



Cross-cultural Communication: Need of the Hour

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the age old philosophy of 'vashudhaivkutumbkum' and the 21st century corporate scenario. There has always been a need of cross-cultural communication, but with the advancement of science , technology and business, it has been accelerated. This paper promotes the understanding of business world better. That it is the need of the hour is the edifice of the arguments of this paper. We have not delved deep into the research though even then there a good stuff for the fair understanding of the topic. The methodology used is analytical and comparative to shed light on the main arguments of the paper. The study gets it's thrust from the awareness that there is need to realize the significance of the cross-cultural communication which takes place at the workplace.

Keywords: Culture, Multicultural, Communication, ethnocentrism, Differences in perception, Multilingualism etc.

“Culture is a way of life of a group of people ...the stereotyped patterns of learning behavior, which are handed down from one generation to the next through means of language and imitation.”

V. Barnouw

With the technological advances in every field of communication, business has increasingly become global. And this is expected to continue in the foreseeable future. So, it is important now how to communicate with people from other cultures both national and international. This paper aims at to know some of the major cultures of the world and their business styles. We will study the differences among cultures. People of different countries have developed different habits, values, and different ways to interpret events. These differences are a major source of misunderstanding while communicating with people of different cultures. The worst part of this is that people tend to view the ways of their culture as normal and the ways of other cultures as bad, wrong, and peculiar. The global dimension to business has brought about a multicultural and diverse workforce which caters to multicultural societies. There is a diversity of race, culture, language, religion, gender and nationality at workplace. So handling diversity at the workplace has become an important factor in successful business. Cultural differences have a subtle or at times, direct influence on business negotiations. In our times successful transactions are based on trust between the people involved. As a matter of fact, communication is not just about speaking the same language. The human element plays a very important role at all levels of interpersonal dealings. After all, it is people who are engaged in business dealings, and not the machines only. Indeed, the development in information technology and the facility of being ‘a mouse-click away’ are the primary channels of communication today, but how we use this technology still determines the effectiveness of our communication.

The problems of differences are both verbal and non-verbal. Specifically, the problems are related to main two kinds of cultural differences. First, the differences in body positions and movements. Second, the differences in views and practices concerning various factors of human relationships. Besides these, there are some international business protocols like Perform-in-voices, letters of credit, meetings, seminars, quotations, bills of lading, financial tools etc. As we all know communication is a dynamic process which takes place verbally and nonverbally. While about 7 per cent of the message depends on the verbal part, the remaining 93 per cent depends on the nonverbal. The social behavior, gestures, tone, body language, all play a very important role in communication. Sensitivity to differences in conventions, perceptions and cultural values can help us reach a common ground with ease, and could build trust. Trust is a sure marker of successful communication. Thus, culture plays a very significant role in communication.

The word ‘culture’ has many different meanings in literature, in sociology, in science etc. Though, the Oxford English Dictionary defines culture as ‘evidence of intellectual development of arts, science, etc., in human society’ and ‘the state of intellectual development among a people.’ Culture can, therefore, be understood as the system of shared beliefs, ideas, customs, a common pattern of behavior of a group of people. Culture can be of many kinds—social culture, corporate culture, religious culture, ethnic culture. Here it is relevant to know that corporate culture affects leadership styles, personnel issues, support for professional advancement, employee morale, work conditions, support for work-leisure balance and, most importantly, ease and frequency of internal communication. For example, some organizations have a closed-door, strictly hierarchical policy, while others have an open-door, interactive policy of communication in day-to-day functioning.

Our social conventions help us to formulate our perceptions and values, and these guide our interaction and communication with other people. Conventions can be defined as general consent, especially about forms of

general behavior, practice or custom based on general agreement. Anyone who does not follow 'customary behavior'-as it happens in multicultural societies- is perceived or seen as an 'outsider' by that particular group. Further, this kind of perception or interpretation brings with it a mental filter where we might put people –their words and actions –in categories according to our own value system. Though the Internet and cable TV have brought the world right into our drawing rooms, yet, we might perceive the world differently. As we know perception is an interpretation or impression based on one's understanding of something. Perceptions vary according to people's social conditioning. At times we might even have fixed opinions, framed by our experiences or the representations and projections of the print and the electronic media's and the Internet. Since our own culture comes to us through lived experience and the culture of others, through representation, we tend to prioritize our own systems of belief. This leads us into the danger of stereotyping and ethnocentrism. Stereotypes may be about another group of people with different religious or cultural beliefs, a profession, any particular part of the world or even at times, about the colour of the skin or gender. Labeling people using stereotypes severely restricts one's perception of other people. Holding on to such perceptions can become a major impediment to business solutions and workplace communications.

Apart from the danger of stereotyping, one also needs to be wary of the danger of ethnocentrism. In a multicultural workplace, such intolerance of differences in culture values can cause severe misunderstanding, if not breakdown of communication. Ethnocentrism is the belief that one's own culture group is superior, and hence, should be given precedence over the other. This severely restricts acceptability of the other. It reduces diversity into the mode of binary opposites: right-wrong, good-bad, ours-theirs. Ethnocentrism can be based on race, social or economic class across the world. It is desirable that deviations or differences of cultural behavior should not be ridiculed. For successful cultural communication, one needs both to acknowledge and accept these differences in conventions and value systems, and view them from the right perspective.

The challenge of communication across cultures can be met with sensitivity to the nonverbal and cultural component of communication. Since business communication is dominated by a specific purpose, the channels of communication need to be kept clear of avoidable hindrances. All human beings might carry on the same tasks, but in different ways because behaviors are learned from the local group or community. These different culture-specific cues are called cultural variables. These bring in the social and cultural variations in the way we talk, eat, dress, and conduct business, or even how we conduct ourselves. Social variables divide people into larger groups. People who 'belong' to a particular social group can be identified by the religion they practice, the social norms of dress, food preferences, etc. These in turn define their 'world-view', that is, the person's attitude to public and private, kinship value, hierarchy, status, etc. These attitudes go on to influence their business practices, decision-making patterns, concept of time, etc. As culture cues are learned from one's immediate social environment, let us now turn to these important parameters of social behaviour and identification. For example, in India, as in some areas abroad, almost all homes and commercial establishments have a suitable space reserved for images or symbols of the deity. All believers routinely seek God's blessings-especially before beginning the day, a new project and entering new premises. Some people might publicly follow certain rituals, while others might be more inclined to keep their faith private. A traditional shopkeeper in India might keep a customer waiting for a few minutes, while he is performing his daily ritual. Most north Indians ward off evil by donating some coins dipped in mustard oil or getting green chillies and a lemon strung on a thread, and tied up at the door one every Saturday. To a foreigner, this spiritual symbolism of green chillies and lemon might be difficult to understand. Orthodox communities impose certain restrictions on dress, food, social behaviour or even business practices. The Tamilians will rarely be seen without the sacred white mark on their forehead. Married Maharashtrian women often wear nose pins. Being a multi-religious, multicultural society since time immemorial, Indians are quite familiar with this plurality of belief, and individual faith does not usually interfere with their business or personal relations with fellow-Indians. Let us talk about a very simple social variable- food. It plays a very important role. Food is not only necessary for survival, rather it forms the most diverse and thriving example of cultural variety. The idiom 'One man's food is another man's poison' quite accurately explains the social

and cultural value humans have attached to food. The modern approach to food is revolutionizing the food culture. People are now open to experimentation with cuisines across the world. It also introduces us to social practices, etc., of other nations. Even the way one dresses is a reflection of one's personality and culture. Traditional forms of dress are easy and immediate identifiers of cultural moorings. As with food, dress was also once dictated by the geographical, climate, social and even religious considerations. Thus, in our times also we find that ethnic and national conventions have a certain say in the local dress code. So to bring uniformity and a cosmopolitan look in the workplace, many business organization have clear codes of formal and informal dressing. Power dressing seems to be the new buzzword. Differences in perception of time as seen and practised by different cultures make this issue rather volatile in cross-cultural interactions. So in cross-cultural context, it is important to be aware of this variation in perception of time to avoid misunderstandings.

Language is also among the most powerful variables. It can pose a challenge in intercultural communications. For example, in India, bilingualism and multilingualism is a common feature, so communication is not really hampered. However, at times, even a common language may become a barrier if the communicators come from different backgrounds. The accent or pronunciation might communicate erroneously. It is true that language acquisition can give you some knowledge of the culture, and it can be an effective tool in cross-cultural communications, but it will not give you the lived experience of culture as it would give to a native speaker. It cannot automatically imbibe in the learner the value systems or the perceptions of the new culture. One can't become an English or a French or a German by just acquiring a particular language. Luckily, one does not need to become an English or a French or a German to be able to build professional or social bridges across cultures. Awareness and sensitivity to the cultural variables will go a long way in paving smooth communication channels and establishing good professional and social relationships.

Now let us talk about body language cues which are really useful. Here are some of the interesting cues of body language to be considered in international market. In America and Britain, maintaining eye contact during formal speeches is acceptable. It denotes honesty and transparency in business dealings. In many Asian countries like Indonesia, Japan and China, keeping one's eyes lowered is a sign of respect. In India, this rule of not looking into the eyes is especially observed when dealing with seniors and women. Staring in any part of the world is, of course, considered rude. However, a westerner might interpret lowered eyes as a sign of dishonesty or deceit. Though one of the most common responses in all communication, and yet surprisingly the ways of saying 'yes' or 'no' also vary across cultures. For example, people in Japan move their right hand to say 'no'; Americans and Canadians shake their heads back and forth, and people in Bulgaria nod up and down. For most north Indians, moving the heads from left to right indicates denial, while moving the head up and down means 'yes'. For some South Indians, both dissents are conveyed by a sideways movement of the head. Sometimes, Filipinos smile and laugh when actually they are angry. Using the left hand to receive or give money or gifts is considered insulting in some Asian cultures as the left hand is considered to be 'unclean'. No such 'taboo' exists in the western cultures. A smiling, nodding face of a Japanese might be perceived as comprehension and acceptance of the message while the gesture actually indicates that the person is still listening. The popular sign of 'okay' with the thumb and forefinger together might be considered obscene in parts of Italy, and rude and insulting in Russia, Germany and Brazil. The Japanese read this gesture as a sign for money, and might interpret it as the requirement of a bribe at the end of a contract!

So far Proxemics is concerned, spatial distance maintained between two people indicates the level of formality, informality, intimacy, as also the category of relationship. Generally speaking, with seniors, elders, strangers and members of the opposite sex, one keeps a respectful distance; while with friends and colleagues, the 'arm's distance' rule is relaxed. Infact, it is commonplace to see peer groups walking hand-in-hand or with an arm across the other's shoulders. Looking overseas, one will find that Arabs and Latin Americans prefer to stay close during a conversation, while a distance of less than five feet during a business conversation is considered uncomfortable for Canadians and Americans. People from Japan and Germany prefer their

business counterparts to be standing even further away. Clearly, a person who is unaware of these cultural variations might give offence where none was meant. The Arab might perceive the American to be disinterested on the basis of the distance maintained by the latter, while the Indian might be standing too close for the comfort of the Japanese businessman.

Last but not least, the sense and concept of public and private play a vital role in cross-cultural communication. Here is a fair comparison of the west and the east so far public and private issues are concerned. While in West, individualism allows privacy, in East hardly any privacy is allowed. In West, criticism can be direct and explicit, in East it is very difficult to criticise. If it is done, it is sugar-coated or indirect. Seniors are never spoken against openly. While in West, private space is highly respected, intrusion is not accepted, in East, at home and at work, colleagues feel free to walk in and out of private space, without an appointment. In West, making requests, especially asking for personal favours, is not heard of in the workplace. Whereas in East, it is common. Saying no, in West, comes easily and is usually not negotiable, but in East, it is almost impossible to refuse. Sometimes, one is forced to accept requests and this may cause complications at the workplace. In West, merit is promoted; no negative implications are attached to hire-and-fire policy. But in East, merit might be bypassed in favour of nepotism, especially in family-run business. In West, while an individual is alone-no cushioning is available in times of need, in East, a system of trust and faith is built up through multiple relationships-usually an adequate support system is readily available in times of crisis. In West, both giving and asking for help is difficult, in East, it comes easily and readily.

Thus, we come to conclusion that so many factors should be taken into account for an effective cross-cultural communication. An awareness and understanding of the other culture can prevent miscommunication and breakdown of mutual understanding. Across culture it becomes important to know the value given to fine print. In dealing with multicultural societies or international organizations, awareness of cultural variables can equip one with the required pattern of communication and behaviour. By seeing the 'other' in the right or neutral perspective, being alert to culture cues-one can win half the battle in cross-cultural communications, as well as, it helps in building of confidence in interpersonal relationships, leading to success in business dealings.

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