

ELEMENTS OF A SUCCESSFUL EXCHANGE

What to do to ensure that your international exchange or project has the broadest possible positive impact on your participants, community and sister city

Before You Go Abroad

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After the Exchange – Follow Up

Key Aspects of Cross-Cultural Communication

The Web of Interaction Between Culture and Development

The U.S. and Japan—Opposites Attract

Thoughts on Cultural Differences

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Before You Go Abroad

1. Inform yourself about any visa or medical requirements. Applying for visas and getting the proper vaccinations should often be taken care of several months in advance. Similarly, make all travel arrangements months in advance so you can be sure of seating availability and then confirm the final schedule with all travelers and hosts.
2. Be certain that financial responsibilities have been clearly arranged. Who will be paying for food expenses? Will you be expected to pay for any inter-city transportation? If the hosts are taking care of food costs, does this include alcohol? What about travel insurance?
3. Program participants represent their community. If the exchange is for an internship, make sure you have a thorough screening and fair selection process. Some interview questions should be designed to test the prospective interns' basic cross-cultural competencies. Role-plays of actual situations that might arise during home-stays are helpful. For professional or thematic exchanges, the best candidate should have language skills (as much as possible), cross-cultural experience (or competency) and knowledge of the subject area. Communities need to periodically re-evaluate their selection process to ensure there is no systematic bias in favor of a particular class, gender, ethnic or other group.
4. Make sure that hosts and participants communicate concerning the schedule and arrangements for the exchange. The hosts should send the preliminary schedule in advance so the visitors can prepare appropriately. Accommodations and expectations should be clearly discussed. If someone expects a four star hotel and gets a two star hotel instead, he/she might be angry or disappointed – *expectations are as important as the actual experience in determining peoples "enjoyment" of an experience*. If something will be expected of participants during their home-stay, such as helping with chores, this should also be explained. Make sure to double-check all arrangements – there are often misunderstandings regarding whether plans are "tentative" or "final." In extreme cases, sister city delegations have arrived at the airport expecting to be met, when their hosts viewed the plans as still needing to be confirmed.
5. It is the responsibility of all program participants to communicate with each other prior to the exchange concerning any particular professional or personal requests. Only frank, respectful, reciprocal communication can ensure that the wishes of all sides are met. Examples of requests that (if not communicated) can cause tension or disappointment later: desire for free time to do a short side trip; vegetarian preferences or other dietary restrictions; desire to do a home-stay instead of staying in a hotel; desire to visit a school, a particular business, or meet the mayor (this is a common expectation of high-level city officials from abroad that is not always met by U.S. hosts).
6. Another possible area of misunderstanding is when one side has a set expectation about their visitors or host being male or female, senior (instead of young), from a particular ethnic or racial group, or free of disabilities. All program participants should be as proactive as possible, respectfully educating and informing those who need it, to reduce the chance of this type of misunderstanding.

SCI staff once avoided a potential problem by explaining to a group of visiting Japanese city officials that the top person in their host organization was a younger woman. The Japanese officials assumed that it was an older man, who was actually the number two-person in the organization. After repeated, gentle reminders, the leader of the Japanese delegation finally understood that he

needed to give their gift of appreciation to the top-ranking person, who happened to be “young” (in their minds) and female.

7. Learn everything about your own culture/community. All cultures are a highly complex mixture of ancient and modern influences – and constantly change over time. As a result, each of us has huge “blind spots” about our own culture. Our knowledge, even about our own nation and community, will always be incomplete. That is why all participants and hosts should make sure to be prepared for their cross-cultural encounter by learning more about the political, socio-economic and cultural systems of their own nation and community. Be prepared to explain your culture.
8. Reciprocally, learn as much as you can about the country/city you will be visiting—study the language diligently, and read about the history, geography, religion, economic situation, and so on. *The more knowledge and language ability you have before you go, the more you will be able to learn about the new culture.* In addition, your orientation, for all those traveling abroad, should include detailed learning about issues of safety, protocol (including awareness of social hierarchies, appropriate gift giving, etc.), and sanitation.
9. Gather useful materials before you travel. Program participants should visit their city hall and other major institutions in their community to pick up maps, copies of their city’s annual report (and budget) and city plan (excellent for discussion), city brochures and videos, and so on. Other materials to gather are cultural artifacts, excellent photography books, and professional materials related to the theme of the exchange.
10. Make sure you properly communicate with all the key people in your community—your mayor, city liaison to sister cities, the chair of your sister city program, your local news media, and professional organizations related to the theme of your exchange. Distribute press releases about your trip and hand-deliver them to key people at city hall and in your local media. *Articles in newspapers do not happen by accident. Make sure to get the word out!*

During the Exchange

1. Most people enjoy the novelty of a cross-cultural encounter, at least initially. The first few days in a new culture usually go by quickly. Some people stay on this “high” throughout their international stay; others start to sour on the culture, the country or some aspect of their program until they cannot wait to go home. While there is no guaranteed way to make sure everyone, including hosts and visitors, has a positive experience, there is a process that makes it possible for each side to express their needs and wishes, lessening the chance of misunderstanding. Hosts and visitors need to proactively schedule formal time for feedback about their program and discussion of cross-cultural differences. This needs to be put on the schedule with a comfortable time frame and not left to chance. Some programs schedule a few minutes of “feedback” at the end of each day. Don’t forget—even if things seem to be going well, problems could be developing under the surface.
 - ✓ At the beginning of the exchange, go over the schedule together and give everyone a chance to comment on it. Important individual needs or wishes that have not yet been taken into account should be addressed, keeping in mind that differences in cultures, personnel or financial limits of program participants may preclude certain options. Also have a preliminary discussion about key elements of the different cultures, such as decision-making style, differences in the governmental systems, and typical roles and customs with regards to hosts and guests, staying in a home, protocol for meeting senior officials, and so on.

- ✓ Halfway through the exchange, the hosts and visitors should come together again for a formally scheduled feedback and discussion session. (Some groups go over the schedule each day, with accompanying mini-feedback sessions.) Get everyone to comment on what has gone well and what they most enjoyed, as well as what has been difficult for them. Look over the remainder of the schedule to see if any adjustments need to be made to accomplish the goals of the group and individual participants. Deeper or new areas of cross-cultural learning should be explored with one person serving as a facilitator.
- ✓ At the end of the exchange, program participants should again gather for a review of what was accomplished, a look to the future, and a summation of key elements of their cross-cultural interaction. While everyone can still meet face to face, have a formal discussion session to review and evaluate the program and set goals and design an action plan for the future. As appropriate, a memorandum of understanding or the outline of a paper about cross-cultural differences could be drawn up.

Remember: It is not enough to just bring people together. Cross-cultural differences in terms of decision-making style or communication style must be integrated into the discussion format. For example, Japanese people tend to be uncomfortable with the casual (people speaking up individually and often interrupting) style of discussion Westerners often use. Without a generous amount of time to respond (Japanese are more comfortable with silence before speaking than Westerners are), the burning, highly useful question of a Japanese participant may never be asked. Another common difference is between direct versus indirect communication. Westerners often find the use of intermediaries or indirect communication to be rude. Japanese people are more comfortable with indirect communication, particularly if it helps avoid confrontation or makes it possible for a person who is “shy,” fearful of losing face, or nervous about contradicting their seniors to express their real thoughts to the group.

2. Study the language of your host country every day. You should be learning at least five words each day that you are in the new culture. By showing an active interest in the language of your hosts, you will be showing a fundamental respect for their culture, and recognizing the important role that language plays in forming our perception of the world. Also, even if your hosts speak your language fluently, you should not, ultimately, be dependent on translators or “handlers” who often play a key role in guiding the exposure of visitors. Only by learning the language will you be in a position to gather your own data about the culture. *Actively trying to learn the language of the host country, whether one is “good at languages” or not, is a minimum requirement of a “global citizen.”* It is also the most practical way to succeed in international business, diplomacy, romance and development cooperation.
3. Do not assume that you are talking about the same thing. Words and concepts that seem to have the same label may have completely different meanings. Also, be mindful of words and concepts which do not exist in the other culture(s). Take time for questions. Frequent pauses are mandatory to give non-native speakers a chance to learn new vocabulary or the history (shared context) behind a word, event, or program. Reviewing key vocabulary prior to a discussion helps. Also, be prepared to explain words and concepts using analogies, pictures, or stories, which will likely be much clearer to a non-native speaker.

A “town clerk” in Zimbabwe is similar to a city manager in the U.S. – the number two official in a city. In the U.S., a “town clerk” has the connotation of a staff person of average rank.

A “mansion” in Japan is a small, nice condominium.

The term “AIDS” meant nothing to the people living in a rural area of a West African country. Realizing this, an African man repackaged an AIDS awareness campaign funded by outsiders in his country, giving the disease a name the equivalent of “deep hole.” This change to more culturally appropriate terminology made it possible to effectively communicate the dangers involved with the spread of AIDS to the people of his tribe.

The common terms “volunteerism,” “business,” or “yes” can mean very different things to people from the U.S., Russia, or Japan, depending on the context or shared history of the individual speakers and listeners.

4. There are three broad types of international interaction: international exchange, for the purpose of developing deeper cross-cultural understanding and interaction; international business, for the purpose of gaining profit or an exchange of mutually desired services or products; and international (development) cooperation, which aims at long-term, environmentally sustainable improvements in the quality of life (e.g. health care, income generation, improved nutrition, spread of educational opportunities) in a target population.
5. Be fair and open-minded as you observe another culture. Always ask yourself: Was my country or culture like this at any time in the past? It is easy to forget that our own countries have experienced painful periods of economic dislocation, ethnic conflict, mismanagement, or even civil war in the past.

Keep in mind that every country is a “developing” country. Every country has intractable social, economic, and political problems that are constantly changing over time (although the resources available to address these problems vary greatly from country to country and, within countries, from region to region, and neighborhood to neighborhood). There is good and bad everywhere. We can all learn from each other.

If you adopt this as your fundamental attitude and strict practice when interacting with people from other cultures, you will make friends easily, learn a great deal about the diversity of cultures on earth, find ways to be genuinely helpful to others, and learn about practical ideas that can help solve problems in your own society, neighborhood, or family.

Be proud of your culture, and be able to explain your culture to others when appropriate. But always maintain a fundamental respect for and interest in learning more about other ways of living, working, worshipping, and playing.

6. Ask yourself if what you have experienced or observed is generally representative of the whole, or only part of the truth. Keep in mind the tremendous socio-economic, regional, and ethnic diversity of every nation. Was the family you stayed with during your trip a “typical” family? Maybe. Maybe not. Further research and observation on your part may be necessary.

After the Exchange—Follow Up

Your exciting international adventure has come to an end. But just like coming back from a wonderful vacation or a great conference, you wonder how you will be able to sustain the energy and ideas that were generated from your trip. Here are some suggestions:

1. Monitor your reentry. “Reentry” is a formal term used by experts in the cross-cultural exchange field to describe various psychological, physical, and spiritual changes that a person experiences when returning, after an intensive cross-cultural experience, to his/her native, familiar culture. Be aware that you will continue to process your cross-cultural experience, sometimes for years to come. In extreme cases, various forms of depression or disorientation will take extensive sorting out. With some people, these complex changes, discarding, adapting or adopting new insights and ideas over months or years, results in the gradual emergence of a truly bilingual or bicultural person who is equally adept in both cultures, comfortable with his/her own preferences with and ties to each culture.

Some ways to monitor or guide your reentry include: keeping a journal of your experiences, putting together a photo album, networking with people who have had similar intensive cross-cultural encounters, doing further learning to see if what you experienced is generally true about the culture, and following up with your contacts by writing thank you letters, organizing new exchanges, and researching and writing a comprehensive report on your trip to share with other organizations.

2. Make sure you share your experience with others in your community. Contact your local newspaper and television stations, visit your mayor, speak at local civic clubs and churches, and make nationwide / worldwide contacts, as appropriate, to make sure your experience and ideas have a wider impact than just an enjoyable trip for one person.
3. Use your expertise to help develop new, creative programs and regular, sustainable exchanges. Relationships need challenges. They also need a somewhat predictable core area of support, attention, and activity. Do not forget about e-mail, satellite television and other telecommunication technologies as an inexpensive, increasingly interactive way to keep contacts alive.

Key Aspects of Cross-Cultural Communication

by Max Saito

High and Low Context Cultures

Anthropologist Edward T. Hall developed a means to explain cultural differences and similarities – high context and low context cultures. When communicating, people from high-context cultures tend to seek meaning from situations, implications, and what is *not* being said. They tend to be rather indirect when expressing their thoughts, and metaphors are often used. Information is rather implicit; people understand the information without verbally expressing it. This concept is just one tool for analyzing cross-cultural situations.

On the other hand, people from low-context cultures seek meaning from the exact words that have been expressed. In a low-context culture, to a certain extent, if something is not said or expressed explicitly, it is not communicated. People from a low-context culture may seek information by asking many questions, while people from a high-context culture may seek information by listening silently. Furthermore, there is a general tendency for men to practice low-context cultural patterns more frequently than women.

For example, Taro, a Japanese student (high-context culture) was “silent” during many meals and activities when he was with his host family in the U.S. (low-context culture). It was his way to be respectful to his host family, and he had a wonderful time during his home-stay. His U.S. host family, however, felt that Taro was unfriendly and that he was difficult to talk to because he did not express his thoughts. Clearly, Taro was expressing his feelings in his own way; however, cultural differences prevented both from understanding the situation.

Dr. Claire B. Halverson categorizes cultural variations as follows:

Various Cultures

High-Context <-----> Low-Context

<u>High</u>	<u>Medium</u>	<u>Medium</u>	<u>Low</u>
Latin American Asian African American Indian Hispanic	Greek French Italian Spanish	North American	German Swiss German Scandinavian
Women Rural			Men Urban

* Source: Claire B. Halverson, Ph.D., *Effective Multicultural Teams* (Brattleboro, Vermont: Program in Intercultural Management, School for International Training, 1991). Copyright by Dr. Claire B. Halverson.

Nonverbal Behavior

Personal distance. People have different preferences about how close or far they stand or sit from each other. When having a daily conversation, North Americans may prefer to have about an arm's length between them, while Japanese prefer a slightly longer distance. People from Spain and Latin America often prefer shorter distance than people from the U.S. (Stewart /Bennett, 1991).

Friendly or Unfriendly. Although many people from various cultures smile when they are happy, there are differences with regards to when and how to smile. In France, people may not smile when saying "Hi" to someone they do not know well. There are also regional (New England and the South in the U.S., for example) and city/urban differences.

Verbal Behavior

Too Talkative or Too Silent? In some cultures, people appreciate a talkative person, while in other cultures people perceive a talkative person as shallow-minded. Research indicates that on average a Japanese person speaks for 3.5 hours a day, while it is 7.0 hours a day for an average North American (Barnlund, 1989). In some cultures, silence is a sign of respect and self-discipline, while it is a sign of disrespect and discomfort in other cultures.

Nonverbal Thinking Versus Verbal Thinking. Some people prefer to think aloud; to express their thoughts while thinking. On the other hand, some prefer to be silent when thinking and express their opinions when they reach a conclusion.

Interruption or Active Listening. The timing of when it is appropriate to speak or not to speak varies across cultures. When having conversations, Californians tend to pause for a shorter time than Midwesterners or New Englanders (Tennen, 1990). North Americans tend to pause for a shorter time than Japanese (Saito, 1994), while Brazilians tend to pause for a shorter time than their Northern neighbors (Adler, 1991). Due to these cultural differences, some people end up dominating conversations, while some others end up playing "silent" roles. In English classes, for example, Latin American students sometimes appear, to their Asian classmates, to be monopolizing class time; to the Latin Americans, the Asian students, by not saying much, might seem uncooperative.

Assertiveness, Aggressiveness and Hostility. People have different perceptions and feelings about the same comments expressed in the same context. In the U.S., women often express less assertive comments than men (Wood, 1994). Many studies indicate that from a North American viewpoint, French people make more critical comments than people from the U.S. African-Americans perceive some comments as being assertive, while some Americans with European cultural backgrounds feel the same comments are aggressive or hostile.

Cultural Variability

Geert Hofstede developed the following means to analyze cultures by studying middle managers in large multi-national organizations. Cultural variability indicates that people from different countries have certain national characteristics. Although individual, gender, and ethnic differences exist in all countries, the concept of cultural variability is a useful tool that can help avoid unnecessary cultural misunderstandings.

Power Distance. Power distance indicates the extent to which people value certain social factors that determine one's rightful place and behavior in society. Some examples of power-distance factors are gender, social class, age, ethnicity and profession. For instance, Filipinos might value formality more than North Americans when having a meeting. To be respectful, Filipinos appreciate a quiet voice and modest attitude, which are in accordance with a person's class, age, title, and the like.

Uncertainty Avoidance. This indicates the extent to which people value formal rules and feel uncomfortable with uncertain and ambiguous situations. For instance Japanese people might highly appreciate a meeting in which all details and even outcomes are clear to every participant. They might not like surprises; if they occur they may feel the meeting was poorly organized. North Americans, on the other hand, tend to value creativity, spontaneity and flexibility. People in Hong Kong have a (relatively) high tolerance for uncertainty, while people in Greece are less comfortable with ambiguous situations.

Individualism and Collectivism. People from individualistic cultures, such as the U.S. and Australia, often value independence, individual choices and decisions, while people from collectivist cultures, like Peru or Pakistan, tend to value cooperation, harmony, and personal relations. The phrase "I think..." is often used by people from more individualistic societies; "We think..." would tend to be heard more in collectivist cultures.

Masculinity. Masculinity indicates the extent to which people value the concept that gender determines a person's roles, professions, behaviors, attitude, and so on. In Japan, gender plays a strong role. In Turkey, social class and profession may be a more significant determining factor than gender. Denmark and Sweden rank low on the "masculinity" scale (as a determining factor in the culture), while Italy and Venezuela rank high.

The Web of Interaction Between Culture and Development

Successful partnerships, exchanges and projects depend on a deep understanding of as many of these factors as possible



The U.S. and Japan—Opposites Attract

The U.S. and Japan make an interesting case study of cross-cultural interaction – in many ways the two cultures are direct opposites. The U.S. is a huge, spacious country with a diverse population and a short (immigrant) history. Japan is a small, crowded country with a long history and is, with regards to culture, religion, race, and ethnicity, one of the most homogeneous nations in the world. The U.S., in many respects, is orientated around the rights, needs, and desires of the individual, while Japanese society is an intricate web of dependencies, loyalties and hierarchies orientated around a strong group ethic. Here are more examples:

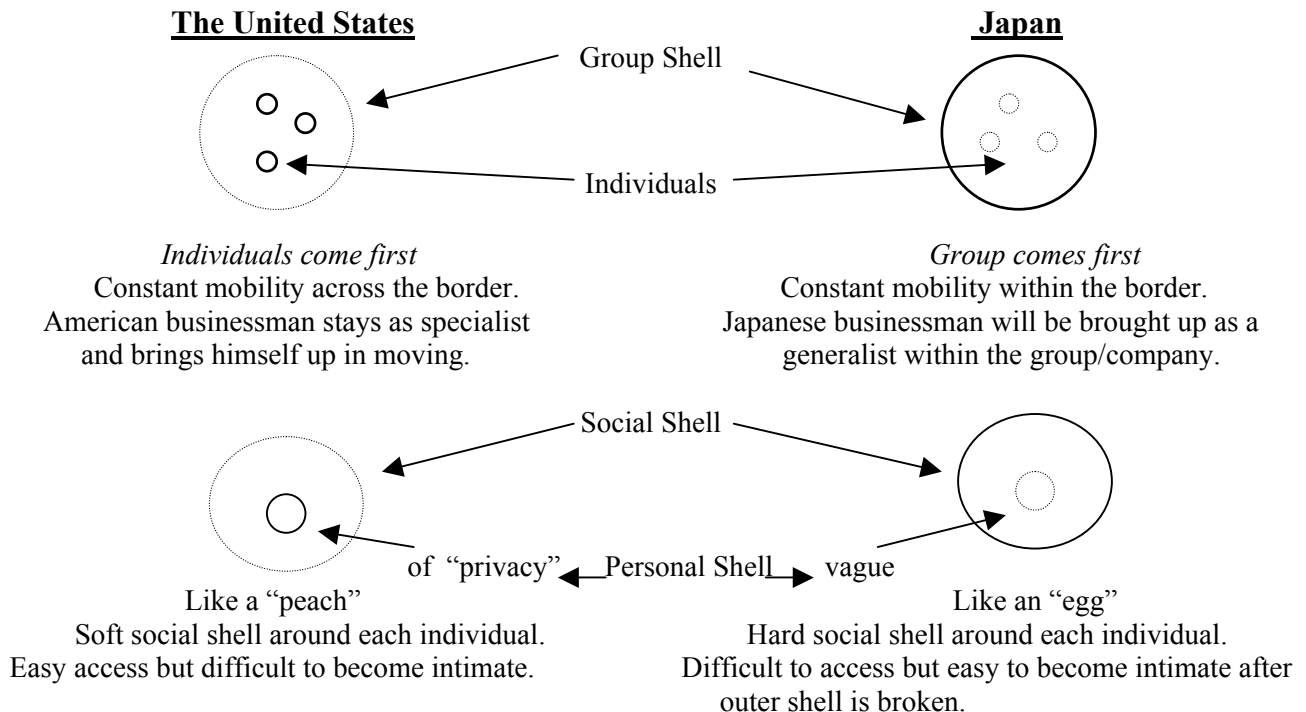
The United States

- ◇ More informal/“Call me Dave.”
- ◇ “The squeaky wheel gets the grease.” (individual needs/being assertive valued)
- ◇ “Frontier spirit”/independent family farm (and tradition of volunteerism)
- ◇ Traditional suspicion, from colonial times, of “big government”
- ◇ Extreme diversity in quality of and access to educational services/flexible system
- ◇ Logical, verbal, more direct communication style important
- ◇ Americans drive on the right and read horizontally from left to right

Japan

- ◇ More formal/“I’m Mr. Saito.”
- ◇ “The nail that sticks up will get hammered down.”
- ◇ Traditional society: intensive rice cultivation as a group/village
- ◇ Fundamental respect for elite government bureaucrats (Confucian tradition)
- ◇ High level of equality and conformity in the educational system/top down
- ◇ Non-verbal (“belly to belly”/role of silence), indirect communication important
- ◇ Japanese drive on the left and read vertically from right to left

Ken Mukai (1991) developed the following interesting models for viewing fundamental differences between Americans and Japanese with regards to group versus individual orientation:



Culture—The Invisible Hand

by Max Saito

Culture is like an invisible hand. People tend to behave according to what the invisible norms of culture dictate. Some elements of culture are visible. However, there are many very powerful invisible elements. Consequently, it is difficult to define what culture is. There are over 600 definitions of what culture is (including the definition below by Samover and Porter). Many scholars disagree over what exactly it consists of – some say culture is everything, while others say culture consists of art, music, and sports.

It is extremely hard to isolate and discuss what one is unaware of, as with the “culture iceberg” below; however, it is a rewarding and essential task. Grassroots level promotion of international peace and mutual trust begins with re-thinking and questioning one’s own common sense and fundamental beliefs and values, while trying to understand that of other cultures. It is sometimes dangerous to trust one’s intuition, common sense, or what comes naturally in a cross-cultural encounter. What appears to be common sense may not be for others. Difficulties may arise, making one person or the other in the cross-cultural encounter feel uncomfortable, annoyed, irritated or upset. At the same time, however, these difficulties are great opportunities to deepen cross-cultural understanding and learning.

One Way to Define Culture

by Larry A. Samover and Richard E. Porter

“We define culture as the deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving. Culture can therefore include everything from rites of passage to concepts of the soul.”

The Culture Iceberg

The “Culture Iceberg,” developed by Gary Weaver (see below) of American University, is a useful model to show the distinction between more “visible” and “invisible” aspects of culture.

Visible (In Awareness)

sports * architecture * language * clothing * material objects * rituals * food * family structure * law

Invisible (Out of Awareness)

knowledge experience beliefs values attitudes meanings hierarchies religion notion of time cleanliness spatial relations concept of the universe concept of charity/assistance interpretations, understanding and practice of leadership, partnership, friendship, management, diversity, love child rearing filial piety pursuit of leisure notion of sin definition of sanity concept of justice logic courtship practices superstitions attitude toward death attitude toward work notion of privacy class/caste facial expressions/body language emotions connotations of certain words smell taste color notion of beauty politeness/rudeness informality/formality spontaneity assertiveness meaning of marriage loyalty honesty

Possible Meanings of “Yes”

- *I agree.*
- *I mostly agree.*
- *I partially agree.*
- *I hear what you're saying.*
- *I don't understand. She speaks too fast.*
- *He is wrong, but I should be respectful. He is a senior boss.*
- *I don't agree, but I should be polite—I think she wants to hear “yes.”*
- *I don't agree, but we can resolve our differences later; we can change the plan later.*
- *I'm deeply embarrassed by this discussion. What they said was very rude. What a strange culture!*