



MASTERING

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

One Conversation Can Change Everything

12 Evidence-Based Techniques to Build Trust, Cultural Competence, and Inclusive Leadership at Work

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Mastering Cultural Differences

What if the next sentence you say either strengthens trust—or silently erodes it?

Every day in workplaces around the world, well-intended professionals say things that land differently than they expect.

In moments shaped by cultural differences, power dynamics, stress, microaggressions, or unconscious bias, even small comments can create confusion, defensiveness, or distance.

The good news? Communication is a skill—and skills can be strengthened.

Researchers have found that **psychological safety is the single most important factor in high-performing teams**. Similarly, a large-scale study published in *The Journal of Applied Psychology* found that employees who feel respected report significantly higher engagement and well-being.

Respectful, culturally competent communication is not just “nice to have”—it is foundational to effective leadership development and inclusive leadership.

This guide is grounded in evidence-based research and practical workplace application. These 12 techniques are designed to help you navigate high-stakes conversations, respond to bias without blame, and build trust across cultural and social differences.

Each technique includes a real-world example so you can begin applying it immediately

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Techniques that Work

1. Assume Positive Intent—Then Explain the Impact

Why it works:

Research in conflict resolution shows that conversations are more productive when feedback focuses on behavior and impact rather than character.

How to use it:

Start by acknowledging intent. Then share how the comment affected you or others.

Example:

“I know you likely meant that as a joke, but that stereotype can reinforce harmful assumptions. I wanted to share how it landed for me.”

This approach supports inclusive leadership by reducing defensiveness and preserving dignity.

2. Say “Ouch”

Why it works:

Brief emotional labeling reduces intensity and increases emotional regulation.

How to use it:

Use a simple cue to signal impact without escalating conflict.

Example:

“Ouch—that comment stung. Can we pause for a moment?”

Short, clear signals interrupt harmful patterns while maintaining professionalism.

3. Reframe or Rephrase

Why it works:

Language shapes perception. Framing effects are well documented in behavioral science.

How to use it:

Restate the comment in a more inclusive way.

Example:

Instead of: *“We need someone young and energetic.”*

Reframe: *“We’re looking for someone with fresh ideas and high engagement.”*

This shifts the focus from age-based assumptions to skills and performance.

4. Ask a Clarifying Question

Why it works:

Curiosity reduces defensiveness and promotes dialogue.

How to use it:

Invite reflection without accusation.

Example:

“Can you say more about what you mean by that?”

This technique is especially powerful when navigating cultural differences or ambiguous comments.

5. Repeat and Invite Reflection

Why it works:

Reflective listening is a core component of effective communication and conflict resolution.

How to use it:

Restate what you heard and check for accuracy.

Example:

“It sounds like you’re suggesting that remote employees are less committed. Is that what you mean?”

Often, the speaker reconsiders once they hear their words reflected back.

6. Interrupt and Redirect

Why it works:

Norm interruption changes group dynamics and reduces the spread of biased behavior.

How to use it:

Stop harmful language and shift the conversation constructively.

Example:

“Let’s pause.” I don’t think that assumption serves our discussion. What data do we have?”

Interrupting respectfully reinforces inclusive leadership norms.

7. Appeal to Empathy

Why it works:

Perspective-taking increases prosocial behavior and reduces bias.

How to use it:

Invite the speaker to consider the impact.

Example:

“Imagine being new to the team and hearing that. How might that feel?”

Empathy strengthens cultural competence by expanding awareness beyond one’s own lens.

8. Name the Dynamic

Why it works:

Naming bias reduces its subtle power and increases accountability.

How to use it:

Identify the pattern calmly.

Example:

“That sounds like a stereotype. Can we unpack that?”

Naming is not shaming—it is clarifying.

9. Seek Exceptions

Why it works:

Stereotypes rely on overgeneralization. Highlighting contradictions disrupts cognitive shortcuts.

How to use it:

Ask about exceptions to broad claims.

Example:

“You mentioned that older employees resist change. Have you worked with any who embraced new systems?”

This shifts the conversation from assumption to evidence.

10. Broaden to Universal Human Behavior

Why it works:

Social identity research shows that emphasizing shared humanity reduces intergroup bias.

How to use it:

Frame behavior as human—not group-specific.

Example:

“I’ve seen people of all backgrounds struggle with new technology. Maybe this is more about training than age.”

This approach supports mastering cultural differences without reinforcing division.

11. Use the “I” Voice

Why it works:

“I” statements reduce perceived threat and increase receptivity.

How to use it:

Describe the situation, behavior, and impact from your perspective.

Example:

“When that comment was made in the meeting, I felt uncomfortable because it seemed dismissive.”

This keeps the focus on impact rather than blame.

12. Combine Techniques for Courageous Conversations

High-stakes conversations often require more than one tool.

Example:

“I know you care about building a diverse team (assume positive intent). When you introduced our new hire by focusing only on their background, I felt concerned (I-voice). It may unintentionally minimize their qualifications (name impact). Can we revisit that?”

Combining empathy, clarity, and accountability reflects advanced leadership development and cultural competence.

Why This Matters for Inclusive Leadership

Organizations with inclusive cultures are significantly more likely to report high performance and innovation. Respectful communication strengthens:

- Psychological safety
- Employee engagement
- Trust across cultural differences
- Retention and collaboration

Mastering cultural differences does not mean avoiding difficult topics. It means engaging them skillfully.

Final Reflection

Before your next high-stakes conversation, ask yourself:

- *What assumptions might I be making?*
- *How can I respond in a way that builds trust?*
- *What would inclusive leadership look like in this moment?*

Words are never neutral. They either strengthen connection—or strain it.

Choose wisely.

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Stay Connected

If this guide resonated with you and you're committed to strengthening inclusive leadership, and elevating your leadership development journey:

Let's continue the conversation.

Connect with me and subscribe to my [DEI+ newsletter](#) for research-backed insights, practical communication tools, and strategies to lead with clarity, courage, and cultural competence.

Because better words create better workplaces—and better workplaces change lives.

Quick Reference Guide

12 Techniques for Communicating More Respectfully in the Workplace

#	Technique	When to Use It	Example You Can Say
1	Assume Positive Intent & Explain the Impact	When a comment feels harmful but may not have been intended that way	<i>"I know you likely meant that as a joke, but that stereotype can reinforce harmful assumptions. I wanted to share how it landed for me."</i>
2	Say "Ouch"	When you need a quick, low-escalation signal	<i>"Ouch—that comment stung. Can we pause for a moment?"</i>
3	Reframe or Rephrase	When biased language is used indirectly	<i>Instead of "We need someone young and energetic," say: "We're looking for someone with fresh ideas and high engagement."</i>
4	Ask Clarifying Questions	When you're unsure what someone meant	<i>"Can you say more about what you mean by that?"</i>
5	Repeat & Invite Reflection	When someone may not realize what they said	<i>"It sounds like you're suggesting remote employees are less committed. Is that what you mean?"</i>
6	Interrupt & Redirect	When a conversation is heading in an unproductive direction	<i>"Let's pause. I don't think that assumption serves our discussion. What data do we have?"</i>
7	Appeal to Empathy	When someone may not see the impact	<i>"Imagine being new to the team and hearing that. How might that feel?"</i>
8	Name the Dynamic	When a stereotype or bias is present	<i>"That sounds like a stereotype. Can we unpack that?"</i>
9	Seek Exceptions	When broad generalizations are made	<i>"You mentioned older employees resist change. Have you worked with any who embraced new systems?"</i>
10	Broaden to Universal Human Behavior	When behavior is being tied to a group identity	<i>"I've seen people of all backgrounds struggle with new technology. Maybe this is more about training than age."</i>

11	Use the 'I' Voice	When giving direct feedback about impact	<i>"When that comment was made in the meeting, I felt uncomfortable because it seemed dismissive."</i>
12	Combine Techniques	For high-stakes or leadership moments	<i>"I know you care about building a diverse team. When you introduced our new hire by focusing only on their background, I felt concerned. It may unintentionally minimize their qualifications. Can we revisit that?"</i>

How to Use This Guide

- Choose **one technique** you feel comfortable trying first.
- Practice in **low-stakes conversations** before high-stakes ones.
- Focus on behavior and impact — not labels or character.
- Remember: respectful communication strengthens trust, psychological safety, and inclusive leadership.