

Overcoming misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication

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Annotation:

Nowadays interest to national cultures and their reflection in the languages is increasing. Other cultures have other norms of behaviour. Peculiarities of etiquette and manners of the people of different nations are considered. To overcome misunderstandings in the communication of the persons of other cultures one must realize realities of each country. Avoiding misunderstandings in cross – cultural communication will make collaboration among people more harmonious and productive.

Прокоф'єв В.М. Подолання непорозуміння в процесі міжкультурної взаємодії. У наш час зростає інтерес до національних культур і їхнього відбиття в мові. Кожній культурі притаманні свої норми поведіння. Розглядаються особливості етикету й манер представників різних культур. Для подолання непорозуміння в процесі міжкультурної взаємодії, необхідно усвідомлювати реалії кожної країни. Запобігання непорозуміння в міжкультурній комунікації сприятиме налагодженню більш гармонійного та продуктивного співробітництва.

Прокофьев В.Н. Преодоление непонимания в процессе межкультурного взаимодействия. В наше время возрастает интерес к национальным культурам и их отражению в языке. Каждой культуре свойственны свои нормы поведения. Рассматриваются особенности этикета и манер представителей различных культур. Для преодоления непонимания в процессе межкультурного взаимодействия необходимо осознавать реалии каждой страны. Устранение непонимания в межкультурной коммуникации будет содействовать налаживанию между людьми более гармоничного и продуктивного сотрудничества.

Key words:

communication, etiquette, manners, behaviour, culture, speech patterns.

комунікація, етикет, манери, поведіння, культура, мовні моделі.

коммуникация, этикет, манеры, поведение, культура, речевые модели.

Introduction.

Recognising cultural differences may be helpful in avoiding misunderstanding between individuals. The range of situations in which one may come across culture clash is vast, ranging from visits to a trade fair to coordination meeting between representatives of companies from different countries. The problem is studied in a number of papers [1, 2, 3, 7].

Culture can be defined as follows [4].

- A collective programming of the mind.
- The methods society evolves to solve problems.
- Everything we take for granted, the way we do things.
- Patterned ways of thinking, feeling and reacting, acquired and transmitted mainly by symbols.

The essential core of culture consists of traditional ideas and especially their attached values.

In corporate environment culture usually means the behaviours and beliefs, norms and values which we have in common. Norms are what is right or wrong. Values are what is good or bad. The heart of cultural differences leads into history, sociology, philosophy, theology, mythology, in fact every branch of the humanities.

Some of the differences may seem superficial – dress, etiquette, food, hours of work. Often it is simply a question of getting used to them, like the climate. Others can be irritating, like the conventions of punctuality.

Speaking a language does not necessarily mean that someone understands social and cultural patterns. Visitors who fail to “translate” cultural meanings properly often draw wrong conclusions.

Other cultures have other norms of behaviour. Yet when these other norms are applied in America, Americans naturally can interpret them through their own. They are taken as a sign of bad manners.

The study is carried out in the framework of research work of Donetsk State Institute of Health, Physical Education and Sport.

Purpose.

Purpose of this paper is to identify cultural differences, factors perceived to be stressful, having a serious impact on the way individuals work together, thereby limiting ef-

fectiveness of communication.

Results.

One should pay special attention to the value of knowing the traditions and customs of the country where one conducts one's business.

Managers must analyze and become familiar with the hidden language of foreign cultures. Five key topics – time, space, material possessions, friendship patterns, and business agreements – offer a starting point from which managers can begin to acquire the understanding necessary to do business in foreign countries. In many parts of the world, time is flexible and not seen as a limited commodity; people come late to appointments or may not come at all.

In Hong Kong, for example, it is futile to set exact meeting times, because getting from one place to another may take minutes or hours depending on the traffic situation. Showing indignation or impatience at such behaviour would astonish an Arab, Latin American, or Asian.

In some countries, extended social acquaintance and the establishment of appropriate personal rapport are essential to conducting business. The feeling is that one should know one's business partner on a personal level before transactions can occur. Therefore rushing straight to business will be rewarded, because deals are made not only on the basis of the best product or price but also with the person deemed most trustworthy. Contracts may be bound on handshakes, not lengthy and complex agreements – a fact that makes some especially western, business people uneasy.

Individuals vary in the amount of space they want separating them from others. Arabs and Latin Americans like to stand close to people they are talking with. If an American, who may not be comfortable at such close range, backs away from an Arab, this might incorrectly be taken as a negative reaction. Also, westerners are often taken aback by the more physical nature of affection between Slavs – for example, being kissed squarely by a business partner.

International body language must be included in the nonverbal language of international business. For example, an American manager may, after successful com-

pletion of negotiations, impulsively give a finger – and – thumb OK sign. In Southern France, the manager indicates this way that the sale is worthless, and in Japan that a little bribe has been asked for; the gesture is grossly insulting to Brazilians. An interesting exercise is to compare and contrast the conversation styles of different nationalities. Northern Europeans are quite reserved in using their hands and maintain a good amount of personal space, whereas Southern Europeans involve their bodies to a far greater degree in making a point.

Much European business education is modelled on American theories and teaching methods. Just as Europe adopted English dress, manners and jargon at the end of the XIX century, so it has adopted Americana in the twentieth.

The essential assertiveness and competitiveness of business relationships are tempered by a greater degree of informal socializing and friendliness than many Europeans are used to. Informality incorporates the extensive use of humour on all formal and informal occasions. The joke is an obligatory warm – up to speeches and presentations. Humour can range from the hearty to the witty and the only taboo subjects for it are money and the company's products. Business life extends deep into family and social life. At social events business is often the main topic of discussion and despairing hosts may find the party split for the evening between those who go out to work and those who work with home and family.

In day – to – day dealings conventions of behaviour can be misinterpreted. Among many westerners there is a presumption of dishonesty about people from cultures in which it is impolite to look others in the eye. Among Europeans the handshake at the end of a negotiation can be interpreted by one side as a sign that the deal is struck and by the other as a polite leave taking.

The most obvious difference between cultures is language. For instance in English “to table an idea” means to put on the agenda, while in American English it means to take off the agenda.

The concept of the boss as “coach” is still in vogue. An analogy taken from sport, it is originally American training – speak and has been adopted extensively in Europe. But the role of the coach in American sport is very different from that in Europe. The team coach in the USA is what in Europe is called the team manager – an authoritarian figure who is solely responsible for selecting and managing the team and who frequently dictates the play. A coach in the UK has an entirely different role, that of trainer or tutor. The potential for misunderstanding increases with people who speak English as a second language. The English that they learn in the classroom as children is not the same colloquial language that native speakers use. Native English speakers have a variety of accents and colloquialisms and slang which foreigners find it difficult to understand. It is most often the native English speakers are criticized for being unintelligible at international meetings and conferences.

It is not exaggeration that native English speakers should make a conscious effort to learn international English, perhaps by listening hard to their foreign colleagues, to make a deliberate effort to avoid slang, jargon and fig-

ures of speech.

It will help native English speakers to understand what their associates are saying. To know that a Frenchman may mean “profitable” when he says “interesting” or “perhaps” when he says “eventually”. To know that a German means “opportunity” when he says “chance”. A “qualified” acceptance in most languages means an unconditional acceptance, but in English means a conditional one.

Nobody can be expected to know all these “false friends” and traps, what is essential is that one checks and checks that everyone is speaking the same language and has really understood what has been communicated.

The English are very fond of sport, but are not particularly interested in political problems. Young people here are very independent, and family ties are not all that close. English people are distant, reserved, terribly conservative, and hopeless at foreign languages. They expect everybody to speak English.

The habit of informality, the ease with which Americans speak to people they've only casually met, still surprises foreign visitors.

Among Americans of about the same age group and social status, first names are easily and quickly exchanged. There are topics – income, religion, politics – that many Americans feel are best avoided in casual conversation. They like to appear to be less than they are, to disguise their abilities and achievements, or to joke about them, and then see how others react. The rules of this game are difficult to learn, especially for people who aren't even aware that it's being played.

Americans have shown their preference for a comfortable and convenient lifestyle. In dress, too, they tend to favour comfort and convenience over convention and “propriety”.

There are differences in not only what you say but how you say it. The way the language is used varies from culture to culture. Scandinavians and Dutch, for example, are very explicit. They try to say exactly what they mean and use facts and figures to back it up. British are fond of allusion and understatement, hints and hedging, which many foreigners find confusing or even hypocritical. Conversely, allusive speakers can be shocked by blunter speakers.

Germans do not like being called at home on business unless there is a very good reason. They place a great deal of importance on individual success and its outwork trappings. The car you drive, the size of your office, where you take holidays are important. It is also acceptable to leave work on time. Like so many aspects of German life, humour is strictly compartmentalized. The more formal the occasion, the less humour is acceptable. Joking among strangers or new acquaintances often makes them feel uncomfortable. At meetings or presentations, while an American or a Briton might feel obliged to sprinkle speeches or presentations with jokes, or an Italian or a Frenchman would indulge in occasional witticisms, a German remains consistently serious.

In some countries people feel they can relax more as they become more senior. In Germany the opposite happens. Seniority is a mantle of responsibility which the holder must be seen to deserve and take seriously.

Among close colleagues in private there is banter and joking. It is usually sharp and biting and directed towards incompetence, mistakes and non – conformity. It is rarely facetious, especially about money or business, and never self – deprecating. To admit inadequacy even in jest is incomprehensible.

Italians value wit, humour and good spirits. It is important to enjoy life and work. Work should not be a burden or taken too seriously. They do not often tell jokes as such, with the exception of political ones. They are fond of irony and the humour of the incongruous. They can be self – deprecating and there is a lot of good humoured banter.

At the same time they will be very aware of public dignity. When playing the institutional role, especially in public, the tone will change to formality and seriousness.

From the Japanese point of view their own behaviour is perfectly clear. They in turn find confusing and ambiguous many of the subtleties of speech and behaviour that Europeans take for granted. Westerners and Japanese do not share the same set of communication conventions. The meaning of body language, silence, manners, as well as language gets lost in translation. For example, the conventions of listening are different. The Western way of listening is constantly to impose judgment, to filter what we see and hear through a critical faculty. While listening, the Japanese engage in a practice called *aizuchi* – a series of “yes” or “I understand” comments which serve to encourage the speaker. Westerners tend to make the mistake of interpreting *aizuchi* as agreement.

In some cultures, Britain and Ireland humour is widely used to create a relaxed atmosphere, lighten tedium and defuse tension when things get difficult. It is also used to disguise aggression. In North America a speech or a presentation almost invariably starts with a joke, frequently irrelevant. But in other cultures humour has no place at work. To make a joke in the middle of a meeting, for example, is interpreted as frivolous or cynical. What is more, humour travels badly, as a glance at foreign cartoons will demonstrate. So much depends on a subtle use of language – understatement, word play, innuendo, and so on – which gets lost in translation or in international English [5, 6].

Although language is the single most important element in communication, it is by no means the only one. It has been said that communication is only 20 per cent verbal while the rest is intonation, body language. We may wonder how the percentage can be calculated, but the fact remains that mastering the vocabulary and grammar is only the beginning of effective communication.

Putting the tip of our middle finger on top of our thumb in English – speaking countries usually means OK, good. In France it means zero, bad. In the eastern Mediterranean it is obscene. Many other gestures and signals, whether deliberate or unconscious, have different meanings across borders.

Even the simple handshake is different from country to country. Anglo – Saxons are taught to look the other person in the eye and use a firm grip. But to many people that can feel like a challenge, an invitation to arm – wrestle. In central Europe and parts of Scandinavia you nod the head in respect, a gesture which can appear to others as a head – butt.

In Mediterranean countries the handshake can be accompanied by an arm squeeze with the other hand.

A relationship that stands or falls on a handshake probably has more significant things wrong with it. But the cumulative effects of etiquette, dress and social behaviour can give a positive or a negative aspect to a working relationship. What seem to be superficial conventions of behaviour are often clues to more significant differences in the way people relate to each other and their work.

Conclusion.

No culture is static. Some are changing faster than others but they are all in transition. Information technology, international competition, education, economic deregulation and, increasingly, the day – to – day influence of the European Union are pushing companies in all countries towards a homogeneous European business culture.

The most active agents of change are senior managers and young professionals. The education and expectation of young people lead them to demand a different management and organizational style. Among senior managers, the national stereotypes are rapidly giving way to a breed of internationally oriented, professional managers. These are mainly to be found in large companies. Observations prove that misunderstandings occur between people different in nationality, age, sex and background. National pride increases sensitivity to incorrect use of the language. It is not an excuse for not trying to learn to speak the language well than an offence to speak it badly. Avoiding misunderstandings in cross – cultural communication will make collaboration more harmonious and productive.

The further study is seen in revealing other factors of cross – cultural communication.

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