

Communicating across cultures in the globalized context

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Abstract- *Cross Cultural Communication can be challenging yet highly rewarding if one comprehends and respects the differences among people of diverse culture, and can go beyond the superficial without any judgment. With the continuing interest and increase in globalization and the diversity in the workplace, cross cultural management has today become an important element of organization life and therefore assumes great relevance. A key to cross cultural change management is to realize that what was acceptable in the past is not necessarily relevant today; the world is constantly converging on some issues and continues to be divergent on many others.*

Keywords- *Cross Cultural Communication; Cultural; Nonverbal communication.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Globalization has made intercultural communication inevitable. The Internet and modern technology have opened up new marketplaces that allow us to promote our businesses to new geographic locations and cultures. Communicating with other cultures characterizes today's business, classroom, and community. Technology especially the internet has increased the probability that whatever is documented online will be read by someone from another culture. Intercultural communication is of importance in any career field thus the art of knowing how to communicate with other cultures should be a work place skill that is emphasized.

2. DEFINING CULTURE

Culture is about human expression. It involves the behaviour, beliefs and practices of individuals and their communities. Culture takes many forms and can be expressed in many different ways such as art, music, sport, entertainment, religion, ceremonies, and of course through our verbal and non-verbal communication.

There are myriad of cultures such as national cultures, subcultures, organizational or corporate cultures, industry cultures, professional or functional cultures to which each of us belong in some way or another. For that reason, culture can be defined as a shared system of values, beliefs, and attitudes of people, and because people are most important in the process they will have different sense of time, of space, of humor, of negotiating, of perceptions and have different expectations. The way of communicating therefore will not be the same from one country to another country and it is important to know some values of other cultures to avoid misunderstandings. Cross Cultural Communication is interactive and calls for reflective listening. Miscommunication will occur even with all the goodwill if there are significant cultural differences.

It is also important to accept the logic of time and space where time is seen from different angles by different people. Time in the West is seen as being quantitative and measurable while in the East it is taken to be an unlimited continuity always unraveling itself. There appears to be no urgency for rushing things through. This difference in time concept can have its effect on negotiations or conflict resolution process. Cultural approach to time and communication should always be considered in good faith.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Cross Cultural communication requires some understanding of every Culture in the world and if you don't have an understanding of the different cultures than how do you communicate to someone who understands and relates to the world differently to you.

In his paper, Roux (2002) argued that successful educators are effective communicators and thus culturally competent in cross-cultural encounters. Teachers should therefore be sensitive to the potentially problematic outcomes of intercultural communication in the culturally diverse class. Communication can be a useful source of intercultural knowledge and mutual enrichment between culturally diverse students if managed proactively by the teacher. Otherwise, communication could be a source of frustration, misapprehensions, intercultural conflict and ultimately school failure. Thus cross-cultural communication is complex and potentially problematic in education.

Successful communication is a prerequisite of effective transfer of knowledge in school. A rich repertoire of verbal and nonverbal behaviors appropriate to the intercultural situation as well as affective capabilities to react sensitively to fellow communicators from other cultures is a necessity in education (Linde, 1997).

The business sector is probably most affected with the issues of intercultural communication. Today with emergence of multi-national companies and global

companies, it is unlikely to do business without communicating cross culturally.

Targowski and Metwalli (2003) viewed this millennium as era that global organizations will increasingly focus on the critical value of cross-cultural communication process, efficiency and competence and cost of doing business. In order to successfully communicate cross culturally, knowledge and understanding of cultural factors such as values, attitudes, beliefs and behavior should be acquired. Effective cross-cultural communication in global economy provides pragmatic tools about how to define a communication strategy, train representatives and conduct business talks in order to achieve success.

Intercultural communication is also an essential component in medicine. For instance, little is known whether health care professionals communicate effectively with the ethnic minority patients. Not only language difficulties, but also cultural differences in beliefs and understanding of disease may result in problems in intercultural communication. (Van, Harmsen and Bruijnzeels, 2002). Prasad and Darrad (2003) noted that communication with non-English speaking patients was still unsatisfactory and there is need for more research to overcome some of the barriers in the intercultural communication. Some recommendations that Prasad and Darrad suggested to health care workers is that one should have training on appropriate use of an interpreter, use pictures to explain concepts to patients, demonstrate via body language but avoid use of common gestures as they may have different cultural meanings, and schedule longer appointment with patients who may have language or cultural barriers so that the interaction is not rushed.

Gudykunst (1995) argues that effective intercultural communication is partly based by one's ability to manage anxiety and uncertainty. Anxiety has to do with feeling of discomfort while uncertainty deals with an inability to predict the behavior of others. Neuliep and Ryan (1998) investigated the influence of intercultural communication apprehension, social-communicative orientation, and uncertainty. Prior to interacting with unknown partners from another culture, participants completed measures of intercultural communication apprehension and social-communicative orientation. After interacting with their partners, participants completed measures of uncertainty. It was found that intercultural communication apprehension was positively associated with uncertainty while intercultural communication apprehension was negatively correlated with social-communicative orientation.

Herring (1990) presented that nonverbal communication was really part of communication itself. Cultural misunderstandings and miscommunications can be greatly reduced by an increased awareness of cultural differences in nonverbal communication patterns. He defined nonverbal communication as behavior that transcends

verbal and written words. Herring noted that many ethnic groups use nonverbal communications more extensively than they use verbal communication especially in expressions of feeling and attitudes. Thus, counselors would enhance and clarify counseling interaction with proper identification and assessment of client's nonverbal communication. This understanding would be beneficial, for example, counselors can avoid unintentional cultural value conflicts within the counseling session. The incorporation of nonverbal communication in current and new counseling techniques could result in more appropriate and effective cross-cultural counseling.

4. COORDINATED MANAGEMENT OF MEANING

Coordinated management of meaning is a comprehensive communication theory that states that people interpret and act on the basis of rules that allow them to coordinate their meanings when interacting with others (Cronen, Pearce, & Harris, 1982). Constitutive rules help us understand or interpret an event or message; they tell us what certain actions constitute or mean. For example, in some cultures preparing a detailed agenda and assertively guiding discussion count as leadership, whereas in other cultures indirectness and subtlety constitute effective leadership. Regulative rules are essentially rules of action that tell us when it's appropriate to do certain things and how to respond or behave in an interaction. For example, in some cultures heated business discussions where individuals promote a personal position is appropriate business conduct, but in other cultures the maintenance of harmony and the sense of group regulates business behavior. When constitutive and regulative rules are understood and coordinated, interactions tend to run smoothly and comfortably. But friction and misunderstandings often result when individuals operate according to different constitutive and regulative rules. Rules tell us what interpretations and actions are logical or appropriate in a given situation and are tied to our overall hierarchy of meanings (Cronen & Pearce, 1981). Pearce and Cronen (1980) further develop a nested hierarchy in which one context is embedded within another and each context is itself part of a larger context. They identify six contexts or levels of meaning in their hierarchy, but are quick to note that there may be additional contexts or levels of meaning that have not yet been recognized.

- The content level represents the raw sensory data—the denotative meaning of words and what we see and hear. To construct the meaning of this content, we have to refer to higher levels of meaning in the hierarchy.
- Speech acts communicate the intention of the speaker, and the relation- ship embedded in speech acts indicates how the content should be taken.
- Episodes are recurring communication routines that have definite rules and boundaries—definable beginnings, middles, and endings. Various cultures and speech

communities have developed different episodes, some of which are functionally similar and some of which are not. Consequently, episodes are larger frames for interpreting speech acts.

- Relationships include mutually scripted expectations among group members and reflect how we interact with others (Shailor, 1994).
- Autobiographies, originally labeled “life-scripts,” represent an individual’s view of himself or herself that both shapes and is shaped by communication. Think of autobiographies as clusters of past and present speech acts and episodes that define your sense of self. Autobiographies reveal a person’s overall pattern of communicating, responding, and acting in the world. It’s important to note that our autobiographies are not fixed or static, but constantly evolving and changing.
- Cultural patterns or archetypes can be described as “very broad images of world order and [a person’s] relationship to that order” (Cronen & Pearce, 1981, p. 21). They are the overriding cultural rules that coordinate our personal interpretations with others; however, different speech communities may have different worldviews and distinctive ways of interpreting experiences that affect how groups construct meanings or rhetorical visions. Thus, from intercultural communication perspective, “the human condition is that of being variably enmeshed in multiple symbolic systems, each with its own logic of meaning and action” (Pearce, 1989, p. 86). Because different social groups develop distinct cultural patterns, communication between cultures is often laced with misunderstandings and plagued with confusion and misinterpretations. Moreover, particular barriers or obstacles often jeopardize intercultural contact and impede effective inter-cultural communication.

5. BARRIERS TO INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

As international managers in expanding world corporations, you will be exposed daily to a bewildering variety of value systems that challenge your intercultural communication competencies and skills. You will need to see the world as a whole and recognize the importance of constructively managing stereotypes, controlling prejudice, avoiding discrimination, and reducing ethnocentrism.

5.1 STEREOTYPES

Stereotyping is a selection process that we use to organize and simplify perceptions of others, and stereotypes are our mental representations of others. Our stereotypes also create expectations regarding how members of other groups will behave, and we unconsciously try to confirm our expectations when we communicate with others and tend to process information that is consistent with our stereotypes. Consequently, the stereotypes we hold directly influence our communication with others, and our initial predictions about others are based on the stereotypes we have about their culture, race, or ethnic group. However,

stereotypes are often inaccurate, and they do not work well with individuals who have worked in international business or who have lived or studied abroad because they will display increased differences from their national cultures. Stereotypes are a problem when you tend to see only that information that supports your stereotyped belief rather than information that runs counter to it. However, by creating subtypes or developing more accurate subgroupings, you can make more precise cultural and sociocultural predictions about others.

5.2 Prejudice

Whereas a stereotype is a belief or conviction that something is probably true or that something exists, a prejudice is an attitude or an evaluation. Prejudice, then, may be defined as a positive or negative attitude toward a group or its individual members. Most people, however, think of it as negative. Racism, for example, is a tendency to categorize people who are culturally different in terms of their physical traits. We are all prejudiced to some degree or another.

5.3 Discrimination

Prejudice should not be confused with its behavioral counterpart, discrimination. Discrimination can be thought of as prejudice “in action. In sum, certain individuals are treated unequally solely because of their membership in a particular group. A contemporary aspect of prejudice and discrimination that needs to be addressed is hate speech. Hate speech can range from “speech attacks based on race, religion or sexual orientation to any offensive expression directed toward women, discrete minorities, and ethnic, religious, and racial groups” (Ruscher, 2001, p. 194).

5.4 Ethnocentrism

Ruhly (1982) defines ethnocentrism as “the tendency to interpret or to judge all other groups, their environments, and their communication according to the categories and values of our own culture” (p. 28). Ethnocentrism, then, is a belief in cultural superiority where people perceive their nation as the center of the world and believe that the values of their culture are natural and correct and that people from other cultures who do things differently are wrong. Everyone is ethnocentric to some degree, and ethnocentrism exists in all cultures. Today’s business leaders are challenged to create new models of management systems and organizations that are better suited to our increasingly complex geocentric stage of development. For this to happen, they must become more innovative and cosmopolitan. A cosmopolitan leader is a “citizen of the world” who interacts comfortably with people who come from diverse backgrounds, hold different values, and express discrepant beliefs (Pearce & Pearce, 2000).

Those in international business are exposed daily to a bewildering variety of value systems and differing business practices. To communicate effectively in this hectic business environment requires an understanding of

other cultures, an awareness of the interdependence of nations, and the need to break interfering cultural barriers in order to find productive ways to work constructively with people of all cultures. Being flexible, open-minded, and person-centered, they are willing to initiate communication and cooperatively pursue their objectives.

6. CULTURAL DIVERSITY

The main and most prominent key to effective cross-cultural communication is knowledge. It is absolutely essential that people understand the potential problems of cross-cultural communication, and make a huge conscious effort to overcome these problems. It is also very important to know that your efforts will not always be successful, and to be prepared to adjust your behaviour accordingly.

A lot of people always assume that there is a significant possibility that cultural differences are the cause of communication problems. And to some extent they are correct. Effective communication with people of different cultures is especially challenging. Cultures provide people with ways of thinking--ways of seeing, hearing, and interpreting the world. Thus the same words can mean different things to people from different cultures, even when they talk the "same" language. When the languages are different, and translation has to be used to communicate, the potential for misunderstandings increases.

Gestures are one of the first things to come to mind that can cause a major cultural faux pas. They can quickly sabotage anyone, including the most savvy business professionals. People from every culture, including various country leaders and several U.S. presidents, have been guilty of unintentionally offending people from different cultures through the use of inappropriate gestures.

In Brazil, Germany, Russia, and many other countries around the world, the OK sign is a very offensive gesture because it is used to depict a private bodily orifice. The OK sign actually does mean "okay" in the United States, however in Japan it means "money," and it is commonly used to signify "zero" in France.

Most people are aware that the V for victory or peace sign was made popular by Winston Churchill in England during WWII. However, it's important to take heed of where you are in the world, because if you make this gesture with your palm facing inward in Australia, the United Kingdom, South Africa, and several other countries throughout the world, it in essence means "Up yours!"

On Inauguration Day 2005, President George W. Bush raised his fist, with the index and little finger extended, to give the time honored hook 'em horns gesture of the Texas Longhorn football team to the marching band of the University of Texas. Newspapers around the world expressed their astonishment at the use of such a gesture. Italians refer to it as "il cornuto," which means that you are being cuckolded (that is, that your wife is cheating on

you!). It's considered a curse in some African countries, and is clearly an offensive gesture in many other parts of the world.

The thumbs-up gesture is commonly used in many cultures to signify a job well done. However, if it is used in Australia, Greece, or the Middle East -- especially if it is thrust up as a typical hitchhiking gesture would be -- it means essentially "Up yours!" or "The thumbs up gesture can also create some real problems for those who count on their fingers. In Germany and Hungary, the upright thumb is used to represent the number 1; however, it represents the number 5 in Japan.

Simply pointing with the index finger at something or someone can be offensive in many cultures. It is considered a very rude thing to do in China, Japan, Indonesia, Latin America, and many other countries. In Europe, it's thought of as impolite, and in many African countries the index finger is used only for pointing at inanimate objects, never at people. It's best to use an open hand with all your fingers together when you need to point at something or someone.

Curling the index finger with the palm facing up is a common gesture that people in the United States use to beckon someone to come closer. However, it is considered a rude gesture in Slovakia, China, East Asia, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, and many other parts of the world. It's also considered extremely impolite to use this gesture with people. It is used only to beckon dogs in many Asian countries -- and using it in the Philippines can actually get you arrested! The appropriate way to beckon someone in much of Europe, and parts of Asia, is to face the palm of your hand downward and move your fingers in a scratching motion.

When it comes to body language gestures in the communication process, the important thing to keep in mind is that what we say, we say with our words, tonality, and body language. Our body language often conveys more than the words we use. At times, it can completely change -- or even nullify -- our words' meaning.

Different cultures and linguistic areas vary considerably in terms of how much body contact is permitted in the greeting and introduction routines of different situations. In a relatively neutral contact, this can be completely lacking, as in classical China, or a handshake may suffice, as is most common in Sweden presently, or one may use hand contact together with an embrace and a varying number of kisses, as is currently the practice in France. The same types of differences and preferences can also be observed in closing sequences such as in leave-taking. It is important at this point to again warn for simple generalizations. In each culture, there are a large number of ways to e.g. greet people and take leave from people that are dependent on the situation and the activity. Influencing factors for what should be done are the purpose of the activity and the person with whom you are speaking.

7. STRIKING A BALANCE

When you communicate, keep in mind that even though English is considered the international language of business, it is a mistake to assume that every businessperson speaks good English. In fact, only about half of the 800 million people who speak English learned it as a first language. And, those who speak it as a second language are often more limited than native speakers.

When you communicate cross-culturally, make particular efforts to keeping your communication clear, simple and unambiguous. Avoid humour until you know that the person you're communicating with "gets it" and isn't offended by it. Humour is notoriously culture-specific: Many things that pass for humour in one culture can be seen as grossly offensive in another.

It may be in every one's best interest to employ a reliable, experienced translator. Because English is not the first language of many international business people, their use of the language may be peppered with culture-specific or non-standard English phrases, which can hamper the communication process. Again, having a translator may be the best solution here. The translator can help everyone involved to recognize cultural and communication differences and ensure that all parties, regardless of geographic location and background, come together and stay together through successful project completion.

When dealing with people in a different culture, courtesy and goodwill can also go a long way in ensuring successful communication. If your starting point in solving problems is to assume that communication has failed, you'll find that many problems are quickly resolved.

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