



# CONNECTIONS

*Communicating in Culturally Diverse Environments*



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## Inside this issue:

### Happy Holidays!

The Barriers to Effective Multicultural Communication 1

Upcoming Presentations & Publications 2

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## The Barriers to Effective Multicultural Communication

Communication problems can occur in any type of organizational setting. People misunderstand each other for a wide variety of reasons, and these misunderstandings can occur between people who are culturally similar as well as those who are different. However, there are some unique issues to consider whenever people from different cultural backgrounds come together. Specifically, there are three problems that commonly occur. I refer to these as the

Barriers to Effective Multicultural Communication:

1. **Stereotyping.** The most significant barrier to effective cross-cultural communication is the tendency of human beings to stereotype, or more specifically, to categorize and make assumptions about others based on identified characteristics such as gender, race, ethnicity, age, religion, socioeconomic status or nationality. Whether we realize it or not (and we often do not), **we all stereotype and make**

**assumptions about others at one time or another.** Most of us do so on a regular basis. Some of the more blatant and destructive examples of these assumptions include job interviewers who reject certain candidates based on racial or gender stereotypes, teachers who assume that certain students are less likely to succeed because of where they come from, or store owners who harass people from particular racial or ethnic groups. However, not all stereotyping is so

## The Barriers to Effective Multicultural Communication

blatant. More subtle examples include shying away from people who are culturally different (which is one of the reasons people from similar racial and cultural backgrounds tend to group together), or assuming peo-

ple will behave a certain way based on their race, gender, place of origin or position within an organization.

2. **A Lack of Understanding.** Another major barrier to effective multicultural interaction is the lack of

understanding that is frequently present between people from different backgrounds. Because people may have differences in values, beliefs, methods of reasoning, communication styles, work styles, and per-

COMMUNICATING IN CULTURALLY  
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## Multicultural Communication Barriers (continued)

reality, a great many of us find discomfort with those who are different in terms of values, beliefs and behaviors. We may then evaluate those values, beliefs and behaviors in a negative light. This is the essence of *ethnocentrism*, where we evaluate good and bad, right and wrong relative to how closely the values, behaviors and ideas of others mirror our own. Put simply, to effectively interact with people who are different from us, we must suspend judgment about their ways, and try to understand them from their perspective. But for most of us, this is much easier said than done.

NEXT ISSUE: Overcoming the Barriers!

## Multicultural Communication Barriers (continued)

sonality types, communication difficulties will often occur. In order to communicate effectively, each party must have a clear and accurate understanding of the thoughts, feelings, ideas, values, styles, desires and goals of the other person. But because of the differences between communication partners, this understanding is not always gained. This is compounded by the fact that many of us are not very effective at getting to understand the ways in which others may differ. Empathy, which is the ability to understand the world from another person's point of view, is an important multicultural communication skill. Unfortunately, in our fast-paced, technologically-focused world, we don't often take the time needed to truly understand where our colleagues are coming from.

3. **Judgmental Attitudes.** The final major barrier to effective cross-cultural communication includes the judgmental attitudes many of us have when it comes to interacting with people who are different. Most of us would like to believe we are open-minded and accepting. But in

## Dr. Holmes' Upcoming Presentations and Publications

**Evaluating Skills Based Diversity Training** at the International Society for Performance Improvement's annual conference in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada from April 12-15, 2005. Please visit the ISPI website for more information at [www.ispi.org](http://www.ispi.org).

**Value-Added Diversity Consulting** - An article published in the 2005 Pfeiffer Annual: Volume Two - Consulting. Please contact us for reprints.

**Characteristics of a High Performance Work Team & How to Facilitate the Strategic Planning Process** - Two articles that will be published in the 2005 Training and Development Sourcebook by the American Society for Training and Development.

