



Aligning intent and impact

By LueRachelle Brim-Atkins

Crosscultural exchanges provide inexhaustible opportunities for cultural blunders. Misalignment between intent and impact is one of the most frequently occurring sources of problems among co-workers.

A speaker tries to communicate one thing (intent), but a listener experiences something quite different (impact). Both the speaker and the listener are sending and receiving data filtered through their experiences, backgrounds, biases, values, beliefs, and stereotypes. This explains how one incident can be perceived so differently by different people.

When the listener has a negative reaction to the message sent, she or he has to decide whether to confront the speaker. In making this decision, the listener must consider how important the relationship is, how important the issue is, and the consequences of not giving feedback (for example, will this continue to happen and how will the listener feel about him or herself if he or she ignores the situation).

Once the decision has been made to respond to the cultural blunder, we recommend using strategies that are based on the premise that both parties want a workable and truthful relationship in which we seek to understand and to be understood. The strategies are far more effective if both parties are not in the conversation to "win."

Five-step process for giving feedback

The following five-step process can help align intent and impact and enhance communication.

1. Assume positive intent (or at

least no ill-intent). The speaker may be unconsciously incompetent.

2. Determine an appropriate *relationship-building* response. For example, ask for clarification, using "what" rather than "why" to minimize defensiveness. *I'm not sure what you meant by that.*

3. Ask if you can give the speaker some feedback on the statement(s) or incident(s). If you are uncomfortable giving feedback, you might simply say, *This is difficult for me, but do you mind if I tell you how your statement affected me?*

4. Using I-messages, clearly communicate the impact on you as the receiver. For example, *When (describe the behavior), I feel _____ because _____. I'd prefer that you (describe the desired change in behavior).*

5. Be prepared to help the speaker see more appropriate ways to communicate his or her intent.

Three-step process for receiving feedback

If someone gives the gift of feedback, they obviously care about the speaker or the relationship. If they did not care, they might simply allow the blunders to continue. When you're receiving feedback, we recommend the following process.

1. Pay attention to your intent. What are you really trying to say?

2. Apologize, ask for clarification if you don't understand, then paraphrase your understanding of the feedback. For example, *I'm really sorry. Thank you for telling me how my actions affected you. Help me understand this better. You're saying that when I said _____, you felt _____.*

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Page 1

3. Restate your intent and, if necessary, ask for help in formulating a more appropriate way of communicating your intent.

It is critical that the speaker and the listener remember that communicating with people from different backgrounds and perspectives can be a complicated process. Everyone makes mistakes. We want to be judged by our *intent* (*You know I'm a good person*), but tend to judge others by their *impact* on us (*That was insensitive and you should have known better*).

Using the recommended strategies for giving and receiving feedback will help individuals align intent and impact, strengthen their cross-cultural communication, and allow them to move beyond their cultural blunders.

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Cultural Diversity at Work Journal,
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Page 2

An analysis of a statement.

Statement: *We want more people with disabilities here, but we don't want to lower our standards. We hired two, and they didn't work out. We're hesitant about hiring any more of them.*

Probable intent: We want to improve the diversity of our work group but we've had some unfortunate experiences.

Possible impact: All people with disabilities are being judged by the lack of success of two people. (Does the speaker know *why* the other two people were unsuccessful? When individuals from the dominant group are unsuccessful, is the speaker hesitant about hiring any more of them?)

Relationship-building response: We are referring qualified applicants who also happen to have some disabilities. Did you conduct an exit interview or do any research to determine why the other employees were unsuccessful here?

Restatement by speaker to reflect real intent: We are really interested in bringing more diversity to our workforce. Unfortunately, we have not been successful at bringing in employees who have disabilities. Can we look at what we've done wrong in the past and come up with a better plan?