



Cross-Cultural Communication

A newspaper story describes the problems of a Japanese executive returning home after working in the United States and acquiring American communication habits: “In New York, Mr Kashima did a lot of business on the telephone and email. In Japan, he must personally visit people in order to conduct any important business – “so they can see my eyes”. When he returns from meetings, he has to write his employer a full report. Below the surface, he says, things get more complicated. “Suppose I want to propose something new” he says. “In Japan, the first thing I should do is take a colleague from the office to the nightclub and talk around the theme – without mentioning my idea directly. Only after my office colleague and I understand each other would I go to my superior and propose the idea. But when I first returned from the U.S., I tended to go straight ahead with my ideas”.

A number of points arise from this story. Culture influences communication priorities. This Japanese manager has to build goodwill among his peers before taking an idea to a superior. In the United States the manager feels less restricted by needs to avoid conflict and to establish peer consensus. Culture also determines whether direct or indirect communication is acceptable in different situations. In Japan the manager feels constrained to introduce his idea indirectly, first establishing a general understanding. In the United States, “blunt” direct expression is often preferred. Culture is also reflected in non-verbal behavior. The need to make eye contact reflects the importance of face-to-face contact in Japanese business negotiations – to be expected in a high-context culture. But in the low-context United States, the lesser importance of face-to-face contact means that more business can be done remotely.

Perhaps all cultures carry stereotypes about the ideal mode of communication. Difficulties arise when members of a culture group impose their stereotypes on another culture, and refuse to make concessions. For example, the Dutch, Germans and Americans often pride themselves on their “blunt” and “direct” communicative style. However, directness is not equally effective in all cultural contexts. In much of the Asia Pacific region and the Arab world over-directness is disliked because it seems to create conflict. The Japanese stringently avoid using language forms likely to cause offence and involve the other person in loss of face. Take “Eii doryoku shimasu” which means “We shall make efforts” which means “We intend to do nothing”...

When working with a colleague who does not speak your language as a first language, particularly if you are the team leader or manager, invest time in careful listening to what the person is saying to you. Develop listening habits of:

- Listening for the whole message;
- Listening for what has *not* been said; what are the unspoken cultural priorities that underpin the message?
- Asking questions to check your understanding; if necessary, para-phrase your understanding of their message;
- Thinking before replying.

Do this particularly at the beginning of a relationship, when you are using your language and before you fully evaluate the other person’s competence in using it. Make it easier for him/her to communicate with you by:

1. Speaking slowly and carefully
2. Avoiding unnecessary jargon, slang and complex words
3. Avoiding complex grammar
4. Explaining difficult ideas more than once and asking checking questions as you go along to make sure that you are being understood.

Where power distances are large (eg, Arab countries, South America, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mexico), subordinates are wary of asking for clarification as this may involve their superior in loss of face (by implying that

he/she communicated inadequately the first time) and so work to make sure that they interpret correctly. They observe his/her behavior and make appropriate responses in part on the basis of past experience. But where power distances are small (Australia, Denmark, Israel, Nordics, New Zealand, USA) a failure to make a correct interpretation can easily be repaired by asking for clarification.

The question arises; in a culture where power distances are large, how does the subordinate communicate criticism back up the line to the boss and is this permitted at all? The Japanese manage this process by institutionalizing after-hours eating and drinking. Japanese culture is relatively tolerant of drunkenness and once in the bar subordinates may express opinions that would not be tolerated back in the office. Elsewhere, a message might be passed outside of the company to a third party. For instance, in Italy, subordinate talks to a cousin, who passes the complaint on to a friend of the manager. An American manager working in a Thai company gave this example: "Exchanging gossip with someone's secretary or driver can often be much more informative than going directly to a top executive, as he may feel uncomfortable expressing dissatisfaction directly.... Likewise, most of the Thai executives in my firm use my secretary to convey messages to me or ask my feelings about something rather than communicating with me, even though their English may be better than my secretary's".

Where power distances are large, one-way communication is more readily tolerated and styles of address are more easily predicted. For example, the usual expectation of the Japanese is that everyone calls everyone else by last name plus "-san" (Mr, Mrs, Ms, etc) or title (for instance "-sensei," teacher;). In South Korea your rank at work has significance generally in society and so the award of a new title that impresses your acquaintances may be highly motivating. For example, a business consultant noted "You are manager Kim, director Kim, both on the job and off. Even your neighbours will call you manager Kim". In part, job titles are used in this way to simplify personal identification because the majority of the population is named Lee, Kim, Park or Choi. Titles are also a badge of status and more important in this country than possibly financial remuneration".

Finally, the success of communication is also influenced by time. Four aspects of time show how perceptions vary in different cultures.

Schedule time: refers to the time by when a job should be completed. Anglo cultures place a premium on a job being finished by the appointed time. Less urgency is attached to schedule time in cultures that show greater pessimism about completing plans as formulated.

Discussion time: refers to the length of time that should be spent in discussing business. Anglo cultures tend to censor discussion that is not focused as "time wasting" – even when this is building the relationship between the participants.

Acquaintance time: determines how long you need to know the other person before he/she will do business with you. This varies across cultures. In a low-context culture (USA, Nordics, Netherlands, German), acquaintance time is often cut back to a single meeting and your business card – which says more about your identity as an employee of a particular company than about your personality – may be considered an adequate credential.

But in high-context cultures (Arab world, Russia, Mexico, Brazil, India), where relationships between individuals are long-lasting and significant, and where insiders and outsiders are distinguished, you may need to invest considerable time in creating relationships.

Appointment time: deals with the issue of punctuality. If you are kept waiting an hour for an appointment with an Anglo businessperson you are probably right to feel that an apology and explanation is in order. But in Latin American or Arabic cultures, punctuality is not valued similarly and you should not assume that you have been deliberately insulted or that your business is discounted.

In the Anglo culture, the manager may be up to five minutes late for an appointment without feeling it is necessary to apologise. But Swedes, the Swiss and Germans are more particular; an appointment for ten o'clock often means ten on the dot.