

(Mis) Communication in Intercultural Context

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Abstract

Communication is a process by which two or more people exchange ideas, facts, or feelings in ways that each gains a common understanding of the message. We live in a culturally diverse world. With team work becoming an integral part of today's corporate world, successful communication among the diverse members of a team has become a necessity. But very often communication breakdown occurs due to cultural differences which may lead to misunderstanding, suspicion, and even animosity. Culture refers to the beliefs, traditions, habits, and values controlling the behavior of majority of the people in a social-ethnic group. Effective communication with people of different cultures is a challenging task. People from different backgrounds may have varied approaches to learning styles, family structure, language, religion, and most other aspects of life. Very often, professionals become victims of misunderstanding when they encounter individuals from different cultures, races, religions, and nationalities in their intercultural communication behaviors. To understand properly the causes of miscommunication, it becomes necessary to understand cultural differences. Consequently, the present paper is an attempt to highlight cultural differences and how they affect communication process. This paper also suggests some measures to overcome culture differences that may create hazards in communication process.

Keywords: Intercultural, Ethnic, Philosophy, Animosity

1. Introduction

Today we live in an age where communication has become the breath and soul not only of individual but also of the organizations. Communication permeates all aspects of our personal and professional lives. It is the key to having positive interaction and to building and maintaining favorable relationship. The ability to communicate and to have that message understood is vital in today's world of work as it is changing dramatically. Many of these changes revolve around processing and communicating information. [1]. Communication has been defined as the process of sending and receiving messages and this process may be disrupted due to large number of factors. Among them, culture is one of the major factors. It includes the organizational and the ethnic and/or the national backgrounds of the people communicating. Today as most of the organizations are operated at global level there is undeniably an overwhelming influence of culture on business, confirming the notion that language is culture generative [2]. Seeing the great need of understanding the cultural differences which pave the way for effective communication at workplace, this paper studies the influence of culture on workplace communication and the ways in which it causes lapses in communication. At the beginning, it elaborates the term culture and then throws some light on ethnocentrism and stereotyping

which create hindrances in smooth communication at workplace. Finally it also suggests some measures to overcome intercultural communication barriers caused by cultural diversity to improve the effectiveness of communication at workplace.

2. Culture: Defined and Explained

Culture is a complex concept, with many different definitions. But simply it refers to a group or community with which we share common experiences that shape the way we understand the world. It includes groups that we are born into, such as gender, race, or national origin. It also includes groups we join or become part of [3]. Culture in broad sense refers to the behavioral characteristics typical to an individual or a group. These cultural traits are unique and are reflected through both verbal and non-verbal communication. Culture seems to differ from person to person and with this politeness, courtesy, and consideration also differ from one region to another affecting the output and final result. Everyman's mind is a unique filter and their communication filters interacted with each other even or commonly shared platform create frictions leading to communication barriers [4].

When people cross cultural boundaries, they take their "taken for granted" and continue to choose actions consistent with the way they've been enculturated. They continue to interpret actions in terms of their own enculturation. It is inevitable that communication across cultural boundaries will break down unless people can recognize their ethnocentrism and take action to overcome it. They must recognize that one culture cannot be judged by the standards of another. This is cultural relativism and it is important to understand this concept and not judge others according to our own cultural values [5].

3. Ethnocentrism and Stereotyping

The process of understanding and accepting people from other cultures is often hampered by two barriers: ethnocentrism and stereotyping. The belief in the superiority of one's own culture is known as ethnocentrism. This natural attitude is found in all cultures. Ethnocentrism causes us to judge others by own rules [6]. And people around the world are ethnocentric to some degree. Beliefs, values, and behaviors that differ from those of their culture may seem peculiar, strange, and even wrong. However, when they study different cultures, they realize that there is not just one right or wrong way but that different ways can be equally correct [1].

Our perception of other cultures sometimes causes us to form stereotypes about group of people. A stereotype is an oversimplified perception of a behavioral pattern or characteristic applied to entire groups. For example, the Swiss are hard working, efficient, and neat; Americans are loud, friendly, and impatient; Germans are formal, reserved, and blunt. These attitudes may or may not accurately describe cultural norms. But when applied to individual business communicators, such stereotypes may create misconception and misunderstanding. Thus there is a great need to look beneath surface stereotypes and labels to discover individual personal qualities [6].

4. Intercultural Communication Differences

Although knowledge of the communication process and skill in implementing it are basic to effective communication, they will not guarantee success. And when in everyday communication, the message does not always transfer from the sender to the receiver communication breakdown occur for a number of reasons [7]. Barriers to communication are the factors that block or significantly distort successful communication. These barriers to communication in organization may be temporary and can be overcome. Awareness and recognition are the first step in formulating ways to overcome the barriers [8]. There are some fundamental patterns of cultural differences, ways in which cultures, as a whole, tend to vary from one another -are described below.

4.1 Different Language Usage: The way people communicate varies widely between, and even within, 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 "maybe, I'll consider it" to "definitely so," with many shades in between.

4.2 Different Attitudes towards Conflict: Some cultures 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 people often are encouraged to deal 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; as a rule, differences are best worked out quietly. A written exchange might be the favored means to address the conflict.

4.3 Different Attitudes towards Completing of Tasks: From culture to culture, there are different ways that people move chose toward completing tasks. Some reasons include different access to resources; different judgments of the rewards associated with task completion, different notions of time, and varied ideas about how relationship-building and task-oriented work should go together.

4.4 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. In view of culture differences individuals' expectations about their own roles in shaping a decision is influenced by their cultural frame of reference.

4.5 Different Attitudes toward Disclosure of Emotions and Reasons: In some cultures, it is not appropriate to be frank about emotions, about the reasons behind a conflict or a misunderstanding, or about personal information. It is desirable to keep this in mind while talking or working with others. When you are dealing with a conflict, be mindful that people may differ in what they feel comfortable revealing. Questions that may seem natural to you may seem intrusive to others. The variation among cultures in attitudes toward 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.

4.6 Cognitive and Affective ways of knowing: Notable differences occur among cultural groups when it comes to epistemologies - that is, the ways people come to know things. European cultures tend to consider information acquired through cognitive means, such as counting and measuring, more valid than other ways of coming to know things on the other hand African prefers affective ways of knowing, including symbolic imagery and rhythm [9].

4.7 Different Attitudes towards Time and Space: Time is one of the most central differences that separate cultures and cultural ways of doing things. In the West, time tends to be seen as quantitative, measured in units that reflect the march of progress. The United States is called a "chronocracy," in which there is such reverence for efficiency and the success of economic endeavors that the expression "time is money" is frequently heard.

In the East, time feels like it has unlimited continuity, an unraveling rather than a strict boundary. Birth and death are not such absolute ends since the universe continues and humans, though changing form, continue as part of it. People may attend to many things happening at once in this approach to time, called polychronous.

4.8 Fate and Personal Responsibility: Another important variable affecting communication across cultures is fate and personal responsibility. This refers to the degree to which we feel ourselves the masters of our lives, versus the degree to which we see ourselves as subject to things outside our control. Another way to look at this is to ask how much we see ourselves able to change and maneuver, to choose the course of our lives and relationships. A parallel has been drawn between the emphasis on personal responsibility in North American settings and the landscape itself. The North American landscape is vast, with large spaces of unpopulated territory. The frontier mentality of "conquering" the wilderness, and the expansiveness of the land stretching huge distances, may relate to generally high levels of confidence in the ability to shape and choose our destinies.

In this expansive landscape, many children grow up with an epic sense of life, where ideas are big, and hope springs eternal. When they experience setbacks, they are encouraged to redouble their efforts, to "try, try again." Action, efficacy, and achievement are emphasized and expected. Free will is enshrined in laws and enforced by courts.

On the other hand there are places in the world with much smaller territory, such as Northern Ireland, Mexico, Israel, and Palestine whose history reflects repeated conquest and harsh struggles. In these places, there is more emphasis on destiny's role in human life. In Mexico, there is a legacy of poverty, invasion, and territorial mutilation. Mexicans are more likely to see struggles as inevitable or unavoidable. Their fatalistic attitude is expressed in their way of responding to failure or accident by saying that the setback was destined.

This variable is important to understanding cultural conflict. If

someone invested in free will crosses paths with someone more fatalistic in orientation, miscommunication is likely. The first person may expect action and accountability. Failing to see it, they may conclude that the second is lazy, obstructionist, or dishonest. The second person will expect respect for the natural order of things. Failing to see it, they may conclude that the first is coercive or irreverent, inflated in his ideas of what can be accomplished or changed [10].

Values: Values are among the first things learnt, not consciously, but implicitly. Developmental psychologists believe that by the age of ten most children would have their basic value in place and after that, changes are hard to make. These values remain unconscious i.e. they are not discussed but they are apparent in the way things are done. These basic values and attitudes have been passed down from generation to generation, and are often shaped by the environment in which we live [5].

5. Guidelines for effective Intercultural Communication

Working across cultures is a new experience for many people. Intercultural communication can be a dynamic and creative affair but occasionally due to the inability to interpret people correctly it can be a challenge. Building an understanding of other people's cultures, their communication styles and behaviors can go a long way in improving relationships and being more successful in an intercultural environment. There are some guidelines for effective intercultural communication.

5.1 Assessing Assumptions: Everyone makes and has assumptions about others. Assumptions are beliefs rather than objective truth and are usually influenced by a number of subjective factors. For intercultural communication to truly work, people need to assess their assumptions and ask themselves why they hold those ideas or beliefs. By doing so and even openly examining them with others, the initial barrier to intercultural communication is overcome.

5.2 Understanding Different Cultures: In order to come to appreciate and understand people from different cultures, empathy is vital. Through putting yourself in someone else's shoes you come to see or appreciate their point of view.

5.3 Emphasis on Individuality: Herd mentality refers to a closed and one dimensional approach. Such a way of thinking curbs creativity, innovation and advancement. Intercultural communication can only flourish if people are encouraged to think as individuals, bring their cultural influences to the table and share ideas that may be outside the box.

5.4 Be Sensitive: People can and do behave in culturally insensitive ways. An attack on someone's personality is an attack on their culture and therefore their dignity. This can only be divisive. Intercultural communication is based upon people thinking through words and actions to ensure they do not act inappropriately. When insensitive behavior is witnessed it is the responsibility of all to shun it and ensure it remains unacceptable.

5.5 Flexible Time Approach: Not everyone in the world thinks that time is money. Understand that for many people work is low down on the priority list with things like family taking a much

higher precedence. Do not expect people to sacrifice their own time to meet deadlines. It is good practice to always leave a bit of spare time when considering deadlines. [11]

5.6 Positivist and Patience: Working in an intercultural environment can be a frustrating affair. Things may not get done when expected, communication can be tiresome and behavior may be inappropriate. Patience with yourself and others helps move beyond such issues and address how to avoid similar incidents in the future. And when faced with incidents of an intercultural nature steer clear of blame and conflict, stay positive, analyze the problem areas and work as a team to build strategies and solutions to ensure the same never occurs again.

5.7 Reflection and Self-Reflect: A good intercultural communicator not only looks outwards but also inwards. Take time to reflect on your own communication, management or motivation style and see where you can improve as an individual. As the foundation of all intercultural communication is respect. By demonstrating respect you earn respect and help create more open and fruitful relationships [10].

6. Conclusion

With the growth of technological development the global village has become a reality and in such conditions the competency in understanding each other across cultures is becoming important day by day. As a result it has become a great challenge to all the upcoming scholars of intercultural communication to explore new strategies and dilute the problems. There are many intercultural barriers in effective intercultural communication such as, different approaches to completing tasks, different decision-making styles, time and space, values, assumptions etc. How to overcome these intercultural communication barriers that would lead to the organizational effectiveness and progress at work places which involves people from diverse cultural backgrounds is a great challenge in this globalize world. In this direction it is necessary to remember cultural relativism – not judging everything from our own cultural perspective. The foundation of all intercultural communication is understanding cultural differences and their respect. By demonstrating respect we can earn respect which creates more open and fruitful relationships. We must try to empathize i.e. put ourselves in the shoes of the other person and most importantly, not to judge a whole group based on the actions of one alone. Successful intercultural communication requires enthusiasm and willingness to overcome cultural barriers as it is a two-way process.

7. References

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