A study on the significant role of Cross cultural communication in business firms

Gagandeep Kaur

Assistant Professor
University Institute of Liberal Arts, Chandigarh University

Abstract

In this world of globalised economy, appreciating and comprehending the different cultures has gained increasing prominence. Misinterpretation related to culture and language can be avoided only by elevating our level of understanding the various cultures and values. In international business, firms must have this significant skill of understanding cultural differences to get more benefits. Cross cultural communication is indispensable for the firms having diverse workforce and employees of these firms should recognize the factors responsible for an effective communication. There are some barriers which can hinder the growth of an organization so an exposure to other cultures and an adequate training in cross cultural communication is essential to overcome these blocks. This paper will focus on the vital role of cross cultural communication, barriers to cross culture communication and some of the strategies to overcome these barriers.

Keywords - cross cultural communication, globalization, communication barriers, diverse workforce

Introduction

Globalization has opened many opportunities for the people to get mingled in varied ways. The working culture within and outside an organization is accustomed to different working styles of the workers who hail from different cultural backgrounds. Cross cultural communication plays a vital role in these types of firms having diverse workplace to have better relationships with international customers, employees and business partnerships. Even it encourages international team working and helps in sharing common goals. Poor communication can be resulted in poor organizational performance. In order to make cross cultural communication effective, a business has to understand the elements associated with a culture, the process of shaping a culture,

barriers involved in cross cultural communication process and identifying means of overcoming such barriers (Adler & Nancy1983).

Nowadays companies have diversified workforce where people from different regions and cultures work together in teams and these multicultural teams face many challenges, cultural issues rising conflicts and disagreements. The firms should ensure the understanding of different cultures to avoid these barriers in communication in order to have an effective cross cultural communication. The relationship of managers and the team members in multinational firms is important for the companies whose involvement is there in global business practices. Diversity in membership can be helpful in increasing the number of solutions offered and substitutes considered so focus should be put on utilizing individual differences to create innovations.

Cross cultural communication has a significant role to play in bringing desired results for the business firms in global market. Internationally collaboration provides an access to the wide range of information which as a result assists everyone to keep their work up-to-date. Research has shown that heterogeneous teams, having a mixture of life experiences and cultures, are more creative than the homogeneous teams .Heterogeneous groups can create a stronger dynamic within a team and thus promote the greater creativity. Cross cultural communication is also helpful in increasing the flexibility and responsiveness of the companies. Cross cultural communication is crucial in making an organization boost greater relevance of its products to its clients because international teams also help to ensure that the most appropriate products are presented addressed in a way that is pertinent to people.

BARRIERS TO CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Cross cultural communication provides good opportunities to foster prosperity and peace in global market but unpleasant consequences should also not be forgotten if it is not well managed. As diversity imposes blockades like stereotyping, uncertainty, ethnocentrism on the cross cultural communication so many problems can also arise. These barriers mainly occur due to lack of intercultural communication skills , an inadequate knowledge of cultures, different management style, varied expectations by management , expectations of the workers ,prevailing power distance and language barriers etc. so that is why an adequate training is essential in cross cultural communication. Barriers are those issues which affect the productivity and progress of

global business. Broadly the communication barriers can be identified as issues that have to do with the management & issues owing to the behaviour of the staff. (Ybema and Byun, 2009)

Cultures are also classified on the basis of high context and the low context cultures and accordingly, the messages are preferred. Communication context in which preference for messages by people is made is the underlying basis for classifying cultures as high context and low context. In high context communication culture, meanings attached to the used or uttered words can carry different interpretations and also words accompanied by body language may also give different meaning to the same word if used elsewhere.

On contrary, a low context communication culture gives a direct expression of feelings and ideas where one can frankly assess the situations. Managers belong to low context culture often give direct and blunt comments without any hidden meanings. In these types of situations, people can easily understand the expressions as the messages contain clarity for everyone to attach only the universal meaning which in turn saves the precious time in business transactions. In this fast changing global business scenario, MNCs prefer low context communication in their operations. So these cultural contexts can arise as barriers where the management and the employees are from different cultures and operate with divergent objectives which influence communication process. Internal communication system as well as external communication would be affected by divergence of national cultures.

Individuals must have some knowledge of non-verbal communication which is beneficial for establishing the effective communication relationship within intercultural context. Non-verbal communication consists of facial expressions, body movements, gestures, chronemics, proxemics and para language. These non-verbal codes are displayed through emotions and speaking style while communicating verbally. Non verbal differences can occur as communication barrier as non-verbal code in one culture can be different from the other culture. For instance, Eye contact is considered to be good and a reflection of honesty and straightforwardness in U.S. However, in some Asian countries, prolonged eye contact can be seen as rude or aggressive in many situations.

Language acts as a barrier in communication when people from different cultures use different languages because even misunderstandings can arise among those people who use the same

language. Although English is used as the international language but not every business firm uses English on a regular basis.

Cultural blindness and cultural imposition are also considered as communication barriers. When a person follows the values and traditions of the culture without even thinking about whether it is good or bad then can have a problem in effective communication as the differences are ignored. There are also some persons in   organizations whose tendency is to impose their own values and beliefs onto other persons.

Ethnocentrism also brings obstacles as one feels the superiority of his or her own culture and generally ethnocentric person shows the tendency to understand the other culture based on his own cultural values. A manager can consider his own mother tongue as the "best" and will not be ready to learn another language as he may consider another language as illogical or inferior. An ethnocentric person will have the tendency to reject the other non verbal systems as he/she considers his/her own non verbal codes as the most civilized. In this way this ethnocentrism can become a block for an efficient empathy and lead not only to the total destruction of communication, but to antagonism and even hostility.

Each society or community has its own language, lifestyle, culture and values and according to their set systems, they live and interact with each other. There is nothing good or bad to have eastern or western cultural values but the way of doing the things may be different. Ethnocentrism is a belief in the centrality of one's own culture. It often involves judging aspects of another culture by the standards of one's own. Bennet(1993) defines ethnocentrism as "assuming that world view of one's own culture is central to all reality" (p. 30).

Stereotyping is another block to cross cultural communication. Samovar and Porter (1991) define stereotypes as "the perceptions and beliefs we hold about groups or individuals based on our previously formed opinions and attitudes" (p. 280). When there is an inadequate knowledge about the people then it leads to misunderstandings. If a group is termed as dishonest we start treating everyone in that group as dishonest irrespective of individual natures. Many examples can be given as the one is the women are not good at math or tough subjects like Aeronautics which may cause women in turn to avoid studying such subjects.

Scollon and Scollon (1995) caution that in order to overcome the problem of oversimplification and stereotyping "comparisons between groups should always consider both likenesses and differences, that is, they should be based upon more than a single dimension of contrast, and it must be remembered that no individual member of a group embodies all of his or her group's characteristics" (p. 157). Indeed, an issue to keep in mind, as McKay (2002) explains, is that a contrast of especially western versus eastern assumptions of cultures of learning "can perpetuate differences, promote the concept of otherness, and lead to simple dichotomies and stereotyping" (p. 121).

Culture shock acts as barrier in communicating with others, especially, in a global environment. Cultural shock is that psychological phenomenon which is experienced by the people after moving to a new environment. When a person shifts to unfamiliar lifestyle and culture from his own then he experiences a feeling of disorientation, emotional and physical discomfort which further leads to sadness,depression,loneliness,insomnia,anger,irritability,unwilling to interact with others. Though culture shock is inevitable but it can be managed with conscious awareness of one's own reactions.

Communication barriers generally arise due to the absence of understanding between parties to the dialogue. Culture tends to create different attitudes and approaches to problem solving. There might be different approaches to solving a problem by the management and staff. When management and staff hail from different cultures their understanding of issues may turn out to be different. This ultimately compounds the process of arriving at a common understanding of the issues at stake.(Richardson and Smith, 2007)

Power distance is also considered as barrier .Since western thinking focuses on individuals' right to property ownership, individuals are expected to protect the individual domains earmarked for them & any unobtrusive foray to others' domain is not seen as unwarranted. In eastern thinking, leaders are supposed to take the power of taking decisions on behalf of others. Under this type of leadership, workforce feels reluctant in sharing knowledge and even employees may not show that much enthusiasm in taking part in the decision making process. Managers hailing from a western cultural background may be receptive to the feedback by the staff while Asian managers

may not think listening as mandatory or an essential prerequisite for decision making. (Richardson and Smith, 2007)

Values, practices, rules and philosophy of the business influence the communication system of a business organization .Communication system acts as link in transmitting values & norms associated with different cultures in an organization. Here an effective system of cross cultural communication plays an important role to transfer knowledge with clarity so that organization functions smoothly without being disrupted by cross cultural differences. Due to the divergence of the work force and management, MNCs have to adopt such effective communication system to confront certain restraints. It is imperative to overcome differences in cross cultural communication since a uniformed pattern can be evolved through an effective communication system in an MNC. Hence an MNC will have to ensure that steps are taken to overcome the barriers to cross cultural communication in order to attaining organizational objectives effectively & efficiently. Business organizations may contemplate many actions to remove the restrains impeding cross cultural communication. (Martin and Nakayama, 2012)

Measures to overcome barriers in cross cultural communication

In the world of globalization, multiculturalism is prevailing at the workplace and at the global business and which has really increased the necessity of effective intercultural communication where a communicator has to be proficient in communicating. Organizations must have this skill of communication to achieve objectives while taking into consideration the different values, norms and beliefs of the people working for the organizations because by developing this intercultural competence, a business organization can become successful in overcoming the barriers to cross cultural communication. Proper knowledge of cultures, attitudes and skills can enable people for flourishing development of intercultural competence.

The cognitive aspect of intercultural communication is known as intercultural awareness. This dimension involves mastering an individual's ability to understand other cultures' implicit conventions that govern the behaviour of people influenced by that particular culture. Intercultural awareness results in enhancing not only cultural-awareness but also self-awareness in the process. (Linghui and Koveos, 2008)

The behavioural aspect of intercultural communication characterizes intercultural adroitness. The development of adroitness focuses on enhancing the skills required enact successfully intercultural transactions. The successful conclusion of transactions would bring about bottom line results to an MNC that translate into tangible results. Interactive management developing social skills especially etiquettes, enhancing the quality of self expression are some of the key results areas where progress is expected to be made.(Dues and Brown, 2003)

Organizations should develop the ability to understand and appreciate the other   cultures how they feel or act. An adequate training can be provided to the employees to deal with blocks to cross cultural communication as they at workplace come across them. Positive attitude is must in solving these cultural barrier issues and this type of attitude brings respect, openness and better understanding of the varied cultures. Intercultural development trainers emphasize the significance of attitudes as they largely shape responses in cross cultural communication. (Linghui and Koveos,2008)

It is very important for the persons to be aware of their own behaviour when working with the people who are from different cultures and should give due respect to the different cultural norms and values by treating them with dignity. Be supportive and try to give encouragement to those who find difficulty in speaking foreign language because when expressing oneself it may not be easy to use different language. If there is any doubt in understanding some of the figures then write it down and get it checked .For example ,a billion is 1,000,000,000 in United States which is different figure in United Kingdom.

To overcome the problem of any ambiguity, speak slowly and clearly. "Many misunderstandings arise when there is a use of negative questions and answers. For example, In English, we say yes if the answer is affirmative and no if it is negative but in India, people often use yes if they think a negative question should be answered in the affirmative. For instance, if someone asks, "Is Neha not coming?" one should say "No, she is not coming." if Neha is indeed coming but people tend to say, "Yes, she is not coming." This response is based on the thought that "you are right that she is not coming," hence the answer begins with "yes"."(Kanchan Malhotra, Tamanna Arora)This can lead to confusion so such questions should be avoided. Listening is a good skill which should be used properly to enhance cross cultural communication and to overcome the

anxiety, Emotional Intelligence must be acquired by the managers and their team members to manage their emotions and feelings while dealing with the people hailing from diverse cultures.

In today's global business scenario, cross cultural communication has a significant role to play in the growth of an organization and it depends on the managers how successfully they manage a diverse workforce. Managers have the responsibility of showing admiration for cultural differences and making the communication effective at all levels. Due to the advancement in technology, different cultures have come on one platform in today's era so success or failure in managing a diverse or multicultural workforce largely depends on the managers at all levels to communicate effectively with people from different backgrounds and nationalities, and showing respect for cultural differences. Inability of the managers in understanding the varied customs, values, language and business etiquette, which are required to make dealings at the international market, can bring failure. Fostering a broad organizational culture by overcoming the blocks in cross cultural communication is always beneficial to the employees as well as the organization. That is why, it is necessary for the managers to develop the global mindset and multicultural sensitivity and also to cultivate cultural awareness, attitude and skills for the sustainable progression of their companies in international business.

Works Cited and consulted

1. Albert, R.D. (1994). Cultural diversity and intercultural training in multinational organizations.

   In Wiseman, R.L and shutter, (eds*) Communicating in multinational organizations* and intercultural communication annual. Vol. xviii (153-165) London: Sage publications.

2. Chaturvedi P.D., Chaturvedi Mukesh, "Business Communication",Third Edition, Pearson Press,2013

3. Gudykunst, W.B.(2003). Cross-Cultural and Intercultural Communication. Sage Publications.

4. John, M. Cross-Cultural Communication: The Essential Guide to International Business. Kogan Page

5. Jenifer Delecta, Dr. Raman G.P.,(Cross Cultural Communication Barriers in Workplace",vol. 6, Issue- I ,Jan.2015, pp 332-335 ,IJM

6. Martin, J and Nakayama, T. (2012). Intercultural Communication in Contexts. McGraw-Hill Humanities.

7. Munter, M. (1993). Cross-cultural communication for managers. *Business Horizons*, *36*(3). Retrieved from http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail

8. Molhotra Kanchan,Arora Tamanna,"Cross Cultural communication – Need of Global Business",Vol.1,Issue- 5(2014), IRJMC

9. Penn Sharon (June29,2018) "Cultural Communication Barriers in the workplace" https://smallbusiness.chron.com accessed on 26 september,2018

10. Welch, D. E., & Welch, L. S. (2008). The Importance of Language in International Knowledge Transfer. *Management International Review*, *48*(3), 339 - 360. Retrieved from http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail