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Cross-Cultural Communication

By

Joseph Sommerville
With some of the highest savings rates in the world, a wealth of natural resources and a well-trained workforce, it is no surprise that Asian economies are growing at phenomenal rates. In addition to American and European firms venturing into Asia, Asian firms are going regional and global as well.

Not only are large numbers of businesses venturing overseas, but as Limaye and Victor (1991) point out, workforces within countries are becoming increasingly multicultural (p. 278). All of this points to the fact that more and more people of different cultures are coming into contact with each other. With this increased contact comes the attendant risk of problems interacting based on cultural differences. These differences among cultures occur along several dimensions. They may have distinct languages, customs, music, foods, dress, etc. But it is the premise of this paper that differences in communicative behaviors are most often at the root of cultural misunderstanding. Within business contexts, much of the activity is communicative by nature. Negotiation, management, persuasion, group deliberation, sales, marketing, etc. is actually a function of communication.

Before proceeding, it will be useful to define and explain the terms used in the title of this paper, i.e. “Cross-Cultural Communication in Asian Business Contexts.” By “Cross Cultural Communication” I mean “communication between people whose cultural perceptions and symbol systems are distinct enough to alter the communication event” (Samovar and Porter, 1995, p. 58). In many communication events, cultural perceptions and symbol systems are so similar that other factors have more effect, e.g., interpersonal relationships, goals or the function of the messages that are produced. Cross-cultural communication emphasizes the cultural elements that affect the event. “Business Contexts” should be understood as those environments in
which the primary goal for interaction is the facilitation of business. The business context includes both organizational and non-organizational settings. It also includes communication flow in various directions (upward, downward, lateral) as well as the various functions, e.g., group deliberation, managing, negotiation, persuasion, etc.

While the term “Asian” is self-explanatory in terms of the regions it identifies, it is important to note that the use of Asian to refer to a single, monolithic culture is counterproductive. There are several very different Asian cultures. Further, “Culture” should not be confused with “Nationality.” Particularly in the case of multi-racial societies, several cultures may exist within a single nation-state. For example, Malaysia’s distinct racial groups of Malay, Chinese and Indian represent distinct cultures within a single country.

The purpose of this paper is to review some of the literature available that deals with one or more of these topics. Its approach will be to first explore some of the schemas for distinguishing among cultures. Second, models of communication are examined to determine their usefulness for research and training. Finally, suggestions are offered for future research and training. Partly because of economic incentives and party because of the revolution in communication technologies, Asia has increasingly been the focus of attention in cross-cultural communication, especially with regard to business contexts. To illustrate, extant literature includes research on communication in maintaining face (Scollon and Scollon, 1994; Ting-Toomey, 1992, 1994), communication patterns within organizations (Steers, 1991; Wiseman and Shuter, 1994), negotiation (Weiss, 1992), comparison of consumers (Tse, 1990), management (Adler, 1993; Adler, Doktor and Redding, 1986; Hofstede, 1987; Swierczek, 1991; Tayeb, 1988) and training (Brislin and Yoshida, 1994).
Two of the most popular schemas for comparing cultures are those of Hall (1976) and Hofstede (1984). Hall (1976) distinguishes between what he calls high and low context cultures. He argues that communication among different cultures varies according to how context-dependent it is. Context is the implicit part of communication. It might include tone of voice, gestures, situational constraints, and other nonverbal aspects of the message. Thus he argues that low context cultures depend less on these contextual aspects of communication and more heavily on the explicit message. While Hall’s (1976) illustrative example is the legal system in high and low-context cultures, others have suggested how this particular aspect of culture influences wider areas of society such as interpersonal relationships and social organization. (Bennett, 1990; Kabagarama, 1993) As a construct, Hall’s scheme is useful in providing a basis of comparison. It is also a useful tool for analysis as it focuses on a particular aspect of communication.

Based on his research into employee attitudes, Hofstede (1984) has categorized four dimensions along which cultures differ: (1) Power Distance, (2) Uncertainty Avoidance, (3) Individualism and (4) Masculinity. According to Hofstede (1984), Power Distance is a measure of “inequality among humans” (p. 65). Cultures with high power distances will exhibit more attention to formality, rank and status. Uncertainty Avoidance is based on “rule orientation, employment stability and stress” (p. 110). Thus cultures with high uncertainty avoidance will be more adverse to risk. Individualism “describes the relationship between the individual and the collectivity which prevails in a given society” (p. 148). This dimension seeks to identify whether groups or individual concerns are emphasized more in the society. Masculinity measures to what extent sex role distributions in a society are masculine as opposed to
feminine (p. 176), or to put it differently, how nurturing and aggressive roles are
distributed.

The strength of Hofstede's (1984) approach lies in the quantity and variety of data
he was able to collect. The findings also have implications for conclusions about what
motivates employees and how to manage them effectively. The number of replications
and citations of his work (Sondegaard, 1994) is evidence of its heuristic value.

When trying to apply models of communication to an understanding of cross-
cultural interaction, most suffer from their generality and inattention to cultural factors.
The traditional model of communication created by Shannon and Weaver (1949) is
inappropriate to understanding intercultural communication because of its sender-
centeredness. That is, it conceptually doesn't permit enough attention to the receiver
and the factors that influence decoding of messages. Other communication models
acknowledge the role of culture but cannot be expected to prioritize its treatment when
the purpose of the model is pedagogic to specific functions of communication such as
speaking (Gronbeck, McKerrow, Ehninger and Monroe, 1994; Lucas, 1995; Osborn
and Osborn 1988), business communication (Benjamin and McKerrow, 1994; O'Hair
and Friedrich, 1992) or general overviews (Devito, 1994; Trenholm, 1995).

1. **Research and training must strike a balance between general principles and
   specific applications.** Divergence rather than convergence describes the cultural
   perceptions that influence communication processes. John Naisbitt (1995) explains this
   enigma as the juxtaposition of universalism with tribalism (p. 24). That is, as
   communication and transportation technology expose people to more and different
cultures, they become more concerned about asserting and maintaining their own culture.

This tension has consequences for research into cross-cultural business communication. While there is a need to identify and implement standards that will facilitate business transactions, there is also a need to distinguish cultural warrants and communication practices that can impede those transactions. For example, international standards such as ISO 9000 can furnish standardized accounting and reporting procedures. Training in business communication can equip participants with the general skills needed for effective cross-cultural interaction. But particular cultures will differ in their approach to interpersonal relationships, negotiation, and the processing of information. Over emphasis on either of these poles is undesirable. In the case of common practices, too much emphasis on standardization leads to the imposition of models that are perhaps inappropriate to different cultures. For example, both Hofstede (1983) and Osigweh (1989) have pointed to the difficulties in exporting theories of management. This is especially problematic for expatriate managers who may attempt to implement theories of motivation and leadership that are ineffective or even counter-productive. However, too much emphasis on individual practices leads to a tyranny of the particular that has little relevance outside specific contexts and that can contribute little to theory. Perhaps the best approach to striking this balance is to identify general structures such as cognitive frames (Triandis and Albert, 1987) that can be applied to specific cultures.

2. Research and training must focus less on problems of translation and more on information processing. It is easy to see how misunderstanding can occur when
participants in a communicative transaction speak different first languages. The gaffes of companies doing business internationally that try to use literal translations of advertising slogans are well known. Even when participants speak the same language, linguistic subtleties abound. This would explain why a very successful advertising campaign in the UK failed to sell vacuum cleaners in the U.S. with the slogan "Nothing Sucks Like an Electrolux" (Victor, 1992, p.34). Although English may be the lingua franca for much of business communication internationally, it does not follow that there is a corresponding homogenization of communication practices within business contexts even when there is a common language. Problems of translation can be solved by competent translators. It is more difficult to identify and understand different patterns of information processing, different value hierarchies and different social relationships that influence communicative behaviors. More research must focus on understanding the cognitive processes involved. As a corollary,

3. Effective research and training will emphasize the paralinguistic dimensions of cross-cultural communication. Just as the cognitive processes that underlie communicative behaviors can help explain the outcomes of information processing, recognition of the coding schemes of sources and receivers from different cultures can provide information about the attitudes and values that underlie such behaviors (Samovar and Porter, 1995, p. 186). Hall's (1966) interest in how different cultures make use of space and time provided the basis for comparing cultures along these nonverbal dimensions. Other researchers have focused on different aspects of nonverbal communication including touch (Kendon, 1988), facial expressions (Ekman, Sorenson and Friesen, 1969) and even clothing (Vicary, 1988).
4. **Analysis must emphasis description over evaluation.** The omnipresent danger in analyzing cultures is that the lens of ethnocentricity colors anything different as less desirable. Effective cross cultural communicators will focus less on the imposition of their own cultural practices and more on adaptation to the practices of the target culture.

5. **Research must take into account the dynamic nature of Asian Societies.** As countries in Asia become more developed, have faster and better access to information and continue to build upon robust economies, such factors will no doubt affect their cultures. We must be cautious about the slice of time upon which we base our conclusions. To return to Hofstede’s schema, consider this example: much of the data was collected between 1967 and 1973. This paper began with the premise that Asia is witnessing a number of changes to its social, political and economic landscapes. If this premise is correct, then data collected over twenty years ago may no longer reflect some of the attitudes of contemporary Asian societies. For example, Malaysia’s score on Hofstede’s Power Distance Index places it near the top of the scale. That is to say, according to this scheme, Malaysia evidences a large power distance. However, the relationship between the government and the monarchy in Malaysia has evolved over the past several years. The evolution of this relationship will most likely be consequential for attitudes about power and the appropriate relationships along this dimension.

It is no accident that interest in more effective communication for doing business in different cultures has driven a significant amount of the research into cross-cultural
communication. As researchers and trainers begin to synthesize findings from
communication, Asian studies and business communication, the result will be a fuller
and richer understanding of Cross Cultural Communication within Asian Business
Contexts.

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