Intercultural Communication: Key to Diversity Management

Chetna Sinha

We live in an organisational society and organisations are an accepted part of life. Today, many organisations are becoming utilitarian global alliances with advanced telecommunications and data processing and a diverse, multicultural mobile workforce. Those in an international business are exposed to communicating with a bewildering variety of cultural systems and different business practices.

And to communicate effectively this hectic business environment requires understanding of other cultures, an awareness of the interdependence of nations, and the need to avoid interfering cultural barriers in order to find productive ways to work constructs with people of all cultures. Against this backdrop this paper tries to understand the complex nature of communication and help comprehend the essential interface between international commerce, culture, communication, synergy and the global organisation. We also explore how culture and communication are intertwined in the process of communicating with people from different cultures and identifies the essential intercultural communication endowment that the workforce needs to effectively cope with an emerging world wide culture and to compete in an international arena.

Key Words: Communication, Multicultural, Diversity, Culture, Global

Introduction

"Most delightful pleasures clay without diversity" is a universal opinion. And of all forms of diversity, Genetic Diversity is the most important phenomena which not only adds to the beauty of the world but also helps preserve the survival of species. That apart our own society is known for its diversity. We are by way a mostly divided by race, gender, ethnicity, cultural standards, physical ability and socio-economic status, than ever before. Thus diversity is in existence since long. However, it is only recently that it has attracted greater attention of the Corporate and Industry mandarins.

There are quite a few reasons behind such heightened attention. As businesses are becoming increasingly global, the world as a workplace is shrinking and being reduced to a "Global Village". Distances are diminishing and the workforce is becoming more and more mobile with the emerging fact that the workforce is progressively becoming more multicultural. It is not at all strange to find people from different nationalities as well as widely different cultures employed as colleagues within organisations. Secondly, diversity at workplace in terms of human skills has tremendous potential to make organisational success possible. Thirdly, diversity in society itself is capable of impacting the behavior of employees at workplaces. And from any of these perspectives, corporate interest in "diversity" appears to be well founded.

In order to better appreciate this growing interest in "diversity", it is essential to understand the concept of diversity at workplace.

By "diversity" we generally mean differences based on national, origin, religion, gender, age, sexual orientation and disability. However, scientifically, diversity is beyond these visible differences and encompasses an infinite range of individual's style of communication, height and weight differences in learning and comprehension, socio-economic and educational backgrounds. Researches have identified seven major differences among employees which are productivity, ability to tolerate stress and institutional integrity in achieving high quality standards, intensity of commitment & loyalty to the firm. Apart from the obvious differences in social and cultural traits, the price of raising such differences in the workplace is quite high. There is also the danger of such people being put into an uncomfortable position and having to work against their grain. Diversity also poses challenges to management, such as maintaining harmony at workplaces. For instance, diversity can be a source of creativity for new leaders, cultures and systems. Personal adjustments from the staff of the multicultural company, which has been proved to be great team building tools, are required for diversity to work for businesses to tackle. Thus, in order to create a positive and equitable environment that values the diverse members with culturally different values, work rules have to be changed and the organisational culture has to be changed. Leadership, policies and practices 'diversity' employee's performance at the workplace. Personal factors, intelligence, emotional intelligence are other sources of diversity. Of these, the diversity associated with education, socio-economics and work experience are considered more critical for organisational success.

Human beings are ethnocentric. They tend to see the world through their own narrow view and judge the world by what is familiar to them. There is a tendency to label the company of those that are more similar to them for they feel an increased trust in 'likeness'. It is difficult for people to share power, and history shows that it is rarely done easily. They resist change and continually strive for a world that suits them. This often makes the constant change that is required for functioning under diversity difficult. However, everyone - young and old, homeless and housed, Hindu or Muslim or Christian - moves difficult. It calls for each person coming to terms with their beliefs and expectations and gaining comfort in diversity. In this context diversity is a resource for organizations fostering varied ideas and output which the organization can utilize.

Properly managed, diversity, at the workplace, can enable the willingness and ability of all employees to contribute to organisational success by encouraging employees of diverse backgrounds, points of view, skills and experiences that have been brought into the system by a culturally sensitive group of employees for the benefit of both the organisation and the individual. It is in fact the view that diversity which could instill diversity into the system and help organizations to achieve their vision and strategic objectives.

From the rich mixture of talents and perspectives that result from having a wide assortment of people in the workplace, making rules, management has to train employees to understand the differences that exist within the organisation and also to communicate with people with different skills that an organisation has to ensure that such differences are not a barrier to their success. However, the price of raising such differences in the workplace is quite high. There is also the danger of such people being put into an uncomfortable position and having to work against their grain. Diversity also poses challenges to management, such as maintaining harmony at workplaces. For instance, diversity can be a source of creativity for new leaders, cultures and systems. Personal adjustments from the staff of the multicultural company, which has been proved to be great team building tools, are required for diversity to work for businesses to tackle. Thus, in order to create a positive and equitable environment that values the diverse members with culturally different values, work rules have to be changed and the organisational culture has to be changed. Leadership, policies and practices 'diversity' employee's performance at the workplace. Personal factors, intelligence, emotional intelligence are other sources of diversity. Of these, the diversity associated with education, socio-economics and work experience are considered more critical for organisational success.

Main Thrust

A communication focus concentrates on the dynamic interwoven relations among people and also underscores structure, process and interaction and is sensitive to the various organisational cultures and communication patterns that are in place. There are many factors that influence the process of communication in an organisation. Communication is the substance of global organisation and the ability to navigate the complex waters of intercultural conflict and the level of skill and tact necessary to coexist high quality decisions out of multicultural teams and effective communication.

Since in the global marketplace, most natural barriers and national borders are no longer the impassable barriers they once were and domestic markets are opening up to worldwide competition business of all sizes looks for new growth opportunities outside their own countries. Researches show that three out of every four multinational companies now manage networks of twenty or more operations which put the burden of the communication strategy on coordinating and communicating with a wide range of geographically and demographically and diverse world wide customers and suppliers.

Throughout its long history of employing and working with people from different cultures IBM has learned some of the most important lessons that are the most effective in managing a diverse workforce are the eclectic workforce is no simple task - particularly in a company that employs more than 325,000 people and sells to customers in roughly 175 countries around the world. An alarming barrier to communication is presented by language alone. IBM is considering that IBM's workforce speaks more than 165 languages. However, it must not be forgotten that language is just one of many elements that play a role in communication between cultures. IBM's experience illustrates both the challenges and the opportunities for
business professionals who know how to communicate with diverse audiences.

To a large degree the fundamental differences between cultures have profound effect on communication. Every attempt to send and receive messages is influenced by culture. This process of sending or receiving messages between people whose cultural background could lead them to interpret verbal and non-verbal signals differently is defined as Intercultural Communication. For successful communication one needs a basic grasp of the cultural differences one may encounter and should be able to handle them. Effective communication requires an understanding of diverse cultural differences and the ability to communicate successfully across cultures. In order to communicate effectively in business one needs to adapt cultural pluralism — the practice of accepting multiple cultures on their own terms. When crossing cultures, one can be even more effective if he chooses to move beyond simple acceptance and adapt one’s own communication style to that of the culture he is dealing with. It is quite unfortunate that even highly motivated people find it extremely difficult to overcome ethnocentrism and stereotyping. It needs to change lifelong habits about oneself and one’s culture. Moreover researches suggest that people often act with beliefs and biases that they are not even consciously aware of — and that they may even conflict with the beliefs they think they have. Thus, whenever the communicator is using the non-verbal elements, he must use them only when it is necessary. For example, using different volumes, gestures, and facial expressions to communicate with people from different cultures can improve the effectiveness of the communication. It is important to mention here that intercultural communication breakdowns occur for a variety of reasons, from simple carelessness to misunderstanding that other people’s attitudes are different. Part of the problem stems from treating others as different, the way we think of ourselves or others is not to be treated. While the best approach when communicating with people from diverse background and cultures is to have a team that wants to be treated. This can be done by recognizing and accommodating different types of cultural differences — communication, social, and non-verbal signals, Age, Gender, Religion, and Ability.

Apart from recognizing these cultural differences, communicating successfully in the diverse workplace requires managers and employees to improve their intercultural communication throughout their career by inquiring training about other cultures and languages. It is always better to have a basic understanding of the preferences for communication styles, helping them to write and speak clearly, carefully knowing when to use interpreters and translators, and helping to adapt to various cultures.

Considering the globalization of commerce, the demand for multilingual communicators continues to grow as well. Shifts in business and language learning too. For instance, U.S. companies continue to use a variety of business functions, knowledge and ability to speak English language has become an important career asset. Not only this, the growing international status of Chinese and Japanese, the fact that many professionals across the world to learn Mandarin, the official language of China. To simplify matters, most of the multinational companies ask all their employees to use English when communicating with employees in other countries, whereas they are located. Level of directness, the degree of formality, preferences for written vs. oral communication and other factors together form the communication style. It is important to know the expectation of communication partners when adapting to any of the styles. The variation of time, pitch, speed and volume that forms the vocal pattern of language also are very important aspect of intercultural communication. The key is simply to accept it as heard first, without jumping to conclusions about meaning or motivation. One must allow other people finish what they have to say. If interrupted something important may be missed. If you understand properly, a repetition or a clarification must be asked for. Any momentary awkwardness which might be felt in asking for extra help in a formal situation is less important than the risk of unsuccessful communication. For written communication too businesses need to familiarize themselves with the written communication preferences and adapt their approach, style and tone to meet their expectations. Some generalities can be followed in this regard viz. using simple and clear language, being tactful in using technical elements, addressing international correspondence properly, citing numbers and dates carefully, avoiding slang, idiomatic and business jargon and avoiding humor and other reference to specifics.

When talking with people whose native language is different from ours, it is important to remember that the pronunciation of every everyday conversation can be difficult. To be more effective, when communicating in a different culture one must be remember to — speak slowly and clearly, not to emphasize, watch the body language, be alert for anything that might be interpreted as impolite, be aware of the different cultures you are talking to the other person over by emphasizing words or oversimplifying sentences. The end of the communication, double check to make sure everyone understands, and the listener agrees on what has been said and decided.

Life has emerged the requirement for an interpreter (for spoken communication) or a translator (for written communication) in business situations. Most customers expect to be addressed in their native language, particularly concerning advertising, warranties, repair and maintenance manuals and product labels. These documents certainly require the services of a translator. Microsoft spends several hundred million dollars a year to make virtually all of its software products, websites and help documents available in dozens of languages. Similarly, automotive giant Ford markets to customers in some 130 countries providing websites that offer local information, usually in the local language. For instance, some skilled professional in the form of interpreters and translators provide invaluable assistance for communicating in other contexts. Keeping up with current technological changes, especially those that are rapidly changing, is also critical in order to avoid embarrassing blunders.

Landor Associates, a leading marketing agency, usually engages three native-language speakers to review and check such factors as translations of materials to ensure the quality of the message is compatible with local culture and language. Some companies use back-translation to ensure accuracy. Once a translator encodes a message into another language, a different translator retranslates the same message into the original language. This back translation is then compared with the original message to discover any errors or discrepancies.

The time and cost required for professional translation has encouraged the development of machine translation, any form of computerized intelligence used to translate one language to another. Dedicated software tools and online services such as World Lingo offer some form of automated translation. Major search engines such as Alta Vista and Google offer translated version of the websites. Although none of these tools promises translation quality in a perfect human-like way, they are helpful in communicating with individual words and phrases, and they can give the overall gist of a message.

Effectively adapting one’s communication efforts to another culture can be about the language of a culture but also the ability and the motivation to change one’s own personal habits as needed. Unfortunately, a thorough understanding of the various cultural and language patterns can take years to acquire. Fortunately, one does not need to learn about the whole world all at once. Many companies appoint specialists for specific countries or ethnic groups. Initially, a focus on fewer cultures at a time. Some firms also provide resources to help employees prepare for interactions with other cultures. For instance, IBM’s global workforce diversity intranet site employees can click on the Going Global link to learn about customs in specific cultures.

Conclusion

Global corporations are increasingly reaching across borders to find the skills they need. The need for knowledgeable workers has caused industrialized nations to realize that most of their workers are not educated in the skills they need. Second, by relying on and competition for foreign-born workers. Moreover, nations having slow-growing workforces but rapid growth in service-sector jobs are becoming magnets for immigrants. Additionally nations whose educational systems produce prospective workers faster than their economies can absorb them are exporting people and their skills. The result is a major redefinition of
labor markets and a workplace that is increasingly diverse and multicultural at both the unskilled and skilled levels. Thus, the combination of a global workforce and multinational organization means that managers and employees must be able to work and communicate effectively with more and more people with differing cultures, customs, values, beliefs and practices. Apart from this widespread increase in free trade agreements and bilateral investment treaties opening new vistas for liberalization and free flow of products and services emphasizes on the fact that understanding of and developing intercultural communication in the international business can assist us in developing self-awareness and building a vigorous trading community keenly committed to the promotion of peace and a spirited market community and world at peace will require considerable effort and hard work but without it there may be very little future to think about at all.

To sum up, researches over the past few years have increasingly shown that the best theories and models in the areas of management, marketing, finance and production can be transformed into successful operations only through effective business communication and intercultural communication adds to the dynamics of business communication by mixing diversity of language and culture.

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