



Multiculturalism as an Element in Business Communication

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Introduction

Intercultural communication means that people from different cultural backgrounds interact with one another. Cultural differences can create potential to make intercultural communication very difficult, and sometimes impossible. Culture strongly affects values, beliefs, world views, nonverbal behavior, language, and how to have relationship with others.

Learning to understand people whose background is diverse from our own is not an easy assignment. That challenge is to become an effective and successful intercultural communicator as we communicate with neighbors who might speak a “strange” language or a business partner who stops in the middle of a meeting. To be successful in communicating with the thousands of others we can face with the new global economy, we should communicate with people whose entire backgrounds, whose very method of viewing the world and doing things, may be different from us. The functioning of this new world refers to intercultural communication.

Intercultural Business and Communication Context.

Most nations are tied to an international system of economic interdependence, and most nations have at least one asset within their borders that is needed by another country. No nation is absolutely self-sufficient. Markets and cultures continued to converge, and major enterprise has seized the opportunity to go global. This results in augmented foreign competition.

International corporations increasingly participate in various international business arrangements involving joint ventures between two or more organizations that share in the ownership of a business undertaking. Global competitors face both abroad and at home as tariffs are reduced, markets are deregulated. Cross-cultural collaboration and teamwork are important for an organization’s success.

Importance of Cross-Cultural Communication Study

Communication covers all aspects of organization activity. It’s the process by which things are achieved in global organizations. For global managers, effective communication is a crucial skill because the manager’s planning; organizing, monitoring and facilitating functions become operationalized only through communication. Cross-cultural communication is created when two managers from different cultures exchange meanings in both verbal and nonverbal ways.

There are various issues when living or working in a foreign environment.



Communication across cultures is difficult. Effective global enterprise communication skills are the backbone that supports the transaction of business around the world.

Cross-Cultural/International Communication

Business is not conducted in an identical fashion from culture to culture. Consequently, business relations are enhanced when managerial, sales, and technical personnel are trained to be aware of areas likely to create communication difficulties and conflict across cultures. Similarly, international communication is strengthened when businesspeople can anticipate areas of commonality. Finally, business in general is enhanced when people from different cultures find new approaches to old problems, creating solutions by combining cultural perspectives and learning to see issues from the viewpoint of others.

Factors affecting cross-cultural business communication

The communication process in international business settings is filtered through a range of variables, each of which can color perceptions on the part of both parties. These include language, environment, technology, social organization, social history and mores, conceptions of authority, and nonverbal communication behavior, conception of time.

By assessing in advance the roles these variables play in business communication, one can improve one's ability to convey messages and conduct business with individuals in a wide range of cultures.

LANGUAGE

Among the most often cited barriers to conflict-free cross-cultural business communication is the use of different languages. It is difficult to underestimate the importance that an understanding of linguistic differences plays in international business communication.). **Language** also influences communication strategies. People who do business in a foreign language bring many of their own cognitive frames to the communication; therefore, "the view that nonnative speakers writing in English ought to master its logic ignores the cultural complexity of the language" (Webb & Keene, 1999, p. 106). If the business partners do not speak a common language, the entire intercultural business communication approach will be influenced by the dynamics of interpreters.

ENVIRONMENT AND TECHNOLOGY

The ways in which people use the resources available to them may vary considerably from culture to culture. Culturally-ingrained biases regarding the natural and technological environment can create communication barriers.

Many environmental factors can have a heavy influence on the development and character of cultures. Indeed, climate, topography, population size and density, and the relative availability of natural resources all contribute to the history and current



conditions of individual nations or regions. After all, notions of transportation and logistics, settlement, and territorial organization are affected by topography and climate. For example, a mountainous country with an abundance of natural waterways will almost certainly develop different dominant modes of transportation than a dry, land-locked region marked by relatively flat terrain. Whereas the first nation would undoubtedly develop shipping-oriented transportation methods, the latter would concentrate on roadways, railroads, and other surface-oriented options.

Population size and density and the availability of natural resources influence each nation's view toward export or domestic markets as well. Nations with large domestic markets and plentiful natural resources, for example, are likely to view some industries quite differently than regions that have only one (or none) of those characteristics.

Some businesspeople fail to modify their cross-cultural communications to accommodate environmental differences because of inflexibility toward culturally learned views of technology. Indeed, cultures have widely divergent views of technology and its role in the world.

SOCIAL ORGANIZATION AND HISTORY

Social organization, as it affects the workplace, is often culturally determined. One must take care not to assume that the view held in one's own culture is universal on such issues as nepotism and kinship ties, educational values, class structure and social mobility, job status and economic stratification, religious ties, political affiliation, gender differences, racism and other prejudices, attitudes toward work, and recreational or work institutions.

All of these areas have far-reaching implications for business practice. Similarly, the nature of praise and employee motivation can be socially determined, for different cultures have settled upon a wide array of employee reward systems, each of which reflect the social histories and values of those cultures.

Finally, it is often difficult to rid business communication of a judgmental bias when social organization varies markedly. For example, those from the United States may find it difficult to remain neutral on cultural class structures that do not reflect American values of equality. For instance, the socially determined inferior role of women in much of the Islamic world, or of lower castes in India—to name just two—may puzzle or anger Western citizens. Nevertheless, if the Western business-person cannot eliminate the attendant condemnation from his or her business communication, then he or she cannot expect to function effectively in that society. An individual may personally believe that a country's social system is inefficient or incorrect. Nevertheless, in the way that individual conducts business on a daily basis, it is necessary to work within the restraints of that culture to succeed. One may choose not to do business with people from such a culture, but one cannot easily impose one's own values on them and expect to succeed in the business arena.



CONCEPTIONS OF AUTHORITY

Different cultures often view the distribution of authority in their society differently. Views of authority in a given society affect communication in the business environment significantly, since they shape the view of how a message will be received based on the relative status or rank of the message's sender to its receiver. In other words, conceptions of authority influence the forms that managerial and other business communications take. In working with cultures such as Israel and Sweden, which have a relatively decentralized authority conception or small "power distance," one might anticipate greater acceptance of a participative communication management model than in cultures such as France and Belgium, which generally make less use of participative management models, relying instead on authority-based decision making.

NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

Among the most markedly varying dimensions of intercultural communication is nonverbal behavior. Knowledge of a culture conveyed through what a person says represents only a portion of what that person has communicated. Indeed, body language, clothing choices, eye contact, touching behavior, and conceptions of personal space all communicate information, no matter what the culture. A prudent business person will take the time to learn what the prevailing attitudes are in such areas before conducting businesses in an unfamiliar culture (or with a representative of that culture).

Temporal conception

International business communication is also affected by cross-cultural differences in temporal conception or the understanding of time. Most U.S. and northern European business people conceive of time as inflexible, a thing to be divided, used, or wasted. This is not, however, a universal view. How one uses time, consequently, may profoundly affect the way in which business is conducted in various parts of the world?

While it is dangerous to overgeneralize, most cultures fall with varying degrees into two types of temporal conception. The first type adheres to preset schedules in which the schedules take precedence over personal interaction or over the completion of the business at hand. Edward Hall coined the term "monochronic" to describe this system of temporal organization. By contrast, those who follow what Hall termed a "polychronic" temporal organization rank personal involvement and completion of existing transactions above the demands of preset schedules.

The communication strategy for facing a generally polychronic system of time conception differs significantly from the strategy for facing a generally monochronic one. For example, in a polychronic system, one should be aware that people distinguish between insiders and those outside the existing personal relationships. One must therefore try to establish an inside connection to facilitate the effectiveness of a given message. By contrast, in a monochronic society, one needs only to schedule a meeting



with the appropriate people. One should not expect people in a monochronic system to give preference to those they know over complete strangers. The outsider is treated in exactly the same fashion as the close associate.

The influence of temporal conception on communication is extensive. This is further complicated by the fact that no culture is exclusively polychronic or monochronic. Members of any culture lean to one direction or the other, although the cultures as a whole may organize their thoughts and conceive of time more one way or the other. The central issue here is to keep alert to communication differences that would indicate that one culture was more monochronic or polychronic in orientation, and to adapt one's communication strategies accordingly.

Communication in Intercultural Interaction

Understanding the dominant communication style of a particular culture is an important first step in understanding the intercultural communication that underlies most international business interactions. However, this understanding is insufficient in an intercultural interaction because it fails to address the extent to which individuals may adapt or otherwise alter their preferred behavior in these situations.. The idea that adapting one's communication style to that of the other culture participant in an intercultural communication will help to bridge cultural distance and improve communication.

Conclusion:

As business has turned more and more to an integrated world market to meet its needs, the difficulties of communicating at a global level have become increasingly widespread. Lack of understanding deriving from ethnocentrism or ignorance of culturally based assumptions erroneously believed to be universal can readily escalate to unproductive conflict among people of differing cultural orientation. This may occur on the domestic front as well. With the increasing numbers of immigrants to the U.S. our "melting pot" society leads to cultural diversity in the workplace. In combination with a growing emphasis on global markets and an interdependent and internationalized economy, the need for dealing with intercultural differences and cross-cultural communication barriers has grown.

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The cross-cultural issues suggested in this brief summary provide a framework for asking the right questions when preparing for business communication with those from other cultures. By asking the way in which each of these factors is likely to affect communication with people from that specific culture, many of the communication barriers between people of different cultures can be anticipated.

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