INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

As the U.S. economy becomes increasingly international, and the global economy increasingly competitive, U.S. businesspeople must be able to communicate effectively with people from other cultures. The costs of cultural miscommunication--lost opportunities and profits, embarrassment, and major mistakes--are too large and too frequent to allow us to ignore critical cultural differences or to dismiss other cultures as quaint, illogical, or wrong.

Effective cross-cultural communication requires that we understand what a culture is, and the ways in which it affects every aspect of life. Today, a growing number of companies are investing resources toward training employees in intercultural communication utilizing either in-house programs or consultants.

Culture has been defined as the "collective mental programming of the people in an environment"; the values and perspectives shared by people who are "conditioned by similar education and life experience."[1] In this sense, culture is difficult to change, because it is not only shared by a large number of people but "crystallized" in such structures as the family, religious organizations, forms of government, work organizations, law, and literature. Because it is crystallized in every layer of society, culture is like a hidden mass of an iceberg, whose tip is a society's visible customs and styles. The mass may be invisible, but if you fail to navigate around it, you can be shipwrecked.

General Guidelines

To avoid shipwreck, as people doing business in and/or with other cultures, we should:

- Learn that differences in behavior or style reflect much deeper cultural values, such as how individuals view time and space, how collective or individualistic a culture is, or how success is defined.

- Try to identify the assumptions and values of our own society, so we know what (often unconscious) biases govern us.

- Try to avoid ethnocentrism, the belief that our culture is superior to others, which is often so deep-seated that it is not consciously felt.

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[1] Geert Hofstede, "Motivation, Leadership, and Organization: Do American Theories Apply Abroad?" Organizational Dynamics (Summer 1980), 43.

[2] Ibid.

- Become aware of and anticipate the differences in norms, values, and behaviors of people from different cultures, and learn to respect and accommodate those differences.

Perceptions/Values that Differentiate Cultures

Following are some issues to consider when thinking about cultural differences. They are not meant to be all-inclusive.

Individualism versus collectivism: Some cultures value individual initiative and independence; the individual seeks his/her own identity, makes decisions based upon his/her own beliefs, and is responsible only for him/herself and his/her immediate family. In other cultures, identity is conferred by one's group; the extended family, clan, and/or organization provide the individual with security, protection, and values, and often make important life-defining decisions for him/her. Individualism focuses on individual freedom; collectivism on group stability and consensus.

High-context versus low-context cultures:[3] How explicit individuals must be when they are communicating with one another, that is, how directly they must state what they want each other to know, can be expressed as a function of whether they live in a high-context or low-context culture. When the culture is relatively homogeneous and provides those living within it with a high degree of common knowledge, the culture is defined as high context, and less information must be explicitly stated. When individuals living in the same culture have relatively less in common, the culture is said to be low context, and people must be more explicit in their communication.

Perception of space: People from different cultures vary in how much space they perceive is needed between themselves and others. For example, individuals from Middle Eastern and Mediterranean cultures tend to be comfortable with less personal space than is generally desired by North Americans and northern Europeans. Thus, if a person from a Middle Eastern culture stands as close to a North American as his/her culture dictates is acceptable, the North American is likely to feel uncomfortable because his/her space has been "invaded." The way in which *organizations* designate space (who sits where and how much room they are given) also reveals a great deal about status and values in an organizational culture.

Perception of time: There are also distinct differences between the way in which cultures observe and value time. Some cultures are time-oriented to a high degree (as evidenced by their numerous phrases about "saving time," "buying time," "investing time," and "wasting time"), while others are less preoccupied with "merely time." There are also cultural differences in time-orientation, that is, in attitudes about the past versus the future. Some cultures revere the traditions and customs of the past, and look for past precedent to justify

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[3] The term "contexting," as we are using it here, was first coined by the anthropologist Edward Hall, who has done much to advance our understanding of the more subtle variables that create culture. Among Hall's most important books are *The Silent Language* (1959), *The Hidden Dimension* (1966), *Beyond Culture* (1976), and *The Dance of Life: The Other Dimensions of Time* (1983).

innovation and change. Other cultures are less concerned with past precedent, and use projected future benefits to justify innovation and change.

Importance of hierarchies: Some cultures particularly value formal roles and structured hierarchies, and place great importance on the respect and deference that must be paid to one in a higher position. Other cultures put greater emphasis upon open, informal relationships. All cultures and organizations have hierarchies of some kind; differences are demonstrated by what hierarchies are based on, and how important and constraining they are.

Other issues or concerns that might be useful in thinking about cultural diversity include:

- The nature of change (is it viewed as positive or negative?)
- Importance and rigidity of gender roles
- Criteria/definitions of success
- The nature of authority
- The nature of humor (what is humorous?)

Communication Practices that Differentiate Cultures

Just as values and perceptions vary from culture to culture, so do specific communication practices. Thus to conduct business with those from different cultures, you must understand the communication practices of that culture. Below are a few of the areas in which you may expect to find differences between cultures:

Emphasis on task versus relationship-building: People from the U.S. often pride themselves on getting down to business quickly and efficiently. In many other cultures, including most Asian and Latin American countries, such an immediate focus on task might seem inappropriate. Instead, these cultures put a premium on first developing relationships based on such non-business factors as common schools, family connections, and similar interests.

Role of written communication: In large and established U.S. firms, written communication plays an important role in informing and persuading people, as well as in documenting information, positions, and decisions. Written communication is viewed differently in other cultures. In Japanese firms, for example, it usually plays a more ceremonial and documentary role. Oral agreement for a proposed action is generally achieved before anything is written down. Then the written memorandum with the proposal is circulated to gain official approval from all involved. Thus you wouldn't want to propose something initially in writing when working in that culture.

Role of meetings: In U.S. business, meetings are often conducted so that people can come together to discuss a project, an issue, or an initiative. Sometimes, meeting participants "brainstorm" with one another, proposing ideas and then discussing their pros and cons. In other cultures, as Japan for example, decisions are forged behind the scenes, so that by the time a meeting is held, consensus has already been reached.

Patterns of reasoning and argumentation: The ways in which people from different cultures structure an argument and reach conclusions can vary considerably. U.S. business, for example, tends to favor "direct structure," in which the main point or recommendation appears first followed by subarguments and evidence. In other cultures, the use of direct structure may seem brusque or even rude; in these cultures, the main point may be deliberately ambiguous, buried, or never even stated. In the West, arguments are to be supported by objective, neutral, often quantifiable "facts." Individuals in other cultures believe information cannot be separated from the speaker or writer, and, therefore, they tend to rely more on intuition or emotion to substantiate ideas.

Level of formality in interpersonal communication: In the U.S., interpersonal relations between business acquaintances tends to be very informal, with first names often used after one telephone call or meeting. Not all cultures are so informal in their business interactions. The British, for example, may find American familiarity a bit pushy, and the Japanese are likely to find it highly inappropriate, especially when the two people are of different ages and at different organizational levels.

Oral presentation style: In most U.S. firms, a relatively lively and informal presentation style is favored. The use of extensive gesture and movement should also work well in France and Italy, for example, but might seem excessive in Finland or Japan.

Nonverbal communication behaviors: Nonverbal cues and behaviors vary from one culture to another. For example, people from the U.S. are taught to use direct eye contact when talking with one another; in many Asian cultures, it is considered improper or rude to look directly at another person throughout a discussion. There are also norms concerning touching behavior (who may touch whom and where) and for the use of silence (is silence considered valuable or detrimental to communication?). When conducting business with a person who does not speak the same language, nonverbal behaviors may be useful in helping to clarify meaning. For example, pauses may provide opportunities for people to digest information or ask questions.

Qualities Required for Successful Cross-Cultural Communication

Successful cross-cultural communication requires not only knowledge and preparation, but the following critical qualities:

Patience--a willingness to accept ambiguity, confusion, frustration.

Tolerance--a fair and impartial attitude toward differing values and those who hold them.

Objectivity--an ability to elicit all necessary information and weigh it from the perspective of both sides before making a judgment.

Empathy--an ability to put yourself in another's position and to anticipate another's reaction to a situation.

Respect--a willingness to esteem and learn from the culture of others, no matter how different from you own.[4]

Although we tend to emphasize the differences *among* cultures, it's also important to note that there are differences *within* cultures. There are distinctions between regions (for example, northern and southern Italy), between ethnic groups within a culture, between organizations (IBM and Apple), and, of course, between individuals. Thus, we have to be careful about making sweeping cultural generalizations and about applying those generalizations to the people with whom we are doing business. To avoid that danger, cultivate the five qualities above. Anticipating and understanding differences will increase the effectiveness of your intracultural and intercultural communication.

When dealing with other cultures, the ultimate goal is not only to respect differences, but to value them.

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[4] Teaching Methodology and Concepts Committee, "How to Teach Intercultural Concepts in a Basic Communication Class," *The Bulletin* (September 1988), 3.

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Film Sources

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