Lecture Overheads: Communicating Across Cultures

Communication for Managers
15.279
Fall 2012
Effective cross-cultural communication means

Being able to recognize cultural variables

Understanding how those variables influence business

Maximizing that knowledge to minimize misunderstanding
The underlying premise

Differences in communication styles and norms arise from and are reflected in cultural beliefs, values, and experiences.
What is culture?

Concrete expressions: dress code, architecture, food, language, transportation, political system, legal system; “Culture with a big C”: language, art, music

Artifacts: working hours, business meetings, social events, rituals, jargon

Recognized behaviors: rituals and taboos

Explicit beliefs and values: social roles and duties

Underlying assumptions: unconscious perceptions, thoughts, feelings

Cultural forms: nature of time and space

Reactions to common human problems and questions
But a caveat:
We need to talk about and in stereotypes.
Stereotypes and necessary generalizations

From: Milton Bennett, *Basic Concepts of Intercultural Communication. Selected Readings*. 

Image by MIT OpenCourseWare.

From: Milton Bennett, *Basic Concepts of Intercultural Communication. Selected Readings*. 

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Ways in which cultures vary

- Perceptions of time
- Perceptions of space
- Individualism versus collectivism
- High context versus low context
- Importance of hierarchy
- Importance and rigidity of gender roles
- Nature of change
- Nature of authority
- Humans’ relationship to the natural world
Three cultural characteristics that impact professional communication

Collectivistic

High Context

More Hierarchical

Individualistic

Low Context

Less Hierarchical
Communication variables: verbal

• Rate, volume, rhythm, intonation of speech

• Use of
  – Silence
  – Pauses
  – Laughter
  – Interruptions
  – Questions
  – Anecdotes

• Who dominates the conversation?
  – Rules for topic shifting and turn taking
  – Tolerance for simultaneous speech

• Forms of interaction
  – Ritual
  – Argument
  – Repartee
  – Self disclosure

• And, of course, content: What can and can’t be discussed with whom under what conditions?
Communication variables: nonverbal

- Proxemics (perception and use of space)
- Kinesics (facial expressions, gestures, etc.)
- Chronemics (perception and use of time)
- Paralanguage
- Use of silence
- Eye contact
- Clothing and physical appearance

NOTE: When the nonverbal conflicts with the verbal, the nonverbal “wins.”
Communication variables: communication styles

**Linear:** Goes from point A to point B

**Direct:**
- Discusses problems openly face to face
- Expresses feelings relatively openly
- Questions answered with “yes” or “no”
- Face saving not very much of a concern

**Contextual:** Moves in a more circular fashion

**Indirect:**
- Uses third parties to discuss problems
- Suggest rather than state individual feelings
- Often questions answered ambiguously
- Face saving a high priority

### Differences in Men’s and Women’s Communication Styles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th><strong>Men</strong></th>
<th><strong>Women</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>World</strong></td>
<td>Competition; key role as provider</td>
<td>Relationships; key role nurturer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>View</strong></td>
<td>A series of negotiations for status &amp; independence</td>
<td>A series of negotiations for closeness &amp; consensus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Purpose</strong></td>
<td>Request for info./tactic to gain control</td>
<td>Request for info./tactic to keep talk flowing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Questions</strong></td>
<td>“Report talk”</td>
<td>“Rapport talk”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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More differences

**Men**
- Defined narrowly; shifted abruptly
- "Verbal sparring"
- Take relatively open stance

**Women**
- Defined gradually; relate to last speaker
- "Cooperative overlapping"
- Take relatively closed stance

Photograph courtesy of Ben Gilman (left) and Ed Yourdon (right) on Flickr.

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How cultural differences can impact teams

Team members may differ in:

- their perception of the team’s objectives
- the way they communicate
- how they view leadership
- work habits
- their manner of interacting with members of the opposite sex
- their level of formality with other team members
- their willingness to socialize with other team members
How cultural differences can impact professional interactions

• Either completing a task or building a relationship takes precedence
• Either the written word or the spoken word is more trusted
• Persuasion is based on facts or on the reputation of the individual
• Meetings are for exploring an issue or for demonstrating agreement
General guidelines for working cross-culturally

• Don’t assume different is wrong, odd, or counterproductive
• Listen and observe
• Be curious
• Try to discuss differences but be respectful if other team members are not comfortable discussing them
• Push your own comfort level