

CHAPTER 3

Communicating Interculturally

CHAPTER OUTLINE

Understanding the Opportunities and Challenges of Intercultural Communication
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- The Opportunities in a Global Marketplace
- Advantages of a Multicultural Workforce
- The Challenges of Intercultural Communication

Developing Cultural Competency [pp. 64-69]

- Understanding the Concept of Culture
- Overcoming Ethnocentrism and Stereotyping
- Recognizing Cultural Variations

Improving Intercultural Communication Skills [pp. 69-77]

- Studying Other Cultures
- Studying Other Languages
- Respecting Preferences for Communication Style
- Writing Clearly
- Speaking and Listening Carefully
- Using Interpreters, Translators, and Translation Software
- Helping Others Adapt to Your Culture

LECTURE NOTES

OBJECTIVE 1

Discuss the opportunities and challenges of intercultural communication.

Intercultural communication is the process of sending and receiving messages between people whose cultural backgrounds lead them to interpret verbal and nonverbal signs differently.

Employees who work in organizations that hope to realize **opportunities in a global marketplace** may be required to visit or at least communicate with people who speak languages other than English and who live in cultures different from what they're used to.

Multicultural workforces have a number of advantages:

- They offer a broader spectrum of viewpoints and ideas
- They help companies understand and identify with diverse markets
- They enable companies to tap into the broadest possible talent pool

Intercultural communication challenges include how business messages are conceived, composed, delivered, received, and interpreted.

Cultural competency

- Is an appreciation of cultural differences that affect communication?
- Is the ability to adjust one's communication style to ensure that efforts to send and receive messages across cultural boundaries are successful
- Requires a combination of attitude, knowledge, and skills

OBJECTIVE 2

Define "culture" and explain how culture is learned.

Culture is a shared system of symbols, beliefs, attitudes, values, expectations, and norms of behaviours. Everyone belongs to several cultures, each of which affects the way people communicate.

Three significant characteristics of culture:

- Cultures are automatic; that is, people learn culture directly or indirectly from other members of a group—whether they are explicitly told which behaviours are acceptable or they learn by observing which values work best in a particular group.
- Cultures tend to be coherent; that is, they are fairly logical and consistent throughout.
- Cultures tend to be complete, providing most of their members with most of the answers to life's big questions.

OBJECTIVE 3

Define "ethnocentrism" and "stereotyping", and then give three suggestions for overcoming these limiting mindsets.

Ethnocentrism is the tendency to judge all other groups according to the standards, behaviours, and customs of one's own group.

- The automatic influence of one's own culture often leads people to conclude that their own group is superior

Xenophobia is an even more extreme reaction – a fear of strangers and foreigners

Stereotyping is assigning a wide range of generalized attributes to an individual on the basis of membership in a particular culture or social group.

- Involves oversimplifying and failing to acknowledge individuality

Cultural pluralism is the practice of accepting multiple cultures on their own terms.

Try to overcome ethnocentrism and stereotyping by cultivating a few simple habits:

- Avoid assumptions.
- Avoid judgments.
- Acknowledge distinctions.

OBJECTIVE 4

Explain the importance of recognizing cultural variations, and list six categories of cultural differences.

Cultural context is the pattern of physical cues, environmental stimuli, and implicit understanding that conveys meaning between two members of the same culture.

Six main types of cultural differences are:

- Contextual differences
- Legal and Ethical differences
- Social differences
- Nonverbal differences
- Age differences
- Gender differences

Contextual Differences

- The role that context plays in communication varies widely across different cultures.
- **High-context cultures** (e.g., South Korea, Taiwan) tend to rely less on verbal communication and more on the context of nonverbal actions and environmental setting to convey meaning.
- **Low-context cultures** (e.g., Canada, Germany, United States) tend to rely more on verbal communication and less on circumstances and cues to convey meaning.
- Contextual differences affect decision making, problem solving, negotiating, interacting among levels in the organizational hierarchy, and socializing outside the workplace

Legal and Ethical Differences

- Cultural context also influences legal and ethical behaviour.
- Low-context cultures value the written word, consider written agreements binding, and view the law strictly
- High-context cultures put less emphasis on the written word, consider personal pledges more important than contracts, and view the law with flexibility

Keep intercultural messages as ethical as possible by applying four basic principles:

1. Actively seek mutual ground
2. Send and receive messages without judgment
3. Send messages that are honest
4. Show respect for cultural differences

Social Differences

Social behavior varies among cultures and is guided by rules, both formal and informal. In addition, social norms vary from culture to culture in the following areas:

- Roles and status
- Use of manners
- Concepts of time

Nonverbal Differences

Nonverbal communication can be considered reliable only if the sender and receiver assign the same meaning to nonverbal signs.

Areas to observe before interacting with people in another culture:

- Greetings
- Personal space
- Touching
- Facial expressions
- Eye contact
- Posture
- Formality

Age Differences

A culture's views on **youth** and **age** affect how people communicate with one another.

Gender Differences

A culture's perception of **gender** affects how people communicate with one another.

OBJECTIVE 5

List seven recommendations for writing clearly in multi-language business environments.

To ensure effective written communication, do the following:

1. Choose words carefully.
2. Be brief.
3. Use plenty of transitions.
4. Address international correspondence properly.

5. Cite dates and numbers carefully.
6. Avoid slang, idiomatic phrases, and business jargon.
7. Avoid humour and other references to popular culture.

OBJECTIVE 6

Outline strategies for speaking and listening carefully when communicating with people of other cultures.

Speaking and Listening Carefully

To communicate more effectively with people from other cultures, you need to

1. Speak slowly and clearly
2. Don't rephrase unless it is obviously necessary
3. Look and ask for feedback to make sure your message is getting through
4. Don't talk down to the other person by over-enunciating words or oversimplifying sentences
5. At the end of the conversation, make sure you and the listener agree on what has been said and decided

For important business communication, use a **professional interpreter** (for oral communication) or **translator** (for written communication).

- Software products and websites can also provide translation services

Helping Others Adapt to Your Culture

- Look for opportunities to help people fit in
- Remember that speaking a language is often more difficult than writing it

ON THE JOB SCENARIOS

Performing Communication Tasks at IBM

1. It's important that employees in your team develop their ability in speaking conversational English. How do you accomplish this?
 - a. No. This option doesn't encourage conversational English and could create a high stress level for employees.
 - b. Yes. This option may be the best way to use conversational English in an informal setting and encourage practicality and fun in learning.
 - c. This may work, although this option might be the next step once they are more comfortable with conversational English.
 - d. This is also a choice that might work. It is always a dilemma as to how informal the classroom should be. You will have to make this decision about the informality of bringing employees to your home.
2. How do you persuade your employees to look at the audience?
 - a. Yes. This is the best choice. As the leader, you are responsible for modelling and informing employees on proper cultural interpretations.
 - b. No. This option is unfair to the employees and does not adequately prepare them for the workplace in another culture.
 - c. This option may help, but the point must be made that eye contact is an important indicator of effective speaking skills in your culture.

- d. No. This option is an attempt to model what is not obvious. Without feedback
- e. regarding eye contact it is unfair to expect students to understand its importance.

END-OF-CHAPTER EXERCISES

Test Your Knowledge

1. Brought about by advances in communication and travel technology, market globalization now allows companies to sell and produce goods all over the world. Globalization has led to cultural diversity, which means that businesspeople are dealing with co-workers, customers, suppliers, and others from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. As a result of these two trends, communicators must be more aware of cultural differences when communicating with contacts inside and outside the organization.
2. In high-context cultures, people convey meaning by relying more heavily on nonverbal signals and the environment rather than on words. In such cultures, the communicator expects the audience to be able to decode the meaning of the message without explicit explanation. In contrast, people in low-context cultures convey meaning by relying more on verbal communication and explicit statements about the rules.
3. Contextual differences make up only one of the six categories of cultural differences; other categories are legal and ethical differences, social differences, nonverbal differences, age differences, and gender differences.
4. Ethnocentrism is the belief that one person's cultural background is superior to other cultural backgrounds. To overcome such ethnocentrism, communicators should avoid stereotyping, acknowledge that people differ, avoid making assumptions about how others think or act, and avoid making judgments about these differences.
5. People in a multicultural audience may not be able to understand slang and idioms, because these phrases do not translate word for word. To avoid misunderstandings, communicators should therefore choose words with a specific denotative meaning.
6. The benefits of machine translators are that they are inexpensive and that they translate quickly. They are particularly useful for translating individual words and short phrases. The disadvantages are that without hands-on human intervention, the translation systems often produce inexact translations that impair rather than enhance communication. Human interpreters and translators provide enriched service by using context as well as words or phrases.

7. While communicating with people from other cultures, communicators can improve their oral skills in several ways: (1) eliminate noise by paying close attention to pronunciation and making points one at a time, (2) watch for feedback to see whether the audience understands the message, (3) rephrase by using simpler words to help the audience understand, (4) clarify with repetition and specific examples, (5) avoid talking down to listeners, (6) use objective and accurate language, (7) listen carefully and patiently; (8) adapt to the other person's style, and (9) clarify any decisions and follow-up actions.
8. To improve one's intercultural writing skills, it is important to commit to continual learning about the diverse cultures internal and external to the company for which you are working. Practise writing that is brief, concrete, and precise. Follow the rules of standard grammar and spelling. Practise writing a message using different levels of formality.
9. Back-translation is a good technique to ensure that the actual meaning is retained when a message is translated into another language. By having someone translate the translation back into the original language, the communicator can see whether any inaccuracies or unintentional changes have crept in.

Apply Your Knowledge

1. Communication varies quite significantly from country to country depending on whether the country is high context or low context. For example, in China (a high-context country), the decision making is shared, so reaching a consensus takes quite a bit of time. Second, in order to develop the trust critical to business relationships, you will have to spend time socializing. Once you finally reach an agreement, don't be surprised if your Chinese colleagues ask you to change the terms at a later date. Chinese executives view their business associates as trustworthy partners who can be relied on for special favours. Because the culture in China is high context, Chinese executives put less emphasis on the written word and more on the long-term trusting relationship. For low-context countries (including many European countries), decision making is more centralized with a clear chain of command. Written contracts, once the terms are agreed to and the documents are signed, are much harder to bend or break.
2. Before accepting an overseas job with a company from your own country, consider your own adaptability. Are you comfortable with people from other cultures? Do you enjoy learning new things in an unfamiliar setting? How will your family adapt to the move? Are you quick to learn languages? Are you willing to spend extra effort, outside working hours, to make these adjustments? Is your motivation strictly material, or are you looking forward to the unique challenges of working in a "foreign" environment?

Working for a local branch of a foreign-owned firm might be even more difficult; since you're living in your own country, the intercultural communication problems could take you by surprise. You'll need to examine your ethnocentrism, and you might discover prejudices and stereotypical attitudes you didn't realize you had. Again, adaptability, curiosity, and a genuine appreciation for other people and new experiences will help make the new job successful. If you don't possess those qualities, such a job might not be the right choice.

3. It would be easy for managers from a relatively homogeneous culture to be caught off guard by the cultural diversity of their foreign counterparts. They would probably be unaccustomed to adapting their communication style, adapting their writing and speaking habits, and approaching business situations from the other person's point of view. Thus, they might react with resentment, confusion, or even anger. They may need time to adjust.
4. Knowing your own culture and its norms and idiosyncrasies will help to ground you in understanding the communication process. It will become more obvious that people from other cultures communicate very differently because they operate with a different set of rules. In the end there is no "right" or "wrong" regarding cultural differences. There is only good communication, which requires both parties to speak and write clearly, listen carefully and ask for feedback to ensure the message got through.
5. The definition of cultural pluralism is the practice of accepting multiple cultures on their own terms. By avoiding assumptions, we avoid the temptation to assume that others will act the same way you do, that they operate with the same values and beliefs, or that they use language and symbols in the same way you do.

RUNNING CASES

Student responses will vary. The following are examples of possible acceptable answers.

Case 1

- a) Noreen should investigate what the source of the odour is. If it is an issue of hygiene, Noreen might politely explain to Shyla that it is expected that employees dress and act professional while at work, and that this includes looking after personal hygiene. If it is the result of Shyla's culture, Noreen should explain to Karen and her coworkers that it is part of Shyla's culture and this should be respected. However, if Karen is still offended by the odour, it is still possible for her to be relocated.
- b) Karen does have the right to ask to change seats. If she feels personally offended or is unable to work efficiently as a result of Shyla's odour, it is well within Karen's rights to ask to be moved.
- c) Shyla may feel that she is being discriminated because of her ethnicity. She may feel offended that someone criticized her in such a way.

- d) It is possible that Shyla suffers from a medical condition that causes an unpleasant odour. Even being in a cast after suffering from a broken limb can cause a strong unpleasant odour. It is also possible that her odour is the result of cultural foods that are relatively spicy. Some individuals may find such an odour overly strong.
- e) There are many things which could be done to help ensure that Shyla is accepted. Explaining to other employees that some cultures' foods can cause odours that others may not be used to.
- f) It is important that Noreen involves the team members in determining the way they want to work together. She can highlight that while each individual team member comes with their own experiences and background, it's up to them to decide the type of culture they want to create/support. Will it be one of fairness, open-ness and acceptance? Or one of judgement and isolation? Depending on the approach, team members could feel isolated or part of strong team.

In order to build strong communication channels where sensitive conversations or conflicts can more easily be managed....

1. Look up the website www.thebalance.com and search for the article titled, "How to Build a Teamwork Culture in Your Organization" and identify different ways in which managers and colleagues can encourage a culture of "teamwork".

2. Increase familiarity of team members, their backgrounds and interests. The more we know about someone, the better we can understand our differences. Noreen could help team members get to know each other outside of workplace assignments and projects. Create a team that can work and play together. For example, celebrate a win or special occasion with an "international pot-luck" where everyone can share dishes/specialties showcasing their cultural background.

3. Noreen could help team members develop their cultural intelligence and build on similarities in interests. Organize inter-departmental sports challenges, music jam sessions, or sharing of /artistic abilities.

Case 2

- a) Kwong did not appear confident. He should have used a firm handshake and make eye contact with the managers. He also avoided answering questions properly.
- b) Kwong did not get the job because there were other applicants who were better prepared, more confident, communicated better, made a better impression, sold themselves better and perhaps were more qualified.
- c) The managers likely thought that Kwong did not even want the job because he was late and did not even listen well to the interviewers.
- d) Kwong likely answered the questions as if he did not hear them properly because he was flustered after being late and did not take the time before hand to have good answers prepared.
- e) Kwong can practise his interview skills. He can use a firm handshake, arrive 15 minutes early, have answers prepared for common interview questions, and take notes about the mistakes he made during that interview so that he can learn from them.

Practise Your Knowledge

The email is not audience-centred: the slang and acronyms contained in the message are too informal for members of the audience and will probably confuse them. Words and phrases such as *ASAP*, *our little family*, *high time*, *shaking hands across the sea*, *pleased as punch*, *my level best*, and *sell you on Canada* will seriously impair their ability to understand your boss's message. A fair suggestion would be to rewrite the message, omitting all culturally biased expressions and idioms.

Exercises

- 3.1 After studying the chapter's examples, students may recognize the dropped eyes, soft tone, and vague answers as the Japanese businessperson's way of showing respect and saying no indirectly so that the Canadian negotiator would be able to save face.
- 3.2 This exercise gives students an opportunity to experience the situation of cultural insensitivity first hand. Having the students rewrite the confusing passages will help them to rethink how Canadians use words and symbols to communicate our messages. Sometimes, when describing a concept, the first words and phrases we think of "off the top of our heads" or on the "tip of the tongue" (puns intended) can be very confusing if taken in the literal sense. Using Google Drive will help them collaborate more effectively and efficiently.
- 3.3 Students may find that it's difficult, even with their own understanding of the expressions, to translate the entire context of these phrases. For instance, "He couldn't hang," loses a little something when it's translated to, "He couldn't hold out and remain calm until the situation concluded or changed." That's why slang emerges in the first place—to fill a unique, idiosyncratic language void. This exercise might serve as a good jumping-off point for a lively class discussion.
- 3.4 Students should find this assignment interesting. A number of books are available on international business communication, and many of them provide country-by-country information. As an option, you may suggest that some students pick two countries and compare their customs, describing the similarities and differences in nonverbal communication, meeting protocol, decision-making processes, and so on. Or some students may prefer to take one type of business practice, such as gift giving, and describe how it varies in a dozen or so countries.
- 3.5 The role-playing should reveal how easily we slip into ethnocentric and stereotypic viewpoints—which interfere with business communications even when the difference is one of age, gender, or physical ability. To deal with the problem, try to understand and view issues from the other person's perspective as much as possible.

- 3.6 Students might suggest that the marketing director should recognize the impasse as cultural and drop the demand for a detailed contract before the whole deal falls through. Requesting an adjournment, the marketing director should do some research to learn about the Chinese representative's culture. Then the marketing director could try an approach more attuned to Chinese cultural practices and suggest a compromise that will allow both parties to save face and achieve their mutual objectives.
- 3.7 Student presentations will reflect their understanding of the ways various time concepts might affect business transactions: interfering with meeting times, missing appointments, delaying product deliveries, missing completion dates, and delaying letter responses. Managers might employ compensating tactics such as the following: set a good example by sticking to their own stated deadlines (such as starting and ending meetings on time), encourage promptness by spelling out and justifying time factors, reward employees who conscientiously attempt to meet the company's time expectations, and establish back-up plans for overseas transactions that may be delayed.
- 3.8 Students might address the pros and cons of translators this way:
In addition to having time to think about responses, the advantages of using a translator might include making sure the negotiator's understanding of the language is good enough for important business discussions. Also, if the translator is a native speaker, the advantage would be drawing on up-to-date knowledge of the language's idioms, the culture's nonverbal signals, and any business customs that might affect communication. Hiring a translator also demonstrates how important the transaction is to the negotiator's company.
- The disadvantages might include eliminating the personal feeling conveyed in a one-on-one communication. Also, it's impossible to translate words precisely from one language to another. The translator might incorrectly filter the message. He or she might fail to communicate the meaning of a tone or gesture, or shorten the translation so that a key word or phrase is omitted or improperly translated, increasing the communication barriers. In addition, either or both parties may consider translation time consuming and thus an added burden that slows negotiations.
- 3.9 Students may find that the back-translation reveals inaccuracies in the meaning of the original sentence they translated. This experience suggests that whenever they use any automated translation service, they must be sure to use back-translation to ensure accuracy. Still, students may find this website useful for checking the translation of common phrases from and into other languages.
- 3.10 Students can use this exercise as an opportunity to study their own subculture and determine its rules in a way that can be explained to outsiders. They should be able to identify a number of common, timely slang phrases that the Swedish students are likely to hear on campus. They should also be able to articulate rules about meals, social events, greetings, small talk, classroom behaviour, and other activities.

- 3.11 Students should eliminate the idiomatic expressions (i.e. took a beating, insane pricing, knucklehead competitors) and the sarcastic incredulity (i.e. how these clowns keep turning a profit is beyond me). The following is a sample rewrite:

Good morning. As some of you are aware, <insert company name> revenue did not meet our projections for 2006. Rising steel, labour, and waste disposal costs contributed to our shortfall. Despite an unrelenting price war, however, <insert company name> is still a leader in this industry. We will be reviewing our supplier contracts and our marketing protocols to adapt to the competitive marketplace and to maximize our revenue for 2007.