

## Communicating Across Cultures By Chris Boleman

The only states that have a higher population than Texas are California and New York. Texas' population is well over 20 million people. This population total is only going up. The state's population has more than doubled between 1940 and 1980 while increasing almost 20% from 1980 to 1990. According to the Texas State Data Center and Office of the State Demographer (2004), the population estimated projections range from 26,085,101 to 45,388,036 depending on what scenario is used to estimate.

In addition to the large population totals, Texas is also one of the most diverse states in the country. All types of ethnicities are present throughout the state. Hispanics are the fastest growing ethnic group statewide. In the near future, it is predicted that Texas will not have a majority ethnicity. In addition to diversity in ethnicity, this state will have differences in cultures, values, and norms. Thus, as leaders, we must evaluate our communities and determine effective ways to communicate with the people in these communities.

What does this mean? It means that as leaders, we must look at ourselves and see how we can communicate with others. In order to this, we must first understand the prevalent cultures and how to most effectively communicate and with all types of people.

*Culture* can best be described as a way of life or people that share beliefs, values, and norms. These are integrated and dynamic systems that people develop from birth.

Hall (1976) describes cultures in two different categories known as high or low context cultures. *High* context cultures have strong interpersonal bonds and extensive networks with members of their in-group and *low* context cultures compartmentalize their personal relationships and they prefer lots of background information. Hall further classifies general high and low context cultures. Here are a few examples of cultures classified as high or low context cultures.

### High

- Japanese
- Chinese
- Korean
- African American
- Hispanics

### Low

- German
- Scandinavian
- American
- English

It is also important to think about nonverbal communication amongst cultures. People can draw many conclusions about others based on nonverbal communication clues. Common nonverbal clues can be found by looking at someone's facial expressions, their touching of others, watching hand movement, and how much space you give someone when talking to them. A further description of each is below:

- Face – primary transmitter of emotional cues (Happy, sad, frustrated)

- Hand – hand movement is primary means of showing intensity
- Touch – Hall (1983) says it is the most fundamental part of the human experience. Include such things as hugging, kissing, shaking hands, and clasping shoulders.
- Space - How much space do people need? Space is one of the most common misunderstanding of communication across cultures. Remember that High Context Cultures prefer close distances when speaking to one another and Low Context Cultures prefer far away distances when speaking to one another

These are just some examples that leaders must think about when they are working or communicating with others. Samovar and Porter provide thirteen pointers leaders should think about when dealing with people representing cultures unlike their own.

- Know yourself and your own cultural makeup
- Consider the physical and human settings
- Seek to understand diverse message systems
- Develop and display empathy
- Encourage and provide feedback
- Develop communication flexibility
- Avoid stereotyping and prejudice
- Be aware of consequences
- Seek commonalities
- Recognize the validity of differences
- Communicate respect
- Be nonjudgmental
- Tolerate ambiguity
- Be aware of individual differences

Leadership is so much more than just knowing your personal style, managing people, and motivating people to reach an intended goal. Leadership is about challenging people to get the most out of them. Your success is based on your ability to communicate. We often think of communication is just basic verbal communication. Hopefully, this lesson has helped you to determine that it is so much more. It is your nonverbal communication. This includes how you approach people, how you dress, how you listen, and how you react to others. Remember, you are always being evaluated as a leader. Make sure you are displaying appropriate communication tactics.

### **References**

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