Strategies for Dealing With Intercultural Communication
by Tara Duggan, Demand Media

Global business professionals require skills in intercultural communication or cross-cultural communication, because they typically exchange information with people from all over the world. Without knowledge of other cultures, people tend to make embarrassing mistakes when conducting international business. These errors confuse and offend business partners and make effective communication difficult. Using techniques such as active listening, including paraphrasing or repeating what the other person has said, people confirm their understanding to prevent misinterpretation. But they also need to consider cultural conventions, such as timing and tone, to be truly effective. Effective intercultural communication strategies prepare people to live or work in other countries, help business departments understand each other better or prepare a company for a merger or acquisition.

Benefits
Successful companies treat acceptance of diversity as a legal and moral obligation. Benefits include improved morale, creativity and productivity. Employees gain respect for one another and trust one another as a result. By recognizing that different groups of people solve common problems in different ways, people come to value their differences and appreciate the different approaches. Becoming competent involves learning how to communicate and interact with people from other cultures in one-to-one situations, small groups and large teams. Creating a diverse work culture enables all employees to feel safe and maximize their productivity. Providing training in negotiation techniques helps people develop skills in using conflict-reducing words.

Acknowledge Differences
By discouraging behavior that makes other people feel excluded or unwanted, companies help prevent stereotyping and demeaning jokes or remarks. Effective leaders establish rules for appropriate behavior and take disciplinary action when violations occur. Everyone should feel safe at work. The first step involves accepting differences. For example, the types of food people consume create an expression of cultural identity. Encourage people to share their favorite foods. Similarly, the customs associated with gift exchanges, such as symbolism, obligations and reciprocity, differ between cultures. Research and observe local customs. Additionally, cultures differ on whether they value the individual or the group, how they treat women and how they perceive time. They also differ on how they respond to authority, how they treat personal space, how they show emotion and how they negotiate.

Develop Intercultural Sensitivity
Effective managers help build a productive team environment by encouraging employees to minimize their differences and focus on achieving the company's strategic goals. By bringing diverse groups together in social situations and allowing employees to see that differences are not threatening, managers help their teams work together more cohesively back on the job. Employees who accept their differences and adapt their behavior to suit the styles of another
culture tend to get better results. By adopting aspects of another culture into their own, employees enrich their cultural identity and ability to succeed in any situation.

**Focus on Behavior**
Dealing with intercultural communication involves including everyone in the process. By focusing on observable behavior and not attitudes, employees maintain a productive work environment. By choosing words carefully, not making assumptions about intentions, and making adjustments so that everyone feels accepted, employees learn to negotiate effectively with people from different backgrounds. By encouraging employees to assess their communications skills, using online surveys such as the one provided by the Mind Tools website, managers allow their employees to recognize their own strengths and weaknesses. Conducting workshops and simulation games, such as Barnga, helps participants experience what it's like to function by different rules and learn to reconcile differences in order to work together successfully.