

Exploring Differences in Communication Style

Instructions: Read the quotes below and discuss the questions. You do NOT need to write.

Communication Style: When people communicate with each other, they exhibit a style that is strongly influenced by their culture. Communicative style refers to several characteristics of conversations between individuals: (1) the topics people prefer to discuss, (2) their favorite forms of interaction in conversation, (3) the depth to which they want to get involved with each other, (4) the communication channels (verbal or non-verbal) on which they rely, and (5) the level of meaning (factual versus emotional) to which they are most attuned."

- In what ways do you think your culture influences your communication style?
- Have you ever noticed a big difference in conversation style cultures of other Latin American countries? What was different?

Discussion Topics: "When they first encounter another person, Americans engage in the kind of conversation they call small talk. The most common topic of small talk is the weather. Another very common topic is what the speakers do, meaning, what jobs they have. They may discuss their current physical surroundings like the room or building they are in, the area where they are standing, or whatever is appropriate. Later, after the preliminaries, Americans may talk about past experiences they have both had, such as watching a particular TV program, seeing a certain movie, traveling to a certain place, or eating at a particular restaurant."

"Americans generally avoid some topics because they are considered too personal: politics, religion, salary, how much somebody paid for an item, bodily functions, sexual behavior, and body weight."

- In your culture what are the preferred topics of small talk between people who are meeting for the first time?
- What topics of conversation would be considered off-limits or "too personal" for casual conversations among acquaintances in your culture?

Forms of Interaction: "The typical conversation between two Americans takes a form that can be called *repartee*. No one speaks for very long. Speakers take turns frequently, often after speaking only a few sentences. Americans tend to be impatient with people who take long turns. Such people are said to talk too much. Many Americans have difficulty paying attention to someone who speaks more than a few sentences at a time. Americans admire conciseness, or what they call getting to the point."

"Americans engage in far less ritual interaction than do many other cultural groups. Only a few ritual interchanges are common: *How are you? - I'm fine, thank you. // Nice to meet you. - Yeah, nice meeting you too.*"

Americans are generally impatient with long ritual interchanges about family members' health - common among Latin Americans - or invocations of a supreme being's goodwill - common among Arabs - considering them to be a waste of time and doubting their sincerity. Of course, people from elsewhere often doubt the sincerity of the Americans' ritual interactions: *They always ask me how I am, but they don't listen to what I say. They don't really care how I am.*"

- How would you describe Costa Rican interaction forms?
- What are some examples of ritual interaction in Costa Rican culture?

Depth: "In the United States the idea of compartmentalized friendships is accepted as natural and positive."

That is, instead of having friends with whom they do everything, Americans often have friends with whom they engage in specific activities. For example they have go-out-to-dinner friends, exercise friends, and friends from whom they might ask advice. Notice that most of these friendship relationships entail doing something together. Simply being together and talking is often not enough for Americans. It seems pointless or a waste of time.”

- How similar or different are friendship relationships between typical Costa Ricans?

Verbal Communication: “Americans depend more on spoken words than on nonverbal behavior to convey their messages. They think it's important to be able to speak up and say what's on your mind. They admire people who have a moderately large vocabulary and who can express themselves clearly and cleverly, but they distrust people who are, in their view, excessively articulate. A person who uses a large vocabulary is likely to be considered over-educated and perhaps snobbish (arrogant). A person who is extremely skillful at presenting verbal messages is usually suspicious: *Is he trying to sell me something? What's she up to? He's a smooth talker, so you'd better watch out. Who is she trying to impress?* This aversion to smooth talkers may be related to the general American aversion to higher education and to well educated people. Someone who has too much education or thinks too much arouses suspicions and even distaste among Americans.”

- What is your reaction to this section? Why do you think Americans distrust or dislike someone who appears to be well educated?

Gesturing: “Americans use a moderate amount of gesturing. They use hand and arm motions to add emphasis and clarity to what they're saying, but they will not generally use a gesture in which the elbows go above the level of the shoulders. In most Americans' eyes, Italians, Greeks, and some Latin Americans are likely to be considered too emotional or hot-tempered because of the vigorous gestures that often accompany their talk. On the other hand, Americans are likely to regard people who keep their hands and arms still or very close to their bodies while they talk as too stiff, too formal, or uptight.”

- What differences have you noticed about the use of body language among cultures?
- According to the description you just read, how do you think Costa Rican body language would be regarded by typical Americans?