GUIDE: Communication and capability to respond

'Culture is communication and communication is culture. People cannot act or interact at all in any meaningful way except through the medium of culture.'[1]

Effective client service delivery depends on good communication at all levels. An organisation must communicate as effectively, succinctly and inclusively as possible to access and address community and client needs.

Does the service:

- know the communication preferences of your target clients?
- communicate information about your service in ways that people who speak English as a second language will understand?
- have the capacity to modify or adapt communication content and style to meet the needs of diverse client groups?
- involve staff with the knowledge and capacity to manage data such as names which may vary across cultures?
- ensure staff can access and use certified interpreters and translators when required?
- have the ability to respond to clients from a culturally diverse background?

A common assumption is that engaging with culturally diverse communities merely involves translation of existing materials into another language. However, good communication involves a lot more thought. Providing frontline information in another language enables the organisation to talk about its services in a cultural context.

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[1] Edward T.Hall, The Silent Language, 1966

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Ways people communicate

What	How	Examples
Verbal	Communicated through words, either written or spoken	Face-to-face conversations, group discussions, interviews, radio, television, phone calls, letters, reports, notes, email
Non-verbal	Communicated through what isn't spoken	Gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, proximity, touching

People from culturally diverse backgrounds learn different communication norms in spoken and non-verbal forms. There is potential for misunderstanding when communication formed in one cultural context is interpreted in another.

Common barriers to good communication include

Barrier	More details	Example
Stereotyping or prejudice	It is easy to stereotype people based on their ethnicity, appearance or background. These stereotypes do not capture or reflect the diversity of the community	When designing services *'Chinese people only like to communicate on WeChat'*
Language differences	People who speak different languages may be challenged in reaching a shared understanding	Key words may have very different meanings e.g. *'Take a seat outside'* (Person picks up a chair and carries it outside and sits down)

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Barrier	More details	Example
The use of jargon, slang, acronyms	Australians are notorious for their use of informal language. This can be very difficult to understand for people who have learned British or American English or people speaking English as a second language	Giving directions: *'Head down here to Woollies, then hang a right at the servo … can't miss it!'*
Off-limit topics	Some topics are 'off limits' in different cultural contexts. To attempt to discuss them may be considered inappropriate, rude or confusing	Gender taboos in relation to who can talk about sexual health and in what context
Emotional 'noise'	Emotions can get in the way of our capacity to listen and communicate. People from different cultures may be nervous about engaging in a system they do not understand and have preconceived ideas based on previous (potentially negative) experiences	Police are among the most corrupt public officials in many countries in the world. For newly arrived migrants from many contexts, speaking to a police officer may have different emotional implications

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Lack of shared experience	To make sense of the world, we all interpret meaning based on our prior experience. People from different cultures may have very different lived experience	In Vietnam, a 'National Park' visit on the weekend means a social outing to a manicured urban park, with food vendors, where you wear your 'good clothes'. An invitation for 'a walk in the national park' in Australia has a different meaning.