

Topic 5.3: How to improve communication in multicultural workplaces

1. Communication in intercultural situations

Communication in intercultural situations is the main mechanism for getting to know the views, knowledge and needs of another person. When communicating across cultures, the more information can be absorbed, the better the understanding of what the other person wants to communicate. Therefore, active listening is an important aspect of effective communication (Nardon, 2017, pp. 145-146).

When communicating with people with a different accent and who use words and body language in a different way, it is possible, for example, that someone gets distracted from the main message during a presentation. Instead of focusing entirely on the content of the message, the speaker's style of presentation is analyzed and evaluated. This could lead to the feeling that although the presentation style is pleasant, the content of the message is not important or reasonable. Instead of really listening and trying to understand the whole message, the focus is on one's own ideas and on planning one's own reactions (Nardon, 2017, p. 146).

When listening across different cultures, it is important to overcome what is perceived as inadequate or strange in the way the message is conveyed and instead focus on the content of which is being communicated through words, body language and facial expressions. However, by listening carefully, it can be noted that there are still things that are not understood due to a lack of commonalities. Therefore, inquiry and advocacy are helpful tools to increase common knowledge (Nardon, 2017, p. 146).

2. Inquiry

Inquiry is a process of searching for new information in order to better understand the perspectives of others. Inquiry refers to the exploration and questioning of one's own reasoning and the reasoning of others in order to understand their point of views (Friedman and Antal, 2005). Although there may be agreement on the facts (for example, when people should come to the meeting), it may not be clear how these facts should be interpreted and how these interpretations affect one's own feelings (Nardon, 2017, p. 146).

Inquiry is important for several reasons:

- (1) It facilitates the exchange of information that is not shared. Even if two people experience the same situation, they may have different information about it that affects their interpretations. Imagine, for example, that you have been sent abroad by headquarters to help a subsidiary introduce a new performance evaluation process. When discussing various issues in the meeting, you may not know that a similar implementation attempt has failed due to the local union's objection to the system, which makes it difficult for you to understand the resistance of the locals to your proposals (Nardon, 2017, pp. 146-147).
- (2) When different people are confronted with the same information, they can pay attention to different aspects of it. What stands out is not necessarily the most essential part of an interaction, but rather what is perceived to be the most important aspect of an interaction. For example, when you try to implement the new evaluation system, you may concentrate on the transparency that clear evaluation processes provide, but your counterparts may be more focused on the impact on motivation (Nardon, 2017, p. 147).

(3) Things can be interpreted differently. Through the cultures in which people are immersed, they learn how things work and attach meaning to them. Perhaps one has been taught that superiors should not be challenged, even if they are misinformed. Or one has learned that a lack of questioning means a lack of interest. When a message is sent to someone else, it is given a meaning based on an individual interpretation of the subject, oneself and the other person. When others receive the message, they attach meaning to it based on their interpretations of the subject, the message, themselves and the other person who sent the message. If there is no common ground, it is possible that what the message was intended to convey may be lost, and the interpretation others make may differ significantly from what was actually intended (Nardon, 2017, p. 147).

“Inquiry is a mechanism of attempting to uncover these different assumptions and interpretations by collecting more information. The questions that require answers are as follows: How do I/you perceive the situation? What do I/you wish to achieve in this situation? Which actions am I/are you taking to achieve this goal?” (Nardon, 2017, p. 147). Inquiry requires to suspend judgement, leave behind an earlier understanding and tolerate uncertainty until a new understanding can be created. Through inquiry, hidden cultural assumptions are uncovered, the underlying facts are clearly stated, and an awareness is gained of how one's own and the other's cultures shape one's own perceptions, expectations and behaviors (Nardon, 2017, p. 147).

3. Advocacy

“Advocacy refers to expressing and standing up for what one thinks and desires. Advocacy involves stating clearly what we think and want and explaining the reasoning behind our point of view. Advocacy is a tool to help *other* people understand *us*” (Nardon, 2017, p. 148). It is challenging to change the frame and get into another person's story, particularly when that story is based on a different set of cultural premises.

The goal of advocacy is to help others understand one's own history and perspective. Advocacy is about explaining one's own thoughts not only to others but also to oneself, as sometimes people are not aware of their own thoughts and assumptions. In an unwise attempt to be considerate, the mistake is often made to focus on what the other person might

be thinking and feeling without really understanding what oneself is thinking. Advocacy is therefore about openly communicating one's own points of view and giving the other person the opportunity to communicate openly as well (Nardon, 2017, p. 149).

4. Combining inquiry and advocacy

When inquiry is combined with advocacy, knowledge of one's own cultural assumptions, the meanings attached to a subject, and the reasons for a particular thought can be shared. This sharing of assumptions and interpretations creates the basis for a new, mutually acceptable viewpoint. Not all values and beliefs need to be shared or discussed in every intercultural interaction. Rather, the few questions that are relevant to a person must be understood in order to reach agreement. Inquiry and advocacy must be used in a balanced way (Hill, 1996). If only inquiry is used, information about the other can be uncovered, but no information about oneself can be shared. If, on the other hand, only advocacy is used, information about oneself can be shared, but no information about the other can be obtained. Building a common understanding requires an exchange in which not only one's own points of view are represented, but also the other's points of view are explored (Nardon, 2017, p. 149).

5. Useful advices for improving cross-cultural communication skills

The following lists the “top ten tips for effective cross-cultural communication” (Chrysos, 2019) by the British business consultancy cHRyosos HR Solutions Ltd:

1. Maintain etiquette

Many cultures have specific etiquette around the way they communicate. Before you meet, research the target culture, or if time allows, do some cross-cultural training. For example, many cultures expect a degree of formality at the beginning of communication between individuals. Every culture has its own specific way of indicating this formality: ‘Herr’ and ‘Frau’ in Germany, reversing family and given names in China and the use of ‘san’ in Japan for men and women etc. Be aware of these familiarity tokens and don’t jump straight to first name terms until you receive a cue from the other person to do so.

2. Avoid slang

Not even the most educated non-native English speaker will have a comprehensive understanding of English slang, idioms and sayings. They may understand the individual words you have said, but not the context or the meaning. As a result, you could end up confusing them or at worst, offending them.

3. Speak slowly

Even if English is the common language in a cross-cultural situation it's not a good idea to speak at your normal conversational speed. Modulating your pace will help, as will speaking clearly and pronouncing your words properly. Break your sentences into short, definable sections and give your listener time to translate and digest your words as you go. But don't slow down too much as it might seem patronising. If the person you're speaking to is talking too quickly or their accent is making it difficult for you to understand them, don't be afraid to politely ask them to slow down too.

4. Keep it simple

In a cross-cultural conversation, there's no need to make it harder for both of you by using big words. Just keep it simple. Two syllable words are much easier to understand than three syllable words, and one syllable words are better than two syllable words. Say "Please do this quickly" rather than "Please do this in an efficacious manner."

5. Practice active listening

Active listening is a very effective strategy for improving cross cultural communication. Restate or summarise what the other person has said, to ensure that you have understood them correctly, and ask frequent questions. This helps build rapport and ensures that important information doesn't get missed or misunderstood.

6. Take turns to talk

Make the conversation flow more freely by taking it in turns to speak. Make a point and then listen to the other person respond. Particularly when people are speaking English as their second language it's better to talk to them in short exchanges rather than delivering a long monologue that might be difficult for them to follow.

7. Write things down

If you're not sure whether the other person has understood you properly, write it down to make sure. This can be particularly helpful when discussing large figures. For

example, in the UK we write a billion as 1,000,000,000 but in the USA, it's written as 1,000,000,000,000.

8. Avoid closed questions

Don't phrase a question that needs a 'yes' or 'no' answer. In many cultures it is difficult or embarrassing to answer in the negative, so you will always get a 'yes' even if the real answer is 'no'. Ask open-ended questions that require information as a response instead.

9. Be careful with humour

Many cultures take business very seriously and believe in behaving professionally and following protocol at all times. Consequently, they don't appreciate the use of humour and jokes in a business context. If you do decide to use humour, make sure it will be understood and appreciated in the other culture and not cause offence. Be aware that British sarcasm usually has a negative effect abroad.

10. Be supportive

Effective cross-cultural communication is about all parties feeling comfortable. In any conversation with a non-native English speaker, treat them with respect, do your best to communicate clearly and give them encouragement when they respond. This will help build their confidence and trust in you.

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