

Sources of Misunderstandings and Blunders In Business Communication

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Abstract: The globalization process can cause people to change deep-rooted cultural values. Many times one's own cultural values and interactional competences are acquired unconsciously, and it is difficult to understand other's cultures without first examining one's own culture. Thus, it is very important that people understand and become aware of one's own and of others' cultural values in business communication.

It has been noticed that the intercultural relationship is positively influenced by respecting the behaviours specific to cultures coming into contact and, at the same time is influenced by breaking the same behaviour norms.

There are nine concrete and immediate sources of inter-cultural communication misunderstandings and blunders: the taboos, the woman's status versus man, the way of showing respect, the perception of time and space, the business etiquette, non-verbal messages, the language and the translator, clothing and prejudices.

Serious errors frequently occur in international negotiations, in international marketing, as well as in diplomatic meetings.

They are usually caused by the difficulties in communication due to cultural differences. The fact is that people are not really aware of their cultural tendencies.

Even more, they become blind prisoners of their own culture norms and thus, see other cultures as abnormal (the normality being for them what is in accordance with the norms of their own culture).

When two or more people belonging to different cultures meet and communicate, their communication brings out something new, something different from each interlocutor's culture. This area of the "frontier communication" is called exchange culture. This area of culture is a "no man's land", with no rules or compulsory norms, characterized by confuse and risky communication. The international negotiation and inter-cultural communication take place in this area. On the one hand, none of the parties can strictly respect the norms of the partners' culture and, on the other hand, none of them can behave exactly as they would in their own culture area. Thus the parties' synchronization

and harmonization inevitably become more difficult than in the same culture area. Behavioural tendencies of different cultures coming into contact are often contradictory.

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The general behaviour rule in a foreign land is *lex loci*. J.M. Hiltrop considered that in order to be efficient in international negotiations, we have to become aware both of our culture tendencies and of the interlocutor's culture norms.¹

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Taboos

The word "taboo" refers to sacred interdictions whose violation leads to severe punishments. Persons, objects, words can be taboo. There are religious, moral, social taboos; the social ones refer to objects, colours, numbers, words, gestures, gifts and behaviours that vary from culture to culture.

In Chinese culture symbolism is important, with colours and numbers having special meaning. For instance, at Chinese New Year, money may be given in a red envelope; it must be even amount, using an even number of new bills.

Red is a lucky colour; pink and yellow represent happiness; and the number 8 is the luckiest number. The colours black, white and blue and the number 4, or four of anything, are negatively associated with death or funerals. Also included in this category are clocks, handkerchiefs, and straw sandals.

In Japan gift giving is an art form, representing friendship, respect, and gratitude. The ceremony is important; the gift is always in a gift box, or beautifully wrapped in quality paper, and given with great respect. Because the symbolism is what's important, frequently the actual gift may be very modest.

Gifts of food or liquor (cookies, expensive candy, and fruit) are always good choices especially for modest gifts. If you're bringing a gift from your home country, make sure it's not "made in Japan". And don't select company items with your logo that may be a promotional item and look cheap.

In Japan symbolism is important. A gift with a pair of items is considered lucky, but sets of four or nine are unlucky.

Plus, the number 4 also means death; and the colour red is associated with funerals, so don't give a pen with red ink, and don't write out a card using red. Books aren't appropriate; and sharp objects like knives, scissors, and letter openers symbolize "severing a relationship".

Latin cultures don't have formal or traditional ceremonies surrounding gift giving. However, business relationships are developed as personal relationships. And in order to build a strong and lasting friendship, gifts are a thoughtful way to make a good first impression, and socially continue showing generosity, appreciation, and kindness.

Because relationships become personal, find out about your Latin counterpart or client's lifestyle. Then using these details, select insightful gifts that will reflect how important this person is. Always have the gift wrapped in a quality paper, as this is a subtle detail that can express the value of the relationship.

¹ Cf. J. M. Hiltrop, Sheilla Udall, *Arta negocierii*, Bucuresti, Editura Teora, 1999, p. 58.

² Cf. Stefan, Prutianu, *Manual de comunicare și negociere în afaceri*, Bucuresti, Ed.Polirom, 2000, pp.150-158.

If you're a man giving a business gift to a female, in order for the gift not to be construed as a romantic overture, tell her you're delivering the gift to her on behalf of your wife, or your secretary.

Symbolism in this culture will also influence the choices you make for gifts and wrapping paper. Black or purple paper isn't used because it's used during Holy Week.

Items associated with death or funerals that wouldn't be used include handkerchiefs, and yellow, red or white flowers.

As in other cultures, sharp objects such as knives or scissors should never be given, since they represent a "severing of a relationship".

In the Muslim culture, the Koran forbids alcohol. Gifts of liquor or any product that contains alcohol, such as perfume, would never be selected to give. Also, forbidden are products or foods from scavengers, which includes pork, birds, and shellfish. So a leather item made from pigskin or ostrich could not be given, nor any food from these groups.

Other categories are also not appropriate for gifts. These include personal clothing items, which are far too personal to give as gifts. Dogs are considered unclean, so any dog item, even something with a picture of a dog would not be given. And knives because they have a sharp edge – severing relationships – are not appropriate.

Artwork that consisted of sculptures, drawings or photos showing the human body, especially a nude or partially nude female body, is not acceptable as a gift. And although nicotine is discouraged, it's frequently used in the Arabic and Middle Eastern countries.

Women's status

Women's social status and the relationships between man and woman have specific approaches in different cultures and religions.

In Islamic countries, for example, the woman's status is inferior to that of the man, as the first category unconditionally obeys man's will and has no power of negotiation. Women don't sit at the same table with men (they usually lay the table and then retire). It is impossible for a man and a woman to negotiate. Thus, it would be a serious error and a great offence to send women to negotiate in these countries. Women are also not allowed to speak or to have any kind of contact with foreigners. This situation is true in the case of Japan and China.³

In Western Europe there are no longer differences between sexes concerning the behaviour or the social status. But this equality raises another category of problems. For instance, to kiss a woman's hand in a business or professional relationship is no longer used. Yet in Eastern Europe this gesture is used in public. There are countries where it is a very rare and intimate gesture, allowed only to a close man.

To carry the purse or the file of a businesswoman partner, to give her priority can be a nice gesture in Romania but it may look suspicious or it may cause a definite refuse in Western Europe. Common behaviours, as the way of looking at a woman may be considered sexual harassment. Thus, it is safer not to "stare" at the businesswoman partner.

The way of showing respect

The problem that rises here is the way of showing respect for the partner in different cultural areas.

The respect can be indicated by age, sex, social status, titles, punctuality, silence, clothes, keeping distance, the attention given to holidays, prier hours, through bowing, reduced visual contact, body posture while standing etc.

³ Idem, Ibidem.

Age, status, sex and title are signs of respect in masculine countries: Japan, Switzerland, Germany and some Islamic countries. In many of these countries, the respect for an old person is very high.

The Japanese or the Germans have a high sense of self-esteem. For them, only the formal addressing, using the titles and the full name, is proper.

The keeping of distance and the respect for punctuality can be another problem. The Germans, for example, are tidy, punctual, well educated but distant and cold.

In India and China there is a great tendency towards social status and age. To send a team of young negotiators there, even if they are intelligent and competent, can be seen as a serious insult for the Chinese or Indian negotiators.

The way of greeting can be another problem. A well-know example of cultural misunderstanding is the greeting of the state-secretary of USA and that of a Japanese dignitary, when the first remained for a few seconds with her hand held out while the latter bowed deeply.

The mutuality of the greeting, of gifts and favours is a very important social ritual in the future-oriented cultures.

The perception of time and space

Time is an important indicator of the business partners' feelings, attitudes and opinions. A minute, an hour or a day doesn't have the same significance in all cultures.

The time problem refers, especially, to punctuality, delay, hurry or patience, and the order of arriving to business meetings. The negotiators' attitude towards time betrays the native cultural area. In South America, southern Europe and the Middle East being punctual does not carry the same sense of urgency. For some tribes, time is something absolutely relative while Western societies are very clock conscious. Time is money and punctuality is crucial.

Asians and Arabians respect complicated rituals, where the duration of the ceremony is more important than that of the actual action. Arabians like to negotiate for a long time. If they get to quickly what they want they have a feeling of dissatisfaction.

The organization of the negotiation space refers especially to interpersonal distances that must be respected by the partners belonging to different cultures. Americans, English and Germans, for example, need a larger personal space than Arabians who can negotiate very closely.

The length of the personal space varies according to the person's psychology and temperament but also according to demographic and cultural factors. In Japan, for instance, the personal space is reduced and the Japanese can deal better with crowd.

Business Etiquette

Business Etiquette has a sufficient number of cultural particularities to cause confusions and blunders. Germans and Japanese care the most about the formal aspects of etiquette. The use of the first name is very rare in direct addressing, an exception being the family and the closest friends.

In Europe and USA it is rude for the guest to leave as soon as dinner is over. On the contrary, in Arabian countries it is rude not to leave before dinner is over.

Another problem can be the choice of the moment of starting discussing business. The Western Europeans can start even after the first words. In some Arabian countries, this would be impolite. First the partners have to exchange favours and gifts, serve tea or coffee. Generally, discussions take place before dinner at Arabians and during dinner at Europeans.

Body Language

The nodding gesture can have contradictory significations in different cultures. It may mean “yes” or “no”. Another example is the sign of victory, which in England signifies an indecent proposal.

The gesture for the American “OK” suggests, in some Mediterranean countries the idea of homosexuality, in France means “zero” and in Japan means “money”.

The language and the translator

The language as a link between cultures can also rise barriers. The problem appears when the partners do not speak the same language or they do not want to learn the language of the other. One of the solutions is to use a translator.

However it is better, even if a translator is used, to learn at least a few words in the partner’s language to show him kindness and respect.

Clothes

As general rule, the conservative suit is used everywhere in the world. The standard business clothes (suit and tie) is compulsory in Western Europe and USA, especially in the banking system, administration and insurance companies.

In China and Japan, the light colours of the clothes are not proper (they render the idea of mourning). In Japan, the suit and tie are dark coloured. In some Islamic countries, men are not allowed to wear shorts.

Prejudices

The problems that may appear refer to the fact that it is necessary to try to convince the business partners that the opinions they have about the Romanian people are wrong. The Western Europeans sometimes see us as thieves, lazy and drunkards, not too loyal and hard working. They sometimes take us for “Romanian gipsies”. The media played a decisive part in creating these opinions.

Another example is that Romanians and other East-Europeans do not give a special attention to life or health insurance, fact that the Western Europeans see as a proof of irresponsibility or immaturity.

Conclusions

The globalization process can cause people to change deep-rooted cultural values. Many times one’s own cultural values and interactional competences are acquired unconsciously, and it is difficult to understand other’s cultures without first examining one’s own culture. Thus, it is very important that people understand and become aware of one’s own and of others’ cultural values in business communication.

According to Robert Gibson, “the next state of going global requires high- level skills to manage diversity inside and outside the company”⁴ and it is extremely important for businessmen to use interactional and communication skills for successful business outcome.

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⁴ Gibson, Robert, *Oxford Handbooks for Language Teachers: Intercultural Business Communication*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 3.

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