

Session Objectives:

- Understanding Different Cultures
- Identifying the Need for Multi-cultural Communication Skills
- Being Sensitive to Different Cultures While Communicating
- Identifying Common Mistakes Committed in Cross-cultural Communication
- Enhancing Multi-cultural Communication Skills
- Developing Cultural Fluency

UNDERSTANDING DIFFERENT CULTURES

Culture is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group from another. Every business function is influenced by culture. The culture of a particular country influences the designing and marketing of products and services. To be successful in foreign markets, managers should understand cultural differences in terms of attitudes, values, religions, customs, education, and language.

Example: Attitudes toward authority and women are quite different in Asian countries when compared to the West countries.

Culture can be classified along four dimensions:

1. Power distance
2. Masculinity vs femininity
3. Uncertainty avoidance
4. Individualism vs. collectivism

Power Distance

Power distance refers to a society's attitude toward physical and intellectual inequalities. In societies with high power distance, there are wide differences among individuals in terms of income and power.

Example: Great Britain, Germany, and the US are examples of low power distance cultures. Mexico, the West African countries and Arab countries, where high social inequalities prevail, are examples of high power distance cultures.

Masculinity vs. Femininity

Masculinity vs femininity is the relationship between gender and work roles. Assertiveness and competitiveness are considered male values, whereas solidarity and quality of life are regarded as feminine values. In masculine cultures, gender roles are sharply differentiated, whereas in feminine cultures, the roles of men and women are less differentiated.

Example: In Japan women are seen more as helpers of men and not considered as capable of doing more demanding work.

Uncertainty Avoidance

Uncertainty avoidance refers to the extent to which a society tolerates ambiguity and uncertainty. In societies

with high uncertainty avoidance, people do not like taking risks. In such cultures employees are provided with job security and high retirement benefits. The managers encourage strict supervision of work and give clear instructions to employees.

Example: Japanese people try to avoid uncertainty therefore they tend to pay close attention to minute details and discuss them at length.

Individualism vs. Collectivism

In individualistic societies, individual interests are given importance while in collective societies, group interests supersede individual interests. In such societies, group achievements and group efforts are highly valued.

Example: Japan has a collective society, while the US has an individualistic society.

Long-term Orientation

Long-term orientation can be considered as the fifth dimension. Long-term orientation focuses on the degree to which a society embraces, or does not embrace long-term devotion to traditional values. A high long-term orientation is thought to support a strong work ethic where long-term rewards are expected as a result of today's hard work. A low long-term orientation ranking indicates that the country does not reinforce the concept of a long-term, traditional orientation.

NEED FOR MULTI-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Lack of knowledge of another culture can result in mistakes that may confuse or even offend the people with whom an organization intends to communicate. Advertising messages, signs and languages have different meanings in different countries. Proficiency in a foreign language is now being increasingly sought in prospective employees by those companies who have overseas business interests.

When executives travel on business, they need a personal comfort level to work effectively in the new language/cultural environment. This comes from being able to understand the basics of the language and the social norms. So culture sensitization, besides language proficiency, is a major component to which most organizations pay attention. This trend is observed across the industries like IT, banking, hospitality, travel, tourism etc.

Non-Verbal Communication

Non-verbal communication plays an important role in influencing communication and the conduct of business. Non-verbal communication can be classified as kinesics, proxemics, appearance, posture, eye contact, paralanguage and symbolism.

Kinesics: It can be defined as body language. Body language can differ from culture to culture and the body language of a particular culture can be misunderstood in another culture.

Example: In most Arab countries, "the thumbs up" gesture is considered to be offensive while in the West, it is considered as a sign of good luck.

Proxemics: Proxemics is the way in which people maintain a physical distance from one another.

Example: Chinese find shaking hands highly uncomfortable while the Northern European countries interpret the tap on the shoulder, often practiced by North Americans, as threatening.

Appearance: In most Western societies, suits and formal attire reflect professionalism, but this is not the case in all societies.

Posture: Posture means standing, sitting, etc. The way someone sits or stands when interpreted together with other non-verbal behavior, may lead to confusion in intercultural settings.

Eye contact: The use of eyes in the process of communication is called as Oculistics. In most Western cultures, direct eye contact symbolizes listening and attention while it is seen as unfavorable by, for example, various Asian cultures.

Paralanguage: Paralinguistics is also subject to cross-cultural interpretations. For example, talking too loud is interpreted in Europe as being aggressive or as a sign of uncultured behavior. Similarly, the British way of speaking softly might be interpreted as secretive by Americans.

Symbolism: Symbols and other forms of passive non-verbal communications are interpreted in different ways in different cultures. Colors are also interpreted in different ways in different cultures.

Example: Blue stands for warmth in Holland, represents death in Iran, connotes coldness in Sweden, and means purity in India.

BEING SENSITIVE TO DIFFERENT CULTURES WHILE COMMUNICATING

Cultural sensitivity is the awareness, appreciation, and honest caring about another individual's culture. It also includes the ability to understand the perspectives of someone living or working in another culture. In cross-cultural communication, it is important to ensure that the sentiments of persons from another culture are not hurt, either knowingly or because of ignorance. What is considered as appropriate behavior in one culture may not be considered appropriate in another culture. In international business, hurting the sentiments of people from another culture may cause mistrust, which may eventually affect business relationships.

Working with people from different parts of the world can be a daunting task. One wrong step can spoil the whole relationship or cause a project to get delayed by months. At the same time, understanding and showing appreciation toward a different culture could possibly ease communication barriers and build better relationships and this would be reflected in the business relationships.

COMMON MISTAKES COMMITTED IN CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Some of the important points to be considered to avoid making mistakes while communicating in cross cultural communication are:

Selecting a Topic of Conversation

An appropriate type of conversation in one culture may be regarded as inappropriate in another culture. It is necessary to have a clear understanding of these aspects while communicating to a person from a different cultural background.

Example: Discussing the earning capacity of an individual or discussing family details may not be considered appropriate in some cultures.

Silence during a Conversation

In Japan, a business meeting may be interspersed with long periods of silence. A person who is not acquainted with this may feel uneasy at such breaks and may try to break the silence. This is especially true in the case of Western companies where silence during a meeting may not be appreciated. But in Japanese culture, it is treated as a sign of thoughtfulness.

Interruption during Conversation

Interruptions during conversations may be commonplace in Arab countries. For instance, during business meetings in these countries, people receive phone calls, friends, or family members. This kind of interruption is very common in these cultures but they are thought highly inappropriate and rude in Northern Europe or American cultures.

Humor in Conversation

Use of humor in a business meeting in Japan may not be appreciated and strict adherence to professionalism is required. What is considered as good humor may have negative connotations in such cultures. However, in Western culture, humor may be used as an attempt to create an immediate rapport between parties in business meetings.

Structure of the Message

In some cultures, people prefer coming to the point directly in business meetings and this is valued as this type of communication is regarded as open and as going straight to the point. In certain other cultures, a more roundabout approach is preferred and business managers in such situations should ensure that they bring in the point to the table slowly.

ENHANCING MULTI-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Enhancing one's multi-cultural communication skills can help to prevent many mistakes and building better business relationships. Some of the factors that need to be considered while enhancing multi-cultural communication skills are objective, style of communication, integrity, message and language barriers.

Objective

The usual objectives of business communication are reaching an agreement, signing a contract, and solving a business related problem. Managers operating in international environment have to thoroughly consider whether their objectives are realistic in the multi-cultural business environment. Another issue to be considered is whether the time frame set is realistic considering the type of culture in which the business is operating. The attitude toward time also varies with culture. While some cultures have a relaxed attitude toward time, in some cultures ensuring that everything takes place according to a timetable is supreme.

Example: In countries like Germany, Switzerland, etc., if a meeting is scheduled at 8 am, it starts exactly at that time. This may not be the case in Arab countries.

Style of Communication

Choosing the right style of communication is crucial in business interactions and it depends a lot on the culture of a region. The communication style depends partly on whether the addressees make a high or low contribution in the communication process. In cultures in which there is more of a democratic style of functioning, the communication style can be more participative. The style of communication also depends on whether a culture is individualistic or collective.

Example: USA is considered one of the most individualistic of cultures. In many African countries, tribes are more important than family or the country.

Integrity

Effectiveness of communication also depends a lot on the integrity of the persons who are involved in the process of communication. Some factors which determine the integrity of a person include personal image, his/her position or status, individual capability, and credibility. Image reflects how much a person wants to look like another person and it varies to a great extent across cultures.

Example: In the UK, a person from the upper class may get certain advantage over a person from other classes. In Islamic countries, a man may get more privileges than a woman while in Asian countries like Japan and Korea, an elderly person may get more advantages than a younger one.

Message

Effective cross-cultural communication requires a manager to present the message in a way that suits the other culture. This requires a thorough knowledge about other culture and the ability to adapt to the other culture.

Example: Standard paper size used in one country may be different from that used in other country and this has to be kept in mind while sending written messages to managers of other cultures as such issues, though minor, may have a significant effect on business.

Language Barriers

Language creates potential problems to managers intending to enter foreign markets. And having just a basic understanding of the language is sometimes not sufficient. Business managers also need to be familiar with the vernacular, pronunciation, codes, and jargon used in that language for effective communication.

Example: When a Japanese manager says 'yes' during a meeting, it only means that he/she is agreeing with what is being said and is showing good manners as required by her/his culture. Saying 'yes' at American business meetings, on the other hand, is tantamount to accepting a proposal.

CULTURAL FLUENCY

Cultural fluency is based on the ability to identify, understand, and apply cultural variables that influence the communicative behavior of members of different cultures. A person who has cultural fluency is able to communicate just like a member of that foreign culture. Cultural fluency can be culture-general or culture-specific.

Culture-general cultural fluency enables a person to understand the factors that characterize the communication behavior of various cultures. Culture-specific cultural fluency enables a person to apply general cultural fluency for communication in one specific cultural group.

Developing Cultural Fluency

Cultural fluency helps bring together people from diverse backgrounds so that they can share technical knowledge. The process of developing cultural fluency received attention when Dr Linda Beamer developed a model for developing intercultural communication competence in 1992. There are four principles underlying the model that Beamer proposed. According to her:

1. Culture can be learned.
2. Cultures are complete and rational.
3. All cultures are equally suitable.
4. A person who is culturally fluent can accept that cultural prejudice always exists.

There are five levels in Beamer's model of learning cultural fluency:

1. Acknowledging cultural diversity.
2. Organizing information according to stereotypes.
3. Asking questions to challenge stereotypes.
4. Analyzing communication episodes.
5. Generating fluent messages from other cultures.

Acknowledging cultural diversity

In developing intercultural competency, first and foremost, there should be an awareness among the managers about the various factors that cause differences between the cultures. Those people who come from high-context cultures may have very little awareness about diversity in culture. Language is one important factor which causes cultural differences. Even though fluency in the language of a new culture is significant, it does not make a person culturally fluent.

Organizing information according to stereotypes

In simple terms, stereotypes are certain basic characteristics that distinguish one culture from another. Examples of stereotypes are, 'treat the business card given by Japanese with respect', 'Latin Americans like those who do business with them to show consideration toward their families', or 'public display of affection should be avoided in China', etc. Stereotypes help to understand a culture better, but they help only to understand very limited aspects about a culture and do not give the full picture about it. In developing cultural fluency, a problem that usually arises is that very often people do not try to look beyond these stereotypes.

Asking questions to challenge stereotypes

The third level involves attempts to break free from the stereotypes. In this level, questions are asked to challenge the various stereotypes. The questions to be asked in this model have to identify what is valued by

members of another culture, how the values influence their behavior in various situations, their attitude toward various establishments in the society, and also toward events which are not in their control.

Analyzing communication episodes

After challenging the stereotypes through questions, the acquired knowledge has to be used to evaluate communication episodes in actual situations. The episodes may include cases of communication failure or communication success or both. This evaluation would help to gain new insights into the other culture.

Generating fluent messages from other cultures

The final level involves the capability to create and reply fluently to communication messages from other cultures and this capability is transferable to more than one culture.

SUMMARY

- Culture is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group from another.
- Culture can be classified along four dimensions which are Power distance, Masculinity vs femininity, Uncertainty avoidance and Individualism vs. collectivism.
- Lack of knowledge of another culture can result in mistakes that may confuse or even offend the people with whom an organization intends to communicate; therefore there is a high need for attaining multi-cultural communication skills.
- Non-verbal communication plays a vital role in influencing multi-cultural communication skills. Non-verbal communication can be classified as kinesics, proxemics, appearance, posture, eye contact, paralanguage and symbolism.
- It is important for managers to be sensitive to different cultures while conducting business and communicating in multi-cultural business environment.
- Some of the important points to be remembered to avoid making mistakes while communicating in cross cultural communication are selecting a topic of conversation, silence during a conversation, interruptions during conversations, humor in conversations and structure of the message.
- Some of the factors that need to be considered while enhancing multi-cultural communication skills are objective, style of communication, integrity, message and language barriers.
- Cultural fluency is based on the ability to identify, understand, and apply cultural variables that influence the communicative behavior of members of different cultures. Cultural fluency can also be developed.

