

Module 9 - Communication Across Cultures



Organizational Theory and Behavior

MGMT 630

What's the benefit of studying this topic?

- You will learn how communication patterns across cultures differ
- You will also learn how to communicate more effectively across cultures and in diverse teams
- While communication is taken for granted, becoming a successful leader requires increased attention to avoiding miscommunication in a diverse work unit

Module 9 Cross-Cultural Communication Competencies

Given the imprecise nature of human communications, it is easy to miscommunicate our intent or meaning. It's not only the words that we use, but it's our tone of voice, facial expressions, and our body language that transmits the meaning or intent of our message. At the other end of our communication is another person who takes in your tone of voice, watches your body language, and assigns meaning to your nonverbal cues to determine what he or she heard. As you can see, the communication process is complex, and there are many opportunities for miscommunication and misunderstanding.

Once you introduce the variable of culture, the chances of miscommunication increases greatly. See the examples below.

1. In 2001, Honda introduced a model called the Fitta in the Scandinavian countries of Europe. However, the word "fitta" is a term referring to female genitalia and used in a vulgar fashion in that part of the world. The company renamed the car the Jazz.
2. At an African seaport, workers saw boxes with pictures of broken wine glasses and threw them into the sea, assuming the boxes contained broken glass. It turned out that the broken wine glass was an international symbol for "fragile."
3. A UK sports manufacturing company in 2002 originally called a pair of sneakers the Zyklon, but that

was also the name of the gas used in Nazi concentration camps to kill Jewish prisoners.

Here is another example of the types of misunderstandings that can occur when working in culturally diverse teams.

At the New Jersey company headquarters, Bernice reviewed Stephan's plan e-mailed from the Poland project location. Stephan requested printed materials by 6/5/09. Bernice made a notation to review/approve and then send the documents by carrier to arrive on June 4, a day early. On May 6, Stephan e-mailed again suggesting the documents were late. Bernice was taken aback! What happened? Stephan was using the European form for noting dates, which places information in this order-- day/month/year. Bernice was interpreting the due date using the American practice of month/day/year.

At-A-Glance Definitions

- **Communication:** Processes and channels by which people exchange information and assign meaning.
- **Perception and misperception:** The process by which we take in sensory information and make sense of the world about us. Although necessarily based on incomplete and unverified (or unreliable) information, our perceptions become our reality. A misperception is a mistaken belief, idea, or interpretation about something.
- **Interpretation and misinterpretation:** An interpretation occurs when a person assigns meaning to what is seen or experienced. Stereotypes, prejudices, and biases may lead to misinterpretation, for they are filters through which we interpret the actions of others.
- **Evaluation and misevaluation:** Human beings are judgmental. We constantly interpret our experiences through the lens of good or bad, satisfying or not, quality or junk, acceptable or not. These judgments often times inhibit our ability to communicate effectively in a diverse team.

Our perceptions are not always accurate. As we noted above, they are based upon the filters we use to make sense out of our experiences and the assumptions that we bring to the situation.

Ladder of Inference Helps to Identify How People Interpret Information

The concept of the ladder of inference was created by Chris Argyris and included in the book *The Fifth Discipline* by Peter Senge. The ladder illustrates how original experiences can be interpreted in different ways (Ashraf, 2008). The ladder of inference helps us understand how our observable actions are a result of a number of inferential processes that our brains use when interpreting data. We just don't experience something and then act. Our brains

are proceeding through a series of steps that determine our final actions and reactions. The bottom rung of the ladder represents how our brain records data, much like a photo, but without meaning (Ashraf, 2008). On the next rung of the ladder, we observe the data and select specific content to pay attention to.

Next, we begin to interpret the information and assign meaning to it. The meaning we assign is based upon our attitudes, beliefs, and values. Once we interpret the data, we assign assumptions and draw conclusions about it. Only then do we act. These processes are taking place at the subconscious level so that we are not aware that these things are going on.

Let's use an example.

One of your team members is from a different country and is having a conversation with you. Your brain receives sound waves as pure data only. The sound waves become words, and we begin to focus on specific elements of what we are hearing. We hear voice patterns and word pronunciations that we interpret as an accent. We assign a meaning to the accent, which is sometimes positive and sometimes negative. Based upon our assigned meaning, we assume certain things about this person.

I have heard people say that when they hear someone speaking the "Queen's English," they assume that the person is intelligent and cultured. I had a friend in graduate school who was from the hills of Kentucky, and when he talked he feared that people would assume that he was stupid because of his southern Appalachian accent.

If you present different people with a picture, you will get different interpretations of the picture from each person.

This process goes on continuously and impacts how we react to and relate to people who are different from us. To avoid making these misperceptions and misinterpretations, we must be aware of our interpretations and assumptions that we use when communicating with others.

Communication Differences Across Cultures

Communicating across cultures is challenging because communication styles differ across cultures. There are many opportunities for communication breakdowns and mishaps that can lead to misunderstandings and a violation of cultural norms and practices.

There are other communication differences that are driven by culture. Carol Kinsey Goman outlined some of the top categories in an article for the American Management Association.

High-Context vs. Low-Context

High-context cultures (Mediterranean, Slav, Central European, Latin American, African, Arab, Asian, American Indian) "leave much of the message unspecified, to be understood through context, nonverbal cues, and between-the-lines interpretation (Goman, 2011). Low-context cultures, which Goman says includes most Germanic and English-speaking countries, expect messages to be "explicit and specific."

Affective vs. Neutral

Cultures differ in terms of how readily they show emotions. Some cultures encourage emotional expression, while others value controlling or subduing emotions. Members of neutral cultures, such as Japan, Norway, and the UK, do not show their emotions. This doesn't mean that people from these cultures are cold or unfeeling, but in the business world, they monitor the amount of emotions they display. Members of affective cultures show their feelings plainly by laughing, smiling, scowling, and sometimes crying, shouting, or walking out of the room.

Says Goman: "When it comes to communication, what's proper and correct in one culture may be ineffective or even offensive in another. In reality, no culture is right or wrong, better or worse—just different. In today's global business community, there is no single best approach to communicating with one another. The key to cross-cultural success is to develop an understanding of, and a deep respect for, the differences" (Goman, 2011).

Cultural expectations impact other forms of communication. For instance, touching or using your left hand is not used by the Islamic and Hindu cultures. Islamic cultures generally don't approve of any touching between genders. Eye contact is not always interpreted the same way in every culture. Some Western cultures see direct eye contact as positive. Ever heard your parents say, "Look at me when I'm talking to you!" Arabic cultures make prolonged eye contact; they believe it shows interest and helps them understand the truthfulness of others. However, in Asian and some Caribbean cultures, avoiding eye contact shows respect.

Respecting Our Differences and Working Together

In a 1997 article on cross-cultural communication, authors Marcelle DuPraw and Marya Axner cited studies by anthropologists Kevin Avruch and Peter Black that noted that when people see something they don't understand, they often call it "abnormal," "weird," or "wrong" (DuPraw & Axner, 1997). This tendency may give rise on the individual level to prejudice. Consequently, it is vital that we learn to control the human tendency to translate "different from me" into "less than me."

Learning about people's cultures helps us understand our own culture, according to DuPraw and Axner: "We can challenge our assumptions about the "right" way of doing things, and consider a variety of approaches." The authors note that if we open up to learning about people in other cultures, we may become more tolerant and understand about differences. "Prejudice and stereotypes separate us from whole groups of people who could be friends and partners in working for change" (DuPraw & Axner, 1997).

Guidelines for Multicultural Collaboration

(Adapted from DuPraw & Axner, 1997)

- Learn from cultural generalizations but don't use them to stereotype or oversimplify your ideas about another person.
- Don't assume that your way is correct. Question your assumptions about the "right way" to communicate. For example, gestures used in one culture may have opposite meanings in others.
- Don't blame the other person when cross-cultural communications break down. Remember when you point a finger at others, three fingers are pointing back at you. Take responsibility for your part in the breakdown.
- Listen to other points of view. Listen for understanding and suspend judgment until you do understand the other viewpoint.
- Be open to hearing other people's perception of the power imbalances between cultural groups and be willing to discuss them openly.

What Do I Do if They Don't Speak My Language?

Communication Challenge	Action to Try
Verbal	Speak slowly; avoid slang or "insider" jargon. Repeat important ideas, using different words to explain. Use short sentences. Use active, not passive verbs (action verbs are shorter; avoid forms of the "is, are" in the action). Be face-to-face as much as possible.
Nonverbal	Use as many visual tools as possible—PowerPoints, images, photos, tables, graphs; consider more "on site" demonstration to convey specific, important plan tasks. Use appropriate hand and face gestures (and do research beforehand to avoid gestures that may offend). Pause frequently. Have summary of presentation/plan, other important information available as handouts.
Interpreting Accurately	Observe silences among others. When other people are silent, wait until they speak. (This action may be especially useful when working across a more collective-oriented society and a more individualistic-focused culture). Speaking errors—don't make leaps of judgment or quickly interpret these mistakes as

	an intelligence gap. When sensing an uncertainty, go ahead and consider different, not similar points of view.
Comprehension (Achieving Meaning)	Understanding—avoid assuming common understanding. Ask specific questions about next steps, actions ahead to observe/measure understanding.
Informational and Planning Meeting Design	Assume there will be additional effort, which tires everyone. Take frequent breaks. Divide presentation units into small clusters or groups of information/material to discuss. Allow two to four times the time you estimate needing for developing a cooperative plan.
Use Motivation Actively	Appreciate and appreciate further. Draw out those who are quieter and ask for their contributions. Do not embarrass.
Source: Adapted from Adler, N., (2008). <i>International Dimensions of International Behavior</i>. Fifth Edition. Mason, OH: Thomson, South-Western	