Designing for Diversity:
Dialogue in Multi-Cultural Settings

North Star Facilitators
Barbara J MacKay, MS, CPF©
(503) 579 5708
www.northstarfacilitators.com

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You may think the topic of working with multilingual or multicultural groups does not apply to you. Yet if you are running any type of meeting or workshop, you are likely already working with multi-cultural and multi-lingual considerations. Are you making any changes at all in how you lead meetings to ensure full participation of people who are:

- In the “minority?”
- Whose first language is not that of the meeting?
- Who were not born or raised in your own country?

If not, you may want to think about this topic. This module covers what I’ve learned from experience and what several of my colleagues have shared with me. Specifically the module sets the stage for working across cultures. It includes specific tips regarding:

- Understanding the concept of dominance
- Understanding the implications of invisibility for some
- Working with multi-lingual groups with a special emphasis on the “do’s” of Working with an interpreter team
- Thirteen strategies for ensuring greater participation of all cultures/languages
- Understanding and accommodating both low and high context cultures

Finally, please note that our definition of culture includes not only ethnicity, but also all aspects of culture related to age gender, ability, class, etc. The more I work with different cultures in groups, the more I realize how ignorant I am. This is a learning edge for most of us, but here are some key things to ask yourself:

- How comfortable are all participants with the culture of the country or the organization?
- How comfortable are you facilitating people from cultures other than your own?
- How many of the group is visibly in the “minority?”
- What are you doing to ensure participation of the invisible minority – such as the hard of hearing (but not deaf), sight impaired (but not blind), sexual orientation, Jewish, immigrants, non-voters, chronic illness or invisible physical impairment, not fluent in the dominant language, illiterate, unable to distinguish some colors, or those struggling with mental health issues?

**Exercise**

*Read over the questions above and jot down any thoughts or insights that come to you as you ponder them.*
Everyone has some ways in which they “fit” into the dominant culture and ways they do not. A simplistic definition of dominant culture is those who have more privilege or power in the group. I am going to raise perhaps a difficult notion for some. I have come to see and experience that it is a very narrow group who truly has the power in any given organization or country. The joy and dilemma of the group facilitator is to break down this oppressive narrow definition of who has power and equalize it for the entire membership of the group. This is freeing both for the non-dominant group members but ALSO for the dominant group members.

For example, the current dominant culture in the USA is white and male. However, it is even more narrow than this. It is white males who are between 35-50 years, speak fluent English with the accent of the area, can walk, see and hear, own property, have at least a university education, have a white-collar job, are between 5’9 and 6’3”, can read and write, are heterosexual, are Gentile (i.e. not Jewish or Semitic), were born in the USA and have US citizenship, are protestant, have not been in prison or have a criminal record, do not have mental or physical health issues, are currently earning an above average income, are good-looking, can play and talk about sports (especially football), are computer literate, and so on! That is a long, very narrow list of characteristics!

Luckily, I hasten to add there are not many of us who fall into this group. Everyone who does NOT fall in these categories is in some way disadvantaged from being “equal” or having as much “power” in the group. However, those that do are not always in an enviable position. It is highly oppressive in its own way to be part of this group and severely limits this group from breaking out of its narrow boundaries.

Exercise
Understanding Your Own Area of Dominance

- In what ways are you part of the dominant culture?
- What privilege does it give you in groups?
- In what ways are you NOT part of the dominant culture?
- When you are not part of the dominant group, how do you want to be treated to allow for your full participation?
- What insights does this give you about working with multicultural groups?
So, we’ve touched lightly on some concepts of working with different cultures in a group you are facilitating. There is an added challenge when some people do not speak, read, or write the language.

Helping the interpretation team do their job:

Prior to your event

- Provide the translators with advance written scripts/speeches/ power-point presentations, so they can pre-search terms with which they may not be familiar.
- On registration forms for participants - ask what language people are really fluent in – i.e., able to communicate important ideas?
- Translate key summaries of written materials into all the languages represented.
- Translate written instructions (e.g., small group work). These need to be simple and

Understanding the Implications of Invisibility for Some

One of the key things to know about people who are non-dominant and clearly in the minority (we call them the target group – they are likely to be targeted by acts of intended and unintended oppression) is that they often feel “invisible” in a group. Many of the dominant people are uncomfortable talking or interacting with them because they are afraid of making mistakes or are entrenched in their own prejudices. Ways people in the dominant group make others feel invisible might include many things. Which ones do you do?

- Fail to greet target group members when they arrive in room
- Isolate target group members (e.g. if two African heritage folks in group of ten – right at the start you put them into two different groups rather than having them feel a little safer by putting them into same group).
- Use slang, colloquiums or terms only dominant members are likely to understand
- Do not make eye contact with them because they choose to sit on sidelines or at back of group
- Do not always use a microphone in larger rooms or with larger groups for those who may have trouble hearing? (NO – not everyone can hear you no matter how

strong your voice. If they wear a hearing aid, they need the microphone system to pick up your voice!)
- Speak clearly.
- Rarely provide instructions in simple plain language.
- Always provide instructions both orally and in writing (for hard of hearing and illiterate).
clear (the fewer words, the better).

- What hours is the professional interpreter’s contract for? Be sure the contract goes from the start until the end of your agenda timelines (including a quick debrief at beginning and end of each day).

- Test all the microphone and transmitter combinations.

- Have technical people on site each day and decide how many are needed.

- Ideally, have two professional interpreters for each language for each day (to give each other breaks every 30 minutes).

- Volunteer interpreters can be tricky because they do not do this for a living and it can be extremely difficult to translate quickly in large groups. If you can not pay interpreters, find students in translation programs.

- Consider having interpreters who are willing and able to mediate conflicts on a 1:1 basis (this can come up because of cultural “faux-pas” or mistakes.

**Day of your event**

- Meet and greet interpreters when they arrive and ensure they have a place to set up equipment that is conducive to excellent translation capabilities. Let them know you are thinking about them.

- Explain how facilitation works and let them know they are 1) either not needed in small group work, or 2) may be needed to translate for certain small groups.

- In one big room with many people, there may be overlapping of languages from interpreters (so be sure not to have two interpreters next to each other so they are not talking over each other).

- Ask participants to slow down when talking and use lots of pauses — remind people of translation.

- Facilitators and participants need to speak clearly otherwise it is difficult for interpreters to hear what speaker is saying.

- Allow for one minute of silence each hour to allow those translating and those listening to translation a rest.

- Think about how to get microphones around to everybody quickly.

- Find out which participants can speak which languages. It will help you when it
comes time to putting people into different small groups. For example, put people who can all speak and understand Spanish reasonably well together. Try to make sure you have both unilingual Spanish speakers and others for whom Spanish is not their mother tongue to ensure diversity in the group.

- Arrange a check–in time with interpreters at beginning and end of each day.

### Thirteen Broader Strategies for Ensuring Greater Participation of All Cultures and Languages

What are all the things we need to do as facilitators to work skillfully with multilingual and multicultural groups?

1. **Understand the audience**
   - If you are customizing a presentation or material be sure to interview reps of m/c group
   - Clearly understand who will be in group- unique individual characteristics
   - Learn as much as possible about the cultural make-up of the group. Language abilities, power dynamics...
   - In planning, explicitly ask about diversity issue with clients.
   - If possible interview individuals w/ each member of group before session.
   - Interview & create relationships with member of multicultural participants

2. **Bring in nonverbal learning modes (i.e., bring in language and cultural styles**
   - Color, art, music
   - Plan agenda to include variety of activities that allow for different modes of expression
   - If there are decorations include touches of all groups related to
   - Use multiple ways of presenting material (verbal, visuals, handouts-in advance)

3. **Speak their language**
   - Two interpreters for each language spoken in room
   - Send out agenda at least, in all languages
   - Work ahead with interpreters
   - Welcome sign in all languages of group

4. **Make it easy**
   - Clear agenda
   - All instructions written and simple, plain, short

5. **Ensure full participation for all physical abilities**
   - Think about people who have less mobility. Can they see and participate?
   - Use microphone if any hard of hearing or any doubt.

6. **Include culture specific activities**
• Learn and practice different affirmations
• Culture-specific ice breakers

7. **Acknowledge ignorance**
• Do an activity or discuss challenge of working in second language
• “Coach” dominant group in dynamics of language and culture oppression
• Acknowledge areas of “ignorance”

8. **Prepare yourself emotionally and mentally**
• Prepare well & then be ready to improvise
• Acknowledge your own cultural-biases. Work to minimize them and their impact on the group
• Read stories from other countries

9. **Create space to participate**
• Use round-robin to hear from all-permitting all a “pass”
• Pause every hour for “silence” break (one minute)
• Allow more time! Expand the agenda or eliminate activities
• Check in regularly with leads during process

10. **Create safety**
• Ask people to introduce themselves with relationship questions and time
• Acknowledge up-front the differences we all bring to the process, as well as the commonalities
• Practice constructivist listening
• Let non-dominant group members sit together as much as possible
• Share “life” stories in pairs at beginning of workshop (three to five minutes)
• Ask them how they (non-dominant group) like to participate

11. **Amplify their voices**
• Structure reporting out from small groups to include multicultural people
• Have a speaking order
• Get everyone’s input
• Include opportunities for participation to have some discussions in their native languages
• In planning, propose that a core group, which includes diversity, be formed for the planning
12. Help non-dominant culture establish credibility

- Non-dominant culture “greeters” as people enter room
- As many cultures as possible doing “important” visible jobs during facilitation
- Highlight and acknowledge various strengths to increase respect and visibility
- Create ways for non-dominant participants to contribute their expertise
- Focus the presentations to everyone (spatially)
- Benefit of thinking intentionally about topic
- The multi-cultural factor is always there
- The audience of successful facilitators need guidelines on “how to”
- Greater awareness that I am part of dominant culture and sometimes not

13. Pay attention to non-verbals

- Monitor body language and use of air time to be inclusive
- Pay close attention to communication dynamics and adjust groupings, rules, etc.
- Awareness of non-verbal cues

Understanding and Accommodating both High and Low Context Cultures

What do we mean by high-context and low-context? In a nutshell, cultures that come from more of a high-context background are those who value relationships more than tasks. Those who are lower-context value tasks and output more than relationships. Obviously any individual within a cultural group may have both high- and low-context tendencies so it is not about stereotyping any person or culture. However, it is useful to know that in any meeting or workshop setting you, the facilitator, can make adjustments to accommodate both high- and low-context cultural preferences. People born and raised in the USA, for example, are typically more oriented towards low-context situations and styles. People born and raised in Latin American cultures may have more of a preference to high-context situations. You can learn more about this topic on the internet and by reading the book “Riding the Waves of Culture” by Fons Trompenaars.
Suggestions for High-Context Culture Individuals Working with Low-Context Culture Individuals

When working with low-context individuals

1. Get to the point quickly and efficiently.
2. Make sure meetings have agendas and begin and end on time.
3. Study the objectives and numerical targets (facts and figures) that are important to them.
4. Expect them to make rational arguments and presentations that push for agreement.
5. Don’t read too much between the lines.
6. Don’t use their titles or acknowledge skills/background other than what is directly relevant to the issue being discussed.
7. Don’t be surprised with the lack of socialization before getting down to business. It’s common to begin business after brief introductions. Personal and business agendas are kept separate for the most part.
8. Keep in mind that rewards (e.g., promotions, recognition, etc.) are linked to specific objectives or performance standards.
9. When making a presentation, don’t spend too much time on history.
10. When giving a report, begin with a summary so that you’re main points are presented first.
11. Offer clear, concise and specific instructions and explanations.
12. Discuss disagreements and conflicts openly (but tactfully).
13. Don’t be afraid to give your own opinion.
14. Don’t be put off by what seem like emotional outbursts.
15. Be open and direct rather than expecting them to understand your indirect messages.

When working with high-context individuals

1. Don’t take everything literally. Consider possible alternative meanings.
2. Listen closely and pay attention to nonverbal cues such as body language and tone of voice.

Exercise
High-Context – Low-Context Application

Take a minute to study these suggestions for working with high-context and low-context cultures. Now think of a meeting that you are about to facilitate and name five ways that you can be more inclusive of high-context and low-context preferences in the individuals attending your meeting.
3. Expect meandering that does not seem relevant to the topic at hand.

4. Don’t say, “You’re not getting to the point…”

5. Acknowledge the person’s title, age and background connections — no matter what issue is being discussed.

6. Keep in mind that they will gather information through friends and associates.

7. Get others’ opinions. Ask more than one person about your interpretation of an interaction.

8. Learn about the history and background of the group with which you expect to do business.

9. Remember that personal and business issues are connected. Allow for socialization before getting down to business.

10. Let the conversation flow in meetings, occasionally nudging the process.

11. Try not to dominate the conversation.

12. Allow room for silence within the conversations.

13. Don’t expect them to be as direct as you are in expressing their opinions.

14. Extra politeness and patience will get rewards.

15. If a conflict arises, make space for them to work through it quietly (in an arena other than a meeting/group situation).

References/Sources

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- Reevaluation Counseling, www.rc.org
- The Annie E. Casey Foundation
Barbara MacKay, MS, CPF®, principal of North Star Facilitators, specializes in strategic planning and large group or complex facilitation processes. She is now offering multiple virtual trainings and coaching others to become competent facilitators.

Barbara is currently mentoring facilitators from all over the world and cares deeply about passing on the skills to others so the world becomes a just, peaceful and creative place.

Barbara’s strong interpersonal communication skills and experience allow her to work skillfully with a wide variety of participant perspectives.

Barbara specializes in helping groups participate, problem-solve, plan and make progress in challenging and complex situations. She is focused, respectful, compassionate and present as a facilitator, trainer and coach. Barbara has worked with hundreds of clients from all sectors with her own company since 1995. She provided social, economic and environmental consulting and facilitation services with many indigenous groups throughout Canada from 1981 to 1995.

Barbara is: Certified facilitator and USA trainer with the International Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA Canada); Certified Professional Facilitator (CPF©) and assessor of other facilitators worldwide with the International Association of Facilitators (IAF); Professional Development Strategic Initiative Coordinator for the IAF for four years; was an Adjunct professor with University of Oregon and Portland State University (Not for Profit Management Institute); certified OneSmartWorld™ trainer; trained in Disaster Crisis Intervention for facilitators; certified accelerated learning trainer; trained extensively in: conflict resolution, Constructivist Listening and Cross Cultural Communication and Alliance Building, visioning processes, Mind Mapping™, Behavior styles model “Why Are You Like That?™”, and Herrmann Brain Dominance Instrument (HBDI). She is also trained in and teaches about learning organizations, organizational development mapping for organizations and strategic thinking for leaders.

Graphic design of this module by skilled facilitator colleague, Mari Mizobe Chu (www.marimchu.com) and Ben Marcus. Photography by Ben Marcus.