Communication Challenges in a Multicultural Organization

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Abstract:

Communication that too effective communication is a tremendous challenge and a huge barrier that one comes across when working with people of different cultures in an organization during the best of times. The challenge that one has to face when working in an environment that is multicultural and with people of different backgrounds is just too mind-boggling. People who work in companies with multicultural environments are subject to communication barriers due to different cultural backgrounds thus engaging in different, varied types of communication. The ineffective or lack of communication as a result of diversity in the workplace can lead to the breakdown of the machinery, confusion among the workers, low morale, division and thus leading to lack of team work. The way we communicate like everything else is determined strongly by the culture we grow in and there are many aspects of the same that differ and this can have a major impact on others and our work balance. Today's multicultural work place creates significant challenges to effective communication beyond the obvious barriers created by varying competence in the primary language of communication, which for global businesses and in the work place is English. Employees come from nations around the world thus the organization is faced with the challenge to ensure that their competencies are not buried under language and cultural barriers.

Key Words: Culture, Communication, Multi-culturalism, Organization, Inter-cultural communication, Barriers

Introduction

Communication is simply the act of transferring information from one place to another. An effective communicator understands his audience, chooses an appropriate communication channel, hones his message to this channel and encodes the message to reduce misunderstanding by the receiver(s).
He will also seek out feedback from the receiver(s) as to how the message is understood and attempts to correct any misunderstanding or confusion as soon as possible.

"Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs and other capabilities and habits acquired by a man as a member of society" – Sir E.B. Tylor

Multi-cultural means relating to or containing several cultural or ethnic groups within a society.

In an organizationally diverse workplace the obvious challenge is the language barrier among employees, including accents and fluency.

Most organizations today have people from many different backgrounds and cultures who work together, the number of organizations operating internationally is also growing rapidly and there is also more diversity within the consumer base, client group and partners. For organizations this interaction is often beneficial, as diversity fosters ideas and new approaches to new undertakings, decision-making and problem solving. But with these come different understandings and expectations regarding management, teams, and social customs and communication norms. Effective communication between people of the same cultural background is complex and challenging at the best of times. Trying to understand and have good, effective communication between people from different cultural backgrounds is even more challenging, as cultural barriers play an important role as an invisible barrier. Communication problems can occur in any type of organizational setting. People misunderstand each other for a wide variety of reasons, and these misunderstandings can occur between people who are culturally similar as well as those who are different. Ineffective communication of key objectives results in confusion, anxiety, lack of teamwork and low morale. Obstacles in communication arise from lack of knowledge; underlying distrust and apprehension that is a common thing among people from different cultures and these can further escalate into larger problems negatively affecting the production and organizational cohesion. A firm needs to understand and identify the barriers involved in cross - cultural communication process and work towards overcoming such barriers in order to make it effective.

Communication in organizations is equivalent to the neural network in the human body. If there is a misfire, the organism becomes inefficient or even dysfunctional. It creates organizational problems; without effective communication, teams and projects lose efficiency and performance across the board suffers.

Effects of Cross – Cultural Communication Barriers:

When people are employed by the organization or when the organizations conduct business with clients from different culture backgrounds, there can often be misunderstandings that occur due to the difference in the culture, values and beliefs and up bringing which can lead to communication barriers due to misinterpretations of a certain cultural norm that are prevalent in one's culture but is not in the others. In doing so, this could lead to a high level of anxiety ending up in breakdown in communication between the two and affecting the outcome. The projects can fail, the conflicts can rise – thus it is very important for the management to be aware of these differences and they should incorporate strategies for dealing with such cross culture barriers that may arise.

Like everything else we learn, the way we communicate is determined strongly by the culture we grow in, and there are many facets of communication which differ from one to another, including how we talk, the volume we use, how direct is the communication, how much emotion we express in various situations, the rules for turn taking, the use or avoidance of silence, and many non-verbal aspects of communication like posture, eye contact, proximity, touching, tone of voice, etc. that occur almost totally beneath our conscious awareness. People with different cultures have different communication and working styles. It is easy to misinterpret other cultures' communication, even when it occurs in a language we understand, since many aspects of culture influence communication style, regardless of the language in which it is expressed.

Communication style in Western cultures is direct and the meaning is seemingly obvious. Other cultures tend to be more discrete in the way they present their message. As a result, communication between a Westerner and a non-Westerner can result in confusion within the workplace. This can occur during face-to-face interactions and when communication is virtual. For instance, East Asians sometimes say that Westerners treat strangers like friends and friends like strangers. It is further seen that communication patterns develop very differently in individualistic and in group-oriented cultures. It is needless to say that each and every culture has it's own and different norms and they are rigid in accepting appropriate behavior and roles, these roles are different and varied and this often leads to conflict. How employees of diverse cultures respond to one another is a major determining factor towards the cohesiveness of an organization. For example, in a Western culture, the question might be, "Is option A or option B more effective?" Whereas in a non-Western culture, employees may have to imply or suggest a particular option without stating it directly. Oftentimes, in a Western culture, during a board meeting, when someone nods, we tend to think they agree with the statement. However, in other cultures, a nod doesn't necessarily mean mutual agreement, rather, just an acknowledgement.

Stereotyping that is the assumption that we carry about a certain set of people and culture, value judgments, exaggeration or overgeneralization is another reason that leads to anxiety – though this is a result of fear of the group or lack of knowledge about them – leading to miscommunication or no communication. It is assumed that all American are both impatient and arrogant at same time they are friendly and tolerant- prejudging an individual can result in both misconception about an individual belonging to this group and barrier to communication. Stereotyping discounts individuals and can limit options for them in the workplace. Many stereotypes are negative or even hostile and are a serious barrier to workplace communication. Ethnocentrism – that our culture is distinctive is directly proportional to the anxiety level and a lot of issues arise due to this one notion, it not only acts as a barrier but also hinders employee morale and productivity.

Today's multicultural work place creates significant challenges to effective communication beyond the obvious barriers created by varying competence in the primary language of communication, which, for global businesses, is generally English. Lack of proper communication skills can lead to misunderstanding the instructions and thus not carrying on the instructions and the work properly. This in turn affects the quality of the work. Communication is the core of any business it is only through this that the information is shared, trust built, constructive relations developed and maintained. Effective communication is often

challenging in a homogenous setting and in a culturally diverse environment, it becomes much harder. In the workplace, obstacles to communication and management come from obvious as well as unseen differences and difficulties in the workplace arise from the lack of knowledge, underlying apprehension and distrust that is normal when people from different cultures work together.

> How often do we as individuals misjudge someone trying to convey something to us in a language known to us but unknown to him, it is not only difficult but also embarrassing and frustrating when one has to explain/convey oneself to another when you do not the language of the place.

Another obvious challenge faced by an organizational having a diverse workplace is **accent and fluency** of the language among employees. Although English has become the official standard language for business, many non- English speakers can feel unnoticed and unappreciated because of their inability to converse and understand the language and thus convey what they want to say, there are chances the subject matter experts take a backseat as they are unable to convey their message across. All this can lead to their going into a shell and further becoming less engaged and motivating as a team player and thus frustrated impediments to the collaborative learning. An organization can be negatively affected and fail to see an increase in their return on investment.

Lack of language fluency can, not only lead to frustration but can also become a reason of stress over a passage of time. Communication differences can lead to significant obstacles to effective teamwork if not managed correctly.

According to a Harvard Business Review article on effectively managing multicultural teams, communication issues include:

- ✓ Direct vs. indirect communication
- ✓ Trouble with accents and fluency
- ✓ Differing attitudes towards hierarchy and authority
- ✓ Conflicting norms for decision making

Communication in Western cultures is generally direct and explicit. The message's meaning is very clear. But, this isn't the case in other countries, like Japan, who embed the meaning in the way the message is presented. Formality and etiquettes play a major role in their communication.

Cultural relativism wherein one compares the norms and conducts of different cultures and evaluates them against standards of what's wrong and what's right. This becomes an obstacle when one presumes that cultural norms, customs and conducts are not right if they differ from those of your culture.

Another common mistake in multicultural environment is making generalizations and assumptions. The work culture in organizations of the same country both domestic as well international can be very different, while some organizations follow a formal and a very hierarchical culture the others are more open, direct

and informal to the extent of being rude. For some eye contact is considered as rude while for others refraining from the same is considered disrespectful. These variations can leave an individual wondering and confused. Even when people are willing and eager to work together and cooperate, they may unintentionally confuse or even offend each other because of their different cultures and linguistic skills. It leaves them wondering how are they expected to communicate and what would the reaction of the individual be, these behavioral differences become barriers if they are not recognized.

Methods and communication skills that are normal for one group of people may appear ineffective or inappropriate to another group. An American tends to be very informal and may come across as over friendly to people especially older generation from Europe or Japan. Loud and over friendly interrupting may come out as aggressive and may intimidate someone from a culture that teaches a more reserved manner of expression - thus causing misunderstanding and a major barrier in a team working towards the same goal because communicating is easy but effectively communicating is actually a very difficult task. Their way of greeting each other are very different – in western cultures it is very informal as giving a hug is considered fine but it may not be so in Asian countries and this could lead to a lot of misunderstandings. Thus not only **verbal but also nonverbal communication** being different in different cultures also becomes a matter of huge concern.

Many cultures have the **hierarchical structures** that have to be followed to the core - any information that has to travel either up or down has to follow a certain order it has to be passed to the higher-level team members and up the corporate ladder before reaching the executive level. Whereas some other organizations have relatively flat hierarchical structures where employees and leaders work as a unified team. In other cultures social hierarchy is so deeply rooted that it creates bumps in communication. Some cultures treat women as subordinate and for men belonging to such cultures it becomes near impossible to working shoulder to shoulder or having women as their superiors. A lack of cultural awareness can result in a disconnected workforce and leave some employees feeling left out and unrecognized.

Discriminatory and Harassment - demonstrating partiality towards or hurtful elimination or rejection of people because of cultural or any other differences between the sexes demands a clear understanding of remarks and actions that could be interpreted as sexual harassment. Sexual harassment is undesirable behavior of a sexual nature or with sexual implications. It may occur for men as well as women; this can be a root cause of communication failure in a major way.

Organizations with multicultural teams also are faced with challenges which the less diverse or team comprised of people of similar set of value, belonging to the same culture in other words coming from the same back ground may not face. If the language of communication is not same and all the team members are not fluent in it, efforts to move forward can be stalled. Cultural differences varied backgrounds can also lead to misunderstanding and communication failures. Exchange of ideas, information and instructions because not understood well; can lead to frustration and members can be gapping in the dark and may individually try to figure out exactly what is being said or suggested. There are times and situations where the communication gap has led to failure of machinery.

When people are employed by the organization or when the organizations conduct business with clients from different culture backgrounds, there can often be misunderstandings that occur due to the difference in the culture and up bringing which can lead to communication barriers due to misinterpretations of a certain cultural norm that is prevalent in one's culture but is not in the others. In doing so, this could lead to a breakdown in communication between the two and ultimately affect the outcome. The projects can fail, the conflicts can rise – thus it is very important for the management to be aware of these differences and they should incorporate strategies for dealing with such cross culture barriers that may arise.

Individual culture has its own peculiar way of reaching an agreement and an executive decision. They differ on time taken to reach the decision and the process as to how and what should one do while reaching it, what steps must be in place beforehand and how much effort should be put in. Unlike other cultures that tend to withhold information until they have performed analyses and comparisons before reaching a decision, Americans tend to be very quick at deciding, according to the Harvard Business Review article.

An article in the Ivey Business Journal discusses how Americans tend to negotiate by making compromises and trade-offs; and how the French differ as they will agree on a set of basic principles to guide them throughout the negotiation process. While diversity in the workplace breeds different attitudes towards hierarchy, it is also important to be aware of the conflicting norms for decision making.

The tools – the software; the Apps used in the organizations sometimes are not the ones that can cater to all the employees. Most of the tools built today are purpose built; this is a challenge for most of the organizations as they are looking to accomplish the task of group communication and collaboration. Purpose built tools like Drop box is great tools for small teams, but lack the other important capabilities needed to actually collaborate across the shared group. Emails sent to a group, unless BCC field used; one has a visibility to everyone else's email address – this can become a fundamental privacy issue to some or all. A different member of the group use different apps and it becomes very difficult to download and work on so many Apps – thus it leads to frustration. Organizations need to unlock the power communication.

Noise is another factor that is often associated with communication difficulty. Noise, is not just auditory. It can refer to anything that is distracting or interferes with communication. For example, it could be caused by not understanding the meaning of a word or how the word is being used. Psychological issues such as stress or anger, frustration overload of information can also be considered noise, as they will interfere with our ability to communicate effectively. When we are stressed or distressed, we may find it difficult to form cohesive sentences and our listening ability is often greatly diminished. It is often much more challenging in culturally diverse environments because of the additional linguistic barriers, difference in communication styles, expectations, approaches and understandings, etc. Yet, because of the permanence of communication, it is critical that we be attentive to both what we say and how we say it.

Another major problem is the **communication networking** – not all employees who need to be kept in the loop are informed – the information is not sent to all, the modes used for the information is not used by all the employees ex. Emails, not all are opening or reading their emails regularly. Different superiors are sending different conflicting messages about the priorities – which leads to confusion and distrust among

the employees. Timely messages are not received thus the same leads to slowing the decision-making process and delay in completion of the projects. Critical information is not being shared among key holders – top management is not engaging the employees in important decisions of the organization. The expectations are not clear- a communication gap once again – mid level managers have no idea about the expectations and they are all on a different tangent about how to reach strategic goals – thus leaving the employees all confused and demotivated. As the leaders do not discuss the vision with the employees thus there is no sense of shared direction toward which all are striving thus there is no inspiration to do the best. There is no sharing of information between the departments, due to a number of reasons

Cross- culture or diverse cultural mix is becoming the need of the day for organization that want to go places in today's world and thus cross culture communication competence enables an organization to achieve its objectives. As many foreign- born workers have assimilated into the work place, it is in the best interest of the employers and the workers that the cultural and language is better understood and the gap bridged. Taking these proactive steps can reduce costly on the job accidents, improve employer's ability to recruit, hire and retain at the same time increase workers' productivity.

Steps to be taken:

Successful organizations create a culture of awareness that inspires employees to respect one another through diversity training. This mutual understanding among managers and employees encourages new ideas, different perspectives and collaboration, making all the difference within an organization.

As a team member one has to learn to listen well and give others the confidence to be able to communicate, respect differences of culture or values should not be reason for communication gaps.

Team norms might need to be recalibrated from time to time and as and when gaps are recognized. Lack of language fluency can build stress over time. Team members, for whom English is a second language, or ESL, must expend cognitive effort on understanding as they do on the task at hand. The organization must extend a helping and understanding hand to them.

Mentors need to be providing, who can be of help, respecting different individual's abilities and personalities and guide them through initially, and 'sink to swim' attitude should be given up. Orientation programs should be appointed and feedback for the same should be sought. Use of flowery language jargon and slang should either be avoided or the same should slowly be made a part of their language thus making them aware of the same. A language level that can be understood by the high school student should be used while discussing the company operations or it simply becomes a clump of meaningless letters.

And of course, always-always, back your oral communication about the project with written communication that can be looked at if someone does not understand perfectly or forgets a point. That holds for all teams. While it may be necessary to strip down written text to the bare bones follow up emails can help drive a point home. As far as possible ensure that your body language and expression is visible, video chat is the best mean out when you are on the other side of the globe.

The older employees should make an effort to develop their interpersonal skills so that communicating with these members from others cultures becomes more effectively. Give people the chance to communicate their views, share ones own, and as with any discussion, it is important to let the other person know you are listening and thinking over their views too.

Organization needs to be patient with these employees to help prevent them feeling inadequate and embarrassed as they fail to express themselves clearly and fully. Sensitivity and empathy towards different cultural difference should be taught to all employees so that many problems can be resolved.

Conclusion:

Multicultural teams will continue to become more common as globalization erases barriers to entry in countries around the world. People on the other side of the world are no longer a world away. Communicating with people from different cultures is paramount to successful global business strategies.

No organization can afford to go along believing that members of different cultures are all seeking to conform to one culture, or that one day differences will cease to exist. Therefore the key for business is to find ways for people who think differently to work together.

So it is extremely important for the organization to be aware of these differences and to have strategies for dealing with any cross-culture barriers that may arise. In a multicultural work environment, it is increasingly important to understand the implicit values that affect communication styles and to address differences openly and check for clarity and comprehension in order to enhance collaboration, success, and relationships. To work in the global environment, there is a great need to develop communication as a conscious skill.

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