

Cross cultural communication in cross border cooperation

“Today, regions must intensify their cooperation, in the face of immense challenges related to climate change, energy security and globalization. They must act together.¹”

Cooperation between regions brings together people and organizations with different nationalities and cultural backgrounds. Therefore it appears to be obvious that cultural variety is taken into account. The importance and urgency of the present challenges stress the importance of attention to cultural variety even more; it is a factor that should be dealt with right from the start of a cooperation process. This article shows the relevance of attention to culture in cross cultural cooperation. It also shows some theoretical principles for cross cultural communication and the approach of cultural differences when parties decide to cooperate across their borders.

It concludes with five essential steps to effectuate cross cultural communication for maximizing the results of cross border cooperation.

Why give attention to cross cultural cooperation in cross border projects?

Cross cultural communication means a great deal when people and organizations with different cultural backgrounds decide or need to cooperate. Cross cultural communication is often not discussed in the first place but sooner or later it always has to be taken into account. As experts in intercultural communication and in cross border cooperation we developed an approach to strengthen cooperation processes where different cultures are involved. Early attention to cross cultural communication by cooperation partners will moderate and strengthen the cooperation process.

The results of early and effective cross cultural cooperation will be the following:

- participants generate a ‘feeling’ for cultural differences;
- participants understand possible consequences of different cultural backgrounds in cross border communication and can handle them effectively.

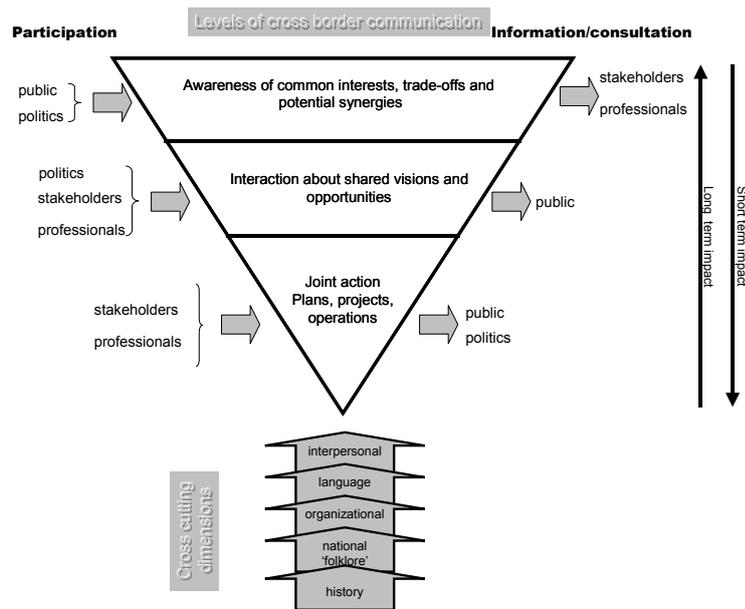
A theoretical background

Roughly, three levels of communication can be distinguished in relation to a regional cross border issue: 1) common awareness, 2) shared visions and 3) joint action. The figure below illustrates this. Different participants will (or should) be involved in the communication process on each level.

The impacts of communication on the three levels will be different and have a different time scale. The higher the level of communication, the larger the ultimate (positive) impact on cross border cooperation probably will be, but the longer it will take. For example, initiatives for common awareness building by teaching school pupils may in the end result in a ‘regional awareness’, in turn resulting in shared visions and joint actions. This is a process that will take a long time but may create a ‘new’ common culture. Joint projects can be realized relatively quick but only the professionals that are involved will gain some experience in cross border communication.

In every level of cross border communication various cross cutting dimensions or cultural aspects can play a role, like interpersonal characteristics, language, organization structures. These dimensions will determine the outcome of the processes that take place on the various levels. It may be clear that every specific situation must be analysed in a different way, focussing on e.g. the involved cultures, parties and type of cooperation. The first step is made by recognizing the cross cultural dimension in every type of cross border relationship.

¹ From “ Cultural Differences in European Cooperation Learning from INTERREG Practice” – Cultplan, 2007



Steps to be made in strengthening cross cultural communication

“Cultural variety is crucial, and will automatically lead to dynamic and interesting interactions. We need openness to maximize the benefits. There must be curiosity about how knowledge, technology and even artistic economies can be linked and strengthened.(...) Culture can be the connection for different worlds brought together in search of innovation².”

This quote shows us to approach culture and cultural variety as an opportunity, instead of as a difficulty, something that restricts us in cooperation. At the same time we observe that in practice, attention to culture and cultural differences is often paid (too) late. In cooperation projects the technical relevance appears to dominate above culture. Only when problems cannot be solved technically, culture appears to come in and is paid attention to.

In order to realize the results mentioned above, aimed for in cross cultural cooperation (generate a feeling for cultural differences; understand possible consequences of different cultural backgrounds and handle them’, in the communication process the following steps should be distinguished:

1. determine and understand the level(s) of cross border communication
2. determine and understand the responsibilities and mandates of the involved professionals;
3. analyse the impact of cross cutting dimensions as mentioned above on the cross cultural relationships;
4. apply tools for improving (cross cultural) communication and formulate joint ideas for strategy development;
5. moderate and strengthen the process of cross cultural cooperation in the ongoing project on a regular basis.

² “Cultural Differences in European Cooperation Learning from INTERREG Practice” – Cultplan, 2007

Tools to realize the steps to be made

Inventory of the cooperation environment

A thorough analysis of participants and levels in cooperation, the roles, responsibilities and main issues is necessary to start with. It provides a basis for mutual understanding and a starting point for following the five steps that are needed in cross cultural cooperation. Partners in cross cultural cooperation are to be involved from the beginning. In practice however it appears that external moderation will speed up an effective process.

Training in communication concerning cross border cooperation

With the inventory as a starting point, the step to mutual understanding can be made by training the involved professionals. Results must be the awareness and understanding of the cross cultural dimension and its impact on cross cultural cooperation projects (steps 1, 2, 3).

Operational plan for communication in the concerning project

The fourth step can be made in a direct follow up of the training. Participants from all involved cultures, accompanied by the trainer(s), should develop joint tools and strategy. They will do this by discussing the relevance of different levels of cross border communication and cross cultural elements for the different cultures involved. The result will be an operational plan that can be used in further steps of the cooperation process.

Cross cultural coaching

The fifth step can be made by the tool of 'cross cultural coaching'. The operational plan that the participants made could be used as a guide for the ongoing process. It can also be used in coaching on the job and it will, if necessary, be adapted to new situations or to new insights in the ongoing process. The coach will be the guide in a continuous strengthening process of the cross cultural cooperation relationship.