**Module 5 Handout: Cultural Competence & Communication**

**Key Considerations for Inter-Cultural Communication**

1. **Social Space**

• This is the physical space surrounding people that they consider their “own.” A person may feel discomfort, anger, or anxiety when they feel that someone is in their personal space.

• Ideas about personal space differ from culture to culture. Some people may feel you are standing too close, and you will notice them backing away. Others will feel you are standing too far away. Try not to take offense at these differences.

• Social space is different in different cultures.

• Privacy and personal space are highly valued in some cultures more than others.

1. **Touching**

• Some people might appreciate a friendly touch on the shoulder or a pat on the hand. Other people may not feel comfortable being touched in any way. Take the person’s cues when it comes to touch.

• Greetings: - Handshake (America) vs. kiss on both cheeks (France)

• Touch the top of a child’s head, Okay in the U.S., inappropriate in some parts of Asia, because the head is considered a sacred part of the body.

1. **Volume of Voice**

• Be aware of the tone and volume of your voice. When speaking with someone for whom English is a second language, use moderate volume.

• This is a common communication problem between English speakers and those with limited English. Speaking louder won’t help someone understand. Speaking too loudly may offend or upset a person.

• Pay attention and practice. Sometimes workers are not aware they are doing this.

1. **Timing of Verbal Exchanges and Silences**

• People are expected to speak one after another in an orderly linear fashion.

• In some cultures, interruptions are acceptable.

• Long silences may seem comfortable to people from some Asian cultures. Silence in Greek culture may indicate refusal; in Egyptian culture may indicate consent.

1. **Gestures**

• “Ok” Sign

* In the U.S. it means it’s acceptable.
* In Japan, it means money; in Brazil or Germany, it may reference an offensive swear.

• Winking (facial expression)

* It can indicate a sexual invitation in Latin America.
* Chinese consider it rude.

• Hands on Hip (posture)

* May mean power or pride in the U.S., but anger or challenge in Argentina.

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1. **Eye Contact**

• In the United States, maintaining eye contact is usually considered a sign of interest and respect. In some cultures, like Asia, Latin America, and Africa, extended eye contact can be considered aggressive, challenging, or impolite.

In some cultures, avoiding eye contact may show politeness, not disinterest.

• Follow a person’s cues when it comes to eye contact.

• Try not to feel or act offended if a person does not look you in the eyes when you speak to them.

• Avoiding eye contact can be a sign of respect in some cultures.

• Eye contact conveys equality (i.e., North America).

1. **Smiles**

• Some cultures are more emotionally expressive, so smiles are more common (i.e., the U.S.).

• In the U.S. a smile is used to greet someone, even a stranger. Other cultures shun overt displays of emotion (i.e., Japan).

• Smiling is more a way of communicating, influenced by culture, than an expression of our emotions. Switzerland has some of the highest levels of happiness, yet people often report they do not smile that much.

**Language and Culture**

Other cultural communication tips to consider:

• Ask people how they prefer to be addressed (name, pronouns, titles, etc.)

• Don’t assume. Ask open-ended questions to gain more information.

• Be aware of your own bias when information is delivered in a way you do not expect.