

# INTERCULTURAL FLUENCY



GLOBAL SKILLS FOR BUSINESS

---

**CULTURAL TOP TIPS FOR UK BUSINESSES  
WORKING WITH NIGERIA**



THESE 'TOP TIPS' HAVE BEEN PRODUCED BY OUR INTERCULTURAL PRACTITIONERS AT BRITISH COUNCIL NIGERIA, THE MAJORITY OF WHOM ARE NIGERIAN CITIZENS

## REALITY CHECK

At British Council we believe that:

- individuals make a difference in any intercultural situation. All cultures have a wealth of diverse individuals. Many do not fit the generalisations that are made about the cultures which they are associated with
- there are more similarities and connections between cultures and individuals than differences
- effective intercultural practitioners are well-informed about the history, economics, conflicts and politics of the parts of the world they are interested in.



**WHILE PROVIDING 'TOP TIPS' ABOUT WHAT IS TYPICAL ABOUT A PARTICULAR GROUP OF PEOPLE CAN BE USEFUL, IT IS NEVER ENOUGH.**

Equally important are being aware:

- of the cultural behaviours and values that you bring to the mix and being able to adjust these to complement the situations you find yourself in. This does not mean disregarding the values that are important to you but being open to and respecting difference.
- of the intercultural expertise of the people that you are working with. You may be fortunate to be working with counterparts who have high levels of intercultural fluency who 'tune-in' to your cultural preferences and adjust to make you feel comfortable.
- that much depends on context. What is expected and appropriate will depend on:

- the type of organisation you are dealing with
- the locale (urban or rural)
- the status, age and seniority of your contacts
- whether you are meeting in public or in somebody's home
- that in most countries there are many cultures and sub-cultures. Cities and regions and younger and older generations often have their own distinct characteristics.

We hope you find our cultural top tips a useful starting point for working in new cultural situations. British Council can support you in developing deeper cultural insights and in acquiring the skills for effective intercultural practice.

**Email us at:** [intercultural.fluency@britishcouncil.org](mailto:intercultural.fluency@britishcouncil.org)

or see the **webpage** for more details:

<http://www.britishcouncil.org/education/skills-employability/intercultural-fluency>



# NIGERIA IS A DIVERSE COUNTRY SO BE SENSITIVE TO CONTEXT

There are three main regions in Nigeria. It's good to make yourself aware of them as everyday customs in each can differ dramatically.

There are more than 250 cultural groups and more than 500 languages spoken in Nigeria. In fact, many people in Nigeria speak several languages. These will include the language of their community, the regional language associated with their ethnic group and English. Ethnic and cultural backgrounds play a key role in their daily lives and transactions.

There are differences between how people typically behave in urban and rural areas; and between predominantly Muslim regions in the north and largely Christian regions in the south.

A simplified map of Nigeria can be imagined as having three regions with three main ethnic groups. The Hausa/Fulani are the main ethnic group in the north, the Igbo in the south-east and the Yoruba in the south-west. Everyday customs in each region are different.

Here are some ideas that will help you know how to react in certain situations:

## **Show respect to elders**

When meeting elderly Yoruba people it is respectful to bow slightly or curtsey as a sign of respect. Greet the people in a room when you enter. Nigerians hold greetings in high regard irrespective of the time of day or the mood of the greeter.

## **Be prepared for men and women to be treated differently outside of business contexts**

In the Northern states it is possible that a man may enter a room and greet only the men in the room and not acknowledge the women. In a social situation, this is intended to show respect to any woman present by acknowledging her husband or brother or father.

## **Be aware of initiating physical contact with the opposite sex**

Some, but not all, Muslims believe that men and women who are not related should not make any physical contact. In some situations it is therefore advisable not to initiate shaking of hands with the opposite sex. It is best to wait for the other party to initiate contact. A smile and a nod of the head will suffice.

## **Accept that business meetings may be interrupted**

Among traditional Nigerian business people appointments are not always private. Do not be offended if your meeting is interrupted by phone calls or visits from your client's friends and family. It is becoming less acceptable in business, but if it does happen be patient.





# KNOW HOW TO MAKE A GOOD IMPRESSION FROM THE BEGINNING

In Nigeria first impressions are critical. The way you are perceived will have an impact on how business partners respond to you.

Nigeria is a 'can-do' society. There is a general spirit of resilience which provides a coping mechanism for survival and success in any environment for Nigerians (within Nigeria and externally). Confidence and good business knowledge are essential for success and relationship building. This confidence can be mistaken for arrogance hence Nigerians are perceived as loud and proud' by other Africans

Nigerians love to bargain. Giving somebody a discount is a way of establishing a business relationship with them. This is known locally as "making you my customer". When in the boardroom expect to be challenged as bartering is an expected and acceptable part of the process.

If you follow this advice you should be able to start off on the right foot:

## Dress smartly

Nigerians are very image conscious and a well fitted dark suit worn with a tie is acceptable business attire. It is not unusual for business people to wear national dress in meetings; most times they do on Fridays.

## Accept hospitality

Accept a drink or something to eat if you are invited to a restaurant or to somebody's home for the first time even if you are not thirsty or hungry. Refusing may be considered impolite.

## Be aware of body language

Make sure to use your right hand to eat with or to pass something to someone. Using your left hand is considered insulting as is yawning and not covering your mouth.

## WHAT ARE PEOPLE IN NIGERIA LIKE?



Data from the British Council's 'Cultural Preferences Survey', carried out in Nigeria in 2014. Survey respondents were asked to read a substantial list of words and phrases and decide which eight of these represent the characteristics of the people of Nigeria. The size of each characteristic in the image corresponds to the percentage of participants who selected it.



## BE PREPARED FOR HIERARCHIAL WAYS OF WORKING

Hierarchy is important in Nigeria and questioning elders is viewed negatively.

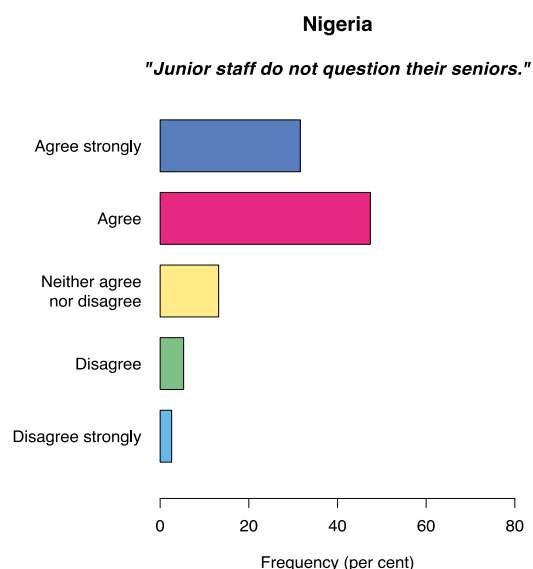
Hierarchy is important and respected in Nigeria. It is not appropriate to question superiors, teachers or community and family elders. You should not comment on or criticise the opinions and decisions of these people. Nigerians do not have a feedback giving culture. However, indirect, diplomatic and constructive feedback is generally accepted though it is not actively sought out or expected. Be careful not to offend anyone with overly harsh or direct feedback.

In the context of business, hierarchy and respect come into play as more junior members of staff are sometimes expected to be seen and not heard. The opinions of the more senior members are revered. Though this is dependent on the organisational culture, it is the case within the majority of Nigerian businesses. In some contexts it is hard to disagree or say no. For example, in many businesses it is considered disrespectful for younger or junior colleagues to question or disagree with older and more senior colleagues. However, in the marketplace or at point of sale, saying no is an expected part of the bargaining process.

It is important to address people by their correct title. In written communication make sure you address individuals with their exact job title and any prefixes. As status is extremely valuable in Nigerian society, be sure to refer to titles such as Her Royal Highness, Deaconess, Chief, Mrs, Dr. or Lolo (Igbo for King of High Chief's wife). Do so in their full form

unless told otherwise. Names in Nigeria have very important spiritual connotations. Often children's names are symbolic of the circumstances surrounding their birth or reflect their parents' wishes for their future. Asking people what their name means can be a good way to find out more about people and show an interest in their lives.

**Nigeria: Junior staff do not question their seniors**



Nearly 80 per cent of the participants in the British Council's cultural preference survey either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement.



## **MAKE THE ‘RIGHT’ CONNECTIONS TO MAKE THINGS HAPPEN**

When working in Nigeria, make establishing contacts and connections a priority.

The hierarchical nature of organisations can cause decision-making to be a slow, collective process. Having the right connections will make things happen. Building and establishing relationships within the Nigerian business community and corporate organisations is essential for success. One way of speeding up the process and making links more easily is spending time with business partners outside of work.

Entertainment is an integral part of business. One must enjoy engaging with people and building relationships. Many business transactions either begin or end in a more social atmosphere over drinks, at a restaurant or the host's home. Such events should be regarded as an essential part of the process of doing business in Nigeria. Accept invitations. Do not be afraid to mention if you have specific dietary requirements.

Etiquette is largely a matter of being open-minded and receptive to small talk. Safe conversation topics include family and your hometown. If you have little cultural knowledge about Nigeria it is good to show interest. Nigerians are generally happy to educate you and share their stories. Avoid talking politics unless you are familiar with the issues.



## 5 ADJUST TO 'AFRICAN TIME'

Be prepared for delays as Nigeria is generally known as a 'last minute market', with a fire brigade approach to business planning and execution.

People in Nigeria often work to a different time rhythm than is usual in the UK and are more flexible with planning. When working on a longer project, it is worth having a few clear deadlines for each project phase, instead of just one at the end. It is however important to note that this may vary from one business to another based on the culture within the organisation.

Nigerians can sometimes run behind schedule. This is familiarly known as 'African Time'. Few guests are likely to turn up to a social function with a 3pm start before 3.45pm. Similarly, though most will be, some business partners will not be prompt. You should take this into account when scheduling your appointments. With regards to your own timekeeping, do not change your own approach. You will be expected to arrive everywhere on time.



**Meaningful and effective intercultural engagement is at the heart of the British Council's vision, mission, and values. We have 80 years of experience in cultivating cultural relations and we work on the ground in over 100 countries. These top tips have been produced by our intercultural practitioners at British Council Nigeria, the majority of whom are Nigerian citizens.**



**PHOTOGRAPHY**

Page 2, 'Pin pointing on Lagos' © Shutterstock  
All other images © Mat Wright

© British Council 2015/E162

The British Council is the United Kingdom's international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities.