

Topic 5.2: Communication challenges in multicultural workplaces

1. Communication and Diversity in Organizations

Globalization and the increasing interdependence of business units is a major reason for the upward trend in the mobility of individuals worldwide. This rapid global networking of individuals has led to many significant changes in the working styles of organizations, but also to challenges for individuals with different cultural backgrounds (Okoro and Washington, 2012).

Communication incidents are very common among people working together in diverse groups and occur particularly often in the workplace where both authoritarian and informal communication is required (Martin and Nakayama, 2007). If communication in a multicultural organization is managed and conducted properly, it can be beneficial depending on the model and structure of organizational communication within an organization (Luthra and Dahiya, 2016).

Encouraging feedback as an essential part of business communication and a greater emphasis on communication in the workplace can help to create an attitude that values individual principles and beliefs and also encourages and appreciates employees who work in such a diverse environment (Luthra and Dahiya, 2016).

Exercises for effective communication as a team-building measure also play an important role in increasing the performance level and productivity of employees. This exercise helps them to improve their ability to encode and decode messages. To create effective organizational communication, on the one hand, effective communication structures should be created. On the other hand, attention must also be paid to interpersonal communication, intercultural differences and concerns related to non-verbal communication. For employees who work in a multicultural group or team, it is crucial to understand the importance of information and messages in order to avoid any decrease in performance (Luthra and Dahiya, 2016).

2. Main communication challenges in multicultural workplaces

In the following section, the major challenges of communication in multicultural working environments will be discussed in more detail.

2.1 Language

In a multicultural organization, people from different fields who speak different languages work together. Since it is almost impossible to acquire knowledge of the different languages spoken by employees, language is sometimes considered a major obstacle to effective communication and can hinder the achievement of organizational goals (Luthra and Dahiya, 2016).

2.2 Pronunciation and fluency

There are many different languages used in organizations around the world, but English has become the global language of business. However, for various reasons, people do not all speak English equally well and fluently. No matter how talented or educated someone is, if they lack language skills and fluency, it is a challenge to share their knowledge and skills with the team (Luthra and Dahiya, 2016).

2.3 Communication styles

It has been shown that communication styles of a diverse workforce can achieve significant improvements in decision making and business activities through their diverse thinking skills and approaches to incorporating new ideas and practices (Friedman, 2005). There are several communication styles, such as verbal or non-verbal communication. For people from different backgrounds, understanding these different communication styles can be challenging. It is not possible that a technique that is appropriate or practicable for one group is also suitable for other groups. For each group or team, individual effective ways of communicating must be found (Aswathappa, 2008).

2.4 Methods of Communication

With the development of various new techniques and means of communication it has become easier to communicate. However, it is not possible that all employees feel equally comfortable in using the various communication techniques and are equally well trained in them. Some

employees prefer to write e-mails, others prefer phone calls or other online meetings, while some rather appreciate face-to-face meetings. The type of communication technique an employee chooses depends on the familiarity and personal interest in using a particular method. The inaccessibility of a certain method and the reluctance to learn a new method can hinder the communication process in organizations (Luthra and Dahiya, 2016).

2.5 Opinions about Hierarchy and Authority

Individuals with different cultural backgrounds may have different opinions about hierarchy and authority based on varying cultural norms and standards. People from certain cultures may have extreme appreciation, respect and even fear of higher authorities, whereas some of the employees from other cultures are not afraid and also have the courage to ask questions when they encounter someone committing incorrect actions (Luthra and Dahiya, 2016).

2.6 Conflicts

Conflicts arising from cultural differences can disrupt the output of any team. These conflicts can be caused by incorrect feedback, work processes, schedules, delivery dates and individual concerns. Conflicts are an essential part of every workplace, because when people from different cultures communicate with each other, a lack of understanding can lead to conflict situations. It is therefore very important to solve conflicts carefully and through efficient communication (Morsella and Krauss, 2004).

2.7 Communication Skills

As mentioned above, the development and refinement of many communication tools and techniques has made it easier to create a creative and productive multicultural atmosphere, but without good and effective communication skills, this may not be beneficial. The use of new methods has reduced the speaking and listening part of communication, as most communication regarding official work is done via e-mail. Information is mostly passed on in written form and therefore it is necessary to have a good command of writing official mails and on the other hand the recipient must have a good knowledge of words to be able to analyze and interpret this message correctly. Excellent communication skills help employees to convey information accurately. A lack of communication skills has a negative impact on organizational communication (Luthra and Dahiya, 2016).

2.8 Personality

In an organization, individuals from different parts of society with individual perceptions and different attitudes come together. Some have a self-confident and robust personality, while others may have complex characteristics and therefore tend to be easily and quickly distracted, lack self-confidence, or have difficulties in participating. It has often been observed that there can be communication problems between people with unique and different personalities (Luthra and Dahiya, 2016).

3. The importance of effective communication

Organizations with a higher degree of diversity have many significant advantages, such as excellent decision-making skills, motivation, innovation, a higher success factor and a stronger growth. Effective communication plays a key role in helping organizations manage a diverse workforce (Luthra and Dahiya, 2016).

Communication serves as an important instrument in organizations to overcome many organizational problems regarding implementation and output, resolves conflicts and disputes while creating connections with team colleagues (Gupta, 2013).

Clashes and disagreements can be managed and resolved at an early stage with effective communication. Effective communication does not only mean dynamic and effective speaking, but also effective listening plays a crucial role. Effective listening promotes better understanding and knowledge, which helps individuals to improve their performance and productivity in the workplace (Weger et al., 2014). Thus, effective and engaged intercultural communication becomes an advantage in systematic business management.

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