

How to handle cross-cultural differences in business | Maria Pastorelli | TEDxNYUShanghai

Video Transcript: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tu1bDTr4eyo>

One of the first days I was in Shanghai, I went into a restaurant for dinner. I came to China to study Chinese, so I thought it was—you know—I had to practice. I went to a restaurant, I ordered some dumplings, and then I ordered a glass of water with my meal.

A relatively short amount of time later, I got my food—and something I was not expecting. I got a glass of hot water.

Now, my first reaction was doubt. Ironically, for a foreigner, I could read and write characters better than I could speak and understand. So I thought that the communication broke down somewhere—probably in my terrible tone pronunciation. Then I thought the waiter had made a mistake.

I didn't say anything at the time because, honestly, I didn't know how, and I didn't want to get into a conversation I probably would not have understood.

Now I know very well that if you ask for a glass of water in China, you get a glass of hot water. In Europe, you probably get a glass of cold or room temperature water—a small but very important difference when you try not to burn your mouth at the first sip.

I'm Italian, born and raised. I'm speaking to you in English, and I'm standing on a stage in Shanghai, China—and I'm not the one with the most cross-cultural experiences in this room. Many of you—probably all of you—are sitting next to someone who has a background that is very different from yours. And that difference is really important.

Why?

Because diversity brings growth. It brings impact.

Think of all the people that you work or study with. You probably have a lot of international colleagues. Now, globalization, COVID-19, the internet era—they have accelerated global collaboration. It is now unavoidable. That means that professors, students, leaders, teams, and the global workforce will interact with people they have very little in common with.

That's why we need to learn how to navigate cross-cultural experiences—because working together is what moves us forward.

I have lived in China a third of my life, and I have seen the beauty and the complexity of the culture. Living and working in Shanghai has given me the opportunity to get in contact with people from all over the world—and also be part of cultural interactions I would never have had in Italy.

I arrived here in 2010 for a six-month Chinese course at Fudan University. As you can see, I'm still here.

What brought me here was a part of me that was always drawn to this side of the world, because my mom worked in Hong Kong in the mid-80s, and so I grew up hearing her stories of travel.

What brought me here was my intense dislike for math—like Paul—and so I chose the university degree that was probably the furthest thing away from numbers: cross-cultural communication.

What brought me here was also my desire to prove myself—to live and work in a different city, in a different country.

My journey had its ups and downs, and it still does. But I am proud of all of it. First, because I get to stand here and share my story with all of you, which is beyond my younger self's wildest dreams. But also because I grew as a person, and I will never give that up for anything.

I got to experience what differences look like—and more importantly, how people react to differences.

I have seen people doing everything they can to avoid dealing with others that don't share their same views. So my mission going forward is to create more bridges for people to collaborate instead of rejecting each other.

I think we can agree that the world can be a more inclusive place.

Now, it sounds easy in theory, but when you're working with people spread across three different continents, from five different cultural backgrounds, who speak seven different languages—it gets a little bit more complicated than just saying, “You know, be nice to each other.”

The first step in dealing with these complexities is understanding and acknowledging our differences. Because the truth is that we are different. We come from different cultures. We have different perspectives. We enjoy a different level of privilege. But often, we're not aware of how different we are.

In my daily work, I help global leaders and teams to collaborate—and that means often working across cultures.

Throughout the years, I've seen a lot of different frameworks and models that explain the connections between differences in culture. And while those can be helpful to understand differences in a big-picture kind of way, the reality is that people are way more complex.

Most frameworks divide people into cultural or national groups. But that doesn't really work. If we have to be realistic, we can say that—generally speaking—normally, people from this culture behave in this way as a group, with exceptions.

And when my clients are struggling to work with their international counterparts, that's not really very helpful, is it?

So what are people struggling with specifically?

Imagine a manager arriving in China for the first time to work with their local team manager from Europe. They get into a meeting and share what they think is a wonderful, insightful presentation. At the end of it, they go, "Now I want to hear from you. Do you have any questions?"

The room is silent—like this—for a while. Despite the encouragement, people don't really speak up or say anything. So the manager and the team become increasingly frustrated, and they end the meeting feeling it was a waste of time.

What happened?

Well, there might be a lot of factors that influence this situation, but one of the things that is definitely important is the difference in communication styles.

Generally speaking, East Asian countries prefer to communicate in a high-context level of communication, which means that communication is indirect. People read between the lines, and how something is said—or not said—is more important than what you say.

Now, to be relevant to our example, the hierarchy and the need to keep face is probably what was important here. You don't say no or ask questions directly to your boss, and any feedback is given in private after building a relationship.

On the other side, generally speaking, European countries adopt a more low-context kind of communication, where communication is straightforward, task-oriented, and very direct. To the manager here, the importance is the ideas, and speaking out—initiative is encouraged, if not expected.

So what happens when people that have different communication styles—so different—meet?

Well, on one side, you have the low-context style that gets labeled aggressive and maybe even rude. On the opposite side, you have the high-context style that gets labeled passive and uncooperative. The manager and the team are on different sides, and there is no bridge.

Now, just because we can see the differences, it doesn't mean that differences are not there. And just because there are differences, it doesn't mean that we can't do anything to deal with them.

It comes naturally for us to separate things and people into neat groups—like “us” versus “them,” an in-group (the people that you have a lot in common with) and an out-group (the people that you feel you have nothing in common with). Because our brain likes structure, it is easier for our brain to remember differences in neat little groups. That's why we have so many stereotypes.

From years of research, we know that our brain is a prediction machine. Our brain likes things that follow a pattern.

Let me show you something. Show of hands if you can read this.

OK, now it might look like gibberish at the beginning, but if you understand English—and I truly hope you do, otherwise you've been staring at everyone making weird sounds so far—you can read this whole slide. You can read this slide despite the fact that only the first and the last letter in each word are in the right place, and all the other letters are in a random order.

This is because your brain fills the space using your knowledge of the language.

It is easier for our brain to rely on the information we have instead of processing a lot of new data. In the same way, for us, it feels safer to rely on the information we think we have about others instead of being uncomfortable with what we don't know about them.

So now that we know that there are differences, and that our brain is trying really hard to take shortcuts, what can we do to move us forward?

We can't pretend there are no differences and just throw our hands in the air. We can't pretend that differences don't matter either, because that's not how we find solutions to problems.

So where is the Goldilocks zone—the sweet spot in the middle?

Hear me out. Here's my revolutionary idea: let's talk about how we communicate. Let's have conversations about how to have conversations.

What does that mean?

It means to be aware of our own preferences—of how we communicate, how we speak our mind, how hot we like our water. It means being aware that other people have different preferences. It means asking questions about those preferences. It means talking about what is necessary for both sides to work together. And finally, it means to make time to work on that.

Simple, but not easy.

At this point, you might ask, “Why do I have to do all the work and other people don't have to do anything?”

Well... I'm sorry, but you can't change people. You can't motivate people to do what they don't want to do. You can tell someone else to communicate a different way, but if they're not motivated, they just won't.

One thing you can do is to take responsibility for your communication. We can't change people, but the good thing about people is that we can have conversations with them—and conversation can help us build those bridges to connect us.

So how can we have those conversations?

Well, it's not a linear process, because it's not a process that has an end and a beginning. It's a constant, ongoing conversation—a flux, if you will.

So here are five things to remember:

1. **Don't assume—ask all the questions.** Ask questions from a place of curiosity, acknowledging your own biases, preferences, and privileges.
 2. **When you ask questions, ask questions that are open—like what, why, and how.**
 3. **Listen to what people are saying—and to what people are not saying.**
 4. **If you're not sure, double confirm—because you probably might have missed something.**
 5. **Lastly, give people time to process information—because not everybody is comfortable reacting to questions right away.**
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In conclusion

Differences are here to stay. There are as many experiences as there are people. You will interact with people from different cultures, backgrounds, and mindsets. It's your responsibility to be aware of how you communicate and to facilitate discussion so that others can share their ideas. It's your responsibility to start building those bridges.

So after this talk, are you going to be brave and have the conversations that we need to have?

If all of us have one conversation that creates one small bridge, we all have the chance to make the world a little bit less divided and a little bit more impactful.

Thank you.

Thank you.