

A Guide to Intercultural Conversations in Mentorships



Lige Adgang
til job, uddannelse og fællesskaber

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Intercultural Conversations

Tips and tools for a succesful conversation

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Introduction

Culture and norms shape our view, values and communication style. Therefore, differences in cultural backgrounds can create challenges in conversations.

To ensure effective communication, it is important to be aware of both visible and invisible cultural differences and to be open to adjusting your communication style when engaging with someone from a different cultural background.

Intercultural conversations aim to foster understanding between individuals with diverse cultural backgrounds. This guide is designed to help mentors navigate these conversations, with a particular focus on mentees with refugee experiences. However, it is applicable to all types of mentees.

This guide includes tools, tips, and examples on how mentors can approach sensitive topics such as culture and religion, as well as the importance of creating a safe and confidential environment for discussions.



Tips to Handle Cultural Differences

Ask openly

- Encourage mentees to share their experiences without judgment
- Example: “Which traditions are the most important to you?”

Use clear communication

- Use clear sentences and confirm your understanding with the mentee to avoid misunderstandings.
- Example: “Did I understand correctly that you mean...?”

Reflect on your own background

- Be open to the mentee’s values and consider how your own norms influence your expectations and reactions towards the mentee

Mentor's Responsibilities and Boundaries

As a mentor, you are responsible for creating a respectful and open space where your mentee feels seen, understood, and respected. At the same time, it is crucial to be aware of both your own and your mentee's boundaries.

We recommend setting clear boundaries on what you, as a mentor, can and cannot assist with.



Tips for Responsibilities and Boundaries as a Mentor

- Make a clear agreement on how and how often you should be in contact - for example by phone or in-person meetings - to create clear expectations and a safe space.
- Maintain a professional relationship and respectfully define your boundaries. Balancing personal and professional aspects is key to a healthy mentorship.
- Listen with empathy and respect, but also be clear about where you can provide support and refer to professionals if necessary.
- Create a list of topics the mentee needs help with and adjust it as needed. Clarify what you can assist with and refer the mentee to relevant institutions if further support is required.
- Foster a space where the mentee feels heard and safe, and acknowledge that their thoughts and feelings are valid.
- Allow the mentee to reflect and avoid imposing your own opinions - this supports their self-development.
- Reflect regularly on the mentorship and the mentee's needs. Take five minutes after each meeting to note your thoughts and adjust your approach accordingly.
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- Be patient and flexible. Not all challenges can be solved quickly, but your support can make a significant difference over time.

Categories and Assumptions

We interpret social situations through categories such as child/adult or man/woman, shaped by experiences and media. This influences our expectations, often leading us to see those similar to ourselves more nuancedly while generalizing others.

As a mentor, it is important to be aware of these patterns and meet your mentee with openness and curiosity.

A useful tool is “I wonder” questions, which help challenge assumptions and avoid quick conclusions

You can use the questions both before and after the meetings with the mentee.

- Under the meeting: “I wonder why I react this way to my mentee’s behavior?” “I wonder if there are other reasons for my mentee’s actions?”
- After the meeting: “I wonder what would happen if I asked different types of questions next time?”

Using these questions allows you to reflect on your reactions and remain curious and open in the relationship.

“I wonder”- questions

- “I wonder how I can ask questions that show genuine curiosity and respect?”
- “I wonder why the mentee is not opening up about their challenges?”
- “I wonder why the mentee seems stressed or pressured?”
- “I wonder if there could be other explanations for the mentee’s behavior?”
- “I wonder which of my own experiences or values influence my interpretation of the mentee’s behavior?”
- “I wonder what categories I place the mentee in and why?”



“I wonder” - questions

The following contains more examples of “I wonder” questions in different contexts, which can help create an open conversation and avoid misunderstandings.

Example 1: Meeting Expectations

The mentee does not show up for scheduled meetings with you. Instead of assuming it is due to indifference, consider:

- “I wonder if the mentee has personal or family-related obstacles that makes it difficult to meet, such as responsibilities at home?”
- “I wonder if the mentee has transportation issues. Is it too expensive for the mentee to get to the agreed location?”
- “I wonder if the mentee is missing a better overview of the program?”

Example 2: Family Expectations

A young mentee shares that they are not allowed to play football after school because of their parents.

Instead of assuming that the parents are strict, consider:

- “I wonder why the mentee’s parents do not want them to play football?”
- “I wonder what is important to the mentee’s family when it comes to extracurricular activities?”
- Afterwards, you can ask the mentee: “Why don’t your parents think you should play football?”

Example 3: Communication

The mentee doesn’t respond to your messages:

- “I wonder if the mentee has a different understanding of our communication?”
- “I wonder if the mentee has personal or family-related challenges that make it difficult for them to respond?”
- “I wonder if the mentee feels overwhelmed by all the tasks they need to complete as part of the program?”

Mentees with Refugee Backgrounds

Mentees with refugee backgrounds may have experienced traumatic events such as war, loss, and forced relocation. They may also face language barriers, cultural differences, and feelings of being outsiders in their new environment.

It is important for mentors to be aware of that certain questions or topics may trigger difficult memories for the mentee. Be cautious when asking about traumatic experiences unless the mentee brings it up themselves.

Trauma-informed Approach

- Be predictable; Make a clear framework for the mentorship from the beginning (time, place, and duration of meetings).
- Communicate clearly: Inform the mentee if you are delayed or need to change plans.
- Build the relationship gradually: It may take time for the mentee to open up, especially if they before have experienced mistrust.
- Stay calm and patient: Mentees with refugee backgrounds may have fluctuating energy and concentration due to trauma or stress.
- Strengthen the mentee's resources: Help identify mentee's strengths and skills rather than focusing on what they have lost.
- Avoid digging into traumatic experiences: Give the mentee the opportunity to share their story without pressure. Ask open questions and be an attentive and supportive listener.

Examples of Supportive Phrases

- "I can hear that this has been very difficult for you. You only need to share what you feel comfortable with."
- "How have your experiences affected your daily life today?"
- "It's okay if we take a break and talk about something else."
- "I am here to support you, but we can also find someone else who is more specialized in this area if you'd like."

Language Barriers

Language barriers can be challenging for some mentees. As a mentor, you play an important role in helping the mentee practice their language skills and referring them to other resources if necessary.

Remember to be patient and encouraging. It is important to give the mentee space to learn and develop at their own pace. Even small progress can make a big difference in the mentee's daily life.

Visit Lige Adgang's website for more tools that can support Danish language training.

Language Barriers

- **Job postings:** Ask the mentee to take a picture of job postings or educational opportunities they are interested in. Review the posting together and help with: Understanding the key words and requirements, identify examples of how the mentee's skills match the posting and brainstorm ideas for an application or follow-up conversation
- **Role-play:** Practice job interviews or everyday life dialogues in a safe setting.
- **Wordlists:** Create wordlist with relevant words and practise them and use them in sentences.
- **Check-out:** End your meetings with a recap of the meeting where the mentee summarizes what was discussed and agreed on in the meeting.

Tips

- **Everyday life conversations:** Talk about simple things like the weather, food, or weekly plans. This can make the language more relatable.
- **Remember to repeat:** Repeat keywords and phrases, then the mentee gets the opportunity to hear and practise them.
- **Refer to other resources:** If mentee needs more help, then refer to other Volunteer centers, language schools or online learning platforms.
- **Contact Foreningen Lige Adgang:** for guidance and access to other resources

Identify and Manage Sensitive Topics

Certain topics may be difficult for mentees to discuss. Be mindful of how you phrase questions and observe the mentee's reactions. If the mentee seems hesitant, it may indicate that the topic is difficult for them. However, mentees may also open up about challenging topics on their own.

This section provides tools and examples for discussing sensitive topics such as:

- Cultural identity and adaptation, societal norms, the importance of the family, religious and spiritual differences, and integration into society.

Cultural Identity and Adaption

It is important to acknowledge the mentee's cultural background, as it is a significant part of their identity.

- Explain that it is completely acceptable to hold on to their traditions and values while also learning about and respecting the norms and customs of the new society they are part of.
- Help the mentee find ways to integrate elements from both cultures into their daily life.

Example: Cultural differences

- In some cultures, direct eye contact is considered disrespectful. If the mentee avoids eye contact, you can ask: "How do people show respect in your culture?"
- Workplace culture can vary. You can ask the mentee: "How would you describe a good work culture?" or "How would you write an email to a colleague?"
- In Denmark, people often participate in leisure activities. If you have a young mentee, you can ask: "What do you do after school?" or "How do you spend time with your friends?"

Societal Norms

Some mentees are interested in gaining more knowledge about norms in Danish society, including topics such as gender roles or workplace norms. We recommend the following considerations when discussing this topic:

- Be open and honest, but also take the mentee’s cultural background and values into account, showing respect for their perspective.
- Focus on understanding rather than change. The goal is not to alter the mentee’s beliefs but to provide insight into Danish society so they can navigate it more effectively.
- Use concrete and practical examples from daily life, and be prepared to answer questions and clarify misunderstandings.

Example: Conversation about Norms in Denmark

1) In Denmark, it is expected that both men and women contribute to childcare and chores in the house.

- Ask the mentee: “How is it in your culture? Do both men and women cook?” or “In some families, everyone helps with everything – what do you think about that idea?”

2) In Denmark, fathers take maternity leave.

- Ask the mentee: “What do you think about that?” “Could you imagine your husband/yourself taking time off work to take care of your child?” “Why do you think we have these rules in Denmark?”

The importance of the family



Many cultures are more collectivist than individualist, and for some mentees, family is the most important priority. They will often place their family's needs and expectations above everything else.

This means they may choose to prioritize family obligations over meetings with you as a mentor or other activities. As a mentor, it is important to show respect and understanding for this priority.

- You can show flexibility and understanding when family commitments interfere with your scheduled meetings
- Have open conversations about the importance of balance and help the mentee find ways to both fulfill their family obligations and work towards their professional and personal goals
- Your support and understanding can make a significant difference in building a trusting and positive mentor-mentee relationship.

Example: A mentee frequently cancels meetings due to family obligations

- Ask the mentee: "What is important for you and your family in daily life?"
- Examples on solution for cancellations: "How can we find a balance so that you can participate in the mentoring program while also considering your family obligations?"
- "Maybe we can set fixed meeting times that fits with your family's routine, or agree on ways for you to continue working from home."

Religious and spiritual differences



For some mentees, religious and spiritual beliefs play a significant role in their lives, which can be challenging when navigating societal norms that may not always accommodate religious or spiritual expression.

- Be open and curious, and ask the mentee about their faith and what it means in their daily life or worklife
- Support the mentee in finding ways to practice their religion in a way that aligns with their daily life in Denmark

Example: Mentee expresses concerns about finding time for prayer at the workplace

- Ask the mentee: “How do you usually practice your faith in daily life?”
- “Let’s talk about how you can explain your needs for a short break to your employer.”
- “Shall we practice a sentence you can say to your manager, such as: ‘I need a five-minute break in the middle of the day for prayer. How can we accommodate that within working hours?’”

Society's Reception and Integration

Mentees with refugee experience or a minority background may face barriers that make them feel unwelcome and stigmatized by society. These feelings can make integration challenging and negatively impact self-esteem and well-being.

As a mentor, it is important to acknowledge these feelings by:

- Showing empathy and listening to the mentee's experiences. Helping the mentee find communities and activities where they can feel welcome

Tips

- There are volunteer initiatives for people with refugee experience, focusing on building a sense of community. For example, the Danish Refugee Council offers social events and similar activities for children, young people, and adults
- Check if there are any social events or other relevant activities in the mentee's local area that they could participate in
- Feel free to use Lige Adgang as a collaborative partner to find relevant activities to recommend to your mentee

Examples of the Meeting with a New System in Denmark:

As a mentor, you may find that the Danish system is challenging to understand and navigate in - for both yourself and your mentee. For your mentee, the Danish system might be significantly different from what they are familiar with, which can lead to confusion and frustration.

- You can guide your mentee in understanding the various systems, for example, how to book a doctor's appointment, translate messages from e-Boks, or introduce them to how job search platforms are used
- Support your mentee in their interactions with the institutions of the society by helping them prepare questions or provide guidance on understanding rules and procedures
- Remember, your role as a mentor is not to provide legal advice but to support and guide. If you or your mentee have any questions, you can always contact Lige Adgang