



# CONNECTIONS

*Communicating in Culturally Diverse Environments*



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## Inside this issue:

Getting Your Message Across in Culturally Diverse Settings 1

Upcoming Publications 2

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## Getting Your Message Across in Culturally Diverse Settings

One of the most frequently asked questions during my multicultural communication workshops is, "How can I make sure I am getting my message across during a conversation in a way that is clearly understood by others?" This typically comes from the frustration of not feeling heard or understood by those around us. Consistently getting your message across in a clear, accurate manner is not easy, especially in a culturally diverse environment where com-

munication styles, language and the meaning behind various nonverbal behaviors can greatly differ. In addition, 'noise' in the environment such as distractions taking place around us or within us can greatly impact the quality of communication. However, there are four things you can do to maximize the likelihood that your speaking partner will understand your message and receive it in the precise way that you intend:

1. **Speak Clearly** - When communicating across cultures, it is especially important to speak clearly, concisely and directly so that your message can be received accurately. In order to get your message across clearly, you should organize your thoughts, say what you mean (no "beating around the bush"), get to the point (e.g., if you want someone to do something, say exactly what you want done), and speak using the shortest, most familiar words possible. Be aware of the fact

## Getting Your Message Across in Culturally Diverse Settings

that word meaning can change dramatically from one culture to the next.

2. **Speak Openly** - To enhance communication effectiveness, you should be open with people as much as possible. Being open

refers to a willingness to talk about yourself (e.g., self-disclosure), to be honest and unguarded, to welcome change, to be open to differences in people and ideas, and to be genuinely open to doing things in new ways.

Sometimes people won't listen to you if they believe you are not open to what they think and feel. Being open is an excellent way to get people to open up and pay attention to what you have to say.

COMMUNICATING IN CULTURALLY  
DIVERSE ENVIRONMENTS

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## Getting Your Message Across (continued)

3. **Speak Inclusively** - Inclusive language acknowledges different people and creates a more positive work environment where people feel included. To communicate inclusively, use terms that will be understood and respected by people of different backgrounds, refer to people by the names they wish to be called (e.g., physically challenged instead of handicapped), and eliminate language that suggests that men are the standard for all human beings (e.g., use both masculine and feminine pronouns). This is a particularly important point. The words we choose have a tremendous impact on the messages we send to others. Often far more than we realize. Sometimes we choose words that have a negative impact on people without even realizing it. For example, using masculine pronouns or other gender stereotypes (e.g., salesman as opposed to salesperson) during conversations can negatively impact the way we are received by others and minimize the likelihood that our speaking partner will hear what we have to say.

4. **Check For Understanding** - The single most effective way to en-

## Getting Your Message Across (continued)

sure that your speaking partner has accurately received your message is to ask him or her. You should consistently check to make sure that what you are saying is fully understood by the person you are conversing with. Ask your speaking partner to restate (known as *reflective listening*) what you have said so that you can make sure he or she understands the message in the way you intended. A simple way to do this is to end your conversation with a review of what each of you will do next. For instance, you might say "Let's review, I will \_\_\_\_\_, what will you do?" This way, you can effectively determine if the person has accurately received your message.

## Dr. Holmes' Upcoming Publications

**Designing and Facilitating Performance-Based Diversity Training** - An article published in the Performance Improvement journal of the International Society for Performance Improvement, May/June 2004 issue. Please contact us for free reprints.

**How to Facilitate the Strategic Planning Process** - An article that will be published in the 2005 Training and Development Sourcebook by the American Society of Training and Development.

**10 Characteristics of a High Performance Work Team** - An article that will be published in the 2005 Training and Development Sourcebook by the American Society of Training and Development.

