



The Rising Importance of Cross Cultural Communication in Global Business Scenario

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ABSTRACT:- Language and cultural misinterpretations can be avoided by increasing our understanding of other people and their cultures. The study of cross-cultural communication addresses this need by examining the communications and interactions between people of different cultures and sub cultures. The fundamental principle of cross-cultural communication is that it is through culture that people communicate. Globalization has made intercultural communication inevitable. 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. Business firms will inevitably have to be accustomed to different working styles of their workers who are drawn from different cultural backgrounds. It is imperative for business firms to understand the cross cultural differences in their operations and this understanding acquires more importance in the sphere of communicating with people hailing from diverse cultures. Hence a Multinational Company (MNC) will have to ensure that steps are taken to overcome the barriers to cross cultural communication in order to attaining organizational objectives effectively and efficiently. The paper deals with understanding and significance of cross cultural communication, barriers to cross cultural communication and measures to overcome these cross cultural barriers by developing intercultural competence in the organizational set up.

Keywords:- Globalization, productivity, attitude, multiculturalism, provocation

Culture is the characteristics and knowledge of a particular group of people, defined by everything from language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts. It is essential for today's work force to be aware of the differences in communication across cultures at their workplaces. A major component of a culture is its systems of values, beliefs, and material products. First, culture includes belief systems that involve stories, or myths, the interpretation of which can give people insight into how they should feel, think, and/or behave. Second, culture includes value systems. Values are formed based on how we learned to believe things ought to be or how people ought to behave, especially in terms of qualities such as honesty, integrity, and openness. Third, culture is also defined by material products such as food, clothing, and music. Thus, culture provides people with a general cognitive frame work for an understanding of the world, and for functioning in it. Culture mediates relationships among men and between men and their environment. It is the primary determinant of how a person views reality both consciously and unconsciously. Moreover it provides the context which enables human beings to communicate. For these reasons, one's professional career can never be separated from his or her cultural habits. Cross-cultural training can put a negotiator in a beneficial position over his or her competitors. Though many companies feel reluctant to train their employees, it is absolutely essential and profitable in view of today's increasing demand for interaction in different global scenarios.

In a global environment the ability to communicate effectively can be a challenge. Even when both parties speak the same language there can still be misunderstandings due to ethic and cultural differences. Over the last decade, there have been countless examples from the business sector that demonstrate how poor communication can lead to poor organizational performance. Understanding the impact of globalization on cross-culture communication is imperative for organizations seeking to create a competitive advantage in the global market. Recent economic challenges further highlight the need for organizations to develop the internal

communication capacity necessary to control and monitor external threats. As society becomes more globally connected the ability to communicate across cultural boundaries has gained increasing prominence. Global businesses must understand how to communicate with employees and customers from different cultures in order to fulfill the organization's mission and build value for stakeholders. The use of technology has a profound impact on how businesses communicate globally and market their products and services. However, with the advancements in technology organizations must still be cognoscente of the culture nuisances that can potentially present obstacles in trying to increase profits and market share. According to Genevieve Hilton, "cultural proficiency doesn't mean memorizing every cultural nuance of every market. It's knowing when to listen, when to ask for help, and when—finally—to speak".(Genevieve, 2007)

For companies involved in global business operations the relationship of managers and subordinates in multinational firms is important. In research conducted by Thomas and Ravlin, it was found that participants to whom nationality was more important indicated lower perceptions of similarity with the manager, lower intentions to associate, and lower perceptions of managerial effectiveness. The results of the study strongly indicate that teaching members of different cultures to behave like each other is an ineffective approach to improving intercultural interactions in business settings. Focus should be placed on using individual differences to create innovation. Training and development of individuals involved in intercultural interactions should involve more than simply promoting cultural adaptation.

Communication is vital for businesses to effectively explain how their products and services differ from their competitors. Companies that are successful to communicate crossculturally have a competitive advantage because they can devote more time and resources to conducting business and less time on internal and external communication issues.(Genevieve, 2007) Communication is necessary for individuals to express themselves and to fulfill basic needs. The same holds true for businesses, governments, and countries. Without the ability to communicate and understand each other, there would be chaos. Communication that is based on cultural understanding is more apt to prevent misunderstandings caused by personal biases and prejudices.

Business firms will inevitably have to be accustomed to different working styles of their workers who are drawn from different cultural backgrounds. It is imperative for business firms to understand the cross cultural differences in their operations and this understanding acquires more importance in the sphere of communicating with people hailing from diverse cultures. The communication system of a business organization is interspersed with values, rules, practices and philosophy of the business. Communication system acts as link in transmitting values and norms associated with different cultures in an organization. Since the communication system holds the key to transcending the differences in cultures a MNC would regard its communication system as a mechanism to transfer knowledge. Hence a MNC will have to ensure that steps are taken to overcome the barriers to cross cultural communication in order to attaining organizational objectives effectively and efficiently.

Intercultural communication that takes place in business entities will have to take cognizance of the differences but at the same time it has become a challenge for them to develop a synthesis whereby unity is brought about in the midst of diversity. The obsession to overemphasize the differences between different cultures may result in stereotypes being conceived and such perceived notions may prove to be a hindrance in communicating with people. (Erez and Miriam, 1992)

Communication context in which preference for messages by people is made is the underlying basis for classifying cultures as high context and low context. High context communication culture is characterized by a society which is interdependent. The meanings attached to word may carry number of interpretations & the context in which these words are used or uttered may give different connotations to them. More often words accompanied by body language may give an altogether different meaning to the same word used elsewhere. Oriental cultures most often seem to be interspersed with unexpressed communication but with underlying messages in body language. (Mary, 1993)

A low context communication culture encourages direct expression of ideas and one can be frank in assessment of situations. In a culture of this nature Mangers may be blunt in their comments and very often what is being conveyed is not marred by hidden meanings. Many people find it easy to come to grips with the expressions of low context cultures as the messages are clear & loud for anyone to attach a universal meaning.

Fast changing nature of business transactions and the need to save precious time has meant low context communication is being preferred by MNCs in their operations. However in putting out a detailed press statement, a business firm has to appreciate the context in which the statement is made, underlying messages and the choice of words if the firm operates in a high context communication culture. A business firm may get tangled if the words are understood in a different light. (Mary, 1993)

The above dimensions of a national culture necessarily influence communication process when business firms operate across cultures. Firstly the internal communication process of business organization would be affected by divergence of national cultures. Internal communication system in a business organization comprises of management style & staff behavior. The former is concerned with the conduct of the superiors & the latter deals with subordinates. Barriers to communication are found between these two layers since the two parties operate with divergent objectives. (Mary, 1993)

The barriers to cross cultural communication could be perceived due to, management style, absence of understanding between management and staff, power distance prevalent, varied expectations by management, language barriers and worker expectations. These issues mar the communication process adding complexities to the situation. Broadly the communication barriers can be identified as issues that have to do with the management & issues owing to the behavior of the staff. (Ybema and Byun, 2009)

Knowledge of the non-verbal code system of a culture different from one's own is particularly helpful in establishing a communication relationship within intercultural context. Non-verbal codes consist of body movements, facial expressions, gestures, Para language, chronemics and proxemics. Verbal communication displays non-verbal cues through emotion and speaking style as well as intonation, rhythm and other prosodic attributes. The following discussion propagates non verbal actions which are extremely culture-bound.

Among the most basic cultural dimensions is individualism versus collectivism. Collectivistic cultures emphasize community, shared interests, harmony, tradition, the public good, and maintain face. Tocqueville (1945) points out, "Individualism is mature and calm feeling, which disposes each member of the community to sever himself (or herself) from the mass of his (or her) fellows and to draw apart with his (or her) family and friends, so that he (or she) has thus formed a little circle of his (or her) own, he (or she) willingly leaves society at large to itself." Evidence exists that personal individualism may transcend cultural differences for certain variables. Schmidt (1983) compared the effects of crowding on people from an individualistic culture (the United States of America) and a collectivistic culture (Singapore). The study examined the relationships among personal control, crowding annoyance, and stress, reporting similar findings for both cultures.

The other dimension of cross-cultural communication is proxemics, the power distance. It is obvious that power distance would affect the non-verbal behavior of a culture. High power distance cultures (e.g., India) may severely limit interaction. High PDI countries often prohibit dating, free contacts, which are taken for granted in low PDI countries. Cultural differences in non verbal behaviors with power implications in one or both cultural groups can lead to misunderstandings eye gaze is a power cue in main stream US culture, in differences in patterns between black and white American communicators may lead to interactional difficulties. LaFrance and Mayo (1976) report that black speakers look at their conversational partner less while listening than speaking. The pattern of for white communicators is the opposite.

Further, the latest research asserts that, in many cultures exterior signs of emotions are taken as a natural thing. The people of the Middle East and of the Mediterranean area are lively and hearty. For the Japanese, the public display of excessive emotions may be considered as an act of impoliteness, lack of control and even a kind of invasion of the private space of the other person. Silence has different meanings in different cultures. The Chinese have a saying "silence is golden..." In Australia silence can be interpreted as shyness or lack of dynamism. Touch has different interpretations in different zones. In Thailand and Laos it is rude for strangers to touch upon the head of the children where as in western countries it is way of showing affection.

Gender has been neglected as a cultural dimension. This dimension refers to the rigidity and definitions of gender roles. More rigid cultures exert influence on members to behave within a narrow range of gender-related behavior and stress traditional gender role identification. Communication between men and women can be like cross-cultural communication. Language also reflects difference in social status between genders.

Proxemics offers considerable evidence that gender communication is a form of intercultural communication. Space is a primary means by which a culture designates who is important, who has privilege. Responses to invasion of space also differ between men and women. While men may respond aggressively, women tend to yield space rather than challenge the intruder. These differences can create problems in communication. In the work place, employees in the traditional female role, secretary, generally have a smaller space rather than the employee in the traditional male role, executive.

Ethnocentrism refers to the superiority feeling of the members of a certain culture. Generally, ethnocentric persons have the tendency to interpret the other culture, based on their own cultural values. An American manager considers English as the “best” and will not learn another language. The manager may consider another language as inferior or illogical. And if she/he considers his/ her nonverbal system as the most civilized, he/she will have the tendency to reject other systems as primitive. In this way the ethnocentrism can become an obstacle for an efficient empathy and lead not only to the total destruction of communication, but to antagonism and even hostility.

Each society has its own culture and values. These are the ways they live and interact with each other. It is not “bad” to have Indian or American values. What is important is that the way of doing things may not be the same. Ethnocentrism is a belief in the centrality of one’s own culture. It often involves judging aspects of another culture by the standards of one’s own. Bennet (1993) defines ethnocentrism as “assuming that world view of one’s own culture is central to all reality” (p. 30).

Stereotyping is an extension of ethnocentrism. Samovar and Porter (1991) define stereotypes as “the perceptions and beliefs we hold about groups or individuals based on our previously formed opinions and attitudes” (p. 280). As the definition suggests, stereotypes do not develop suddenly but are formed by our culture over period of time. Stereotypes can either be positive or negative. If a group is termed as dishonest we start treating everyone in that group as dishonest irrespective of individual natures. Many examples can be given as the one is the women are not good at math or tough subjects like Aeronautics which may cause women in turn to avoid studying such subjects.

Scollon and Scollon (1995) caution that in order to overcome the problem of oversimplification and stereotyping “comparisons between groups should always consider both likenesses and differences, that is, they should be based upon more than a single dimension of contrast, and it must be remembered that no individual member of a group embodies all of his or her group’s characteristics” (p. 157). Indeed, an issue to keep in mind, as McKay (2002) explains, is that a contrast of especially western versus eastern assumptions of cultures of learning “can perpetuate differences, promote the concept of otherness, and lead to simple dichotomies and stereotyping” (p. 121).

Therefore, it is also important for teacher educators to emphasize individual variation, as well as the dynamic nature of cultures. It needs to be pointed out that the main aim of using the above framework is not to find out how different the students or teaching context will be from what teachers are accustomed to, but to explore what kind of preconditioned ideas teachers themselves have about that particular context, while showing them the dimensions over which cultures are most likely to vary in their discourse systems.

Culture shock is a strange psychological phenomenon which acts a barrier in communicating with others especially in a global environment. The term “culture shock” was first introduced in the 1950s by Kalvero Oberg to describe the phenomena people might experience after moving to a new environment. Culture shock can be described as the feeling of disorientation experienced by a person suddenly subjected to an unfamiliar culture or way of life. Culture shock is the physical and emotional discomfort a person experience when entering a culture different from his or her own. Culture shock is not a sudden phenomenon; rather, it builds up slowly and is often a series of small events. Culture shock may involve any of these symptoms like sadness, loneliness, melancholy, preoccupation with health, insomnia, desire to sleep too much or too little, depression, feeling vulnerable, feeling powerless, changes in temperament, anger, irritability, resentment, unwillingness to interact with others, loss of identity, unable to solve simple problems and lack of confidence. For some people, culture shock can be brief and hardly noticeable. For others, it can bring intense physical and emotional discomfort. Though it is inevitable it can be managed or overcome with conscious awareness of one’s own reactions.

The style of functioning by the management of a business house is largely affected by the culture to which the majority of management belongs to. Studies done have revealed that western managers

tend to be explicit in their communication. In the case of resolving conflicts, managers from the west tend to adopt a competing style whereby parties to the conflict are encouraged to air their grievances freely. The issues as the managers perceive them need not be swept under the carpet rather they need to be brought to the surface to understand the intricacies connected with them. In contrast to this Asian managers prefer to avoid direct expression bordering on criticism or provocation as they believe in a healing of wounds through a long term perspectives. Managers may not want to discuss certain sensitive issues as they regard them to be affecting one's privacy. Communication may be affected due these varying styles since the staff may not be clear on what to say & how to give expressions to their thoughts. Management may come down hard on them for arousing sensitivities or painting a rosy picture in a myriad situation.(Tang and Koveos, 2008)

Communication barriers generally arise due to the absence of understanding between parties to the dialogue. Culture tends to create different attitudes and approaches to problem solving. There might be different approaches to solving a problem by the management and staff. When management and staff hail from different cultures their understanding of issues may turn out to be different. This ultimately compounds the process of arriving at a common understanding of the issues at stake.(Richardson and Smith, 2007)

Western culture functions on the notion that power is not individual centric so that decision making need not be concentrated in the hands of a coterie. This approach would require the staff to assert themselves in performing duties. Individuals are empowered to act & take decisions on the spot. Employees do not have to refer decisions always to the management. (Gudykunst, 2003)

Since western thinking is based on individuals' right to property ownership, individuals are expected to protect the individual domains earmarked for them & any unobtrusive foray to others' domain is not seen as unwarranted. In eastern thinking power tends to be concentrated in the hands of an apex body comprising of the leaders who would take decisions on behalf of the others. Staff used to be dictated by the management as to what to do in given situations may not be enthusiastic in taking part in the decision making process & they may not be willing to share in risk taking adventures. Managers hailing from a western cultural background may be receptive to the feedback by the staff while Asian managers may not think listening as mandatory or an essential prerequisite for decision making. (Richardson and Smith, 2007)

Staff working in an organization would form a vital element in a business organization. At an MNC, workers hail from different backgrounds. They bring varied skills and a knowledge base but at the same time have a multitude of expectations. The language barriers owing to workers belonging to different ethnic groups are an issue to grapple with in communication. As has been discussed under low context and high context communication, the words spoken in a different culture may carry a different meaning in another cultural setting. The context in which these words are used may vitiate or steer clear issues. (Kirkman&Rosen,1999)

Language has become a barrier in the case of many MNC's operating especially in China since the majority of the workers cannot converse in any international language. Since the Chinese society is more of homogeneous in nature, the receptiveness to speaking in a different language other than mother tongue may not be an attractive proposition. But in the case of an Asian country like India this has proved to be a blessing as owing to the Colonial background & proliferation different languages in the country, the society is receptive towards accommodating pluralism. Many MNC's prefer to recruit Indian staff as they could intermingle with staff coming from other cultural settings. (Welch and Welch, 2008)

Different expectations of the staff would have to be taken into consideration in motivating them. Empowerment of the staff may not appeal to a group of workers who are more stimulated by extrinsic benefits such as pay hikes and other monetary benefits. Asian staff may be largely motivated by extrinsic motivation in some situations if they are offered additional responsibilities. In some instances they may prefer leisure over work even though monetary considerations seem to be tempting. Western staff would tend to value monetary gains as long as they could afford them an accepted level of material comfort but once this threshold is surpassed there would be eyeing for challenging assignments & variety in work schedules. (Hitt, 1995)

The communication system of a business organization is interspersed with values, rules, practices and philosophy of the business. Communication system acts as link in transmitting values & norms associated with different cultures in an organization. Since the communication system holds the key to

transcending the differences in cultures an MNC would regard its communication system as a mechanism to transfer knowledge. This mechanism has to bring about clarity and cohesion to sustain the organizational fabric so that it functions smoothly without being disrupted by cross cultural differences. However the communication system in an MNC will necessarily have to confront certain restraints due to the divergence of the work force & management. It is imperative to overcome differences in cross cultural communication since a uniformed pattern can be evolved through an effective communication system in an MNC. Hence an MNC will have to ensure that steps are taken to overcome the barriers to cross cultural communication in order to attaining organizational objectives effectively & efficiently. Business organizations may contemplate many actions to remove the restrains impeding cross cultural communication. (Martin and Nakayama, 2012)

Measures to overcome barriers in cross cultural communication

In an era of having to operate with multiculturalism, a communicator has to be competent in intercultural communicating. This competence in cross cultural communication would enable an organization to achieve objectives while according due respect to values, norms, beliefs of the people being affected by its operations. A business organization has to develop intercultural competence in organizational set up to overcome the barriers to cross cultural communication. (Welch and Welch, 2008)

Intercultural competence is defined as the ability to participate in a set of activities the core of which happens to a common communication code. This ability is aided by knowledge, skills & attitudes. Successful Development of intercultural competence rests on three pillars. These components that facilitate orderly cross cultural communication would be intercultural sensitivity, intercultural awareness and intercultural adroitness. The affectionate aspect of intercultural communication is identified as intercultural sensitivity. This aspect is to be developed in order to equip individuals with the ability to appreciate other cultures' differences. Through the development of intercultural sensitivity, an individual would be able to grasp self-concept, neutrality & self-possession. (Welch and Welch, 2008)

The cognitive aspect of intercultural communication is known as intercultural awareness. This dimension involves mastering an individual's ability to understand other cultures' implicit conventions that govern the behavior of people influenced by that particular culture. Intercultural awareness results in enhancing not only cultural-awareness but also self-awareness in the process. (Linghui and Koveos, 2008)

The behavioral aspect of intercultural communication characterizes intercultural adroitness. The development of adroitness focuses on enhancing the skills required enact successfully intercultural transactions. The successful conclusion of transactions would bring about bottom line results to an MNC that translate into tangible results. Interactive management developing social skills especially etiquettes, enhancing the quality of self expression are some of the key results areas where progress is expected to be made.(Dues and Brown, 2003)

The development of ability to appreciate how people hailing from different cultural backgrounds think, act and feel requires a concerted effort and a considerable time. Apart from this fact a business organization that has to del with inculcating individuals with certain qualities to enable them to continue to maintain intercultural competence. These qualities would imbibe in an individual long lasting value so that the person concerned would effectively deal with barriers to cross cultural communication as they encounter them. These qualities can be identified as attitudes, knowledge, comprehension and intercultural skills, and managing anxiety. Attitude would encompass respect, openness, curiosity and discovery. Intercultural development trainers emphasize the significance of attitudes as they largely shape responses in cross cultural communication. (Linghui and Koveos, 2008)

Respecting the cultural norms, values and ethos of others stem from a belief that such cultures need to be treated with dignity. The belief is coupled with treating others as equals. The spirit of respecting other culture would find expression in being empathetic about use of language. Openness has to do with being respective towards accepting people from various cultures. Openness would avoid prejudgment of individuals and circumstances to leave room for listening to others. Openness promotes engagement through a polite manner of seeking clarifications. In the process an individual would be enabled to view the world from others point of view. Curiosity is inherent with ambiguity but this ambivalence can be used as a stimulating urge in order to understand peculiar aspects of other cultures. (Orozeo and Blando, 2007)

As intercultural communication is often clouded with ambiguity individuals may suffer from a paranoid in dealing with an alien culture. Hence there is an imperative need to overcome anxiety in cross

cultural communication in order to ease constrains. Anxiety often stands on the way of effective communication since individuals develop antipathy to dealing with people hailing from diverse cultures. To overcome anxiety in cross cultural communication care has to be exercised in enabling individuals to manage their emotions and actions followed by feelings.(John, 2003)

In today's workplace, the issue of intercultural communication is definitely of importance in the global business scenario. Success or failure in managing a diverse or multicultural workforce largely depends on the ability of managers at all levels to communicate effectively with people from different backgrounds and nationalities, and showing respect for cultural differences. International business is the outgrowth of globalization which is driven primarily by economic interdependence and advances in technology, but the success in global business ventures will be affected by the inability of international managers to understand appropriate business etiquette, customs, and values needed to conduct business among nations of the world. In light of the advantages and complexities associated with globalization and multinational operations, cultivating cross-cultural awareness and skills, and developing multicultural sensitivity and global mindset by managers will lead to sustainable growth in international business. Overcoming the barriers in cross cultural communication would aid in fostering an inclusive organizational culture which is mutually beneficial to the individuals as well as the organization.

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