

Managing cross-cultural communication challenges Toward a more perfect union in an age of diversity

GABRIELLA KISS

Miklós Zrínyi National Defence University, Budapest, Hungary

We all have an internal list of those we still don't understand, let alone appreciate. We all have biases, even prejudices, toward specific groups. We need to try thinking about their hopes and fears in relating to people of a group different from their own. Fears usually include being judged, miscommunication, and patronising or hurting others unintentionally; hopes are usually the possibility of dialogue, learning something new, developing friendships, and understanding different points of view. At any moment that we are dealing with people different from ourselves, the likelihood is that they carry a similar list of hopes and fears in their back pocket.¹¹ We all communicate with others all the time – in our homes, in our workplaces, in the groups we belong to, and in any community. No matter how well we think we understand each other, communication is hard. “Culture” is often at the root of communication challenges. Our culture influences how we approach problems, and how we participate in groups and in communities. When we participate in groups we are often surprised at how differently people approach their work together.

Intercultural communication includes diversity and global communication within different cultures

Culture is a complex concept, with many different definitions. But, simply put, “culture” refers to a group or community with which we share common experiences that shape the way we understand the world. It includes groups that we are born into, such as gender, race, or national origin. It also includes groups we join or become part of. We can acquire a new culture by moving to a new region, by a change in our economic status, or by becoming disabled. When we think of culture this broadly, we realise we all belong to many cultures at once.

In a world as complex as ours, each of us is shaped by many factors, and culture is one of the powerful forces that acts on us. Culture is central to what we see, how we make sense of what we see, and how we express ourselves.

As people from different cultural groups take on the exciting challenge of working together, cultural values sometimes conflict. We can misunderstand each other, and

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Address for correspondence:

GABRIELLA KISS

Miklós Zrínyi National Defence University

H-1581 Budapest, P.O. Box 15, Hungary

E-mail: gabiengl@freemail.hu

react in ways that can hinder what are otherwise promising partnerships. Oftentimes, we aren't aware that culture is acting upon us. Sometimes, we are not even aware that we have cultural values or assumptions that are different from others.

Intercultural communication covers a wide spectrum of interests in the cross cultural and multicultural education fields. While multicultural education and diversity concentrate primarily on domestic issues, the field of intercultural communication also includes the branch of cross cultural communication which concentrates on educational, business and governmental exchanges between nations. It is primarily concerned with how to develop relationships among people from different backgrounds so as to be effective in living, working and studying in cultures different from one's own.

Six fundamental patterns of cultural differences

Six fundamental patterns of cultural differences – ways in which cultures, as a whole, tend to vary from one another – are described hereby, in accordance to that research work Marcelle E. DuPraw and Marya Axner have conducted.¹¹ These descriptions point out some of the recurring causes of cross-cultural communication difficulties.

1. Different communication styles

The way people communicate varies widely between, and even within, cultures. One aspect of communication style is language usage. Across cultures, some words and phrases are used in different ways.

Another aspect of communication style is the degree of importance given to non-verbal communication. Non-verbal communication includes not only facial expressions and gestures; it also involves seating arrangements, personal distance, and sense of time. In addition, different norms regarding the appropriate degree of assertiveness in communicating, can add to cultural misunderstandings.

2. Different attitudes toward conflict

Some cultures view conflict as a positive thing, while others view it as something to be avoided. In the U.S., conflict is not usually desirable; but people often are encouraged to deal directly with conflicts that do arise. In fact, face-to-face meetings customarily are recommended as the way to work through whatever problems exist. In contrast, in many Eastern countries, open conflict is experienced as embarrassing or demeaning; as a rule, differences are best worked out quietly. A written exchange might be favoured means to address the conflict.

3. Different approaches to completing tasks

From culture to culture, there are different ways that people move toward completing tasks. Some reasons include different access to resources, different judgements of the rewards associated with task completion, different notions of time, and varied ideas about how relationship-building and task-oriented work should go together.

When it comes to working together effectively on a task, cultures differ with respect to the importance placed on establishing relationships early on in the collaboration. This does not mean that people from any of these cultural backgrounds are more or less committed to accomplishing the task, or value relationships more or less; it means they may pursue them differently.

4. Different decision-making styles

The roles individuals play in decision-making vary widely from culture to culture. For example, in the U.S., decisions are frequently delegated – that is, an official assigns responsibility for a particular matter to a subordinate. In many Southern European and Latin American countries, there is a strong value placed on holding decision-making responsibilities oneself. When decisions are made by groups of people, majority rule is a common approach in the U.S.; in Japan consensus is the preferred mode. Be aware that individuals' expectations about their own roles in shaping a decision may be influenced by their cultural frame of reference.

5. Different attitudes toward disclosure

In some cultures, it is not appropriate to be frank about emotions, about the reasons behind a conflict or a misunderstanding, or about personal information. When you are dealing with a conflict, be mindful that people may differ in what they feel comfortable revealing. Questions that may seem natural to you – What was the conflict about? What was your role in the conflict? What was the sequence of events, – may seem intrusive to others. The variation among cultures in attitudes toward disclosure is also something to consider before you conclude that you have an accurate reading of the views, experiences, and goals of the people with whom you are working.

6. Different approaches to knowing

Notable differences occur among cultural groups when it comes to epistemologies – that is, the ways people come to know things. European cultures tend to consider information acquired through cognitive means, such as counting and measuring, more valid than other ways of coming to know things. Compare that to African cultures' preference for affective ways of knowing, including symbolic imagery and rhythm.

Asian cultures' epistemologies tend to emphasise the validity of knowledge gained through striving toward transcendence. Recent popular works demonstrate that our own society is paying more attention to previously overlooked ways of knowing.

You can see how different approaches to knowing could affect ways of analysing a community problem or finding ways to resolve it. Social actions combine a transformation approach where people view situations from other perspectives and then are asked to take a position to help solve them. The social system and its historical processes along with social change and personal awareness are important parts of multicultural/diversity studies. The strength of this approach is in its identification of various groups that are not normally recognised in the countries' collective consciousness, and further in understanding the process they undergo in living in a culture in which they are not the majority and finally focusing on the need for personal and social change. This discipline, however, does not provide a structured way in which the participants make the transition from recognition of different perceptions to an enlargement of their own worldview. While self-awareness is included, it is given less importance than the need to focus on minority group characteristics and needs.

In addition to helping us to understand ourselves and our own cultural frames of reference, knowledge of these six patterns of cultural difference can help us to understand people who are different from us. Anthropologists Avruch and Black have noted that, when faced by an interaction that we do not understand, people tend to interpret the others involved as "abnormal", "weird", or "wrong".⁴ This tendency, if indulged, gives rise on the individual level to prejudice. If this propensity is either consciously or unconsciously integrated into organisational structures, then prejudice takes root in our institutions – in the structures, laws, policies, and procedures that shape our lives.

Explanation of culture bump theory

One reason that a personal change structure has failed to evolve in either diversity or cross cultural communication training is that both fields tend to deal with individuals at a macro-cultural level. The methodology for programs in these fields has been developed with a focus on individuals as products of a culture rather than focusing on individuals as generators of their own culture. Multicultural education and cross cultural communication theory has been built around identifying the various values and behaviours of individual cultures rather than focusing on how individuals create and interpret their own cultural identity. While both approaches stress the need for recognising different perceptions, neither approach provides a specific guideline for

leveraging that awareness into a self-awareness that translates into a changed behaviour. The *culture bump theory* addresses this structural need for a change mechanism in cultural programming. It thus incorporates both the strengths of diversity and cross cultural communication training by acknowledging and delineating cultural differences. Archer² describes the culture bump (cultural difference) as that phenomenon which occurs when an individual has expectations of a particular behaviour within a particular situation and encounters a different behaviour when interacting with an individual from another culture. While culture bump theory consists of a cluster of concepts regarding the effect of cultural differences on interpersonal, intercultural interactions such as their relationship with stereotyping and their duration, it is in the notion of how culture specific knowledge is acquired and its effect on relationships that culture bump theory contributes most to a training design.

Approaching cultural differences from the perspective of a culture bump allows an individual to view cultural differences, not as problems to be solved, but as opportunities to learn more about oneself and others. Culture bump theory assumes that culture bumps are never eliminated since one's own culture is never eliminated.³ Without self-reflection, culture bumps maintain the potential for misunderstanding. An important aspect of this approach is that the participants define their own cultural identity and beliefs and in the process of uncovering and sharing their own cultural criteria, their prejudice and ethnocentric blind spots are surfaced. They are a necessary element for diverse individuals to truly connect with one another. In one sense, by using culture bump, individuals, more than describing what happens as simple events, are actually accessing the domain of understanding of another's world view not as knowledge but through an extension of his or her own horizon. It is at this stage, that the individual participant may have moved toward mastery of higher levels of knowledge so that they can better understand race and ethnic relations and develop the skills and abilities needed to make reflective personal and public decisions.⁵

Indeed, the creation of the term culture bump creates a common language for individuals to discuss cultural differences that depersonalises the incidents as well as empowering the individuals who experience them. Furthermore, this information base, while learned primarily about differences in national culture, also transfers to differences in age, gender, ethnicity, and professional background. This shift in mental models leads to communication effectiveness, higher team efficiency and communicative abilities.

Managing multicultural teamwork

In today's world people spend a considerable time communicating across cultures with other people and organisations around the world. Intercultural communication competence of employees of multicultural organisations has risen to a higher level of importance. Today a large portion of communication in multicultural organisations occurs between people with different cultural backgrounds.⁸ Team members with different cultural backgrounds are likely to have difficulties in understanding each other because of the difference in the perception about what competent communication is. To work effectively with diverse people, managers of multicultural organisations need to know about the culture of the person with whom they are interacting, but also about his or her personality, behaviour patterns in conflict situations, demographics, and life experiences. An ability to work in a diverse workforce requires managers to become competent intercultural communicators.

There is growing pressure to achieve common results in an interdependent work environment where individual technical brilliance is no longer enough. We are compelled to find success through working with others. The "others" will increasingly not share our language, not share our "local" way of thinking, not even share the same building, city, country or continent. Being a successful team-builder in this new environment means building teams in a *lingua franca* – probably English; building teams across functional, corporate and cultural differences; building teams at a distance.

In traditional national teams we often know what motivates the members and so can try to create the necessary conditions for them to work together. In global virtual teamwork, we know even less about what we don't know and how it may show up. Understanding people when we share a common corporate culture, using the same mother tongue and meeting frequently and informally is in itself challenging. It is not surprising that international teamwork promises so much but in fact creates new frustrations in its wake.

Often these teams are "multicultural" in the sense that they are drawn not only from different national cultures but also from different areas, functional and professional cultures both within and outside the organisation. Such multicultural teams have a clear intuitive appeal. The benefits can include:

- Providing a greater range of perspectives and options
- Enhancing the quality of decisions taken
- Developing the 'global awareness' of team members, and improving relationships with key partners through working together.

However, there are a number of problems that inhibit the rewards that teamwork can bring. Firstly, multicultural teams are often formed less as a deliberate attempt to promote better decision-making and more as an inevitable consequence of the geographical compression caused by globalisation. Secondly, and more importantly, while potentially solving problems linked to *external adaptation*, multicultural teams bring their own problems of *internal integration*. Indeed they have been shown to be highly effective or highly ineffective when compared to culturally homogeneous teams. Since in multicultural teams each participant brings their own unconscious process and often assumes (or wants to believe) that there is more similarity than there is, the result can be:

- Paralysis through stand-off politeness
- Domination by individuals or subgroups
- Exclusion of one or two members

This explains how cross-cultural groups can be highly ineffective. At the other end of the scale, the competitive advantage in setting up international teams is undoubtedly linked to their potential for interactive synergy. In order to leverage positive rather than negative results, available researches by Canney Davison suggest that:⁶

- Differences need to be understood, acknowledged, respected and explored before people will start to value and utilise them. Learning across the team will probably not occur until this aspect is in place.
- In this process 'critical moments' will occur in the group accompanied by feelings of discomfort as people face the realities of confronting the issue of diversity. These can be turned into breakthroughs with the help of the facilitator and/or the group leader.
- At this early stage of the group's life cycle, it is impossible to overemphasise the importance of preparing extensively for kick-off sessions. A facilitator needs to have information about each person's expectations, their attitudes to each other and their level of commitment, i.e. any hidden agendas. To this end it might also be useful to send team members a short questionnaire asking them about their expectations, perception of hot issues and convergence or divergence of styles noticed.

Learning about different ways that people communicate can enrich our lives. People's different communication styles reflect deeper philosophies and world views which are the foundation of their culture. Learning about people's cultures has the potential to give us a mirror image of our own. We have the opportunity to challenge our assumptions about the "right" way of doing things, and consider a variety of approaches. We have a chance to learn new ways to solve problems that we had previously given up on, accepting the difficulties as "just the way things are".⁷

Respecting our differences and working together

This research analysed the perception of intercultural communication competence within multicultural teams and cultures. The importance of intercultural communication competence to the performance of multicultural teams is highly determined. It explains the cultural differences in the perceptions of intercultural communication competence, and differences in the scores on the dimensions of intercultural communication competence between managers and leaders of different nations with experience on multicultural teams. Managers of multicultural organisations emphasised that the success of their common work would depend on how well their employees are able to deal with cultural complexity and to understand, accept, and respond to cultural differences.

In conclusion, multicultural teams need cultivating in an atmosphere where the alchemy of diversity can work its magic.¹⁰ This depends principally on the ability of members to manage intercultural relationships rather than managing data. It is our experience that to harvest the potential of international teams, organisations need to provide the appropriate nutrients – specific training, external facilitation, benchmarking, guidelines and sensitive sponsorship from senior management. In accordance to Adler much investment goes into creating the technological links to facilitate global teamwork, but there is often much less support for teams to meet the more complex challenges of nurturing and developing the human relations on either side of these links. Without support in managing the process of working together, international teams will be left to their own instinctive devices... and in a multicultural environment, instinctive devices lead to divided teams.¹

Lastly, if we are open to learning about people from other cultures, we become less lonely. Prejudice and stereotypes separate us from whole groups of people who could be friends and partners in working for change. Many of us long for real contact. Talking with people different from ourselves gives us hope and energises us to take on the challenge of improving our communities and worlds.

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