

Overview:

We all have experienced moments where we just can't seem to understand each other. Moments of miscommunication commonly occur in our everyday interactions, and cultural differences can sometimes further complicate these situations. Therefore, this activity is designed to get participants thinking about not only how miscommunication happens but also how understanding culture can help us to mitigate scenarios where misunderstandings occur.

Note: Learners in more ethnocentric/monocultural orientations (denial, polarization, minimization) will often fail to recognize the cultural aspects of miscommunications and assume negative intent in others. Be prepared to point out potential cultural factors at play in scenarios if participants miss them.

Background and Information:

This activity was created by Kris Acheson-Clair, PhD, and Lindsey Macdonald, CILMAR.

Objectives:

As a result of this activity, participants will be able to:

1. Analyze how miscommunications happen.
2. Discover cultural causes for miscommunications.
3. Generate solutions that could prevent or resolve miscommunications.

Time:

30 minutes

Group Size:

Small group

Materials:

The Understanding Miscommunication PowerPoint (see [Downloads](#)), or a handout with sample scenarios to analyze

Intercultural Development Continuum Stages:

- Denial
- Polarization
- Minimization
- Acceptance

AAC&U Intercultural Knowledge and Competence Goals:

Cultural Self-Awareness:

- To articulate insights into own cultural rules and biases (e.g., seeking complexity; aware of how their experiences have shaped these rules, and how to recognize and respond to cultural biases, resulting in a shift in self-description).

Verbal and Nonverbal Communication:

- To articulate a complex understanding of cultural differences in verbal and nonverbal communication (e.g., demonstrates understanding of the degree to which people use physical contact while communicating in different cultures or use direct/indirect and explicit/implicit meanings).
- To skillfully negotiate a shared understanding based on these differences.

Knowledge of Cultural Worldview Frameworks:

- To demonstrate sophisticated understanding of the complexity of elements important to members of another culture in relation to its history, values, politics, communication styles, economy, or beliefs & practices.

Facilitator Activity Instructions:

1. The facilitator should begin by explaining the Understanding Miscommunication Model. They should emphasize that, in an ideal situation, the message delivered from the source would be clear and understandable to the receiver. Both source and the receiver need to be engaged (paying attention, invested in the success of the interaction, and able to perform at a baseline skill level) in an ideal communicative situation. If either party is not engaged, miscommunication is more likely to occur. Additionally, the context surrounding the situation may create “noise” that disrupts the communication, or there may be cultural differences or barriers that cause miscommunication to occur. For example, there may be cultural differences in terms of behaviors expected of sources and receivers (i.e. different communication styles).
 - a. The facilitator should also note that that roles depicted in the model are fluid, not static, and they can change from moment to moment in a given interaction (and perhaps a person can even perform both roles at once).
 - b. The facilitator may choose to provide some examples: the receiver may perceive the source as unreliable, the receiver may get distracted during the exchange, the source and the receiver may not speak the same language, etc.
 - c. The facilitator may also choose to provide a concrete example in addition to the more abstract examples provided above. For instance, miscommunication may occur when a stranger asks for directions if the receiver and source do not speak the same language, or if the receiver is distracted and does not have time to explain the directions (maybe they are talking on the phone or running late).
2. Divide participants into groups. Then, provide each group with a scenario where miscommunication has occurred. The facilitator can have all groups work on the same scenario or vary the case by group. Facilitators may either use the three scenarios provided on the following page, or come up with their own.
3. Using the Understanding Miscommunication Model as a guide, each group should do the following:
 - Identify the issue/problem that occurred during the scenario. Where in the model is communication breaking down?
 - Discuss their initial reaction to the issue/problem identified (i.e. why they think it happened, how they would feel in each role – source and receiver).

- Consider what other factors could be inhibiting communication in that particular scenario. What other possible explanations could there be for what happened? Specifically, what role could culture be playing?
 - Discuss how they would solve or prevent the miscommunication from occurring, and/or deal with it once it has occurred. Are these solutions culturally dependent (that is, appropriate in some cultural contexts but not others)?
4. After all groups have finished, each group should share their scenario and the problem(s) they identified. If they believe there are potential solutions, they could also discuss how they might improve communication, how they arrived at these conclusions, and why they think their suggestions would be successful.

Three Scenarios:

1. You are the supervisor of an international team that usually communicates virtually through email or video chat. Any time the entire team must communicate in a virtual meeting, you take the lead by asking each member direct questions. Your company has organized a business retreat where the entire team will meet together in person for the first time to participate in a brainstorming session. You decide that in this space you will take a more passive approach and let your team members take the lead. However, you notice that some team members are dominating the conversation, while others have not contributed at all.
2. You asked your friend if they could do you a favor and help you move the following weekend. Your friend agreed, but they did not show up. You are now upset and feel deceived and forgotten.
3. A colleague approached you as you passed each other on the sidewalk and asked you how your day was going. Your day had not been going so well, so you proceeded to tell them about everything that had gone wrong so far. As you were talking, you noticed that your colleague kept looking away or checking the time on their phone. When you finished, they simply responded, "Well, I've got to go. Nice running into you!" You left the interaction feeling confused and hurt.

Related Tools:

Tools to use in conjunction with this lesson:

- [Dominant Narratives](#)
- [Hidden Ways in Which Culture Differs, The](#)
- [High and Low Context](#)
- [Hofstede Round Robin](#)
- [How Does a Behavior Mean?](#)
- [Perfectly Logical Explanations](#)

Similar tools:

- [Bridging Behaviors](#)
- [Dialogue Blocker Activity](#)
- [Direct-Indirect Communication Quizzes](#)
- [How Rude Was That?](#)
- [What Does It Mean To You?](#)