

Influencing Cross-culturally via E-mail

Many of us work in global organizations. Because of time and distance factors, we may do a lot of our cross-cultural influencing through company e-mail.

In order to be successful at influencing across cultures, whether face-to-face or electronically, two things are especially important to keep in mind.

1. Your own thinking and experience are culture-based. Culture is like the water the fish swims in—obvious to everyone but the fish. What seems natural, right, and even obvious to you may be experienced very differently by someone operating from another set of cultural assumptions. It is easy to think that we are “normal” and everyone else’s thinking is distorted by their cultural perceptions. This is a particularly difficult attitude to overcome for those of us who operate in what is both our first language and also the language in which we do business.
2. You can never know everything about someone else’s culture, even when you live in another country for significant periods of time. Since you carry your own culture with you everywhere you go, that will affect your view of other cultures. You certainly can’t know very many cultures very deeply. Therefore it is extremely important to know what you don’t know and be prepared to ask for help and coaching from someone who is, preferably, a native of a culture you are working with.

That said, there are a few useful assumptions you can make when influencing those of another culture.

“The world, dear Agnes, is a strange affair.”

Molière

General Suggestions for Influencing Cross-culturally by E-mail

In general, the same guidelines you have learned to apply to any cross-cultural communication are useful for e-mail. Use the following guidelines as you would in any cross-cultural communication:

- Use the other's full name, don't abbreviate unless you have been asked to use another form. In some cultures, titles are important, even in informal correspondence. Notice what the other person uses when signing his or her name and use that to address him or her next time.
- Use a few words of the other's language to say hello, especially in high-context, relationship-based cultures (see next page).
- Check your message carefully before sending it; be sure you are not using any local or idiomatic jargon or non-standard business English without explaining what you mean.
- Provide a brief explanation at the beginning of the message as to what you are hoping to achieve and be specific about what you would like from them in a return message. Don't assume that the other will know what you want.
- Be especially careful to use courteous language; express appreciation at the close of the communication.