**Intercultural communication and conflict resolution**

*Intercultural communication* is defined as a set of interactions between people from different cultural backgrounds, which consists on a process of exchanging, negotiating and mediating cultural differences through language, non-verbal gestures and space relationships.

As a competence, intercultural communication involves the ability to be aware of how cultural differences influence communication process and its outcomes. Through this competence we realize the distinctions between people coming from different cultures.

Being competent on intercultural communication may help WBL professionals to:

- Understand how people from different cultural backgrounds behave, communicate, express feelings and perceive the world
- Understand basic cultural differences influencing intercultural communication
- Identify different forms and means of intercultural communication and how to manage them
- Understand the principles and conditions of effective intercultural communication
- Avoid cultural conflicts related with communication

The benefits of managing Intercultural Communication are several: willingness to accept differences, personal growth through increased tolerance, better skills related to dialogue and cooperation, as well as development of a positive attitude towards otherness. On the other hand, applying intercultural communication skills with a group of WBL learners can lead them to other type of benefits, such as:

- Improving verbal and nonverbal communication
- Becoming better in recognizing and undertaking communication behaviours
- Better adaptation to a new environment
- Better understanding of one’s own culture and finding one’s place in a society
- Reduced feeling of anxiety in contacts with members of other cultures
- Learning about customs and habitual behaviours of members of other cultures
- Improving abilities related with intercultural conflict resolution

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**Intercultural conflict resolution styles**

One of the most relevant approximations to understand how people manage intercultural conflicts is the theoretical model proposed by Mitchell Hammer. From his perspective there are four main intercultural conflict resolution styles. This model is based on two core dimensions (as showed in figure 5):

- **Direct** versus **Indirect** approaches to dealing with disagreements
- **Emotionally expressive** versus **Emotionally restrained** patterns for dealing with the affective dimension of conflict interaction

![Figure 5. Model for intercultural conflict resolution styles. Source: Hammer 2005](image)

Hammer theory states that people need to understand and recognise that there are differences in conflict styles across cultural communities, and with that awareness we must learn how to understand from each other and how to face and resolve intercultural conflicts. The four main **conflict resolution styles** are:

- **Discussion style.** It involves the use of a verbally direct path: “say what you mean and mean what you say”. Within this style, when talking about the disagreement, people tend not to throw in their own personal feelings in the discussion. Examples of cultures that typically use this communication style are Northern European cultures and white North Americans.

- **Engagement style.** This style is confrontational and verbally direct using strong verbal and non-verbal communication. In the engagement style, sincerity is judged by the intensity with which each party conveys emotion. Russian and Greek cultures can be used as examples of this communication style.

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- **Accommodation style.** It emphasizes ambiguity in language use in order to help ensure that a conflict does not “get out of control”. That is, maintaining emotional calm and reserve is essential to this style for enabling interpersonal harmony to counter relationally damaging disagreements among the parties. Southeast Asian and Japanese cultures are traditionally related with the use of this communication style.

- **Dynamic style.** This style uses indirect language which is often communicated through third party intermediaries, showing more emotion during a conflict. The credibility of each party in the dispute is gauged by how emotionally expressive and intense they are. Arab cultures are representative of this communication style.

**Discussions and controversial situations due to cultural differences at the workplace**

Conflict is a form of social interaction in which substantive disagreements arise between two or more individuals which gives rise to an affective or emotional reaction, often based on a perception of threat or interference by one or more other parties to the disagreement.

**Conflicts in the workplace** can arise because of the cultural differences in values and norms of behaviour of people from different cultures. People usually act according to their cultural values and norms. The interaction with colleagues and co-workers with a different worldview (**cultural differences**) might make them to interpret behaviours from an opposite standpoint. These situations create misunderstanding and can lead to cultural conflicts in the workplace.

Discussions and controversial situations among colleagues and with employers are common responses to conflicts based on cultural differences. These situations are usually interpreted on the basis of patterned responses, in terms of personal characteristics. But actually, during a conflictual interaction, individuals adapt their responses toward negotiating disagreements and dealing with emotional upset. That is, **individuals respond not to personal patterns but to behavioural orientations based on cultural characteristics.** They use interpretive frames within which individuals make meaningful
messages, and behaviours arise from interaction with the other party. From this perspective, cultural differences at the workplace can be faced by means of providing colleagues and co-workers with the appropriate frame to interpret own and others' behaviours. That is, facilitate the right tools to understand the manner in which contending parties communicate with one another around substantive disagreements and their emotional or affective reaction to one another.

**Dealing with cultural differences**

The role of WBL trainers, tutors and mentors in dealing with cultural differences can be empowered through the mentioned competences of intercultural communication and conflict resolution. Besides, WBL professionals should develop awareness of the differences among intercultural conflict resolution styles, beginning with themselves. Get to know the own intercultural conflict resolution style provides a clear window on how oneself will likely frame and respond to a problem that arises or a conflict that erupts. Recognizing how one’s own approach differs from others then becomes the basis for increased sensitivity to difference and an improved ability to better bridge across these intercultural style patterns of difference. Sensitivity to cultural differences and conflict resolution styles will facilitate the role of WBL professionals in promoting participation of migrants and ethnic minorities in WBL programmes.