



Guide to effective communication with speakers of other languages

Part of the excitement and pleasure of hosting a shadow placement is the opportunity to work alongside someone of another nationality and learn about their culture. Despite this, adapting to cultural differences can be a challenge; misunderstandings arise because we have different expectations. We risk judging behaviours incorrectly because we are limited by our own cultural viewpoint.

Practicing Good Communication Skills

To build a good working relationship with your shadow you will need to become more aware of your own behaviour and pay keen attention to them. This is what we mean when we say running a placement can be beneficial to staff in understanding their own strengths and weaknesses. The following very basic model for effective communication is a good place to start:

- **CAPTURE** – listen attentively
- **CLARIFY** – ask questions to make sure you (or they) understand
- **CHECK** – repeat what has been said by paraphrasing to confirm that you understand each other correctly

Shadow hosts may also find it helpful to continuously ask themselves the following:

- Do I still have more to learn about this person's culture?
- Am I paying full attention to both their words and their body language (facial expressions, hand gestures, eye contact, tone of voice, posture)?
- Am I listening for unspoken questions?
- Am I paraphrasing what they tell me to make sure I understand?
- Am I remembering to check that they understand what I have asked them to do?

What Problems May Arise?

Anticipating that you may encounter glitches during the placement is half the battle. A shadow host can prepare by critically scrutinising their own 'British' characteristics and considering how these might be perceived by someone from another culture. For instance, think about how the following behaviours are 'read' in a contemporary British workplace.

- Assertiveness
- Speaking softly
- Demonstrating initiative and a pro-active approach
- Asking questions
- Expressing concerns, needs, likes or dislikes
- Waiting to be directed or to be given instructions before taking any action
- Lack of eye contact
- Smiling regardless of the gravity of the topic being discussed
- Shaking (o not shaking) hands

What British people consider an effective communication tool may be entirely inappropriate in another country so you may need to adapt your communication style in the early days of the placement to accommodate cultural differences. Sometimes, the very fact that you feel uncomfortable about the shadow's spoken or body language indicates a potential misunderstanding; use this alert to explore any cultural assumptions you may have made.

The table below draws on Bridges' experience of running work shadow placements and the feedback we have received highlighting some of the common misperceptions that have occurred between refugees and their shadow hosts.

"My shadow isn't very pro-active, she doesn't speak during meetings and she rarely takes the initiative to start a task on her own. I feel like she doesn't really want to be here and it's making me wonder why I am bothering!"

Taking the initiative to do something demands confidence and this may be the problem here, alternatively it may stem from a more deep-rooted cultural belief.

- Many asylum seekers experience years of unemployment awaiting a decision on their asylum claim and a subsequent loss of confidence in their occupational competence. Their self-esteem and ability to assert themselves may also have suffered from the loss of their professional, economic or societal status in their homeland
- In Britain we recognise assertive behaviour as a positive quality in the workplace but other societies may see it as immodest, overbearing or possibly aggressive
- Taking the initiative in Britain is valued as pro-active but can be considered arrogant or disrespectful in a culture where awaiting instruction demonstrates deference for your superior

"My shadow never asks any questions so he hasn't learnt anything about me or anything more about my work than what I've told him. I feel that he isn't really interested in the job."

Again, self-confidence may be the issue here or the shadow could feel a shyness to speak English. Many asylum seekers have few opportunities to use English outside the classroom, with your patience and encouragement they may make great strides in their spoken English as the placement progresses. Also consider:

- Asking questions in some societies is considered insolent although in British society it suggests an interest and willingness to learn
- 'Why' questions can be deemed particularly rude in some cultures as they put the other person on the defensive
- Women refugees who have come from a patriarchal society may be reticent about asking for help or demonstrate a reluctance to act upon their own initiative

"I think she has a problem understanding some of the things I am explaining but when I ask her if she understands she always nods and says 'yes'. What can I do?"

As in the scenario above, this may reflect your shadow's fear of feeling foolish when speaking English incorrectly but it could also result from one of the following.

- Showing emotion is frowned upon in some cultures: what British people might recognise as coldness or disengagement might be regarded as dignified restraint
- A refugee may have come from an oppressive political environment where voicing an opinion led to persecution; they may be less willing to share their opinions as a result
- In some Asian cultures the word 'no' is considered rude so answering a question indirectly can signify respect. In Britain we regard an indirect answer as evasive or indecisive both of which have negative undertones in our own culture

"I feel quite uncomfortable because my shadow will not look at me in the eyes and refuses to shake hands when introduced to new people."

A lack of eye contact is often understood as shyness, timidity or unassertive behaviour in Britain or in the worst case scenario, suspicious behaviour. Likewise an unwillingness to shake hands in a formal greeting might be regarded as standoffish. These are cultural assumptions and may not be accurate, for instance:

- Some cultures perceive any eye contact as intrusive, intimidating or sexually provocative
- At the opposite extreme, prolonged eye contact can also indicate reverence and attentiveness
- For some Muslim women physical contact with a male member outside of her immediate family is not permitted and therefore she would never be put in that situation at home and may find it difficult to participate

A checklist for developing a culturally-sensitive service for clients

- Do you ask clients how they would like to be addressed?
- Is it appropriate to shake hands?
- Are staff dressed in a way that will not cause offence to the more modest requirements of some Muslim religions for example?
- Are there any gender-specific accommodations you need to make to your practice? For instance, some male clients may feel uncomfortable alone in an interview room with a woman (and vice versa)?
- Are you aware of the differences in body language between cultures, for instance, shaking hands, making eye contact, degree of personal space?
- Are you aware of the special dietary requirements connected to certain religious beliefs? And are you aware of the requirements and times for fasting? (Note that you may need to alert a shadow host of such things before a placement begins).
- What do you know about the different religions of your clients?
- Do you know which languages are used in which countries?