THE ROLE OF NEGOTIATION IN INTERCULTURAL BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

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Intercultural business communication is a comparatively new field. Its founders, E. T. Hall (1959), Hofstede (1980), and Trompenaars (1994), among others, established a framework for approaching different cultures, and developed concepts such as high and low context cultures, individualism versus collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, ascription versus achievement. Originally, one of the goals was to help western—mostly American—businesses to understand other cultures so that they could be successful in different environments. What do we need to know about other cultures in order to communicate effectively? To what extent do we have to adapt to their practices? Comparative studies were an outcome of this phase (Lerner & Malach-Pines, 2011; Matveev & Nelson, 2004; Tipton, 2009).
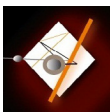
With the expansion of international trade, the field has exploded over the last 20 years. As a result, researchers have taken a more critical view of the theoretical underpinnings of intercultural business communication. In particular, critics are now arguing that intercultural communication has focused almost exclusively on western value systems when examining other cultures (Lowe, 2001). As Thatcher (2001) points out, cultural studies frequently are based on monocultural and monolinguistic methodologies, thereby limiting the validity of the findings (Stewart & Bennett, 1991). In the guise of research, western managerial practices and Western agendas are advanced and may even result in a new form of colonialism (Ailon, 2008; Őzkazanç-Pan, 2008; Wong, 2010).

As other countries have expanded their global trade, they have also been looking at the world from their viewpoint. The Japanese, for example, want to know how Danish business practices and communication patterns differ from their own and what they need to do to be successful in Denmark (Clausen, 2007). Chinese researchers are examining the influence of Confucian value systems on managerial practices, and how those values influence their international business dealings (Tan & Chee, 2005).

In this approach, the players from other cultures are looking at the world through their self-reference criteria (SRC), similarly to western researchers. The problem is that the SRC easily shuts out the other side's views. For example, in American culture, individualism, directness, and achievement orientation are positive values. Americans, therefore, will look for those values in foreign managers and employees

to evaluate their contributions. This approach neglects that, in Asian cultures, the group, indirectness, and reciprocity play a large role in communication (Chinese Cultural Connection, 1987).

To overcome some of these problems, the research has typically focused on understanding the other side, creating positive environments where people feel comfortable voicing their opinions, and training in other cultures. This requires a high level of cross cultural communication competence involving cross cultural effectiveness, interpersonal skills, social interactions, cultural empathy, personality traits, and managerial ability (Matveev and Nelson, 2004).

While these traits are necessary, by themselves they are insufficient in creating effective intercultural business communication. Managers need to go beyond understanding the other side. As business people, they have the task to get results, implement strategies and create an environment where employees can work effectively and efficiently. They are responsible for bringing together cultural strategies, communication strategies, and business strategies. And in that scenario, understanding the other side is a first step only (Varner, 2000).

To advance the field, we need a paradigm shift. I propose that effective intercultural communication requires active negotiation by both sides. As we enter the process, we need to understand our own goals and the goals of the other side. Clausen calls this "negotiated culture" (Clausen, 2007). As people from two cultures come together, they create a new culture (Clausen, 2007; Varner, 2000). In this context, we need to understand what is negotiable and what is not, and what are the underlying positions of power and authority. No culture dominates

all the time. Which cultural priorities prevail will depend on the circumstances of the situation, and the new culture will emerge in the process of negotiation.

So far, researchers have examined the impact of culture on the negotiation process in international business (Metcalf, Bird, Peterson, Shankarmahesh, & Lituchy, 2007). Clearly, culture has a huge impact on this process, but there has been almost no attention to intercultural communication as a negotiated culture. Yet, it is precisely this negotiated culture that moves the business process forward. From the research, managers understand the cultural priorities of Japanese and American managers (Hofstede, 1980). Japanese managers are more high context, collectivist, and tend to avoid uncertainty when possible (Hall, 1959; Hofstede, 1980). But how do those characteristics influence the communication patterns? For example, when American managers work in a Japanese environment with Japanese managers, they negotiate when direct communication is appropriate and when it is beneficial to be more indirect. When safety issues are of concern, both sides may agree to be direct in their communication. On the other hand, when a manager wants to communicate concerns about the level of performance, the two sides may negotiate a more indirect communication—especially if others are present—in order to save face. Both sides are actively involved in this process.

The role of negotiation of cultural positions in intercultural business communication needs to be further researched and tested. ■

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