



CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND FACTORS THAT MAY IMPEDE COMMUNICATION AT AN INTERVIEW

G. Raja Kumar, Seva.Gopi

(Asst Prof. of English, Gudlavalleru Engineering College, Gudlavalleru, Krishna Dt. AP)

ABSTRACT

G. Raja Kumar



Cross-cultural communication has become strategically important to companies due to the growth of global business, technology and the Internet. Understanding cross-cultural communication is important for any company that has a diverse workforce or plans on conducting global business. This type of communication involves an understanding of how people from different cultures speak, communicate and perceive the world around them.

Seva.Gopi



Cross-cultural communication in an organization deals with understanding different business customs, beliefs and communication strategies. Language differences, high-context vs. low-context cultures, nonverbal differences and power distance are major factors that can affect cross-cultural communication.

At the same time, English is not the first language of most of the interviewees you will encounter. Although some interviews are conducted entirely in English, at most interviews there is an interpreter who interprets what the interviewee says into English and what you say into a language the interviewee can understand. Not only does this increase the time spent conducting the interview, but it also creates a situation in which miscommunication can occur.

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Interpreting from one language to another is not simply a word-for-word interpretation. The language structure and vocabulary of a culture evolve as an expression of what is necessary and important in that culture; therefore, language and culture are closely intertwined. Although there are literal translations between languages for many words, there are many other words in some languages that do not have lexical equivalents in other languages and which need to be translated by multiple words or phrases. (For example, Alaska natives have many different words for "snow." A translation into English using only the word "snow" would not capture the exact meaning of what had been said.) In addition, communication does not involve merely the spoken

word; tone of voice, "body language," and other factors contribute to the message that is conveyed. One needs to be aware of the potential for miscommunication when a second language is used, and to attempt to keep the possibility of miscommunication at a minimum.

Let me present you an interesting example on failure of communication due to lack of cross cultural communication.

A real-life illustration of how words don't always mean is the case of the ombudsman to the mayor of Washington, DC. The ombudsman, who is white, used these words in commenting



on his budget: "I will have to be 'niggardly' with these funds..."

The word "niggardly" means "miserly". It is derived from a Scandinavian word and has no racial origin or meaning. Even so, the mayor's office was filled with protest calls from the black community (because 'nigger' is an offensive word meaning 'a black person'). So intense were the objections that the ombudsman resigned, and his resignation was accepted.

The appropriateness of the resignation was intensely argued. Those favouring the resignation generally argued that the ombudsman should have been more sensitive in his choice of words – that he should have known that the word's sound would offend. Those opposing generally argued that the man should not be criticized because of the ignorance of other. After considerable argument was heard, the mayor appointed the man to another position

HIGH- VS. LOW-CONTEXT CULTURE

The concept of high- and low-context culture relates to how an employee's thoughts, opinions, feelings and upbringing affect how they act within a given culture. North America and Western Europe are generally considered to have low-context cultures. This means that businesses in these places have direct, individualistic employees who tend to base decisions on facts. This type of businessperson wants specifics noted in contracts and may have issues with trust.

High-context cultures are the opposite in that trust is the most important part of business dealings. There are areas in the Middle East, Asia and Africa that can be considered high context. Organizations that have high-context cultures are collectivist and focus on interpersonal relationships. Individuals from high-context cultures might be interested in getting to know the person they are conducting business with in order to get a gut feeling on decision making. They may also be more concerned about business teams and group success rather than individual achievement.

Let's take a look at how cross-cultural differences can cause potential issues within an organization. Jack is a manager at a New Mexico-based retail conglomerate. He has flown to Japan to

discuss a potential partnership with a local Japanese company. His business contact, Yamato, is his counterpart within the Japanese company. Jack has never been to Japan before, and he's not familiar with their cultural norms. Let's look at some of the ways that a lack of cultural understanding can create a barrier for business success by examining how Jack handles his meeting with Yamato.

Jack and Yamato ran into some difficulties during their business negotiations. Jack spoke quickly and profusely because he wanted to seal the deal as soon as possible. However, Yamato wanted to get to know Jack, and he felt that Jack spoke too much. Yamato also felt that Jack was only concerned with completing the deal for his own self-interest and was not concerned with the overall good of the company. Jack's nonverbal cues did not help the negotiations either.

NONVERBAL DIFFERENCES

Gestures and eye contact are two areas of nonverbal communication that are utilized differently across cultures. Companies must train employees in the correct way to handle nonverbal communication as to not offend other cultures. For example, American workers tend to wave their hand and use a finger to point when giving nonverbal direction. Extreme gesturing is considered rude in some cultures. While pointing may be considered appropriate in some contexts in the United States, Yamato would never use a finger to point towards another person because that gesture is considered rude in Japan. Instead, he might gesture with an open hand, with his palm facing up, toward the person.

Eye contact is another form of nonverbal communication. In the U.S., eye contact is a good thing and is seen as a reflection of honesty and straightforwardness. However, in some Asian and Middle Eastern cultures, prolonged eye contact can be seen as rude or aggressive in many situations. Women may need to avoid it altogether because lingering eye contact can be viewed as a sign of sexual interest. During their meeting, Jack felt that Yamato was not listening to his talking points because Yamato was not looking Jack in the eyes. However, Yamato did not want Jack to think he was



rude, so he avoided looking directly into Jack's eyes during his speech.

LANGUAGE DIFFERENCES

The biggest issue dealing with cross-cultural communication is the difficulty created by language barriers. For example, Jack does not speak Japanese, so he is concerned with his ability to communicate effectively with Yamato. There are some strategies that Jack can use to help establish a rapport with Yamato. Jack can explain himself without words by using emotions, facial expressions and other nonverbal cues. He can also use drawings and ask for an interpreter.

Additionally, companies that have to deal with cross-cultural communication can hire employees with proficiency in other languages. Fortunately for Jack and Yamato, they both had excellent translators who communicated their words. The next cross-cultural issue regards how individuals deal with power distance.

NO TWO PEOPLE ARE ALIKE

Even two people within the same culture will not react exactly the same in similar situations. One's ways of interacting with people and coping with situations are developed by prior experiences, family background, age and sex, culture, etc. No two people are alike – not even people who are from the same family and who share a common culture. We bring to every situation our “personal baggage” of how we expect others to act and think. We sometimes misinterpret the words and actions of others because we unconsciously expect that the meanings behind their words and actions are the same as our own meanings if we were in a similar situation. Misunderstandings arise, feelings are hurt, and problems are encountered due to such misinterpretations. Even when we make a conscious effort to be sensitive to other cultures, we may still miscommunicate because of the difficulty in picking up on the cultural cues of others.

INTER-CULTURAL MISCOMMUNICATION PERCEPTIONS OF OTHER CULTURES

Most people have had little or no training in inter-cultural interactions. Therefore, in an encounter with someone from a culture other than our own, we rely on our assumptions about how other persons from our own culture act, as well as on our

perceptions of how individuals from the other culture act.

These perceptions are formed by what we have heard or learned in school, through the media, and through other vicarious experiences, as well as any actual contact with persons from the other culture. We may have developed ideas about persons from certain cultures that have little basis in actual fact.

In addition, we have fewer points of common reference with someone from a different culture than we have with someone from our own culture and we may find it difficult to understand someone with whom there are only a few or no common points of reference.

Our “personal baggage” is sometimes magnified when dealing with persons from other cultures because we often know very little about their cultures, and may have misconceptions about them.

Interviewers and interviewees (as well as others at an interview) bring with them to the interview culturally based perceptions of the world.

CULTURAL PERCEPTIONS AT AN INTERVIEW

Interviewees usually have preconceived ideas of immigration officers.

Culture dictates certain behaviour. One needs to keep constantly in mind that one cannot assume that an interviewee's actions and words have the same meanings as they have in your culture. Following are some of them to be cautioned about;

- Certain body language may differ from culture to culture. Many hand gestures used in one culture to beckon people, to point to people or objects, to indicate agreement, to wave, etc., can have different meanings in other cultures, some of which are very insulting. Ways of non-verbally indicating “yes” and “no” also vary from culture to culture. What may be a gesture to indicate affirmation may indicate a negative response in another culture.
- The physical distance between two people who are engaged in conversation differs from culture to culture. In some cultures, a foot of space is sufficient between two people; in other cultures, much more space is needed for the people involved to feel comfortable.



- The amount of physical contact also varies from culture to culture. For example, in some cultures, individuals of the same sex who are not romantically involved hold hands when walking or talking. In other cultures, this is rarely done.
- Sitting so that the sole of your shoe faces someone is considered very rude in some cultures, whereas in other cultures, this is not an issue.
- Time is measured differently and holds different importance in various cultures. Time in some cultures may be measured in terms of planting seasons rather than months, weeks, and days as it is in other cultures. Being on time for all functions is highly valued in some cultures while in others, it is expected that people will arrive after the announced starting time for events, especially social functions such as parties.
- Women's roles vary greatly from one culture to another. In some cultures, very few women hold positions of authority, power, and respect in the workforce; in other cultures, women have a more active role in this area. In certain cultures, many women have little contact with men other than male family members and defer to men; in other cultures, women interact openly and freely with men.
- People's reactions to grief differ widely from individual to individual as well as from culture to culture. Some people may have difficulty speaking about the death of a loved one without crying while other people may be able to discuss events surrounding the death of a loved one without exhibiting any outward signs of emotion.
- "Saving face" rules many of the actions of people from some cultures; people may do the utmost possible to avoid losing face or putting someone else in a situation where that person would lose face. In other cultures, being "forthright" in interactions often takes precedence over saving face.

For example, if an individual is asked to give directions to a location but does not know how to get to the location, he or she may point the

questioner in a particular direction in order to avoid not being able to give assistance.

- Gift-giving is a way of assuring that things get done in some cultures; gifts are expected and are given to thank people for performing a service or act, or in anticipation of a particular service or act. In other cultures, such practices may be viewed as inappropriate or may be seen as a form of bribery. In addition, in some cultures, if you admire a possession of someone, you may receive it as a gift; not accepting it may offend the giver.
- Eye contact varies from culture to culture. What may be considered a normal length of time for eye contact in one culture, may, in another culture, be termed "staring" and considered rude, causing the other person to feel uncomfortable.
- In some cultures, the left hand is only used for bathroom functions, and so giving or receiving anything with the left hand is considered extremely rude.

APPLICATION OF KNOWLEDGE OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

There are many such examples, and it would be impossible to list or understand all of them. The point is not to try and learn about every situation and cultural nuance, but to recognize that our expectations about how people react and what they say are often culture-bound. It is not uncommon for individuals to make judgments based on preconceived ideas of cultures. You must try as much as possible to recognize and put aside any preconceived ideas about how people act and the meanings of their actions in order to avoid making decisions based on cultural misperceptions.

CONCLUSION

You cannot possibly be aware of all of the factors that impede communication at a particular interview; each interview is unique, and each interviewee is unique. What you can do, however, is to be aware that a number of factors may impede communication, and when communication appears to be impaired, you should attempt to discern what the problem may be and attempt to alleviate it.