



Cross Cultural Communication: Its Relevance and Challenges in Organizations

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Abstract- We communicate with others all the time-at our homes, and in workplaces, in the groups we belong to and in the community. No matter how we think we understand each other, communication is hard. Just think, for example, how often we hear things like “He doesn’t get it” or “She didn’t really understand what I meant to say”. This is because communication is the understanding not of the visible, but of the invisible and hidden. These hidden and symbolic elements embedded in the culture give meaning to the visible communication process

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What is culture?

Culture in general is concerned with belief and values on the basis of which people interpret experiences and behave, individually or in groups. Broadly, “culture” refers to a group or community with which one shares common experiences that shape the way one understands the world.

Four Cultural Dimensions

Cultures-both national and organization- differ along many dimensions. Four of the most important ones are-

- 1) Directness (get to the point versus imply the message)
- 2) Hierarchy (follow orders versus engage in debate)
- 3) Consensus (dissent is accepted versus unanimity is needed).
- 4) Individualism (individual winners versus team effectiveness).

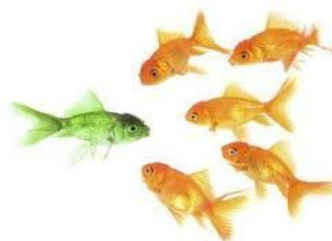
Challenges faced due to cross cultural communication in workplace-

1) Cultural shock-



Failure to identify cultural issues and take action can lead to cultural shock. In order of priority, the most often found symptoms of culture shock are feeling isolated, anxiety worry, reduction in job performance, high nervous energy and helplessness. Not coping with cultural shock symptoms, when they appear can lead to very negative situations. .

2. Failure in respecting differences & working together-



When faced by interaction that we do not understand, people tend to interpret the others involved as “abnormal”, “weird” or “wrong”. This tendency, if indulged in, gives rise on the individual level to prejudice. If this propensity is either consciously or unconsciously integrated into organizational structures then prejudice takes root in our institutions- in the structures, laws, policies and procedures that shape our lives. Consequently, it is vital that we learn to control the human tendency to translate “different from me” into “less than me “. We can learn to collaborate across cultural lines as individuals and as society. Awareness of cultural differences doesn’t have to divide us from each other. It doesn’t have to paralyze us either, for fear of

not saying the “right thing”. In fact becoming more aware of our cultural differences, as well as exploring our similarities, can help us communicate with each other more effectively. Recognizing where cultural differences are at work is the first step toward understanding and respecting each other

3) Different attitudes toward conflict-



Some culture view conflict as a positive thing, while others view it as something to be avoided. In the U.S conflict is not usually desirable; but often people encourage dealing directly with conflicts that do arise. In fact, face- to- face meetings customarily are recommended as the way to work through whatever problems exist. In contrast, in many Eastern countries, open conflict is experienced as embarrassing or demeaning as a rule, differences are best worked out quietly. A written exchange might be the favoured means to address the conflict.

4. Different Approaches to completing tasks-

From culture to culture, there are different ways that people move towards completing tasks. Some reasons include different access to resources; different judgements of the rewards associated with task completion, different notion of time, and varied ideas about how relationship- building and task oriented work together.

When it comes to working together effectively on a task, cultures differ with respect to the importance placed on establishing relationship early on in the collaboration. A case in point, Asian and Hispanic cultures tend to attach more value to developing relation-ships at the beginning of a share projects and more emphasis on task completion toward the end as compared with European –Americans. European- Americans tend to focus immediately on the task at hand, and let relationships develop as they work on the task. This does not mean that people from any one of these cultural backgrounds are more or less committed to accomplishing the task or value relationships more or less; it means they may pursue them differently.

5) Different Decision-making styles-

The roles individuals play in decision-making vary widely from culture to culture. For example, in the U.S decisions are frequently delegated – that is, an official assigns responsibility for a particular matter to a subordinate. In many Southern European and Latin

American countries, there is a strong value placed on holding decision- making responsibilities oneself. When decisions are made by groups of people, majority rule is a common approach in the U.S., in Japan consensus is preferred mode. Be aware that individuals’ expectations about their own roles in shaping a decision may be influenced by their cultural frame of reference.

6) Different Attitudes toward disclosure-



In some cultures, it is not appropriate to be frank emotions, about the reasons behind a conflict or a misunderstanding, or about personal information. Keep this in mind when you are in dialogue or when you are working with others. When you are dealing with a conflict, be mindful that people may differ in what they feel comfort able revealing. Questions that may seem natural to you- what was the conflict about? The variation among cultures in attitudes towards disclosure is also something to consider before you conclude that you have an accurate reading of the views, experiences, and goals of the people with whom you are working.

Recent popular works demonstrate that our own society is paying more attention to previously overlooked ways of knowing. Indeed, these different approaches to knowing could affect ways of analyzing a community problem or finding ways to resolve it. Some members of your group may want to do library research to understand a shared problem better and identify possible solutions. Others may prefer to visit places and people who have experienced challenges like the ones you are facing, and get a feeling for what has worked elsewhere.

7) Problem in building trust across cultural boundaries-

There is a strong correlation between components of trust (e.g communication effectiveness, conflict management and rapport) and productivity. Cultural differences play a key role in the creation of trust, since trust is built in different ways, and means different things in different cultures. For example, in the U.S., trust is demonstrated performance over time. Here one can gain the trust of his/her colleagues by “coming through” and delivering on time on his/her commitments. In many other parts of the world, including many Arabs, Asian and Latin American countries, building relationships is a prerequisite for professional interactions. Building trust in these countries often involves lengthy discussions on non-professional topics and shared meals in restaurants.

Work-related discussion start only once his/her counterpart has become comfortable with him/her as a person.

Cultural difference in multicultural teams can create misunderstanding between team members before they have had a chance to establish any credibility with each other. Thus, building trust is a critical step in creation and development of such teams.

8) Cross cultural PR-



Brand image, public relations and advertising are all areas companies must be careful about when moving out of the national context. Taste and values change dramatically from continent to continent. It is crucial to understand whether the brand name, image or advertising campaign is culturally applicable is the target place or country. Therefore, it is very essential to examine words, images, colours and symbols to ensure, whether they fit well with the target culture or not.

9) Different communication styles

The way people communicate varies widely, cultures. One aspect of communication style is language usage. Across cultures, some words and phrases are used in different ways. For example, even in countries that share the English language, the meaning of “yes” varies from ‘may be’. I’LL consider it “to” definitely ‘so’ with many shades in between.

10) Problems related to non-verbal communication

Nonverbal communication is hugely important in any interaction with others; its importance is multiplied across cultures. This is because we tend to look for nonverbal cues when verbal messages are unclear or ambiguous, as they are more likely to be across culture (especially when different languages are being used). Since nonverbal behaviour arises from our cultural common sense- our ideas about what is appropriate, normal and effective as communication in relation, emotions expression, touch, physical appearance and other nonverbal cues. Cultural also attribute different degree of importance to verbal and non verbal behavior.

Some elements of nonverbal communication are across cultures. For example, research has shown that the emotions of enjoyment, anger, fear, sadness, disgust and surprise are expressed in similar ways by people around the world. Differences surface with respect to which



emotions are acceptable to display it various cultural settings, and by whom. For instance it may be socially acceptable in some settings in the United States for women to show fear, but not anger, and for men to display anger, but not fear. Sometime, interpretation of facial expression that would be recognized around the world as conveying happiness may actually express anger or mask sadness both of which are acceptable to show overtly.

How to overcome challenges arising due to cross-cultural communication?



The key to effective cross cultural communication and thereby overcoming the pitfalls is knowledge. First, it is essential that people understand the potential problems of cross cultural communication, and makes a conscious effort to overcome these problems. Second, it is important to assume that one’s effort will not always be successful and adjust one’s behavior appropriately.

Active listening can sometimes be used to check this out by repeating what one thinks he or she heard, one can confirm that one understands the communication accurately. If words are used differently between languages or cultural groups, however, even active listening can overlook misunderstandings..

If we are open to learning about problems from other cultures, we become less lonely. Prejudice and stereotypes separate us from whole groups of people who could be friends and partners in working for change. Many of us long for real contact. Talking with people different from ourselves gives us hope and energies us to take on the challenge of improving our communities and world.

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