and Sue Leonard. January 1993.

▶ "'Street Smarts' for International Consultants" ("Four by Four" section). July 1992.

▶ "Japan-Bound Training," by Ernest Gundling. July 1992.

To purchase reprints of these articles, please contact ASTD Customer Service at 703/683-8100. Use priority code BZM. Single article photocopies are \$6 each; the package is \$15. Phone for prices on bulk orders (50 or more) of custom reprints. Call to order by credit card, or send your order to ASTD Customer Service, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313-2043.