
**WHEN IN ROME, CONVERSE AS THE ROMANS DO:
EFFECTIVE CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION IS THE BRIDGE BETWEEN
MEDIOCRITY AND SUCCESS**

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When companies become multi-national, the business methodology followed by employees need to be reviewed for applicability abroad. Often companies continue applying the "culture norm" that, 'what worked is going to continue working because people despite their cultures are basically the same'. If managers truly understand that what works in Japan cannot be homogenized and shipped to Canada and used with equal success the process of understanding and utilizing cultural differences to grow the company can begin. It aims to capture these, sometimes elusive, truths about differences in how cultures view and approach communication and put them at managers' fingertips. Several topics will be covered to highlight relevant considerations; firstly, a basic outline of communication and its components; secondly, cultural differences, specifically regarding communication; then, criteria necessary for cross-cultural effectiveness and lastly, using different tactics for different cultures to achieve goals successfully.

Key phrases: cross-cultural communication, intercultural communication, multi-national business communication

INTRODUCTION

"No part of international business is more important than global communication". This truism stated by Spinks & Wells (1997:Internet) forms the basis for this article which examines and seeks to explain the effect culture has on communication and indeed the considerations this should elicit with multinational business practitioners. It is not focused on international communication, which crosses national boundaries but may be similar in nature. It is concerned with intercultural communication, which can occur within national boundaries but could be between an American expatriate in Saudi Arabia with Saudi nationals.

Impact Factory (2004:Internet) offers communication skills training and one of the first things they say about communication is "if you know how the dynamics work, you can be in charge of them". That is part of the purpose of this article, enhancing awareness about communication, not simply as a daily occurrence but as a process that can be improved and leveraged to lead to increased business success, in this case particularly in the context of cross-cultural communication as is the case in multinational business relations.

COMMUNICATION AND ITS COMPONENTS

Defining communication

Ideally the word 'communication' should elicit the same meaning for every one; this is, however, not the case. In aid of the effectiveness of the rest of the article it seems prudent to start with a definition of communication. According to Wood (2004:9) communication is "a systematic process in which individuals interact with and through symbols to create and interpret meanings". Tubbs & Moss (in Du Plooy-Cilliers & Olivier 2001:4) similarly state "human communication is the process of creating meaning between two or more people".

Thus, understanding communication requires a grasp of two features, firstly the *process aspect* and secondly the *creation of meaning*, which is affected by the interpretation of symbols. Communication is a process. This indicates that it is always in flux, continuously changing and in motion (Wood 2004:10), hence it does not stagnate. Communication is essentially concerned with the creation of meaning. According to Wood (2004:10), "we actively construct meaning by working with symbols". Communication is not about the mere exchange of words but rather exchange of meaning, and this is the sphere where different cultural norms exert influence on communication because cultural norms influence meaning. Du-Plooy-Cilliers & Olivier (2001:5) note that "sharing meaning means that the communicator takes responsibility to ensure that the meanings created during a conversation are understood by the receiver". Thus it is not sufficient to understand what you are saying, the people receiving the communication must grasp the meaning being conveyed.

This illustrates the first link between communication and its effect on multinational business dealings, conveying meaning is the simple yet often neglected task of communicators, especially in multinational settings.

The language and culture link

It is important to start with a definition of culture to aid the understanding of what culture refers to. Cullen & Parboteeah (2005:43) defines *culture* as "... the pervasive and shared beliefs, norms, and values that guide everyday life". They also note that culture is continuously reiterated when members of the culture interact with its symbols, experience its rituals or hear its stories.

A *sign* according to Griffin (2000:39) is "... anything that can stand for something else" and *semiotics* refers to "the study of signs". Words are special kinds of signs, called symbols. The *symbols* referred to in the definition of communication "represent specific ideas and are generally understood" (Du Plooy-Cilliers & Olivier 2001:10). An example of a symbol is the word CAR, it does not look like a car but people with an understanding of English will associate the symbol CAR with a specific type of vehicle for transportation. Words, therefore, according to Richards (in Griffin 2000:40) are "arbitrary symbols that have no inherent meaning ... they take on the context in which they are used". Proponents of semiotics conclude that meaning does not reside in symbols or words but are in fact dependent on people. Symbols differ by language, in a different language the symbol will be different but the image conjured up by the equivalent symbol will be the same. An important consideration here is that languages, with their sets of symbols, inevitably result in ambiguity. Two South African English speakers could have a conversation about a CAR, both picture a vehicle with four wheels but one may picture a red Maserati and the other person a blue Peugeot.

There is a further link between language and culture that also affects communication. The socio-cultural tradition states that as people converse they in fact reinforce and create culture. Sapir and Whorf pioneered the socio-cultural tradition and the Sapir-Whorf *hypothesis of linguistic relativity* states "the structure of a culture's language shapes what people think and do" (Griffin 2000:43). This effectively discounts the assumption that all languages are similar and that words act to convey meaning. A practical example is that Americans use the word 'you' to address others, regardless of their relationship to them. Japanese offers ten alternatives to cater for the relational differences between the speaker and receiver and all of these words are translated as 'you' in American English. Some would state that languages merely reflect cultural differences but the widely accepted Sapir-Whorf hypothesis states that "language actually structures our perception of reality" (Griffin 2000:43). All languages have limited word sets and that in turn "constrains the ability of the users to understand or conceptualise the world, hence determining cultural patterns" (Cullen & Parboteeah 2005:494).

Explicit or implicit communication

Edward Hall distinguished languages based on the context in which the communication took place and the effect this had on understanding the

communication. The distinction is in fact between low (explicit) and high (implicit) context languages.

In low context languages the word used provide the meaning as people are speaking directly. Understanding the context of the situation is not crucial to understanding the message, this type of communication is used in Northern European languages, such as German, English and the Scandinavian languages (Cullen & Parboteeah 2005:495).

High context languages state things more indirectly and in order to understand the communication, which could have many meanings, the receiver of the message must be able to read the context within which the communication is taking place. Asian and Arabic languages are high context languages where what is unsaid and incomplete sentences require receivers to interpret the communication context to extract meaning (Cullen & Parboteeah 2005:495).

An example can be found when Americans negotiated with the Japanese, the Americans realised that the Japanese were using language that made them think they were agreeing with them, often saying what was translated as 'yes'. However, the meeting would adjourn and their Japanese counterparts would discuss the matter again in the next meeting. The Americans eventually realised that the positive indicators 'yes' merely indicated that their counterparts understood what they were saying, it did not in fact indicate agreement (Mendenhall & Oddou 2000:91).

Communication styles

Communication styles comprises two considerations, firstly the directness of communication and secondly the formality of communication.

Direct communication is unambiguous and seeks to come to the point (Cullen & Parboteeah 2005:496). Questions and statements are formulated in a straightforward manner and some cultures perceive this as rude, they would reply using indirect communication that relies on implied meaning as opposed to overt meaning. Business people need to be aware of which style of communication is prevalent in the culture they are visiting in order to understand that people are not being intentionally oblique in their answers, merely polite according to their cultural norms.

Formal communication refers to a country's acknowledgement of "rank, titles, and ceremony in prescribed social interaction" (Cullen & Parboteeah 2005:497). North Americans tend to dispense titles and formal business attire often addressing business partners by their first names, in Spain this would be considered rude. It is wise for business people to adapt to the 'manner of doing' of the culture they are visiting as this will most likely be a key factor in facilitating success, however, even if nationals from other countries visit the business person in their own country, it is prudent to adapt to some degree to their expectation of communication in order to be consistent and accommodating.

Non-verbal communication

Thus far much has been clarified about the spoken word but this is not the only vehicle for communication. There is an old truism that states what you do speak so loud, I cannot hear what you are saying. This is the reason it is crucial to understand non-verbal communication, which refers to "face-to-face communication that is not oral" (Cullen & Parboteeah 2005:495). According to Du Plooy-Cilliers & Olivier (2001:14) people tend to believe non-verbal messages more than verbal messages because we believe that "one has less control over one's non-verbal behaviour".

Non-verbal communication, according to Du Plooy-Cilliers & Olivier (2001:104-106), has several functions:

- *Accenting* involves using nonverbal communication to emphasise the verbal symbols used,
- *Complementing* involves using nonverbal communication to intensify the meaning of verbal symbols,
- *Substituting* involves replacing a verbal symbol with a nonverbal symbol
- *Contradicting* occurs when the verbal and nonverbal message do not relay the same meaning,
- *Regulating* involves using nonverbal cues to regulate the pace of verbal communication.

Several components make up non-verbal communication, namely kinesics, proxemics, haptics, oculosics and olfactics.

Kinesics refers to the use of body movements to communicate, this includes hand gestures, posture and facial expressions and these actions often have different meanings in different cultures. These differences in use can lead to

misunderstandings. According to Du Plooy-Cilliers & Olivier (2001: 107), black South Africans sometimes walk before superiors, to “encounter potential dangers”, a behaviour white South Africans often experience as rude. Facial expressions are considered reliable, indicating true emotions, and unlike language they are similar across cultures. Many facial expressions are assumed to be inborn because children who were born blind use many of the same facial expressions as seeing children when showing emotion. This supports the reliability of non-verbal communication to convey meaning across cultures. However, there are differences. South Africans reveal far more emotion in public than their Chinese counterparts who were taught not to display too much emotion in public (Du Plooy-Cilliers & Olivier 2001: 112). An example of different understandings of the same gesture is captured in this quote by an American businessman: "During initial meetings, we assumed that when we spoke English to the Swedes and they nodded their heads, they understood what we were saying. Now we realize the nods only meant that they heard the words" (Kanter & Corn 1994:Internet).

Proxemics refers to “how people use space to communicate” (Cullen & Parboteeah 2005:498). Each culture has an unwritten understanding understood by all its members that define the distance there should be between individuals for specific types of communication. Ignoring these conventions for acceptable distance between individuals is even considered rude by certain cultures. Du Plooy-Cilliers & Olivier (2001:116) identify four zones, firstly, the *intimate zone*, reserved for family and close friends where nonverbal communication is used more than verbal communication. Secondly, the *personal zone* that applies for close relationships where non-verbal communication can be used but is not vital. Strangers entering this space often make individuals uncomfortable. The distance differs by culture, for white South-Africans it is about 1.2 meters and for black South Africans it is about 40 centimetres, according to Du Preez (in Du Plooy-Cilliers & Olivier 2001: 116). The third is the *social zone*, which is the appropriate distance for business interactions. The fourth is the *public zone*, in this case individuals often amplify their voices or use overstated hand gestures to communicate.

Haptics, more commonly referred to as touching, describes communication that occurs through body contact. Whilst greeting, many cultures deem it appropriate to “shake hands, embrace or kiss” (Cullen & Parboteeah 2005:499). In fact the type of touching deemed appropriate is very much linked to culture. Axtell (in Cullen & Parboteeah 2005:499) classified Japan and North America as “no touching”,

Australia and China as “moderate touching” countries, and Latin American countries and Greece as “touching” countries. Haptics will impact the type of handshake, firm or limp, that business people use in different cultures.

Oculesics is a form of non-verbal communication via eye contact. This factor differs significantly between cultures and even between individuals in cultures. In America eye contact during conversations is a requisite to show attention and even trustworthiness. However, individuals also use more or less eye contact depending on their level of extroversion. In China, avoiding eye contact is considered respectful. An American businessman in China would be wise to conform to the expectations on this account, as appearing disrespectful (with eye contact) is a poor start to any business relationship.

Olfactics is non-verbal communication using smells. North Americans and British nationals tend to be “uncomfortable with body odours”. Other cultures tend to be more accepting of body odours. This would be an aspect of another culture that multinational business people will have to undertake to accept without passing judgment.

Listening

So far a great deal has been said about how to communicate a message and in fact convey meaning. The crux of this process is whether or not the receiver of the message has in fact heard and understood the meaning.

Listening is the term used to describe the process of receiving and interpreting messages. Weitz *et al.* (2001:135) refer to the *speaking-listening differential*. It refers to the fact that “people can speak at a rate of only 120 to 160 words per minute, but they can listen to more than 800 words per minute”. This would presumably mean all people have more listening skills than conversing skills. Unfortunately this is not the case as people have been found to remember only 50 percent of what they hear, immediately after hearing it with the rate of forgetting increasing as time passes. This can be a tremendous problem in multinational dealings. However, listening skills can be improved by active listening.

Active listening is the process of drawing as much information out of the communication situation as possible by “repeating information, restating or rephrasing information, clarifying information, summarizing the conversation,

tolerating silences and concentrating on the ideas being communicated" (Weitz *et al.* 2001:135).

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Attribution

Attribution "is the process by which we interpret the meaning and intent of spoken words or non-verbal exchanges based on our own cultural expectations" (Cullen & Parboteeah 2005:503). It is essentially the danger this article attempts to warn multinational business people about. It involves applying your own cultural context and accepted meanings of certain non-verbal cues to other cultures, assuming that these cues convey the same meaning across cultures. This can be a death knell for international business dealings as assumptions based on perceptions are allowed to be the basis for the cross-cultural interaction, hardly the evidence most business people consider when making important decisions. However, actively countering attribution errors involves a conscious paradigm shift for business people and knowledge about the other culture's habits and mannerisms with regard to both verbal and non-verbal communication. This in-depth understanding is a crucial preparation factor for doing business cross-culturally and insight can be gained from books and articles as well as interpreters, who are often 'insiders' of the culture being visited and can therefore provide valuable insight.

Cultural Issues

Office layout

This is affected by the proxemics of a specific culture. In South Africa top management is often surrounded by a great deal of space, receiving the largest offices as well as an outer barrier provided by a secretary or personal assistant who screens visitors. This communicates the power and importance of the manager, fellow South Africans perceive this as acceptable and right but foreigners may find the space and privacy allotted to these managers strange, even lower echelon employees often have their own compartmentalised offices, valuing the privacy this affords them. In contrast, Japanese managers, although they are part of a 'no touching' culture, are accustomed to open and shared office space. There is no privacy in this arrangement, which the Japanese deems unnecessary during working hours. Hence they comfortably share desks, telephones and even computers. The

Japanese do not use partitions and desks and are placed next to each other with the manager within earshot of the employees in the department. This would make South Africans as uncomfortable as the South African arrangement would make the Japanese uncomfortable. The differences here are important to bear in mind and for multinational business people to try to adapt to, as it is unlikely to change for their comfort.

Employee attitude towards work

This differs according to culture but there are also a number of interesting commonalities. In Cullen & Parboteeah (2005:543) a ranking of the importance of needs to different cultures according to Maslow's hierarchy is provided, the United States, Korea, Israel and Holland ranked *advancement* as a function of self-actualisation (the highest need level) as very important and *remuneration* for their job, a fulfilment of physiological needs (the lowest level need) as being of low importance. This signals that although they may need the remuneration, their motivation for excelling at work is not the pay cheque but rather the advancement opportunities that they are afforded. Multinational business people should bear this in mind, opening offices in countries where advancement or an interesting job (which also ranks as important if not the most important factor) are important to employees. Structuring the company to provide these will inevitably lead to more success than paying an employee well but providing a repetitive job with no opportunities for advancement.

In Mexico it is important to employees to meet their perceived obligations to their managers. This would allow a more hierarchical structure where a major motivator for employees is living up to their manager's expectations. The organisational and management structure communicate to employees the degree of autonomy they have. In the United States employees value autonomy and are allowed to make at least some level of decisions. A more hierarchical structure would not allow for this decentralisation of power.

In other countries, such as Belgium, hierarchy and job security are sought from their employers. They may be willing to accept less remuneration monthly, provided they know their jobs are secure. The Japanese value achievement as well as the level of remuneration, where as North Americans value advancement and challenging work. It is crucial to know what motivates employees, their reasons for going to work each

day. Providing a Belgian employee with autonomy would probably not be seen as an advancement opportunity but as creating an unacceptable level of certainty.

CRITERIA FOR CROSS-CULTURAL EFFECTIVENESS

The effect of interpreters

Spinks & Wells (1997:Internet) note it can take many months for someone to master a new language and even so the level of proficiency required to conduct business dealings often lead to the use of interpreters. They are careful to differentiate between translators and interpreters.

Translators convert word from one language to another. The discussion on language earlier should illustrate the shortcomings of this.

Interpreters, however, convey meaning. In theory when interpreters perform their job well they avoid misunderstandings and ensure efficiency and mutual satisfaction of participants in business dealings.

There are a number of steps multinational business people can take to ensure greater efficiency in business dealings where interpreters are used. According to Cullen & Parboteeah (2005:502) some of these are discussing the intended message with the interpreter beforehand, to ensure they understand the meaning that is their task to convey, allowing the interpreter to be familiarised with the manner in which your delegation communicates and learn from the interpreter about the communication styles of the other culture to be encountered. Interpreters should be asked to apologise on behalf of the business people for their inability to speak the local language and they should be encouraged to provide frequent interpretations during the business dealings.

In cases where two different cultures can master the same language and interpreters are not used there are a number of guidelines that can increase the efficiency and understanding of communication. According to Cullen & Parboteeah (2005:502-503) the simplest and most unambiguous words and grammar should be used, slang or terminology that is culture-specific should be avoided and speakers should summarise their message and test their communication efficiency by asking the other party what they heard. It is also wise in these cases to confirm important aspects of the communication situation in writing to ensure mutual understanding.

Characteristics required for success

The traits that multinational managers should possess include the ability to function well in ambiguous and uncertain situations where their position may be unclear. They must have a high tolerance for the ambiguity that is a result of differences in communication styles as well. Managers that are curious about other cultures accommodate their differences and seek to understand these differences, will be of great value to multinational businesses. Managers should also have a degree of acceptance of other cultures with the notion of adopting their best practices if they try to conduct business dealings entirely from their context, the likelihood of a failed transaction increases.

Examples of cross-cultural interactions

Differences in communication and culture not only affect business meetings but also marketing for multinational firms. Novell, an American-based software company, wanted their marketing campaign to sell the same message worldwide. This was an admirable goal, but their advert, featuring American football, failed abroad because it was not relevant to them.

Similarly, a new campaign called, 'selling red' (Novell's logo colour), was fiercely resisted by their European branches for its connotation to the Soviet Union (Mendenhall & Oddou 2000:93). In order to be effective, multinationals, even if they follow an International strategy, need to adapt to some degree to the local market and culture. More appropriate marketing campaigns could be developed for cultural regions even if the product offering is standardised.

In a study, done by Harvard Business School, (in Kanter & Corn 1994:Internet) to examine the experiences of employees in firms that were acquired by companies from other cultures, some interesting perceptions and conclusions came to the fore.

North Americans observed different decision-making styles, they experienced their new parent companies prolonged analysis of alternatives before decision-making as frustrating. A British counterpart noted rather tongue in cheek that, "unlike American companies which manage by quarterly numbers, we at UK headquarters base our strategy and business policies on long-term positioning" (in Kanter & Corn

1994:Internet). This illustrates the frustration that cultural differences can lead to and this is between two cultures that speak the same language.

North Americans identified a number of differences between themselves and their foreign counterparts which they attributed to cultural differences. "The Swiss were described as *very orderly and efficient*, the Swedes were universally described as being *very serious*. British managers were described as *less emotional, less community-oriented, more deliberate*, and much less likely to *shoot from the hip* than Americans. Europeans were described by nearly all American employees as being *more formal, less open and outgoing*, and slower to form friendships than are Americans. Japanese managers were described as *very courteous and polite*" (Kanter & Corn 1994:Internet). This illustrates the practical experience of individuals of some of the factors identified throughout this article.

DIFFERENT TACTICS FOR DIFFERENT CULTURES

Why different tactics are required

Unfortunately multinational business people often only realise their mistakes in hindsight, which is often 20/20. While these mistakes provide most of the lessons learned to date, they are none the less important for firms to avoid or get right rather than to write a case study about how not to do business internationally. Miroshnik (2002:Internet) states that the dominant reason for business failures abroad is a lack of cultural understanding.

A Japanese parable about a monkey and a fish illustrates the differences succinctly. The monkey assumed that the fish's environment was similar to his and he treated the fish accordingly. The obvious shortcoming of this approach is evident to spectators but often companies selectively forget that to converse with the fish requires leaving the jungle, so to speak. Communication is crucial because it is the means that companies and individuals use to interact with companies and individuals of other cultures and hence the first area where understanding of differences is required.

How to approach different cultures

According to Miroshnik (2002:Internet) a common problem is that managers in a company's home office are discouraged to see people as different because of their

gender, race or ethnicity and to treat them as individuals according to their professional skills. This results in “cultural blindness”. Unfortunately, these managers that are discouraged at home to see differences between people are sent abroad to conduct multinational business dealings and apply the same logic of “cultural blindness”, effectively ignoring the difference in culture and how this difference affects the individuals relationship with their and other companies.

Miroshnik (2002:Internet) identifies three different strategies multinational companies can use to deal with cultural diversity, and that will affect the way communication is approached;

- parochial – “our way is the only way”
- ethnocentric – “our way is the best way”
- synergistic – “The combination of our way and their way may be the best way”

The *parochial approach* is the result of the multinational manager choosing to ignore or being unable to recognise cultural differences and proceeding with their cultural behaviour as the correct way of doing business. This is bound to leave many stories of failures in international dealings in their wake.

The *ethnocentric approach* is most common and occurs because managers recognise the cultural differences but view the other cultures way of doing business as incorrect and inferior. Many companies learn the hard way that this approach is also sub-optimal as it does not realise the success countries like Japan have achieved in ways North Americans may once have thought were inferior.

The *synergistic approach* recognises cultural diversity as a source of problems and advantages.

It is important to note that a company's *approach to cultural diversity* and not the diversity itself leads to either success or failure.

CLOSURE

Currant (2004:295) states succinctly a main concern for multinational business people: “We all need to make sure that we interpret the things that others are saying correctly and do not let cultural differences get in the way and distort the message”. Bearing this in mind, more unambiguous communication will result, reducing the time

taken to reach a consensus and increasing the efficiency of multinational business dealings.

A prerequisite for multinationals to be successful is to acknowledge cultural differences in their various business dealings. These differences do not inherently lead to success or failure of business dealings. The way the multinational company and its representatives approach and manage these differences is what will lead to a competitive advantage or a disadvantage. In order to achieve success whilst utilising cultural diversity, it can be concluded that a synergistic strategy is the best practice approach. Ignoring cultural differences entails ignoring the benefits that can be leveraged from them such as a different point of view, fresh insight and a new approach to performing certain tasks. It is vital to concentrate on communicating *meaning* in all interactions, with business partners and stakeholders. Communication is the vehicle through which cultural interactions take place and in order to achieve success internationally and leverage cultural differences, it is necessary *when in Rome to converse in Rome as the Romans do*.

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