



## AN OVERVIEW OF COMMUNICATIVE CHALLENGES IN MULTICULTURAL ORGANIZATIONS

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### ABSTRACT :

*Diversity is one of the things that shapes today's world. We have 'n' number of communicative cultures because of linguistic, social, geographical, cultural and religious differences among us. There are plenty of examples of co and peaceful existence of many cultures in the world. It seems that the whole world has become a place of liberal economy. The organizations are operating beyond the boundaries of their national and cultural origin. A multicultural organization needs to make some extra efforts to keep the employees of all backgrounds happy. This paper makes an attempt to look at various aspects of communication challenges that may occur in a multicultural organization. It also suggests some important steps that such an organization may take to overcome communication challenges.*

**KEYWORDS :** *communicative cultures , liberal economy , multicultural organization.*

### INTRODUCTION

Even siblings are not same. They may have difference in their behavior, attitude, likes and dislikes because of difference in their cognitive abilities. All members of a family may not pursue same kind/ type of education. They may not enjoy same food items. Their role models, favorite actors/ actresses, favorite movies and television programs may not be the same. It is a collective impact of these above situations that makes me believe that we all are different despite of a lot of similarities among us. These differences are apparent every time on careful examination of the prevailing communicative patterns of people during various occasions of problem solving and decision making.

In organizational situations even when employees are of the same background and speak the same language, communication can be challenging. This challenge takes a bigger shape with the people with diverse backgrounds who tend have difference in interpretation of languages, signs, symbols and other forms of communication. There are many governing factors that affect how they converse, make decisions and approach conflict. These factors may include their age group, sex, geographical, social, economical, educational, national, cultural and religious backgrounds. Each of these needs a special attention. Above all, when our audience is scattered around the globe and speaks unknown numbers of languages, it might seem impossible to handle with.

Organizational diversity should actually not be taken up as a problem. This is a help as our target audience is diverse most of the times. Organizational diversity should inspire teamwork on a global scale with each employee performing at their best. This can be achieved with a strong understanding of the various cultural profiles within the organization; the right business alliances; and a truly global plan. The



assignments should be given to an employee keeping in mind his/her background and competence. It's more promising to manage different time zones and languages, and effectively and efficiently communicate with all of the employees of the organization. The organization should create a culture of awareness that inspires employees to respect one another through diversity training. This mutual understanding among various levels of employees encourages new ideas, different perspectives and collaborations, making all the difference within an organization. On the other hand, ineffective or lack of communication as a result of diversity in the place of work may lead to confusion of business and customer needs, low employee morale and division among employees.

### UNDERSTANDING CULTURE

Culture seems for most of us difficult to explain but easy to understand. While thinking of culture we usually think of customs, traditions and values of a society or community, such as an ethnic group or nation. E.B. Tylor defines culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." [1974, 2] According to Fielding culture is a system of beliefs, assumptions and values shared by a group of people. (1993: 50) Cambridge English Dictionary states that culture is, "the way of life, especially the general customs and beliefs, of a particular group of people at a particular time."

Culture is one of the fundamental concepts in anthropology, about the range of phenomena that are transmitted through social learning in human societies. Culture, like language, makes us different from other animals and contributes in our being human. The word culture may be used in a general sense as the advanced ability to categorize and represent experiences with symbols and to act imaginatively and creatively. It is also used to denote the complex networks of practices and accumulated knowledge and ideas that are transmitted through social interaction and exist in specific human groups, or cultures, using the plural form. Some aspects of human behavior and social practices such as kinship, gender and marriage, art, music, dance, ritual, religion, and technologies for instance cooking, shelter, and clothing are said to be cultural universals. These are found in all human societies. The concept material culture is used in the sense of the physical expressions of culture. This may include technology, architecture and art.

The concept immaterial culture may be used in the sense of principles of social organization including, practices of political organizations and social institutions, mythology, philosophy, and literature. At times "culture" is also described as a specific practice within a subgroup of a society. But this "culture" may be termed as a subculture like "pub culture", "bro culture" or a counter culture. Within cultural anthropology, the ideology and analytical stance of cultural relativism holds that cultures cannot easily and objectively be ranked or evaluated because any evaluation is necessarily situated within the value system of a given culture. All cultures are equally important. For a commoner culture may be any and everything that an individual needs to know to be a functional member of the society.

It seems apparent by now that Culture may be defined in accordance with our target audience. The same is the case with the concept of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism may be understood as a concept that values the peaceful coexistence and mutual respect between different cultures inhabiting the same province. Multiculturalism is a part of secular believes.

Multicultural ideologies and policies vary widely, ranging from the advocacy of equal respect to the various cultures in a society, to a policy of promoting the maintenance of cultural diversity, to policies in which people of various ethnic and religious groups are addressed by the authorities as defined by the group to which they belong. Multiculturalism that promotes maintaining the distinctiveness of multiple cultures is often contrasted to other settlement policies such as social integration, cultural assimilation and racial segregation. Multiculturalism has been described as a "salad bowl" and "cultural mixture."

### ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

In modern times professionals of organizations operating at large scales are expected to reflect and operate globally. Due to large geographical area of operation of the organization it becomes a challenge to

have a balanced collaboration with central office leaders and maintain close contact with regional office leaders. The challenge is more in completing culture due diligence and use communication to: bridge potential gaps of cultures; establish a climate of trust; engage employees; bring employees together towards a shared organizational goal.

Some basic commonalities said to be found across the globe, generally speaking, all of the employees want to be treated fairly and consistently. They try to understand the organization's vision. All of them may be keen to develop their skills and career. Key to our global communication plan may be learning the traditions; values; thinking patterns; perceptions (how does this culture perceive other cultures or think they are perceived); process and procedures (on what basis are decisions made – relationship-focused or deal-focused); and motivators (what motivates and how this is rewarded). One ought to also understand local customs to a degree that allows you to assess if they contradict corporate policy. It is must to have the pulse of the cultural environment of the countries and cultures that are part of our company. This may include understanding the history, government, current regional issues and current world relations of the place. Without this knowledge it may not be possible for us to provide good communication counsel to leadership or manage communication effectively.

### STEPPING AHEAD

Communication challenges in multicultural organizations may be addressed to a certain extent just by having a transparent system of communication. The policies should not carry ambiguities at the level of language. Instructions should in no case be contradictory to one another. All downward flow of communication should be focused. The message should not be send to every employee. It should reach to relevant and concerned employees only. Upward flow of communication should be supported. The message communicated by lower level employees should be decoded with a sympathetic and empathetic attitude. From upward flow of communication we usually get complaints, suggestions, or feedback. They may complain about working conditions, conduct of superiors, ignorance of his/ her religious and cultural existence and increment and appraisal policies. We may get named and anonymous suggestions advocating certain change in the existing condition. The feedback may or may not be approving certain things and people. Whatever may be the situation the received message should be considered relevant and genuine.

The organization should clearly stick with its norms whatever difficulty may come in between. Policies regarding working hours, punishment for defaulters, dress codes or a uniform for the employees and duties and rights for various designations should not be made in haste. On deciding upon these aspects of the organization one needs to make a note of the regional practices. An organization may adopt some changes for being compatible with the regional practices. There is a need for being neutral in some regards but we should accept that thing do work with certain limitations also.

A multicultural organization need to educate all of its employees in regard with the following thing :

- The world is multicultural
- All cultures are equal
- All languages are equal
- Various cultural practices
- Various religious practices
- Policies of the organization
- Some basic etiquettes across the cultures

This education will help the organization and function as a 'cure' against some major challenges. A real education of this type may reduce prejudices in our minds against people of other cultures. The researcher believes that it strengthens interpersonal relationships among the employees. It helps in improving their interpersonal communication as well.

Multicultural education seeks to achieve greater social harmony in a society and world currently beset by intercultural conflict. Based on an ideal of cultural pluralism, this does not mean that people must reject their ethnic identities but strike a compromise between cultural assimilation and cultural separatism or segregation. Being multicultural can lead to an increased perception of the equal human worth of all people and its acceptance as the norm of human experience. (Samovar and Porter 1995)

The above recommended education should help the employees in knowing the significance of non-verbal communication, or body language which is in academics known as kinesics, in organizational communication. Ignorance of norms of non-verbal communication in various cultures is a major cause of communication breakdown. In multicultural organizations sometimes non-verbal behavior leads to miscommunication because the people are unaware that non-verbal patterns are determined by culture, and that people from different cultures have different interpretations of different behavioral patterns in a given situation. Nonverbal communicative behavior, such as interpersonal space, turn taking, or eye contact during face to face mode of communication, differs widely from one cultural environment to other cultural environment. The use of space helps define social relationships in deferent societies in different way. For example, the people from one cultural background may sit with an empty chair between them, whereas the people from other cultural background may sit close to each other in the room even though there were plenty of seats available. The latter may feel that the first were being racist, while the first could not understand the need to sit close to each other as there is plenty of room available. Hall (1976) asserts that most of us hold unconscious assumptions about what is appropriate in terms of space, time, interpersonal relations and ways of seeking truth. These assumptions he says, may cause intractable difficulties in intercultural encounters. Misinterpretation of non-verbal behavior often leads to the development of stereotypes and negative attitudes.

Rana Sinha, a cross-cultural trainer and author, wrote an article 'Key Factors of Multicultural Team Management & Leadership' (<http://EzineArticles.com/293829>). National culture (orientation to time, style of communication, personal space, competitiveness and worldview), corporate culture of the organization (A large multinational organization is bound to have a more structured, hierarchic and bureaucratic approach to running its affairs), nature of the industry or functional culture (coal mine, marketing, accounting), stage of team development and personal attributes (If the team has a history of performing efficiently, new entrants can rely on established practice and older members to teach them the skills required) are five identified factors that may affect team management and leadership of multicultural organization.

## GATEWAYS

One of my favorite teachers emphasizes on identification of the problem. According to him the moment we 'know' the problem it is half solved. The fact that the employees are well aware or made well aware of the challenges is a solution in itself. The above suggested educational steps will certainly prove a remedy. Efforts are needed to nullify unwanted and negative messages that may travel in the organization through grapevine. Grapevine is to hear something informally and unofficially by means of gossip or rumor. A true and functional ombudsperson must be appointed who can hear the grievances, complaints and suggestions of the employees and take necessary steps wherever required.

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