

Bridging Global Gaps at Workplace: Challenges, Perspectives and Strategies

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Abstract

In today's competitive business environment due to economic liberation and globalization various multinational companies having different cultural credentials are venturing jointly. Employees with diverse cultural backgrounds are coming closer at a workplace. Communication being the lifeline of any organization; it has become imperative for professionals to understand the cultural differences in intercultural communication. Differences in cultural values and perception can be an invisible source of great misunderstanding between people from an array of cultures. A poor understanding in areas such as languages, etiquette, non-verbal communication, norms and values may lead to damaging blunders. On the other hand an understanding of cultural differences will pave way for effective communication at various work places.

With the main objective of understanding cultural differences and their subsequent impact on communication process, this paper at the outset elaborates the term culture and intercultural communication and then moves on to discuss the various cultural perspectives which may cause challenges in communication. The paper also suggests some strategies to minimize lapses to bridge cultural differences.

Key Words: Intercultural Communication, Globalization, Workplace Communication, Multicultural Organizations

1. Introduction:

Developing excellent communication skills is extremely important. Survey of employees often shows that communication skills are critical to effective job placement, performance career advancement, and organizational success (Mary & Anne, 2001). In making hiring decisions, employers often rank communication skills among the most requested competencies (Wilhelm, 1999). In fact, many job advertisements specifically ask for excellent oral and written communication skills (Janette, Brent & Cynthia, 2002).

Now in this 21st century, the phenomenal growth of international trade creates the need to understand intercultural communication; the ability to speak and write in ways that are sensitive to and cognizant of the factors in different cultural contexts (Murphy, Herbert & Jane, 1997). Organizational Communication is influenced by various factors amongst which the context in which it occurs is very important. The overwhelming influence of culture on communication led anthropologist Edward Hall to assert, "Culture is communication and communication is culture" (Raman, 2005). Most of the time we are engaged in communicating with others; at home, at workplace, group communication and interacting with the community. No matter how well we think we understand each other; communication is arguably challenging. We often come across the phrases; "He does not get it," or "She did not really hear what I meant to say." "Culture" is often at the root of communication challenges. Our culture influences how we approach problems, and how we participate in groups and in communities (DuPraw & Axner, n.d.).

Undoubtedly, it is more comfortable to work with persons of our own culture, our own language, and our own communication norms. But multinational organisations demand work with people from varied cultures. The workplace environment includes employees and customers with a wide range of needs, interest, abilities, and culture backgrounds. If culture diversity is not understood and valued, misunderstandings may occur that negatively affect business success (Krizan, Patricia, Joyce & Karen, 2008).

Oman is a multicultural society where intercultural communication is a regular process. As per Oman census 2010 Omani population was 2,773,479 out of which expatriates were 816,143 which make about 30 % of the population (Oman Census 2010). According to National Centre for Statistics and Information Sultanate of Oman, Oman population by the end of September 2014 is 4064,580, including 1782,889 expatriates (National Centre for Statistics and Information, Sultanate of Oman, 2014).

Since 1970, the Omani government has given high priority to education in order to develop a domestic work force, which the government considers a vital factor in the country's economic and social progress. This created a lot of job vacancies in the sultanate and raising number of guest workers. Also because of the combination of a relatively small Omani population and a fastgrowing oil-driven economy, Oman has attracted many migrants from India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Indonesia, Philippines, Jordan and Egypt (Ali, 2014).

2. Purpose and Layout of the Study:

To overcome this problem and to mitigate the effect at global level, this paper has come up with some finding that would enhance intercultural competence in multicultural organisations.

With its main objective of understanding the key communication challenges in multicultural context, this paper at the outset explores the term culture and sheds light on intercultural communication. Secondly, a sincere effort has been made to explain the barriers arising out of ethnocentrism and cultural relativism. Next, the methodology of data collection is concisely discussed. Then the study moves on to analyse and discuss the various cultural variables (national and individual) in the light of primary and secondary data. Finally, the paper concludes with strategies which orbit around recommendations to alleviate various communication challenges arising out of cultural diversity.

3. The Concepts of Culture and Intercultural Communication:

Though culture is a complex concept with legion of definitions, but it is widely used in our life. According to the dictionary the word, "culture" refers to the arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement regarded collectively (Oxford English Dictionary, 2014). It includes groups that we are born into, such as gender, race, or national origin. Also, it often means different things to different people

(Gudykunst & Kim, 1997). Scholars have tried to define culture in many different ways (Hofstede, 2001). For instance, Kroeber and Kluckhohn collected 300 various meanings of culture in their 1954 study (McLaren, 1998). Having considered these meanings, it is challenging to define the word culture as a single definition. Samovar and Porter (1991) too support us that culture is not a unitary concept so there is a need for many diverse definitions.

Culture cannot be confined and the study encompasses on richness of culture meanings. Since it is hard to combine its numerous aspects, there have been different approaches to defining the word culture. Amongst those, Lusting and Koester (1999) outline five approaches to define culture in order to ease better understanding of how culture is pertinent to communication:

1. Culture is learned;
2. Culture is a set of shared interpretations;
3. Culture involves beliefs, values, and norms;
4. Culture affects behavior; and
5. Culture involves large group of people (pp. 30-33)

“The relationship between communication and culture is reciprocal, complex, and interrelated.” Cooper et al (2007)

Indeed there are many cultural groups around the world with different patterns of behaviour, values and beliefs. These ties are culture specific i.e. different cultures develop different rules for achieving the same task and people attach different meanings to the same events (Patrice, n. d.). The same action is thus evaluated in different terms for example, thumbs up in America means approval, but in Iran and Ghana it is a vulgar gesture. Similarly if people stand too close when conversing, Germans, Canadians, and Americans may feel uncomfortable; in Middle Eastern cultures, however, conversations may be almost nose to nose (Krizan, Patricia, Joyce & Karen, 2008).

Thus Intercultural communication also, is an important yet complex phenomenon. For a better understanding of intercultural communication, the study can employ Barnett and Lee’s (2003) structure of intercultural communication. Barnett and Lee outline the structure of intercultural communication which they refer to as exchanging cultural information between two groups with distinctive cultures. Gudykunst (2003) and Jandt (2004) acknowledge intercultural communication as a face-to-face interaction; however, it is not the only means of intercultural communication. The mass media and interaction organizations are also parts of intercultural communication (Barnett and Lee, 2003). Also intercultural communication occurs whenever a message produced in one culture must be processed in another culture (McDaniel, Samovar and Porter, 2006). Cooper et al. (2007) define intercultural communication as occurring “whenever a minimum of two persons from different cultures or micro-cultures come together and exchange verbal and nonverbal symbols” Lustig & Koester (2003) define intercultural communication as occurring when “large and important cultural differences create dissimilar interpretations and expectations about how to communicate competently”. This is an interesting definition as it looks more at the issues and complexities of intercultural communication.

Intercultural communication involves people working towards the common channel of communication regardless of their differences. Incorporating these definitions, intercultural communication can be termed as an interaction between people from distinctive cultural backgrounds which might influence or be influenced by own cultural characteristics. Each of which offers certain interpretations to intercultural communication that will manifest in the research (Ali, 2014).

When people cross cultural boundaries they take their "taken for granted" meaning structure from their home culture. They continue to choose actions consistent with the way they've been enculturated and continue to interpret actions in terms of their own enculturation. It is inevitable that communication across cultural boundaries will break down unless people can recognize their ethnocentrism and take action to overcome it. They must recognize that one culture cannot be judged by the standards of another. This is cultural relativism and it is important to understand this concept and not judge others according to our own cultural values (Patrice, n. d.).

3.1. Cultural Relativism and Ethnocentrism:

Cultural relativism compares the values and behaviours of different cultures and usually means judging them against standards of right and wrong for our own culture. This approach to other cultures becomes a barrier when we assume that cultural beliefs, values, and behaviours are wrong if they differ from those of our own culture. Ethnocentrism is the inherent belief that our own cultural traditions and values are correct and superior (Krizan, Patricia, Joyce & Karen, 2008). This natural attitude is found in all cultures. Ethnocentrism causes us to judge others by our own values. If a person was raised in North America, the values just described probably seem "right" to him or her. That person may wonder why the rest of the world does not function in the same sensible fashion (Guffey, 2004). The reality is; to some extent most the people are ethnocentric. Norms, attitudes and beliefs that differ from those of our culture may seem peculiar, strange, and even wrong. However, as a person study different cultures recognize that there is not just one right or wrong way but that different ways can be equally correct (Krizan, Patricia, Joyce & Karen, 2008). Some very simple examples of ethnocentric thinking; we often talk about British drivers driving "on the wrong side" of the road. Why not just say "opposite side" or even "left hand side"? We talk about written Arabic as reading "backwards". Why not just say "from right to left" or "in the opposite direction from English." An Arab considers a North American who wants to set a deadline for completion of negotiation pushy. That same Arab, who prefers a handshake to written contract, is seen as native and possibly untrustworthy by a North American (Raman, 2005).

4. Research Methodology:

The qualitative research methodology is opted as the study aims to investigate human communication in a natural setting.

Qualitative data includes verbal and non-verbal communication and documents but generally precludes statistics (though not hundred percent). Such data sources could be appropriate for the researcher to gather information about human interactions as they are experienced through interpersonal, intercultural communication.

4.1. Procedure:

In-depth interviews were conducted with males and females from an array of cultures. The language of interviews was English. The interviews were conducted from June to December 2013. Interviews took place in the Omani cities of Muscat, Salalah, Nizwa and Sur. The reasons to choose these cities were; different geographic regions of Oman (from Centre and North to South of Sultanate), the cities attract large number of expatriates, presence of multicultural organisations, and the researcher had contacts in each of these cities who assisted in conducting interviews.

This qualitative research method was adopted because of the explanatory nature of the research. The central concern of the interpretative research is to understand human experiences at a general level. Maykut &

Morehouse state that “The data of qualitative inquiry is most often people’s words and actions, and thus requires methods that allow the researcher to capture language and behaviour.”

42 males and 19 females (61 total) were interviewed. Each of the participants had experienced intercultural communication phenomenon in a multicultural organisation. Interviewees ranged in age from 28 to 59 years old. Interviews investigated many issues ranging from communication in multilingual environment, cultural relativism and ethnocentrism, cultural shock, acculturation, intercultural communication competence, cultural intelligence, cultural adaptation success and failure, cultural diversity and performance, and non-verbal communication.

5. Cultural Variables:

When most people use the word culture they think of people from different national backgrounds. National cultures certainly do exist and play an important role in shaping the way people communicate. But there are other dimensions of culture too. Within a nation, regional differences can exert a powerful influence on communication. Race, ethnicity, customs, values, attitudes can shape behaviour. Gender, sexual orientation, physical disabilities, religion, socio-economic backgrounds are just a few. Broadly we can divide the cultural variables into two categories (Raman, 2005).

5.1. National Cultural Variables:

Both the message sender and the receiver are affected by external and internal stimuli. When communicating with business people in a foreign country, people must realize that overall national and individual cultural differences within the cultures further affect those stimuli. The national and individual constraints and variables that communicators face when working with foreign receivers of their messages have been discussed below.

Religion: In the United States people accept religious diversity; they are tolerant of Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and many other personal beliefs. Other foreign countries are less tolerant. For instance Iran is less tolerant of diversity in religion.

In connection with religion there is great need for tolerance. Buddhism, Jainism, and Islam are found in many parts of the world, affecting the values (and attire) of people. For instance, these three religions forbid consumption of alcohol; thus no liquor is served at business affairs. To communicate well internationally, it is also essential to understand the diversity patterns within one’s own country (Murphy, Herbert & Jane, 1997).

Language: An important constraint that undergirds all the preceding variables is language. Obviously, unless both sender and receiver understand a common language, the opportunities for successful communication are significantly limited. Unfortunately, wide differences among languages make precisely equivalent translation difficult. One reason for differences is that languages are based on the concepts, experiences, views, and such of the cultures that developed them. Different cultures have different concepts, experiences, views, and such. For example, we think of a florist as someone who sells flowers and related items in a store.

In some cultures, however, flowers are sold by street vendors, mainly women and children. Obviously, English word “florist” does not have a precise equivalent in the language of such cultures.

Similarly, English word “supermarket” has no equivalent in some languages (Flatley, 2002). Advertising language must also be analysed for its cultural suitability. For example, the slogan employed by the computer games manufacturer, EA Sports, “Challenge Everything” raises grumbles of disapproval in

religious or hierarchical societies where harmonious relationships are maintained through the values of respect and non-confrontation

(International Advertising: Understanding Cultural Differences, n. d.).

Similarly it was reported that in the early 1950s, an American ink manufacturer attempted to sell bottled ink in Mexico while its metal outdoor signs told customers that they could "avoid embarrassment' (from leaks and stains) by using its brand of ink. The embarrassment, it sees was all the ink company's. The Spanish word used to convey the meaning of "embarrassed' was "embarazar,' which means "to become pregnant.' Many people thought the company was selling contraceptive device. It is vital therefore that language should be examined carefully in any cross cultural advertising campaign. Overcoming such language problems is difficult. The best way, of course, is to know more than one language (Jonathan, 1984).

Economics: Availability of capital and transportation and the standard of living per capital vary from nation to nation. The opportunity to borrow money, the rate of inflation, and the exchange rates influence business and a county's ability to communicate concerning that business. Under the U.S. freeenterprise system, competitors usually set their own prices. In contrast, OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries) as a cartel sets oil prices. Israeli agricultural, competitors mutually agree on a price. Some Japanese businesses check with the government before initiating major production and trading changes. And only recently have freedom associated with capitalism made inroads in Eastern Europe and the southern part of China (Murphy, Herbert & Jane, 1997).

Education: It may be wrong on our part to think that educational systems of all nations are alike. For example the way in which the universities and colleges function may be different in different countries. The curriculum, teaching methodology, evaluation systems, etc., differ. Also the emphasis given to various degree programs varies across the nations. Few major schools in Germany offer classes in business or managerial communication. Often training occurs outside the university, in private and public seminars frequently taught by non-academics. But in India and Gulf countries, most of the business schools include this course in their curriculum. Similarly the amount of interaction between universities and the industries may not be the same. The education may be formal or informal and it may depend upon the nation's history and social development. These factors need to be understood thoroughly if we wish to communicate at intercultural or global level.

Politics: The type of government and even the concept of democracy vary from nation to nation. Also the sweeping political changes in a nation may affect the way organisations are run there. The political stability and instability of the nation in which we wish to conduct our business or communicate for our business, need to be monitored. All such events affect communication, understanding of a country, and an organisation's willingness to do business in an unclear political environment.

5.2. Individual Cultural Variables:

In the preceding section we have discussed the macro national characteristics affecting communication- both intra-national and international. The forthcoming section throws some light up on the individual variables-variables related to the unique lifestyle of personal habits and ethnic diversity. Thus, within each culture, on the micro and more personal level, are differences in verbal and non-verbal cues expressed through varying concept of time, individual speech, food, acceptable dress, manners at home and at work, decision- making patterns, and other nonverbal variations (Murphy, Herbert & Jane, 1997).

Time: In American culture people are very punctual. They try their best to meet the deadline as it's essential for the smooth conduction of the work. Quite contrary to it in most of the Asian countries people view time in more relaxed way. They see planning as unwise and unnecessary (Flatley, 2002). Various organizations in the United States such as business, government, and schools – keep time by the calendar and the clock. Other cultures may keep time by the seasons and the moon, the sun or a personal feeling that “the time is right”.

Space: Personal space is the distance someone wants between himself or herself. Most North Americans, North Europeans, and Asians want a bigger personal space than do Latin Americans, French, Italians, and Arabs. Even within a culture, some people like more personal space than do others. One U. S. study found that men took more personal space than women did.

Eye contact: North American whites see eye contact as a sign of honesty. But in many cultures, dropped eyes are a sign of appropriate deference to a superior. Puerto Rican children are taught not to meet the eyes of adults. The Japanese are taught to look at the neck. In Korea, prolonged eye contact is considered rude. The lower - ranking person is expected to look down first. In some Muslim countries, women and men are not supposed to have eye contact. These differences can lead to miscommunication in the multicultural workplace. Superior may feel that subordinates are being disrespectful when the subordinates are being fully respectful- according to the norms of their parent culture.

Values, Beliefs, and Practices: Values and beliefs, often unconscious, affect a person's practices in various situations. Most North Americans accept competition and believe that it produces better performance. The Japanese, however, believe that competition leads to disharmony. U.S. business people believe that success is based on individual achievement and is open to anyone who excels. In England and in France, success is more obviously linked to social class. And in some countries, people of some caste or races are prohibited by law from full participation in society.

Many people in the United States value individualism. Other countries may value the collectivism. In traditional classrooms, U.S. students are expected to complete assignments alone; if they get much help from anyone else, they're “cheating”. In contrast, groups routinely work together to solve problems in Japan. In the dominant U.S. culture, quiet is a sign that people are working. In Japan people talk to get the work done. These differences in values, beliefs, and practices lead to differences in what kinds of appeals motivate people (Jonathan, 1984).

Non-verbal Communication: In multicultural organisations, nonverbal signals vary as much as spoken languages do. Non-verbal greetings differ from a bow to a handshake or from a hug to an upward flick of the eyebrows. Not understanding cultural differences in nonverbal messages may cause miscommunication. For example, the Japanese consider crossing one's legs by placing one foot or ankle on the knee of the other leg to be impolite or vulgar. The preferred way of sitting is with both feet on the floor with knees together. Thumbs up in America means approval, but in Iran and Ghana it is a vulgar gesture. In addition, the social distance or individual space that persons need for comfort in communication varies in different cultures. If people stand too close when conversing, Germans, Canadians, and Americans may feel uncomfortable; in Middle Eastern cultures, however, conversations may be almost nose to nose (Krizan, Patricia, Joyce & Karen, 2008).

6. Strategies for Successful Intercultural Communication:

Primary and secondary data and the outcome of this research heavily argue the vitality of intercultural competence within multicultural organisations. Thus, any effort that can give opportunity for people from various cultures to come across, interacting and understating each other and support them to establish connection with each other is an essential endeavour in bridging gap and enhancing communication abilities in such organisations.

We live in an increasingly complex world. A major cause of this density is the mixing of countless cultures, languages and beliefs. Within the organisations, intercultural communication is becoming rule of thumb for success. Effective communication between colleagues from different cultural backgrounds ensures a team is working harmoniously (Locker & Stephen, 2007). A person can become an effective multicultural communicator if he/she follows few simple recommendations. Understanding our own culture, keeping an open mind and respecting differences, adapting to cultural communication patterns, and identifying language differences can improve multicultural interactions. These strategies to enhance successful intercultural communication are basic indicators that all intercultural teams should be aware of to ensure that culture becomes a vehicle for positive advancement rather than a barrier.

Respect Diversity: Get to know new cultures without judging them by our own cultural identity and unexamined biases. This is not to suggest that people should change their beliefs or disrespects their own culture, but rather that they should recognize that cultural values affect attitudes and practices and that understanding how others interpret verbal and nonverbal language helps them in receiving the intended response. Knowledge of an individual's ethnic or other cultural background is only an initial clue to understand his or her interests, needs, and values.

Learn language differences: While communicating with persons from another culture, people should try to learn the differences of verbal and nonverbal language. Avoid non-verbal signals that may be offensive. When speaking or writing, alter language and change traditional word usage to avoid language that offends someone. Be sensitive and considerate of other's beliefs (Krizan, Patricia, Joyce & Karen, 2008).

Break Assumptions: Assumptions are beliefs rather than objective truth and are usually influenced by a number of subjective factors. For intercultural communication to truly work; people need to assess their assumptions and ask themselves why they hold those ideas or beliefs. By doing this and discussing with others, the initial barrier to intercultural communication can be overcome.

Empathize: Empathy can play a pivotal role in bridging cultural differences; play down the errors and emphasis on appreciation. Through putting our self in someone else's shoes we come to see or appreciate their point of view.

Discourage Herd Mentality: Herd mentality refers to isolated and uni-dimensional approach. These attitudes curb creativity, innovation and advancement as people are restricted in how to think, approach and engage with people or situations. Intercultural communication can only flourish and therefore contribute if people are encouraged to think as individuals, bring their cultural influences to the table and share ideas that may be outside the box (Locker & Stephen, 2007).

7. Conclusion:

Intercultural communication today means getting an edge as now a days workplace is highly competitive and fast changing. It is crucial for employees to understand the impact of intercultural differences on organisation.

The success or failure of organisation is in the hands of employees. If they are not conscious about communication with different cultures, collapse of communication process can be occurred which obviously will be resulting in denting the organisation. Basic to any country are certain national variables such as education, politics, language, religion etc. These mega principles indirectly affect a nation's population. Similarly within each country there are individual people – all with their own personal behaviours involving how they handle time, what a comfortable distance for interpersonal communication is, what is considered appropriate dress, what procedures and speed are followed in arriving at personal and organisational decisions. All of them affect the process of communication, and can be responsible for clash or the escalation of conflict when it leads to miscommunication or misinterpretation. A resolving approach to conflict means working enthusiastically to understand these and other ways communication varies across cultures and applying these understandings in order to boost intercultural communication within organisations. Successful intercultural communication requires enthusiasm and a willingness to overcome cultural barriers. It is a dynamic process and cultural intelligence is the key.

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