

CORPORATE COMMUNICATION: EXPLORING THE ROLE AND IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION AND ITS RELEVANCE IN THE CROSS CULTURAL BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT ACROSS THE GLOBE

Sohini Datta
Assistant Professor
Institute of Engineering & Management, Kolkata

Abstract:

There has been, over the last few years, a lot of cross-cultural communication that multinational companies have to deal with. 'Culture is communication and communication is culture', opines Edward Hall, renowned anthropologist. This definition of culture clearly establishes the strong influence of culture on communication. The culture and values that shape the lives of individuals are essentially different in different countries and communities. Though there may be some generalization that may be applicable across a lot of cultures, the finer difference in values always exists. Culture governs our thought process and perception. Our dressing sense, cuisine, body language and our mannerisms are all shaped by culture.

Before the invasion from the West and much before the multinationals spread their tentacles all over India, cross-cultural communication was restricted to a few top-level managers and senior officials who used their experience and exposure to handle culture-related communication barriers. However, a young executive employed in an MNC or a fresh graduate working in a BPO has to communicate with people across the globe on a daily basis, chiefly through telephone conversations and e-mailing. Most of them have no first-hand knowledge or information about the cultural background of their clients, thereby resulting in lack of preparedness to deal with them effectively. It often leads to misunderstanding. At times, the other person may not even be aware that he has offended the sensibilities of his client. What may be perfectly acceptable and natural in one culture may appear strange to a person belonging to another culture. If employees therefore are trained about the culture, behaviour and values of the people with whom they are likely to communicate, it will foster healthy and respectful relations, and difficulties arising out of cultural differences can be minimized.

The present paper will try to investigate the shared values and behavioural patterns that are expected from people of diverse cultures to be termed as corporate culture. Most of the times, it becomes difficult to identify the variations in culture and ethnicity because of overlap between groups. These differences due to language or dialect create barriers that affect communication. The value system and beliefs of individuals also influence understanding, accepting or rejecting a message.

Keywords: Communication, culture, employees, behavior, interpersonal skills, ethnic

If you happen to glance through the frequently published nationwide surveys of corporate recruiters you simply cannot overlook the fact that amongst the top five criteria for selecting employees, four communication skills i.e. speaking and writing, listening and interpersonal communication were rated as most important by the recruiters. Whether you are an MBA

applicant or undergraduate or graduate business student the main focus of most of the top business employers is good communication skills. The chief skill sought by all core business houses is an exceptional ability to conduct and communicate with others. This focus on the need for good communication skills gets accentuated by the fact that in today's world of globalization there is a greater need to connect with people across the globe to meet different business requirements. In this context one must remember that "No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The world's in which different societies live are distinct, not merely the same world with different labels attached." (Edward Saper: Culture, Language and Personality)

Communication brings people together. For business to be successful and relationships to remain healthy, communication plays a vital role. Words and sentences must be emphatic and clear because if what you communicate is vague and abstract business is hampered and relationships are affected. The communication process may get hampered in a scenario when English is not the first language and preferred medium communication of the international clients. They may use the language peppered with certain culture specific and non-standard English phrases that may lead to confusion. In "Managing Across Cultures" Schneider and Barsoux have rightly observed that the embracing of culture in all its diversity as 'a resource rather than a threat is essential for responding to the demands of a global market economy for reaping the full benefits of cross border alliances and for enhancing organizational learning". So, it is of prime importance to recognize and cross the hurdle of geographic and cultural differences to pave way for an enriching business relationship. We are living in an era when words and gestures play an alarmingly important role. The role of making or breaking your career – the role of determining your credit worthiness in the market and the role of ascertaining your reputation as a business house where one has good communication facilitates co-operation and action -bad communication on the other leads to resentment and resistance. Technology can be learnt but good communication skills can only be cultivated after sustained and conscious practice. One may be able to match the stiff competition and investments ability of one's competitor but ultimately effective business acumen in the form of outstanding communication skills is what acts as a Reveler. Just as oil rises above water a good command over what one speaks or writes is what finally uplifts one's resume over the others.

Researchers, practitioners and teachers over the years have studied varied aspects of business communication. It is an issue which has pervaded every corner of the corporate world. Good communication skills provide a kind of foothold to an employee in an organization. He or she is bound to climb up the ladder of success faster if he or she has the edge or command to communicate effectively. In present times even talent is a saleable commodity. If one wants to be successful in terms material gain one must possess excellent communication competence. But sadly so in spite of this hype, corporate houses often fail to fulfill their need of recruiting employees with good communication skills. There is also a close correlation between income and communication. The growing BPO culture is a clear reflection of this. Ordinary college graduates are drawing handsome salaries only on the basis of their high scores in tests on speaking, grooming, etiquettes and attentive listening which have become prerequisites in plotting one's graph of success. Hence it is evident that improving one communication skill improves one's chances for success in business.

However, even in the best of conditions communication can be difficult .Cross cultural barriers pose a complex threat to communication. Rudyard Kipling's observation in "We and They" aptly conveys this dilemma of cross cultural communication

“All good people agree,
All good people say
All nice people like us are We,
And everyone else is They.
But if you cross over the sea
Instead of over the way,
You may end by (think of it)
Looking on We
As only sort of They.”

The past political and historical links seriously affect a healthy environment- especially if relationships between the two countries have been bitter. In a world that is becoming global in its business, skill in communicating with people of other cultures becomes vital to success. Nowadays a lot of firms conduct fast track courses wherein employees are given training on cross cultural communication. The employees are acquainted briefly with the language, culture, values norms of behaviour, thought patterns, concept of time and space and perceptions of people of various countries. Constant organizational and personal effort on part of the employee is needed to overcome barriers which obstruct communication. The workplace today is rapidly becoming vast and spans across many cultures. The use of modern technology facilitates business across diverse geographic locations and cultures. Although the use of internet permits remote communication as against face to face interaction, it is equally important to follow the norms of etiquettes even though communication is through the electronic medium. Even if the communication is between two individuals from English speaking countries there may be a lot of mutual incomprehension due to difference in cultures. It would be wise in this context to imbibe the words of L. Hoecklin in “Managing cultural differences: strategies for competitive advantage” where he remarks ...” the essence of culture is not what is visible on the surface. It is the shared ways groups of people understand and interpret the world. These differing interpretations that culture gives to their environment are critical influences on interactions between working and managing across cultures”.

The medium of communication is also of great significance. The medium that we choose to transmit our message – be it written or oral leaves an impression on the receiver. Each medium has its own characteristics which may be advantageous in one situation but may be disadvantageous in another. In ascertaining the choice of medium the content of the message needs to be evaluated. Emotional content in message is not carried equally by all media. Similarly information about loss of job, change in company’s policies or any bad news are sensitive and complex situations of high intensity which are best conveyed personally in a face to face situation because it provides an opportunity for a feedback i.e. a two way communication and allows for a satisfactory closure to communication. With the emergence of modern communication technology a lot of options are now available to business houses. Instruments like the laptop and cellular phone have virtually freed a person from the office desk. He has a ready access to the net,

can take instant pictures and can store and transmit huge amount of data at the click of a button. Such enhancement in communication technology has given impetus to business productivity.

The use of sexist expressions and ideas in business communication should be avoided. This becomes all the more important when the communication canvas spans the globe. Sexist language consists of words or phrases which show a bias against the competence or importance of women. In today's gender sensitive age business writing should scrupulously leave out all such words which lower women's dignity competence and status. For example the pronoun 'He' is a generic pronoun. Most of us have been accustomed to referring to people in general as of male gender. In today's scenario especially in job descriptions the use of such sexist words and phrases is highly objectionable.

Also, the concept of humour varies from one culture to the other. Humor has difficulty crossing cultural boundaries because what may be humorous to one may end up being offensive to another. So unless you are sure that the person you are communicating with shares the same wavelength as you, avoid humour for it is notoriously culture specific. Remember "The essence of effective cross cultural communication has more to do with releasing the right responses than with sending the right message" (Edward Hall : Understanding Cultural Differences)

As Indian business goes global, the business houses are desperately trying to equip their employees to handle visitors from all over the globe. Culture and etiquettes vary from country to country. To an Arab businessman, giving gifts may be treated as good hospitality which in turn would foster healthy business relations. In another culture the same gesture may amount to bribery. Similarly serving alcohol may be appreciated by a group of international clients the same may be treated offensive by another. Japanese businessmen generally greet the US or UK businessmen by shaking hand and not with a bow. You should do the same. Never send red greeting cards to Japanese -Red Cards in Japan are funeral notices. German business meetings are highly formal and scheduled much in advance. They address people by their surnames unlike Americans who use first names and are extremely particular about punctuality. For the Italians and Spaniards business is closely linked to social life. Personal and family matters may take precedence over business talks. The challenge in such situations demands the ability to address different cultures under one roof. While for some cultures like in Hong Kong, a simple handshake can seal a deal there are other cultures that are stern about personal distances. The Chinese lower their eyes as a sign of respect when greeting but one must be cautious – keeping eye-contact for too long must be avoided as this may be seen as a challenge of authority. Italians observe a lot of formality when doing business. Though they come across as extremely friendly, they don't like being fooled when it comes to business. Greetings may be very enthusiastic but very formal. Max Messemer makes an interesting observation when he says that "Danish punctuality would result in hypertension in Greece". Also, time commitments may have varied implications for people from varied cultures – they may be desirable objectives but not binding promises in one culture but may hurt, upset and embarrass the sensibilities of a person from another culture. The objective must be clear – good collaboration and it would be wise to remember what Bernard Baruch said "We didn't all come over on the same ship, but we're all in the same boat".

Hospitality demands that guests from different countries are made to feel comfortable in a foreign environment and catering to their smallest need is a good reflection of your culture and definitely enhances healthy business relationships. Peter Drucker, one of the most respected management consultants made these observations about communication:

"College teach the one thing that is perhaps most valuable for the future employee to know. But very few students bother to learn it. This one basic skill is the ability to organize and express ideas

in writing and speaking”; but when we talk of speaking and writing again a word of caution from Mark Twain in *The Innocents Abroad* where he says “They spell it Vinci and pronounce it Vinchy. Foreigners always spell better than they pronounce”.

As soon as you move one step from the bottom, your effectiveness depends on your ability to reach others through the spoken or written word and the further away your job is from manual work, the larger the organization of which you are an employee, the more important it will be that you know how to convey your thoughts in writing or speaking. In a very large organization this ability to express one’s self is perhaps the most important of all the skills a person can possess.

Another important aspect of communication across cultures is the role of adaptation. Adaptation in communication is of prime importance because poor communication skills tend to hurt the sensibilities of the other person or it may not correctly convey the message as it was intended. Adaptation becomes even more important while communicating with multiple readers. The task becomes tougher when readers happen to possess different levels in terms of education, skills and intelligence. If you cater to the baser level in terms of intelligence you may in turn insult the intelligence of people at higher levels. In such a scenario the safest approach would be to carefully word your sentences and keep expression like “as you know” handy to imply that you know the reader knows what you are writing about.

Another approach that facilitates good communication globally is rightly worded by Winston Churchill in his classic remark “Little men use big words; big men use little words”. The rule is clear – simplicity and readability must be the chief aims of communication- Even while writing the aim should be to write slightly below the reader’s level of understanding. Communication is best if words-spoken or written – don’t interfere with simple understanding of a concept. In most cases a simple conversational style of writing is best in communicating with readers. Familiar words are always better because the reader understands them. Technical words and acronyms should always be used with caution for most of the time they only produce a dull and formal effect. One must always remember what Lesikar said of words. He said that words are like people; they have personalities. Some words are strong and vigorous. Some are weak and dull. And some fall between these extremes. So while choosing a particular word one needs to keep in mind the purpose that the word needs to fulfill. Also cluttering phrases are best avoided and economizing on words should be stressed on. Round about constructions and unnecessary repetition of words and ideas are best avoided cutting out rubber stamps or clichés should not be used as a matter of habit each time a particular situation arises. Positive words are best to achieve desired goals in communication especially when persuasion and good will is required.

When we talk of business communication across multiple cultures we are not essentially talking of a special language with a special grammar – it is simply English used in business situations. So far as words are concerned Leo Jones and Richard Alexander say – “The words professional people tend to use and understand when talking about their own or other people’s working lives must justifiably be defined as business English”. Such language is extensively used in contemporary industrial societies. When we talk of language we cannot afford to ignore the spoken mode-Using the telephone, welcoming visitors, sending telegrams/telexes, conducting or attending meetings, conducting/attending interviews, negotiating deals, bargaining .When we use the same language i.e. English for a specific purpose, the language is standard English and its purpose is to serve the purpose intended effectively. This is Business English.

Careful planning is the basis of success in most tasks. Thinking, reasoning and planning before writing has many advantages. For communication to be effective one needs to write tactfully and develop the basic skills for empowering the internet generation. Modern business language is simple, easy to understand, friendly and courteous old fashioned business language is not suitable for modern business methods and practice. Jargon phrases ruin clarity. They are unfriendly and pompous and they waste typing time. Similarly the use of technical terms is not a problem if the letter is being written to a person who is in a related profession e.g. a person who knows accounts understands the term “current liabilities” or “fixed assets”, a person familiar with computers understands “megabytes” or “64k”. But when writing to persons who do not know the technical terms, they must be avoided. One needs to develop the skill of using the language so that it is not offensive to the reader. In order to optimise communication between two parties an effective communication strategy begins with the recognition that the sender of the message and the receiver are from different cultures and backgrounds. To avoid complexity of communication in such situations it is essential to understand cultural diversity. This does not entail a detailed study of individual cultures and languages but a basic understanding of their greeting cultures and behaviour patterns will help us to engage with them in accordance without causing offence. It is also in the interest of good cross cultural communication to be mindful of time zone differences and work to keep everyone involved aware and respectful of such differences.

While handling business communication another golden rule that needs to be highlighted is **ACCENTUATE THE POSITIVE**. It is a natural human tendency and people tend to respond more favourably to positive ideas than to negative ones. The focus on positive wording even when something negative is to be conveyed works wonders. Words with negative connotations or denying words are best avoided – “No, Do not, Refuse, Stop, Mistake, Error, Failure, Negligence, Damage, Cannot, Debt” are words that have unpleasant associations and should be replaced by words emphasizing what is, rather than what is not, by stressing what you can do rather than by what you cannot.

Verbs in active voice are the strongest part of speech. Communication is more effective when the message is carried in active voice rather than in passive. In active voice the subject does the action while in passive voice it receives the action- And that makes all the difference in the force of the statement. For example, compare the impact of the two sentences given below:

- a. The management highly appreciates individual efforts
- b. Individual efforts are highly appreciated by the management

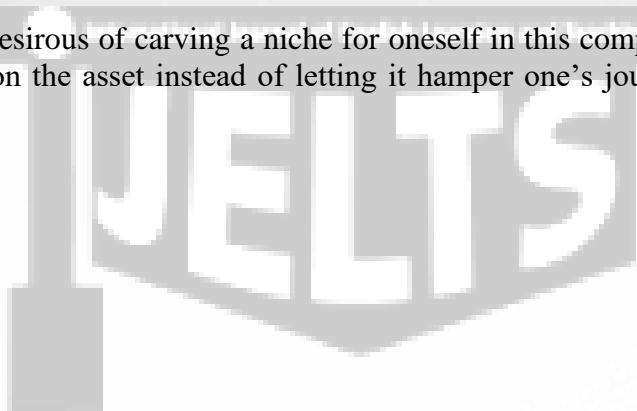
Whereas the first sentence focuses on the management the second sentence puts the employee as the focus of subject.

This does not mean that passive voice is incorrect but the writer has to use it to his advantage. It is best used when the doer of the action is not important. People who need to communicate will have to keep up with the technology of communication which is developing rapidly and bridging the gap between communicators. As some channels become outdated new ones mushroom up in no time. Your selection of the medium will ultimately determine effective or ineffective communication. A perfect match between type of message and your intentions will finally gauge your selection. Keep your communication clear simple when communicating cross cultural. Remember that even though English is considered as the international language of business it is erroneous to assume that all businessmen speak fluent English. Of the 800 million people who speak English globally only half of them learned it as a first language.

To conclude, one must remember the words of Plato “Wise Men Speak because they have something to say; fools because they have to say something”. While communicating globally it is essential to be professional and formal but not rigid or stubborn. It is good to be personal in addressing one’s client and leave enough space for listening because communication is a two way street. To be a good communicator cross culturally one must follow the 5 golden rules of HW Fowler in his book “The King’s English”

- a. Prefer the familiar word to the far fetched
- b. Prefer the concrete word to the abstract
- c. Prefer the single word to circumlocution
- d. Prefer the short word to the long
- e. Prefer the sexton word to the romance

If therefore one is desirous of carving a niche for oneself in this competitive business one must make communication the asset instead of letting it hamper one’s journey on the royal road to success.



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