
Communicating Across Cultures

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ABSTRACT

COMMUNICATING ACROSS CULTURES

Man started to communicate with his few kinsmen through symbols. Mutually understood grunts became spoken communication. Population started to thrive. The concepts of race and socioeconomic were established and thus began the rich diversity of culture. Culture enriches language, affecting dialect, grammar and literature, to name a few. As more and more people mingle, the world is literally becoming one. The term culture has a wide range of meanings today, because it has actually changed in meaning over time. In the nineteenth century the meaning was broadened to include the general state of human intellectual, spiritual and 'aesthetic works and practices' meaning that which is associated with music, literature, painting, theatre and film. Goddard reports that the 'anthropological' usage of culture was introduced into English by Tylor in the late nineteenth century in his book Primitive Culture. Tylor defined Culture as 'that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a society'

National economies and even national cultures are globalizing. Globalization means that national borders do not limit a nation's investment, production, and innovation. Everything, including relations among family and friends, is rapidly becoming organized around a much more compressed view of space and time. The most important thing in communication is "hearing what isn't said." More than half of all information communicated in conversation is done so in nonverbal form. Types of nonverbal communication vary considerably based on culture and country of origin. For individuals working in the realm of international business, understanding how to effectively communicate with peers from across the world is a key competency for their professional wheelhouse.

To further understand the nuances of nonverbal communication across cultures, it is important to know the differences between "high-context" and "low-context" cultures. Context refers to the information that surrounds an event "High-context" cultures rely heavily on nonverbal communication, In contrast, "low-context" cultures depend largely on words themselves. Countries considered "high context" include Japan, Greece and various Arab nations. . Some countries considered "low context" include the United States, Germany and various Scandinavian countries. While "high" and "low" context are examples of opposing cultures, it is also true that many cultures fall in between these two extremes. Called "multi-active," these cultures might include those of Spain, Italy or Latin America.

"Actions speak louder than words." In essence, this underscores the importance of non-verbal communication. Non-verbal communication is especially significant in intercultural situations. As the global village continues to shrink and cultures collide, it is essential for all of us to become more sensitive, more aware, and more observant to the myriad motions, gestures, and body language that surround us each day. In spite of the increasing importance placed on communication skills, many individuals continue to struggle, unable to communicate their thoughts and ideas effectively – whether in verbal or written format. Getting your message across is paramount to progressing. To do this, you must understand what your message is, what audience you are sending it to, and how it will be perceived. You must also weigh-in the circumstances surrounding your communications, such as situational and cultural context.

KEYWORDS: Communication-Culture-Globalization-International Business-"High-Context- Low-Context-Non-Verbal Communication- Posture-Facial Expressions- Paralanguage Gestures- Space-Touch-Greetings

INTRODUCTION

The appearance of new ways of thinking and communicating between 70,000 and 30,000 years ago constitutes the Cognitive Revolution. What caused it? We are not sure. The most commonly believed theory argues that accidental genetic mutations changed the inner wiring of the brains of the earlier men, enabling them to think in unprecedented ways and to communicate using an altogether new type of language.

Man started to communicate with his few kinsmen through symbols. Mutually understood grunts became spoken communication. Population started to thrive. Groups of people separated and changed. The concepts of race and socioeconomic were established and thus began the rich diversity of culture. Culture enriches language, affecting dialect, grammar and literature, to name a few. As more and more people mingle, the world is literally becoming one.

The term culture has a wide range of meanings today, because it has actually changed in meaning over time. Goddard (2005:53 ff.) provides an excellent account of some these changes. In its earliest English uses, *culture* was a noun of process, referring to the rendering of crops or animals. This meaning (roughly ‘cultivating’) is found in words such as *agriculture*, *horticulture* and *vivi-culture*. In the sixteenth century culture began to be used about ‘cultivating’ the human body through training, and later about ‘cultivating’ the non-physical aspects of a person. In the nineteenth century the meaning was broadened to include the general state of human intellectual, spiritual and ‘aesthetic works and practices’ meaning that which is associated with music, literature, painting, theatre and film. Goddard reports that the ‘anthropological’ usage of culture was introduced into English by Tylor in the late nineteenth century in his book *Primitive Culture*. Tylor defined Culture as ‘that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a society’ (Tylor 1871:1).

NATIONAL ECONOMIES AND CULTURES ARE GLOBALIZING:

National economies and even national cultures are globalizing. Globalization means more competition, not just with other companies in the same city or the same region. Globalization also means that national borders do not limit a nation’s investment, production, and innovation. Everything, including relations among family and friends, is rapidly becoming organized around a much more compressed view of space and time. Companies in Europe, the United States, and Japan can produce chips in Singapore, keypunch data in India or the Peoples’ Republic of China, and outsource clerical work to Ireland or Mexico, and sell worldwide, barely concerned about the long distances or the variety of cultures involved. Swatch now sells a watch that tells “Internet time,” a continuous time that is the same everywhere in the world. Even children watching television or listening to radio are re-conceptualizing their “world,” in terms of the meanings that they attach to music, the environment, sports, or race and ethnicity.

In a video conference involving developers from the United States, France, and Germany, the Americans spent the first five to ten minutes worrying that not all participants were there yet. In contrast, the Europeans spent the time talking among themselves (across video link) about the weather, sports, and other personal matter until the Americans decided that a quorum was present and the business could begin. At the end of the videoconference, the Americans immediately disconnected the call. The French and the Germans continued for another five minutes wishing a departing French teammate well in his retirement, and reminiscing about good times. The Europeans viewed the American behavior as rude and insensitive. The Americans viewed time as money, focusing on the cost of the videoconference. In other countries, entire videoconference calls are devoted to establishing relationships, without conducting the core of the task at all. (Source: Olson, I.S and Olson, G.M (2003-4), (‘Culture surprises in remote software development teams’ Queue 1 (9):52-9)

EAST AND WEST

‘Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the Twain shall meet’

(Rudyard Kipling)

Of course the twain do meet in today's small world-but research since the 1980s has illuminated huge differences between Confucian thinking in the Chinese cultural area, western thinking in general, and the Muslim –based thinking of middle Asia

The area around central London's Marble Arch has acquired an Arab look, with many a shop in the curly right –to –left Arabic script, and late night cafe customers sit at pavement tables with their Hubble bubble hookahs. East and West are meeting more frequently. In London, the Sikhs in Southall, the Bengalis in Brick Lane and the Hindus in Harrow have clustered together like the Arabs of Marble Arch, in a sort of reverse colonization, forming communities that are distinct from the host country.

Unfortunately, host communities often feel threatened by visible gatherings of foreigners whose customs, dress and language are different from their own. They feel anxious about losing their jobs, their homes and even their womenfolk to the invaders. Yet not every society is antagonistic towards newcomers. The Japanese have a concept they call *kyosei*, which means living and working together for the common good- enabling cooperation and mutual prosperity to coexist with healthy and fair competition.

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

The most important thing in communication is hearing what isn't said." -Peter F. Drucker . More than half of all information communicated in conversation is done so in nonverbal form, *Psychology Today* reports. Types of nonverbal communication vary considerably based on culture and country of origin. For individuals working in the realm of international business, understanding how to effectively communicate with peers from across the world is a key competency for their professional wheelhouse.

HIGH-CONTEXT VS LOW-CONTEXT CULTURES

To further understand the nuances of nonverbal communication across cultures, it is important to know the differences between "high-context" and "low-context" cultures. *Context* refers to the information that surrounds an event and is tied up with that event's ultimate meaning, according to Shoji Nishimura, Anne Nevgi and Seppo Tella. "*High-context*" cultures rely heavily on nonverbal communication, using elements such as the closeness of their relationships, strict social hierarchies and deep cultural knowledge to convey meaning. In contrast, "*low-context*" cultures depend largely on words themselves. Communication tends to be more direct, relationships tend to begin and end quickly, and hierarchies are more relaxed. It is important to note that no culture is "better" than another; communication styles simply convey differences, rather than superiority. Much has been written about the differences between high- and low-context cultures, particularly by noted anthropologist Edward T. Hall. For business professionals, other useful differences are outlined below:

HIGH CONTEXT

Communication tends to be indirect, harmoniously structured and understated. In conversation, people are expected to speak one after another in an orderly, linear fashion. Disagreements are personally threatening. It is important to solve conflict immediately or avoid it completely in order for work to continue. Physical space is considered more communal. Standing very close to others is a common practice. Verbal messages are indirect. Speakers often talk around a point (instead of directly to it) and use embellishments to convey meaning. Accuracy is valued. How well something is learned is important. Some countries considered "high context" include Japan, Greece and various Arab nations.

LOW CONTEXT

Communication tends to be linear, dramatic, precise and open. Because words are so highly valued, they are used almost constantly. Disagreements are depersonalized. Conflicts do not have to be resolved immediately

for work to continue. When solutions are found, they tend to be rationally based. Privacy and personal space are highly valued. Physical space is considered privately owned. Verbal messages are explicit and direct. Words are valued above their context. Speed is valued. How efficiently something is done is important. Some countries considered “low context” include the United States, Germany and various Scandinavian countries. While “high” and “low” context are examples of opposing cultures, it is also true that many cultures fall in between these two extremes. Called “multi-active,” these cultures might include those of Spain, Italy or Latin America.

WHAT IS NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION?

Definition (CBC): “nonverbal communication involves those nonverbal stimuli in a communication setting that are generated by both the source [speaker] and his or her use of the environment and that have potential message value for the source or receiver [listener] (Samovar et al). Basically it is sending and receiving messages in a variety of ways without the use of verbal codes (words). It is both intentional and unintentional. Most speakers / listeners are not conscious of this. When two people meet for the first time, their initial reaction is to size up each other by observing appearance , attire, facial expression, hand shake and posture. Body language can include any reflexive or non- reflexive movement of a part or all of the body to communicate an emotional message to the outside world. It is the basis from which we draw our non-verbal conclusions.

WHY IS NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION IMPORTANT?

“Actions speak louder than words.” In essence, this underscores the importance of non-verbal communication. Non-verbal communication is especially significant in intercultural situations. Probably non-verbal differences account for typical difficulties in communicating. As the global village continues to shrink and cultures collide, it is essential for all of us to become more sensitive, more aware, and more observant to the myriad motions, gestures, and body language that surround us each day. And as many of us cross over cultural borders, it would be fitting for us to respect, learn, and understand more about the effective, yet powerful "silent language" of gestures. People all over the world use their hands, heads, and bodies to communicate expressively. Without gestures, our world would be static and colorless. Even simple things like using hands to point and count differ.

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

\ More than 700,000 possible motions we can make — so impossible to categorize them all! But just need to be aware the body movement and position is a key ingredient in sending messages.

POSTURE

It would be helpful to note the cultural differences and keep in mind while crossing the borders:

Bowing: (not done, criticized, or affected in US; shows rank in Japan). Slouching: (rude in most Northern European areas). Hands in pocket: (disrespectful in Turkey). Sitting with legs crossed: (offensive in Ghana, Turkey). Showing soles of feet: (Offensive in Thailand, Saudi Arabia)

FACIAL EXPRESSIONS

While some say that facial expressions are identical, meaning attached to them differs. Majority opinion is that these do have similar meanings world-wide with respect to smiling, crying, or showing anger, sorrow, or disgust. However, the intensity varies from culture to culture. Many Asian cultures suppress facial expression as much as possible. Many Mediterranean (Latino / Arabic) cultures exaggerate grief or sadness while most

American men hide grief or sorrow. Some see “animated” expressions as a sign of a lack of control. Too much smiling is viewed in as a sign of shallowness. Women smile more than men.

Whether or not eye contact is made, who makes it and how long it lasts vary tremendously in meaning. In many Asian cultures, avoiding eye contact is seen as a sign of respect. However, those in Latin and North America consider eye contact important for conveying equality among individuals. In Ghana, if a young child looks an adult in the eye, it is considered an act of defiance. In USA, eye contact indicates: degree of attention or interest, influences attitude change or persuasion, regulates interaction, communicates emotion, defines power and status, and has a central role in managing impressions of others. Western cultures — see direct eye to eye contact as positive (advise children to look a person in the eyes). Arabic cultures make prolonged eye-contact. — believe it shows interest and helps them understand truthfulness of the other person. (A person who doesn’t reciprocate is seen as untrustworthy) Japan, Africa, Latin American, Caribbean- avoid eye contact to show respect

GESTURES

Gestures can convey wildly different meanings. Individuals in the United States use the “OK” sign to convey that something is acceptable. In Japan, the same hand symbol means “money.” Argentinians, Belgians, the French and the Portuguese all use the symbol to mean “zero” or “nothing.” Still other countries in Eastern Europe consider that same sign an offensive swear.

Pointing: US with index finger; Germany with little finger; Japanese with entire hand (in fact most Asians consider pointing with index finger to be rude)

Counting: Thumb = 1 in Germany, 5 in Japan, middle finger for 1 in Indonesia.

PARALANGUAGE

“Paralanguage” refers to factors of speech such as accent, pitch range, volume or articulation. In Britain, for example, people use volume to convey anger, while in India; they use it to command attention. Japanese women make a point of raising the pitch of their voices to differentiate themselves from men. In America, voice pitch between genders remains comparably the same. Silence can also be considered a type of paralanguage. The Greeks use silence as a way to refuse things, while Egyptians use it to consent. Some cultures (such as those in Asia) are generally more comfortable with long bouts of silence than others. When international business professionals take the time to learn what isn’t being said, everyone benefits. Not only will their efforts decrease the likelihood of misunderstandings, they will improve their abilities to negotiate, solve problems effectively, create good working relationships and become better global citizens.

CULTURAL USE OF SPACE

Culture also tells us how to organize space in such a way as to control the nature of interaction. In North American corporate offices, for instance, the boss is usually physically isolated in a very separate private room. This tends to minimize his or her personal contact with ordinary workers. In contrast, Japanese offices commonly are set up with the boss's desk at the end of a row of pushed together desks used by subordinate employees. This maximizes his interaction with them.

A court room similarly alters behavior. In the United States, the judge usually wears a black robe and sits behind an elevated desk. The other desks and chairs in court are positioned so that all attention is focused on the judge. This intentional setting makes those present feel respectful and subservient to the judge, thereby making it easier for him or her to control the proceedings. Countries that are densely populated generally have much less need for personal space than those that are not. The Japanese, for example, are less likely to react strongly to an accidental touch by a stranger than Americans. Less personal space is also needed in areas such as Latin America, and, in the context of one-on-one conversations, the Middle East.

COMMUNICATING WITH CLOTHES:

Putting on certain types of clothing can change your behavior and the behavior of others towards you. This can be the case with a military uniform, doctor's white lab coat, or a clown's costume. For instance, it is likely that the Spanish policemen are more assertive and aggressive when they wear their uniforms. Likewise, others are more likely to follow their directions. Most uniforms are consciously symbolic so that they can rapidly and conclusively communicate status. For instance, the ribbon, crown, and scepter leave little doubt that the young woman is a beauty queen. The ribbons and other insignias on the U.S. sailor's uniform can tell even a stranger about his status, authority, and military experience. All cultures are concerned for how they look and make judgments based on looks and dress. Americans, for instance, appear almost obsessed with dress and personal attractiveness.

TOUCH

Touch is culturally determined! But each culture has a clear concept of what parts of the body one may not touch. Basic message of touch is to affect or control — protect, support, disapprove (i.e. hug, kiss, hit, kick). USA—handshake is common (even for strangers), hugs, kisses for those of opposite gender or of family (usually) on an increasingly more intimate basis. Note differences between African-Americans and Anglos in USA. Most African Americans touch on greeting but are annoyed if touched on the head (good boy, good girl overtones). Islamic and Hindu: typically don't touch with the left hand. To do so is a social insult. Left hand is for toilet functions. Islamic cultures generally don't approve of any touching between genders (even hand shakes). But consider such touching (including hand holding, hugs) between same-sex to be appropriate. Many Asians don't touch the head (Head houses the soul and a touch puts it in jeopardy).

Respect to elderly people, smiling often can cover a gamut of emotions: happiness, anger, confusion, apologies, or sadness. Displaying an open mouth (such as yawning or a wide-open laugh) is considered rude, especially with women who cover their mouths when giggling or laughing. Try to maintain a balanced posture, stand or sit erectly or squarely. Don't slouch or put on the ground with arms in the lap or on the armrest. Crossing the legs at the knees or ankles is the preferred form rather than with one ankle over the other knee. Silence (listening) is a sign of politeness and of contemplation. During conversations, be especially careful about interrupting.

GREETINGS: CHINA:

The western custom of shaking hands is the customary form of greeting, but often a nod of the head or slight bow is sufficient. Hugging and kissing when greeting are uncommon. Business cards are often exchanged, and yours should be printed in your own language and in Chinese. Also, it is more respectful to present your card (or a gift or any other article) using both hands. The Chinese are enthusiastic applauders. You may be greeted with group clapping, even by small children. When a person is applauded in this fashion it is the custom for that person to return the applause or a "thank you."

JAPAN:

The graceful act of bowing is the traditional greeting. However, they have also adopted the western custom of shaking hands, albeit with a light grip and perhaps with eyes averted. Avoid hugging and kissing when greeting. It is considered rude to stare. Prolonged direct eye contact is considered impolite or even intimidating. It is considered rude to stand with your hand or hands in your pockets, especially when greeting someone or when addressing a group of people. The seemingly simple act of exchanging business cards is more complex in Japan because the business card represents not only one's identity but one's station in life. Yours should be printed in your own language and in Japanese.

KOREA:

Bowing is the traditional form for both greeting and departing. Western and Korean male friends usually greet with both a slight bow and shaking hands. When shaking hands, both hands are sometimes used. Women usually do not shake hands, especially with men, but usually just nod slightly. The senior person offers to shake hands first, but the junior person bows first. However, shake hands with a light grip and perhaps with eyes averted. Avoid hugging and kissing when greeting. Prolonged direct eye contact is considered impolite and even intimidating. Business cards are traded respectfully. Keep the card on the table in front of you as just one small gesture of respect. When saying good-bye, the traditional gesture is the bow, but the younger generation has adopted the western custom of waving good-bye by moving their arm side-to-side. Respect is always shown to elderly people, so it is appropriate to rise when a person-- especially an elderly man enters the room or giving up a seat on a subway. However, an elder may not give up a seat for a young boy. Men generally have priority in Korea: Go through a door first, walk ahead of women, and women may help them on with their coats. Among the Koreans, laughter is used to disguise many emotions: anger, frustration, and fear.

CONCLUSION:

By successfully getting your message across, you convey your thoughts and ideas effectively. When not successful, the thoughts and ideas that you send do not necessarily reflect your own, causing a communications breakdown and creating roadblocks that stand in the way of your goals – both personally and professionally. In a recent survey of recruiters from companies with more than 50,000 employees, communication skills were cited as the single more important decisive factor in choosing managers. In spite of the increasing importance placed on communication skills, many individuals continue to struggle, unable to communicate their thoughts and ideas effectively – whether in verbal or written format. This inability makes it nearly impossible for them to compete effectively in the workplace, and stands in the way of career progression. Getting your message across is paramount to progressing. To do this, you must understand what your message is, what audience you are sending it to, and how it will be perceived. You must also weigh-in the circumstances surrounding your communications, such as situational and cultural context.

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