



Communicating Across Differences



Communication helps service members build a military culture that incorporates differences, develops multicultural teams, recruits and retains a diverse service, resolves conflict between military employees, reduces turnover, and promotes productivity.

- Most DoD communication involves speaking and writing; also includes nonverbal communication such as body language, graphics, etc.
- At least 75% of each workday is consumed by talking and listening.
- At least 70% of all workplace communication fails to achieve the intended purpose.
- The ability to effectively communicate across differences has a positive impact on communication and ultimately performance.

The key to effectively communicating across differences is KNOWLEDGE:

- First - it is essential we understand and make a conscious effort to overcome the potential contributors to communication problems:
 - Cultural Differences
 - Generational Differences
 - Gender Differences
- Second - it is important to assume that one's efforts will not always be successful and adjust one's behavior appropriately.



Cross Cultural Communication



Process of exchanging, negotiating, and mediating one's cultural differences through language, non-verbal gestures, and space relationships. It is also the process by which people express their openness to a cross-cultural experience. (Gotland University)

- It is interactive and calls for reflective listening.
- If there are significant cultural differences, miscommunication will occur, even with all the goodwill intended.
- Involves exploring ways in which various groups within our society relate to each other.
- Culture may often be at the root of communication challenges and can influence miscommunication.

Effective Cross-Cultural Communication Strategies:

- When things seem to be going badly, stop or slow down and think:
 - What could be going on here?
 - Is it possible I misinterpreted what they said, or they misinterpreted me? *Often misinterpretation is the source of the problem.*
- Active listening can sometimes minimize misinterpretations:
 - Repeating what one thinks they heard can confirm understanding of the communication accurately.



Cross Generational Communication



The ability to successfully form, foster, and improve communication with members of a generation different from one's own (DEOMI).

- Understanding generational differences is critical to creating harmony, mutual respect, and joint effort

Effective Cross-Generational Communication Strategies:

- Understand generational motives”
 - Generation X (1961-1981) - balanced (work/life quality), self-reliant, pragmatic, street smart; can discuss an issue without having to be right
 - Millennial (1982-1996) - fast-paced/multi-tasking, fun-seeking, technology-savvy, appreciates transparency; look for the greater good, almost like “all for one and one for all.”
 - Generation Z (1997-2009) - Flexible work environment, dislikes set timelines and rigid or fixed standards, need immediate response or feedback, can't understand how people can work without technology
- Communication style must adapt to the realities of today, i.e., face-to-face meetings combined with webinar-type technology.
- Look beyond appearances. One who appears “old” isn't brain dead; One who is “a kid” may have a brilliant idea if you take the time to listen.
- Learn from generalizations about others; don't use them to stereotype, oversimplify, or categorize.



Cross Gender Communication



- Cross Gender communication differences and the awareness of barriers plays an important role in communication effectiveness.
- Men and women are NOT the same. However, "different from" is not the same thing as "less than."
- Being unaware of gender-related communication barriers may cause a misinterpretation followed by misguided reactions in communication.
- Miscommunication and conflict can occur when male and female communicators interpret language semantics differently (Rodino, 2005).

Gender Communication Barriers:

- Men interrupt more in conversations and women take turns (Butler & Geis, 1990)
- Women tend to be inclusive in their communication, whereas men exhibit individualistic behavior (Wood & Dindia, 1998)
- Women model non-gendered language more often than men (Blaubergs, 1980)
- Men are prone to linear thought patterns, whereas women favor “web” thinking or the cognitive process of bringing in more details for consideration (Fisher, 1999).

Effective Cross-Gender Communication Strategies:

- Commit yourself to ongoing self-analysis of your perspectives
- Evaluate how you filter and may distort the way you see and communicate with other genders
- Be aware of preferences and behaviors that are gender-based and not the “correct” or only ones



Strategies for Effective Communication



- It's not what you say, but how you say it.
- Don't assume that there is only one right way (your way) to communicate.
- Learn from generalizations about others, but don't use those generalizations to stereotype, oversimplify, or categorize
- Don't assume that breakdowns in communication occur because others are wrong and unyielding
- Listen actively and empathetically
- Stop, suspend judgement, and attempt to look at the situation as an outsider
- Be aware of power imbalances
- Customs and slang language make communications more difficult
- Often what is meant is not what is heard, intended or not
- Stereotyping and generalization cloud the issues
- Become sensitive to a range of verbal and nonverbal behavior.
- Have an open mind to other views and ways of doing things
- There are no universal gestures or cultural patterns
- Address and challenge questionable behavior before it escalates



Strategies for Effective Communication



Focus on developing / improving the following skills:

- **Listening**: Attentive listening is critical to be able to understand meanings, read between the lines and empathize with the speaker.
- **Speaking**: Positive speech such as encouragement, affirmation, recognition, phrasing requests clearly, expressing opinions sensitively will improve communication. Also, avoiding negative or stereotypical comments and innuendo based on gender, race, age, etc., is critical to communication success.
- **Observation**: Noting people's dress, body language, interaction, and behavior is beneficial. Be aware of differences within your own culture and try to understand the roots of behaviors. Asking appropriate and thoughtful questions expands your cross-difference knowledge.
- **Patience**: Through patience, respect is , and cross-difference understanding is enhanced.
- **Flexibility**: Adaptability and open-mindedness is the route to successful communication. Understanding and addressing differences leads to the breaking of barriers, which result in better lines of communication, mutual trust, and creative thinking.

Learning to communicate across differences can eliminate major confrontations and misunderstandings in the workplace!