21. CHAPTER

CROSS CULTURAL DIMENSIONS OF BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

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Structure

- ➡ 21.1 Learning Outcome
- ➡ 21.2 Introduction
- ➡ 21.3 Components of Communication
- ➡ 21.4 What is culture?
- ➡ 21.5 Culture and Communication
- ➡ 21.6 Various types of cross cultural Communication
- ➡ 21.7 Some of the impediments for Cross Cultural Communication
- ➡ 21.8 Traits of Good intercultural communicators
- ➡ 21.9 Best practices for cross cultural communications
- ➡ 21.10 Summary
- ➡ 21.11 Key terms with Definition
- ➡ 21.12 Review Questions
- ➡ 21.13 Situational Question (Real Life Experience).
- ➡ 21.14 Multiple Choice Questions
- ➡ 21.15 Case Study

"Tact is the ability to describe others as they see themselves." – Abraham Lincoln

21.1 Learning Outcome

- Establish need to be culturally sensitive/ need for cultural sensitivity for Business Communication
- Understand impact of cultural dimensions on Business Communication
- Define various nuances to various cultures
- Equip readers with do's and don'ts for business communication for various cultures
- Case studies

21.2 Introduction

The word communication is derived from the Latin word *communicare* which means sharing or giving to another your thoughts, knowledge and ideas. So business communication also stands for sharing ideas, knowledge or thoughts while conducting the business with colleagues, customer, suppliers, business partners and competitors. However, business communication has many objectives. At a very routine level it is to share ideas, opinions, thoughts and information between professional colleagues, customers, partners or vendors. Ultimately its purpose is to ensure that all business functions run efficiently and effectively. But if we analyze deeper, the role of business communication goes much beyond that. Any business communication has always to be for achieving a suitable outcome with a customer or with a colleague. A good communication is corner stone for achieving organization goals. This includes identifying needs and opportunities, as well as defining and proposing useful solutions to the customer for the long-term success of the company. Once the expected outcome is defined, then the communicators can focus their energy on specific, measurable goals. Business Communication also entails development and execution of a business plan. By providing timely information, the efficiency of the employees of an organization can be increased.

There is a softer side of the business communication that creates consciousness among the employees about their duties and responsibilities. This way coordination and cooperation amongst various work groups and departments can be increased. This may require motivating, persuading or sometimes directing employees to work hard for the organization goals. All this is especially relevant if the organization is making changes. All managers must keep employees aware of the impending changes through proper communication.

Good communication also helps in improving relationship and develops empathy towards each other in business settings. Education and training of employees is another goal of business Communication. Communication is also needed during education and training of employees of the organization.

Often in work situation, managers encounter certain issues and problems that need resolution through suitable discussions. Communication plays an important role. Making decisions is highly dependent upon business communication. Given this background, we will embark upon to establish how different cultures have impact on the communication. This is an important aspect as articulating and establishing the goals of communication is usually a tough task while interacting with people from different cultures.

One of the significant developments has happened due to the rise of social media and internet based technologies to facilitate communication. Since people are able to use Internet easily across boundaries, its impact has become very extensive. Internet has made communication easier and faster as well as diverse thus giving rise to a whole culture of communication challenges.

21.3 Components of Communication

Before we establish the relationship and impact of culture and communication, let us revisit the components of the communication. They are namely:

- Source : The person with the idea or thought
- Process of encoding: These thoughts will have to be conveyed (or coded) into a symbol conveying the idea. Language is one of the common ones, but the same thought can be conveyed

as a picture, video, sentence or poem. This could be non verbal communication also like sign language, nodding your head or raising your shoulder.

- Message: message is the product of the coding process
- Medium or channel: is the means of transmission of the encoded message. This could be print media, electronic means, lights or sound or face to face communication.
- Noise: anything that contaminates the message, it could be external sources like other messages getting mixed up. The noise could be internal when the thought is not expressed properly or semantic where a word with a possible different menacing is used
- Receiver is the person who receives the message.
- Decoding; the process of converting the message symbols in the receiver's thought
- Receiver response: the action that the receiver takes. It may be no action or some activity
- Feed-back: refers response from receiver on the message sent. This is the beginning of two-way or interactive communication which further facilitates communication process. One way communication may not have a built-in mechanism for feedback but most business communications will have a two way communication i.e. communication with feedback.
- Context: defines the environment of communication some of which are done in certain situations. For example the context of communication during recruitment process will be totally different than the one where employees are being retrenched. Communications in a board room meeting will be more formal than internal brain storming sessions.

21.4 What is Culture?

Culture is a collective manifestation of symbols, rituals, language, beliefs, values, and artifacts of any society. There would be certain portion represented through material, for example flag of the country, putting vermillion by women on their forehead. This could also mean the utensils, clothing, eating habits, and means of transportation. The other portion of culture is values, beliefs and language that define a society. Certain gestures may be acceptable in one culture but it may be considered obscene in another for example the gesture of saying "OK" by raising your thumb. Shaking hand is perfectly normal in western culture and is being adopted world over but in Asian culture you don't shake hands with your elders and instead bow and touch the feet. In India itself we have diverse culture which changes in almost every state . Nodding in affirmative or negative is done in two different ways in India if you compare people from south with the north India.

Given all these cultural difference a framework was proposed by *Hofstede[1] who proposed cultural dimensions theory for cross-cultural communication. He surmised that any society's culture impacts the values and behavior of its member. This is a simple model created after doing factor analysis after a world-wide survey of employee.*

The six dimensions proposed by Hofstedeto define culture are

- Individualism versus collectivism
- uncertainty avoidance
- power distance (strength of social hierarchy)
- masculinity-femininity (task orientation versus person-orientation)
- long-term orientation, to cover aspects of values
- Indulgence versus self-restraint.

In addition, different languages create their own culture and barriers to communication. By and large language is crucial to communication and to any society's culture. Language in either spoken or written form creates a unique culture. The later has helped in the development of the society immensely and improved communication as it minimizes ambiguity.

Ritual also plays a significant role in establishing culture. These are established procedures and ceremonies at different parts of our life during festivals, marriages and other life events. Rituals for start of college or school life are common in different cultures.

Any culture will have several layers such as National, Regional and Ethnical level. Cultural norms will also be different for different Sex. Culture may warrant behaviors differently amongst various Generations, Social class and Organizational level. There exists a link between culture and behavior, because we perceive the world based on our cultural and people from different background of culture would perceive the same situation differently. This is the precise reason that interacting with people from other cultures (countries) may sometimes be difficult and frustrating. It also leads to misunderstandings without doing anything intentionally.

21.5 Culture and Communication

It is well known that communication is rooted in the culture and these two are inseparable. Culture is a way we behave or conduct ourselves in the society we live. It is like code which we learn while we grow up by using communication as means. Whatever we do in the society we need communication. Given this association we must study them together. As described before culture and communication are interdependent and closely linked. The communication happens to define what is this, how it is done and why? Without understanding the various cultures nuances the chances of misunderstanding between members of different cultures only increases. Typically the Western and Asian cultures are poles apart. While in western culture the "source" is more important than the "receiver," and the later has to pay attention to the information, in Asian communication is a way for cooperating to arrive at the common understanding. Another reason for miscommunication is making ethical judgments while communicating with each other. So even if the words may be used are same the meaning being interpreted by the receiver could be different.

21.6 Various types of cross cultural Communication

The approach of communication and culture for business purposes could be understood by different types of communications being used.

They can be further categorized as

- **Diplomatic cross cultural communication** happens to facilitate business between countries or done by industry groups, governments or professional bodies. This term is used to define how people connect and share information across diverse geographies, countries, political and cultural space. Diplomatic cross cultural communication brings in Information power to shape opinions and drive political power and diplomatic superiority in international relations. Diplomatic cross cultural communication study is interdisciplinary in nature covering information flow for transferring values, opinions, knowledge, culture across boundaries.

- **Business Cross-cultural communication:** Most companies playing in global scale have diverse workforce. It is very common that people from different culture and countries work on a common project. In order that company performs to its potential it must ensure that its employees understand cross cultural communication to become an effective workforce. Understanding and acting on the cross cultural communication area is of strategically important to companies as most of them aspire to be global and will be using technologies such as Internet. Business Cross cultural communication requires to build deep understanding of how people from different cultures behave. This will require them to be sensitive to the way other culture people speak, communicate and perceive a situation. In addition, understanding different business customs and approach will help build communication strategies. Many cultures use verbal, many non verbal means while communicating. How much distance is required to be maintained, how much friendly one can be in the first meeting, what types of jokes to be avoided and how to put your argument across are very culture-sensitive features.

Business Cross Culture Communication is an important area of communication that takes place when two people with different cultural backgrounds communicate with each other. A good example would be communication between an American and a Japanese business person. Because of the difference between these cultures they can interpret verbal and non verbal signs in a very different way.

Business Cross Culture Communication has become very important these days as more and more businesses are becoming Global. Movement of people, goods and services leads to increase in cross cultural interaction. People are traveling to other countries to seek business opportunities or employment in countries with totally different culture. The benefit of acquiring good cross cultural communication skill will increase the employees' potential to contribute in a diverse situation where people of many cultures work on projects. Having a good understanding of cross cultural communication will facilitate improved sharing of views and ideas, seeking talent from other cultures and improved understanding of diverse market.

In countries such as America, people rely more on facts and words to convey the meaning. These countries are called low context culture countries. The others for instances Japan and other Asia countries rely heavily on non-verbal and subtle situational cues in communication. These are called High-context cultures. This is shown in figure below.

In America looking people in their eyes is considered honesty where as in India people do not look in the eyes of someone who is respected or elder. In the case of later looking in the eyes are considered defiance and being rude. In England some eye contact is desired but too much is not considered good. Similar complexities exist for gesturing while speaking. Waving of hands, pointing fingers or head movement is considered an aid to communication. However, one has to be careful according to the culture in selecting and using them because the same Gestures may invite different response in different cultures.

- **Understanding High- vs. Low-Context Culture**: This is a clear case of cultural differences which are described as high vs. low-context culture. This describes how a person behaves in a situation based on his thoughts, opinions, feelings and upbringing . While western educated people are more direct and to the point and to have low-context cultures. Business meetings are fast and direct and decisions are taken on hard data. Whereas high context eastern countries like Japan the culture is high-context where the focus is more on interpersonal relationships. Here the relationship comes first while taking business decisions.

- **Verbal and Non verbal Communication**; These also changes in different cultures. While touching someone while talking is considered normal in India the same may not hold good while talking to an American. Similarly gesturing using hands may be considered inappropriate in certain cultures. In some cultures Japanese for instance using finger to point is considered rude and use of an open hand, with his palm facing up, toward the person is acceptable.

- **Language Differences:** The biggest issue dealing with cross-cultural communication is the difficulty created by language barriers. For example, if someone does not speak Chinese then the ability to communicate will be greatly impacted which has to be supported by hand movements or sign or use drawings and use an interpreter. Speaking the same language eliminates the cultural barriers to a large extent.

- **Power Distance:** this refers to the concepts of distribution of power in an organization. Western culture has low power distance and informal in nature. This way open communication exists between the employees and the bosses. In contrast several Asian and Japanese society high power distance exists and more informal method is used while communicating with their supervisor. American companies utilize a low power distance and have more informal hierarchies that allow for interaction between executives and their subordinates. Managers ask for feedback from employees and will even socialize with subordinates. Companies with high power distance are typically very hierarchical in nature and have severe differences in authority. Some Japanese companies may utilize this power structure.
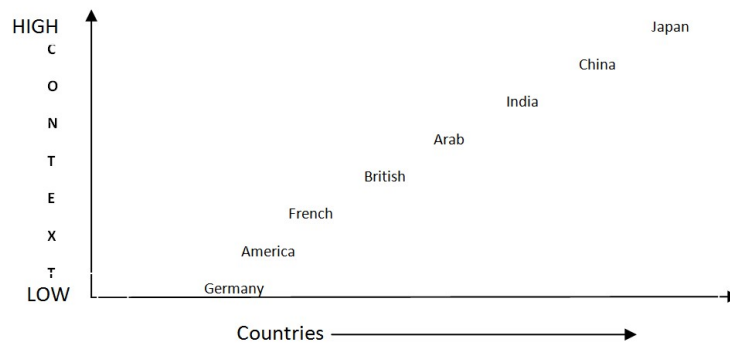
Take the case of popularly used gesture of creating a ring between index figure and thumb. In India it is a yoga mudra and considered good for health but in other countries it means differently. In America it stands for showing agreement but in Brazil it is an offensive gesture and can be taken as insult. In Japan this is sign for money and in Russia to denote zero. See the figure below.
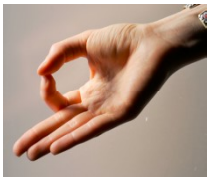
21.7 Some of the Impediments for Cross Cultural Communication

One should avoid the following misconceptions during business cross cultural communications.
- Avoid Ethnocentrism which means one should accept another culture's world view
- Never Discriminate based on sex, religion, race or physical conditions.
- Avoid Stereotyping : This happens when we make preconceived notion about <u>personnel</u> of other culture without considering individual differences. Such generalizations are often based on limited information. Many a time media depicts a person of certain culture in a typical way. For instance in Hindi Movies Adivasis were always shown dumb, scantily clothed.
- Never be Culturally Blind by thinking that there is no difference between different cultures hence we need not worry or take actions
- Never impose your cultural beliefs of what to eat and what to do
- Avoid change of tone

21.8 Traits of Good intercultural communicators

Good intercultural communicators are socially aware individuals who possess excellent verbal and nonverbal communication skills. They are usually aware of the context and adjust their tone and choice of words as suitable to different cultures. They know and therefore adjust their communication output to adapt to new situations and cultures. For example thanking God for success or conclusion of project is very common in Indian or Asian culture but while dealing with a western business associate reference to God is strict "no" "no". Some of the skills needed for good business cross cultural communicators are:
- Self-awareness: ability to understand your own capabilities according to the situations.
- Self-respect : having belief in yourself and the way you think
- Ability to establish rapport with people of different cultures and adapt
- Develop empathy by being able to appreciate other's
- Inquisitive and explorative to new situations and cultures.
- Tolerance to ambiguity

21.9 Best practices for cross cultural communications

Some of the best practices used to improve business cross cultural communications are :

- Slow Down: Speak slowly so that the other person is able to comprehend your accent and thoughts.
- Separate Questions: when you are asking questions do not mix with your other thoughts.
- Avoid Negative or personal Questions: Do not offend the other person by asking negative, personal or critical questions. Avoid questions, discussions on race, religion and political affiliations.
- One at a time: Interaction should be by turns and you must allow the other person to finish before you start speaking. Interjecting is a typical trait Indian has that needs to be avoided/ corrected in cross cultural communications.
- If required, take notes or show your question by writing it.
- Try to look agreeable by endorsing the other person's views by nodding your heads and saying "yes I agree ", or "I understand".
- In doubt, doubly check meanings by politely asking clarifications.
- Always recommended to avoid slangs or abusive words
- Be careful with your jokes especially if they are related with gender, politics or religion
- Always maintain etiquette and show respect.
- Respect Differences of culture and never impose your own culture
- Try to work together by developing Trust with the other person.
- Be sensitive of body Language while Connecting with people

21.10 Summary

We started the chapter by defining the word communication which is derived from the Latin word *communicare* which means sharing or giving to another your thoughts, knowledge and ideas. But business communication has many objectives and entails development and execution of business plan. We established that Good communication also helps in improving relationship and develops empathy towards each other in business settings and noted the significant development due to the rise of social media.

We then described various components of Communication such as Source, Process of encoding, Message, Medium and receiver amongst other things. We also defined Feed-back and context. We then defined culture as collective manifestation of symbols, rituals, language, beliefs, values, and artifacts of any society. This was followed with *Hofstede cultural dimensions theory for cross-cultural communication.*

We then established the relationship between Culture and Communication which are interdependent and closely linked. It was followed up with various types of cross cultural Communication such as diplomatic cross cultural communication and business Cross-cultural communication. Business Cross cultural communication requires building deep understanding of how people from different cultures behave and is an important area of communication that takes place when two people with different cultural background communicate with each other. We further explained this by detailing out differences between High- and Low-Context Culture, Verbal and Non verbal Communication, Language and Power Distance. This was further explained using a diagram and examples.

The next topic was to explain the impediments for Cross Cultural Communication and a followed with a short Case on Cross Cultural differences. We then explained the traits of Good intercultural communicators such as Self-awareness, Self-respect, rapport building, empathy, being inquisitive and explorative and tolerant to ambiguity. This was followed by best practices used to improve business cross cultural communications.

21.11 Key terms with Definition

Source: Who initiates the communication
Channel: medium of communication
Noise: non related communication
Context: environment of communication
Cross-cultural: comparison of cultural phenomenon in different cultures
Intercultural: communication between people of diverse culture
Decoding: converting the symbols back to thoughts
Encoding: Converting thoughts to symbols
Feedback: response after receiving the communication

21.12 Review Questions

a. Define the word communication in few sentences. How it is different from business communication?
b. What are the objectives of Business communication and what are its components?
c. Define culture and explain Hofstede cultural dimensions theory.
d. What is the relationship between Culture and Communication? What the various types are of cross cultural Communication? Explain them with examples.
e. Write Short notes on :
   I. High- and Low-Context Culture ,
   II. Verbal and Non verbal Communication,
   III. Importance of Language in cross cultural communication
   IV. Power Distance
f. What are impediments for Cross Cultural Communication? What traits a Good intercultural communicators must adopt?
g. Explain the best practices used to improve business cross cultural communications.

21.13 Situational Question (Real Life Experience)

You are establishing a new company with offices in India, Americas and China. All the employees at different locations want to have branch opening event . Which type of event will you organize where? Pick up from amongst the list :
a. Sit around a table and partake of tea.
b. Puja and Havan by sitting on floor
c. Cake cutting ceremony
   Answer , b, c, a

21.14 Multiple Choice Questions

1. The word communication is derived from
   A. Arbaic word *kahana*
   B. French word *la communicare*
   C. Latin word *communicare*
   D. None of the above.
2. One of the business communication objectives is the development and execution of business plan.
   True/False
3. One of the following is not the component of Communication such as
   A. Source,

    B. Summary
    C. Process of encoding,
    D.   Message
    E. Medium
    F. Receiver

4. One the following is not part of *Hofstede cultural dimensions theory*
    A. Individualism vs collectivism;
    B. uncertainty avoidance
    C. Religion tolerance
    D. power distance (strength of social hierarchy) and
    E. masculinity-femininity (task orientation versus person-orientation
    F. long-term orientation, to cover aspects of values
    G. Indulgence versus self-restraint for cross-cultural communication.

5. Culture and Communication are never dependent and not always linked. True/False

6. Business Cross cultural communication does not require building deep understanding of how people from different cultures behave . True /False

7. Which amongst the following are the high context countries ?
    A. Americas
    B. Canada
    C. UK
    D. Japan

8. Which are the Low-Context Culture countries
    A. Americas
    B. India
    C. Bangladesh
    D. Japan

9. Which amongst the following is not a good traits of Good intercultural communicators?
    A. Self-awareness,
    B. Self-respect,
    C. Rapport building,
    D. Empathy
    E. Hostility
    F. Being inquisitive, explorative and tolerant to ambiguity

21.15 Case Study

Cross Cultural differences

Raghav is an Executive at a Bangalore based retail group. He wants to develop a relationship with A Japanese company and goes to Osaka to meet Mr Osikawa. Raghav received all his education in the US and was a brilliant person but was not very aware of Japanese culture. He talked a lot about his company and put the proposal in the first meeting outlining all the positive points thinking the Mr. Osikawa san would accept the proposal and he will return the same evening after signing the deal. But Mr Osikawa felt that he is rushing too much and without having a good understanding of each other there is no way the business relationships can be concluded. He loses the deal.

He discussed this with his mentor who advised him to go slow in such cases.

His next visit was to Paris where after the meeting the customer invited him for drinks. The meeting was very good and the deal was almost concluded so he thought he would rather spend

time shopping around rather than wasting it on drinks with the customer. He politely refused the offer and went to his hotel.

Next morning he was informed that the customer is not available as he has some urgent meeting and flown to London for next week. After repeated try he could not establish contact and finally retuned dejected after failing to conclude the deal.

He went to his mentor and discussed what happened in Paris. His mentor felt that he should have gone with the customer for drinks when he was invited.

Armed with the newfound wisdom Raghav went to Americas for another client meeting. He was very careful and was not rushing with the proposal and spent the whole day developing relationship. He also indicated that he can go out for drinks in the evening to the client. The client bluntly rejected his offer and felt that he has no technical depth in his proposal therefore no point having more meetings.

Questions for Case Study

1. Explain with high and low context principle the mistakes Raghav was making while dealing with people from different culture.
2. Which all principles of Hofstede is applicable here?
3. What will be your recommendations?
4. How should Raghav behave with a Bangladesh client?

Footnotes

1. Hofstede, Geert (1984). Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values (2nd ed.). Beverly Hills CA: SAGE Publications. ISBN 0-8039-1444-X.

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