On Effective Communication of Cross-cultural Enterprises

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Abstract: With the globalization of world economy and the spread of multinational operation, transnational corporations are playing an important role in the world. Therefore, how to achieve effective communication among employees of different cultural backgrounds concerns the success of cross-cultural enterprise management. Based on the impact of cultural differences, this paper elaborates on the general modes of communication and the process of cross-cultural communication. It discusses the relevant factors that influence cross-cultural communication and then puts forward some measures on how to achieve effective communication in cross-cultural enterprises.
Keywords: Communication; Cross-cultural communication; Johari window; Prototyping

1 Introduction

With the globalization of economy, multinational operation and joint ventures are sweeping across the world. China's huge market has attracted more foreign enterprises. At the same time, Chinese enterprises will invest more abroad. However, it was found that there were many misunderstandings or even conflicts in employees' communication and cooperation in these cross-cultural enterprises. As managers and employees in the cross-cultural enterprises are faced with partners of different cultural backgrounds, languages, values, states of mind and behaviors, all the activities are conducted on the basis of cross-cultural communication. Compared with the general management activities, cross-cultural management encounters more intense cultural conflicts. Similarly, cross-cultural communication is more difficult than the general communication. Therefore, how to overcome the barriers in the cross-cultural communication and how to achieve effective communication among employees is a common problem of all cross-cultural enterprises.

2 The Process of Cross-cultural Communication

2.1 The general communication process

The communication refers to the process in which two or more individuals or groups exchange information, as well as their ideas and feelings. If there is any deviation or obstacle in this process, there will be communication problems. Generally, the communication process consists of seven parts: (1) the information sources of the communication; (2) encoding; (3) information; (4) channel; (5) decoding; (6) recipients; (7) feedback. It is the information source that encodes the idea in the mind into information, which is then sent through specific channels to the recipients, who decode the information, learn about the meaning of the information, and then send feedback to the information source.

2.2 The process of cross-cultural communication

The cross-cultural communication refers to the coded information in one culture, including language, gestures and facial expressions, which have a specific meaning in a particular cultural unit and will not be accepted, perceived and understood until they are decoded and deciphered in another cultural unit. In other words, when the information sender and receiver do not belong to the same cultural unit, there is cross-cultural communication.

As for cross-cultural enterprises, the heterogeneity of cultural units may cause certain difficulties in communication. In the decoding process of cross-cultural communication, the meaning of the original cultural **message** may be changed, distorted, deleted or added. Thus, the meaning and acts will not be the same with what the encoder and decoder have intended**.** Samovar **p**roposed a communication model, as is shown in Figure 1. He uses A, B and C to represent three different cultures. Cultures A and B are similar to one another while culture C is quite different. The distance between the figures signifies the differences between the cultures.
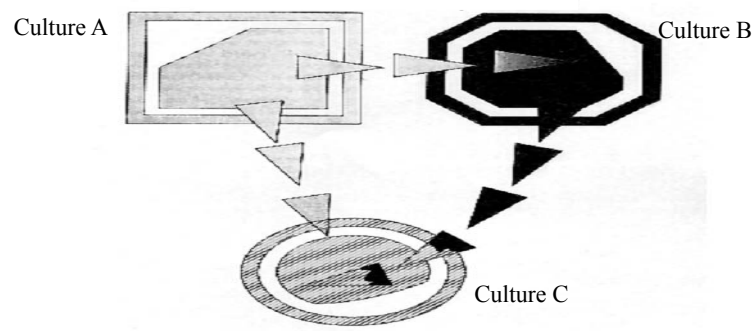
Figure 1　Intercultural Communication Model

Within each culture is another form somewhat similar to the shape of the influencing parent culture. This represents the individual who has been molded by his/her culture. However, the shape of the individual is somewhat different from that of the parent culture. The difference suggests that we are all shaped by our cultures, but are influenced by other factors as well. Also, there is internal variation within any culture. The series of arrows connecting the figures represents the production, transmission, and interpretation of messages across cultures. When a message leaves one culture, it carries the content of the intended message and is encoded with the specific characteristics of its own culture. When it reaches another culture, the message changes because the new culture influences how the message is interpreted. Also, the greater the differences between the cultures, the more likely the message will be changed. For example, the change that occurs between cultures A and B is much less than the change between cultures C and A, or cultures C and B. This is because there is greater similarity between cultures A and B. Culture C, on the other hand, is quite different from cultures A and B.

3 Main Factors Influencing the Cross-cultural Communication
3.1 Verbal factors
The most direct barriers to cross-cultural communication are from language differences. Language is the mirror of culture. As a way of information communication, language is not only a simple range of letters, but also the embodiment of rich knowledge, history, emotions and attitudes. In the cross-cultural communication, as people of different cultural backgrounds speak with their own set of rules or habits, they follow their own way of speaking automatically in the conversation. Thus, people are accustomed to interpreting others' words in their own way of speaking. Hence appear barriers of cross-cultural communication. For example, as there is a Chinese aphorism "A teacher for a day is a father for lifetime", it is disrespectful to greet one's parents and teachers by their first names in China. However, it is different in the English-speaking countries where children can address their parents and teachers by their first names. All these cultural differences are from the distinctions in registers.
3.2　Nonverbal factors
Non-verbal factors refer to all the stimuli beyond structured language, including body language, facial language and personal space, etc. As employees in the cross-cultural enterprise are of different cultural backgrounds, they will have difficulties in the non-verbal communication. Take personal space for example. Everyone needs some personal space. If one's personal space is "broken into" by others, he will not feel comfortable. The size of personal space is established by different cultural conventions. As Hall ever described, the northern Europeans need greater personal space or "protective bubble" than the Latin Europeans, and the southern Europeans need to stand closer to feel the contact of each other. Therefore, when a northern European keeps stepping back in order to gain the "protective bubble", a Latin European will feel that they are rejected. We will find that when an American talks with the Japanese, the American keeps stepping back while the Japanese keeps moving forward. This is because the Americans' conversational space is 46-122 cm, whereas that of the Japanese is 25 cm. Hereby, the two parties should constantly adjust their spatial distance. In the Americans' opinion, the Japanese "broke into" their space, making them uncomfortable, so they have to move back. However, according to the understanding of the Japanese, they have to keep up in order to maintain the proper distance.

3.3　Codes of conduct

The code of conduct refers to the set of rules commonly accepted by a society's moral standards and codes of behavior. Generally speaking, it tells people what to do and not to do. In cross-cultural enterprises, as employees of different cultural backgrounds apply different codes of conduct to interpret, define or judge a behavior, there will unavoidably be misunderstandings in their communication process. It is because that a certain behavior may be compliant in one culture while prohibited in another culture. This is particularly prominent in religions and customs. For instance, hugging and kissing each other is considered as a kind of warm welcome in the Western culture, but it is not the same in the oriental culture. Therefore, when a French male colleague insists kissing a Chinese female colleague hello or goodbye, he will make the female colleague worried and uncomfortable.

3.4　Values

Every culture has its particular set of value system, which informs people what is good or bad, beautiful or ugly, right or wrong. The values represent the philosophy of life and codes of conduct in a culture. It should be noted, however, that a value may be considered good in a culture but bad in another culture and it is the same case with a kind of behavior. In other words, though the standards in every culture are different, they are reasonable in their own cultures. We cannot say one standard is advanced and the other is not. In cross-cultural enterprises, employees of different cultural backgrounds have different values, which will cause a series of communication problems. Take the different standards of business success for example. While the German employees consider the high-quality products of their company as important, the French employees attach importance to leading technology.

4 Establishing Effective Cross-cultural Communication

4.1 Having cultural awareness

In cross-cultural communication, there are barriers to the employees of different cultural backgrounds. To eliminate these barriers, we should firstly recognize the cultural differences. However, cultures are perhaps the most indeterminate in the world. In fact, we may find that while it is relatively easy to describe others' culture, it is difficult to describe our own culture. As the 18th century British writer Samir Johnson said, "When I stand on the land of another country, I understand my country better." In the same way, only when we get away from our own culture and are faced with another culture do we begin to understand it. Moreover, the more we understand each other's culture, the easier we will find effective means of communication. How to recognize the differences between cultures? The model of "Johari window" offers us a perspective (see Figure 2).

	Known by selr	Unknown by selr
Known by others	Arena（Public. Open）	Blind Spot
Unknown by others	Façade (Avoided. Hidden)	The Unknown

Figure 2　Johari Window

In Johari window, we can find different views of "I": things I know about myself, things I don't know about myself, things others know about me, and things others don't know about me. How we view ourselves and how others view us may affect the effective interactions. By opening up and receiving feedback from others, we will understand more about the hidden and unknown areas. While discussing differences that we can easily find (obvious to the two parties), we begin to notice and study differences that we have not seen (our blind spots) and they have not seen (their blind spots). Then, we may try to imagine differences that the two parties have not seen (a common blind spot). Lastly, we can eliminate the blind spots, find the differences between different cultures and have a deeper understanding, which will establish the cognitive basis for further communication.

4.2 Surpassing stereotypes

In cross-cultural communication, neither to ignore the convention nor to keep the stereotypes is wise. There is a most effective way, however, that is, to accept the stereotypes and take it as a starting point to improve. We will not just show what we have already known about others in our communication, but recognize how these differences can affect our communication and surpass these stereotypes. Prototyping can help us better understand this point. This approach allows deviations around a set of core characteristics. Therefore, in any given coordinate of a culture (e.g. expressiveness), a presumptive "national" mean and the deviation around it can form a normal curve (Figure 3). Comparing these presumptive "national" means, we will find huge differences, which is much smaller

within a culture than between cultures. In other words, the members of the same culture have much more in common than members of different cultures. It is very important for us to realize that individuals always act more or less according to their own cultural curves. For example, if an American is too conservative in his culture, he will not be considered as a typical American. Thus, the most important is to know what is typical in a culture and accept the possible deviations, in other words, surpass the stereotypes. In this way, we can not only improve the speed of information processing, but also communicate more efficiently by decreasing the probability of mistakes from the simple processing of information.
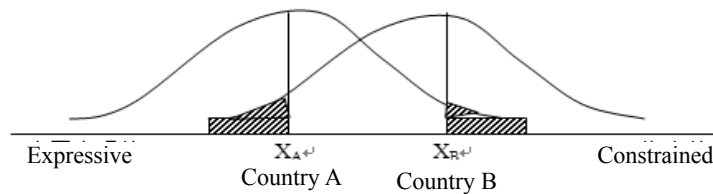

Expressive X_A X_B Constrained
                     Country A   Country B

Figure 3   A Normal Curve

4.3 Improving communication skills

It is an effective way to communicate efficiently by improving communication skills either in general or cross-cultural communications. Here are some tips on how to improve communication skills in THE CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION. FIRSTLY, WE SHOULD FOCUS ON DESCRIPTION RATHER THAN INTERPRETATION OR EVALUATION, WHICH are based more on the observer's cultural background. Therefore, in the cross-cultural communication, we should leave enough time to adjust our angles according to cultural factors and not rush in making judgments. Secondly, we should assume that differences do exist. Most people take it for granted that all the others are similar to themselves, which is not always the case though. Thus, we should assume the differences before we are confirmed of the similarity. In this way, we will make fewer mistakes in communication (e.g. avoiding bias). Thirdly, we should take our interpretations as a working hypothesis. When we put forward an idea on the new situation or think about an issue from another culture's perspective, we should treat our hypothesis as a hypothesis. As you still have blind spots (see Figure 2) in your understanding of another culture, you cannot fully understand it. Therefore, whether your ideas or hypothesis about another culture are reasonable or not remains to be tested. What you can do is to read the recipients' feedback carefully to see whether your assumptions can be proved. As for important decisions, you can check with your colleagues of similar cultural background to ensure that your interpretations are accurate.

5 Conclusions

To sum up, transnational corporations are playing a more and more important role in the world with the globalization of world economy. However, many misunderstandings and even conflicts were found in employees' communication in the cross-cultural enterprises, so how to achieve effective communication among employees of different cultural backgrounds is an issue that concerns the success of cross-cultural enterprise management. Based on the impact of cultural differences, this paper first discussed the general communication process and the process of cross-cultural communication, and then elaborated on the relevant factors that influence cross-cultural communication, including verbal factors, nonverbal factors, codes of conduct, and values. Lastly, it put forward some measures on how to communicate effectively in cross-cultural enterprises, such as having cultural awareness, surpassing stereotypes and improving communication skills. It is believed that in cross-cultural enterprises, we should especially increase our awareness of cultural differences in order to reduce cultural conflicts. What's more, we should neither consider the values, thinking patterns and codes of conduct of one culture as good or bad, nor take the values of one culture as the standard for all. Differences do exist and cultural conflict is unavoidable, so what we should do is to understand, adapt to, and accept different cultures. Only in this way can we overcome the barriers to cross-cultural communication and can the employees communicate effectively.

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