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COMMUNICATING ACROSS CULTURES*

Nancy J. Adler

All business activity involves communication. Within the global business environment, activities such as leading, motivating, negotiating, decision making, and exchanging information and ideas are all based on the ability of managers and employees from one culture to communicate successfully with colleagues, clients,

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and suppliers from other cultures. Communicating effectively challenges managers worldwide even when the work force is culturally homogeneous, but when employees speak a variety of languages and come from an array of cultural backgrounds, effective communication becomes considerably more difficult (6:3–5, 121–128; 16:1).

Cross-Cultural Communication

Communication is the exchange of meaning: It is my attempt to let you know what I mean. Communication includes any behavior that another person perceives and interprets: It is your understanding of what I mean. Communication includes sending both verbal messages (words) and non-verbal messages (tone of voice, facial expression, behavior, and physical setting). It includes consciously sent messages as well as messages that the sender is totally unaware of having sent. Whatever I say and do, I cannot *not* communicate. Communication therefore involves a complex multilayered, dynamic process through which we exchange meaning.

Every communication has a message sender and a message receiver. The sent message is never identical to the received message. Why? Communication is not direct, but rather indirect; it is a symbolic behavior. I cannot communicate my ideas, feelings, or information directly; rather, I must externalize or symbolize them before they can be communicated. *Encoding* describes the producing of a symbol message. *Decoding* describes the receiving of a meaning from a symbol message. Message senders must encode their meaning into a form that the receiver will recognize—that is, into words and behavior. Receivers must then decode the words and behavior—the symbols—back into messages that have meaning for them.

For example, because the Cantonese word for *eight* sounds like *faat*, which means prosperity, a Hong Kong textile manufacturer, Mr. Lau Ting-Pong, paid \$85 million in 1988 for car registration number 8. A year later, a European millionaire paid \$4.8 million at Hong Kong's Lunar New Year auction for vehicle registration number 7, a decision that mystified the Chinese, since the number 7 has little significance in the Chinese calculation of fortune (12).

The process of translating meanings into words and behaviors—that is, into symbols—and back again into meanings is based on a person's cultural background and differs accordingly for each person. The greater the difference in background between senders and receivers, the greater the difference in meanings attached to particular words and behaviors.

Cross-Cultural Misperception

Do the French and the Chinese see the world in the same way? No. Do Venezuelans and Ghanaians see the world in the same way? Again, no. No two national groups see the world in exactly the same way. Perception is the process by which individuals select, organize, and evaluate stimuli from the external environment to provide meaningful experiences for themselves (1; 7; 8; 10). For example, when Mexican children simultaneously view tachistoscopic pictures of a bullfight and a baseball game, they only remember seeing the bullfight. Looking through the same tachistoscope, American children only remembered seeing the baseball game (2). Similarly, adult card players, when shown cards by researchers, fail to see black hearts and diamonds, or red clubs and spades.

Why didn't the children see both pictures? Why did the adults fail to see the unexpected playing card colors? The answer lies in the nature of perception. Perceptual patterns are neither innate nor absolute. They are selective, learned, culturally determined, consistent, and inaccurate.

- **Perception is selective.** At any one time there are too many stimuli in the environment for us to observe. Therefore, we screen out most of what we see, hear, taste, and feel. We screen out the overload and allow only selected information through our perceptual screen to our conscious mind (3).
- **Perceptual patterns are learned.** We are not born seeing the world in one particular way. Our experience teaches us to perceive the world in certain ways.
- **Perception is culturally determined.** We learn to see the world in a certain way based on our cultural background.
- **Perception tends to remain consistent.** Once we see something in a particular way, we continue to see it that way.
- **Perception is inaccurate.** We see things that do not exist and do not see things that do exist. Our background, values, interests, and culture act as filters and lead us to distort, block, and even create what we choose to see and to hear. We perceive what we expect to perceive. We perceive things according to what we have been trained to see, according to our cultural map.

For example, read the following sentence and quickly count the number of *F*'s in the sentence:

Finished Files Are the Result of Years of Scientific Study Combined with the Experience of Years.

Most non-native English speakers see all six *F*'s. Many native English speakers only see three *F*'s, they do not see the *F*'s in the word *of* because *of* is not an important word in understanding the sentence's meaning. We selectively see those words that are important according to our cultural conditioning (in this case, our linguistic conditioning). Once we see a phenomenon in a particular way, we usually continue to see it in that way. Once we stop seeing *of*'s, we do not see them again (even when we look for them); we do not see things that do exist. One particularly astute manager at Canadian National Railways makes daily use of perceptual filters to her firm's advantage. She gives reports written in English to bilingual Francophones to proofread and those written in French to bilingual Anglophones. She uses the fact that the English secretaries can "see" more errors—specially small errors—in French and that the French secretaries can "see" more errors in English.

"The distorting impact of perceptual filters causes us to see things that do not exist. In an executive development program, for example, U.S. executives were asked to study the picture shown in Figure 1 and then to describe it to a second colleague who had not seen the picture. The second colleague then attempted to describe the picture to a third colleague who had not seen the picture, and so on. Finally, the fifth colleague described his perception of the picture to the group of executives and compared it with the original picture. Among the numerous distortions, the executives, similar to other groups, consistently described the black and the white man as fighting; the knife as being in the hand of the black man; the white man as wearing a business suit; and the black man as wearing laborer's overalls. Clearly the inaccurate stereotype of blacks (as poorer, working class and more likely to commit crimes) and of whites (as richer, upper class, and less likely to perpetrate violent crime) altered the observers' perceptions, thus totally changing the meaning of the picture. The executives' personal and cultural experiences, and therefore their perceptual filters, allowed them to see things that did not exist and to miss seeing things that did exist."



FIGURE 1 Perceptual Filters Change the Story

Cross-Cultural Misinterpretation

Interpretation occurs when an individual gives meaning to observations and their relationships; it is the process of making sense out of perceptions. Interpretation organizes our experience to guide our behavior. Based on our experience, we make assumptions about our perceptions so we will not have to rediscover meanings each time we encounter similar situations. For example, we make assumptions about how doors work, based on our experience of entering and leaving rooms; thus we do not have to relearn how to open a door each time we encounter a new door. Our consistent patterns of interpretation help us to act appropriately and quickly within our day-to-day world.

Categories

Since we are constantly bombarded with more stimuli than we can absorb and more perceptions than we can keep distinct or interpret, we only perceive those images that may be meaningful to us. We group perceived images into familiar categories that help us to simplify our environment, become the basis for our interpretations, and allow us to function in an otherwise overly complex world. Categorization helps me to distinguish what is most important in my environment and to behave accordingly.

Categories of perceived images become ineffective when we place people and things in the wrong groups. Cross-cultural miscategorization occurs when I use my home country categories to make sense out of situations abroad. For example, a Korean businessman entered a client's office in Stockholm and encountered a woman sitting behind the desk. Assuming that she was a secretary, he announced that he wanted to see Mr. Silberbrand. The woman responded by saying that the secretary would be happy to help him. The Korean became confused. In assuming that most women are secretaries rather than managers, he had misinterpreted the situation and acted inappropriately. His categorization made sense because most women in Korean offices are secretaries, but it proved inaccurate and counterproductive here, since this particular Swedish woman was not a secretary.

Stereotypes

Stereotyping involves a form of categorization that organizes our experience and guides our behavior toward ethnic and national groups. Stereotypes never describe individual behavior; rather, they describe the behavioral norm for members of a particular group. Stereotypes, like other forms of categories, can be helpful or harmful depending on how we use them. Effective stereotyping allows people to understand and act appropriately in new situations. A stereotype becomes helpful when it is:

- **Consciously held.** People should be aware that they are describing a group norm rather than the characteristics of a specific individual.
- **Descriptive rather than evaluative.** The stereotype should describe what people from this group will probably be like and not evaluate those people as good or bad.
- **Accurate.** The stereotype should accurately describe the norm for the group to which the person belongs.
- **The first best guess.** about a group prior to having direct information about the specific person or persons involved.
- **Modified.** based on further observation and experience with the actual people and situations.

A subconsciously held stereotype is difficult to modify or discard even after we collect real information about a person, because it is often thought to reflect reality. If a subconscious stereotype also inaccurately evaluates a person or situation, we are likely to maintain an inappropriate, ineffective, and frequently harmful guide to reality. Andrei Ratiu (9), in his work with INSEAD, a leading international business school in France, and the London Business School, found that managers identified as “most internationally effective” by their colleagues altered their stereotypes to fit the actual people involved, whereas managers identified as “least internationally effective” continued to maintain their stereotypes even in the face of contradictory information. Highly effective managers use the stereotype as a first best guess about the group’s behavior prior to meeting any individuals from the group. As time goes on, they modify or discard the stereotype entirely; information about each individual supersedes the group stereotype. By contrast, the least internationally effective managers maintain their stereotypes. In drawing conclusions too quickly on the basis of insufficient information—premature closure (7)—their stereotypes become self-fulfilling (11). To be effective, global managers, therefore, become aware of their cultural stereotypes and learn to set them aside when faced with contradictory evidence. They do not *pretend* not to stereotype.

In conclusion, some people stereotype effectively and others do not. Stereotypes become counterproductive when we place people in the wrong group, when we incorrectly describe group norms, when we inappropriately evaluate the group or category, when we confuse the stereotype with the description of a particular individual, and when we fail to modify the stereotype based on our actual observations and experience.

Sources of Misinterpretation

Misinterpretation can be caused by inaccurate perceptions of a person or situation that arise when what actually exists is not seen. It can be caused by an inaccurate interpretation of what is seen; that is, by using my meanings to make sense out of your reality. Culture strongly influences, and in many situations determines, our interpretations. Both the categories and the meanings we attach to them are based on our cultural

background. Sources of cross-cultural misinterpretation include subconscious cultural “blindness,” a lack of cultural self-awareness, projected similarity, and parochialism.

Subconscious Cultural Blindness

Because most interpretation goes on at a subconscious level, we lack awareness of the assumptions we make and their cultural basis. Our home culture reality never forces us to examine our assumptions or the extent to which they are culturally based, because we share our cultural assumptions with most other citizens from our country. All we know is that things do not work as smoothly or logically when we work outside our own culture as when we work with people more similar to ourselves. For example:

Canadians conducting business in Kuwait became surprised when their meeting with a high-ranking official was not held in a closed office and was constantly interrupted. Using the Canadian-based cultural assumptions that important people have large private offices with secretaries to monitor the flow of people into the office, and that important business takes precedence over less important business and is therefore not interrupted, the Canadians interpreted the Kuwaiti's open office and constant interruptions to mean that the official was neither as high ranking nor as interested in conducting the business at hand as they had previously thought. The Canadians' interpretation of the office environment led them to lose interest in working with the Kuwaiti.

The problem is that the Canadians' interpretation derives from their own North American norms, not from Middle Eastern cultural norms. The Kuwaiti may well have been a high-ranking official who was very interested in doing business. The Canadians will never know.

Lack of Cultural Self-Awareness

Although we may think that a major obstacle in conducting business around the world is in understanding foreigners, the greater difficulty involves becoming aware of our own cultural conditioning. As anthropologist Edward Hall explains, “What is known least well, and is therefore in the poorest position to be studied, is what is closest to oneself” (5:45). We are generally least aware of our own cultural characteristics and are quite surprised when we hear foreigners describe us. For example, many Americans are surprised to discover that foreigners see them as hurried, overly law-abiding, very hard working, extremely explicit, and overly inquisitive (see the box “Cross-Cultural Awareness: Americans As Others See Them”). Asking a foreign national to describe businesspeople from your country is a powerful way to see yourself as others see you.

To the extent that we can begin to see ourselves clearly through the eyes of people from other cultures, we can begin to modify our behavior, emphasizing our most appropriate and effective characteristics and minimizing those least helpful. To the extent that we are culturally self-aware, we can begin to predict the effect our behavior will have on others.

Projected Similarity

Projected similarity refers to the assumption that people are more similar to you than they actually are or that another person's situation is more similar to your own situation than it in fact is. Projecting similarity reflects both a natural and a common process. American professors asked managers from 14 countries to describe the work

Cross-Cultural Awareness: Americans as Others See Them

People from other countries often become puzzled and intrigued by the intricacies and enigmas of American culture. Below is a selection of actual observations by people from around the world visiting the United States. As you read them, ask yourself in each case if the observer is accurate and how you would explain the trait in question.

India: "Americans seem to be in a perpetual hurry. Just watch the way they walk down the street. They never allow themselves the leisure to enjoy life; there are too many things to do."

Kenya: "Americans appear to us rather distant. They are not really as close to other people—even fellow Americans—as Americans overseas tend to portray. It's almost as if an American says, 'I won't let you get too close to me.' It's like building a wall."

Turkey: "Once we were out in a rural area in the middle of nowhere and saw an American come to a stop

sign. Though he could see in both directions for miles and no traffic was coming, he still stopped!"

Colombia: "The tendency in the United States to think that life is only work hits you in the face. Work seems to be the one type of motivation."

Indonesia: "In the United States, everything has to be talked about and analyzed. Even the littlest thing has to be 'Why, Why, Why?' I get a headache from such persistent questions."

Ethiopia: "Americans are very explicit; [they] want a 'yes' or 'no.' If someone tries to speak figuratively, the American is confused."

Iran: "The first time my [American] professor told me, 'I don't know the answer; I will have to look it up,' I was shocked. I asked myself, 'Why is he teaching me?' In my country a professor would give the wrong answer rather than admit ignorance."¹

Source: L. R. Kohl, *Survival Kit for Overseas Living: For Americans Planning to Live and Work Abroad*, 4th ed. (London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing in association with Intercultural Press, Yarmouth, Maine, 2001), pp. 47–49. Based on Kohls (15: 47–49); adapted by Adler, 2007.

and life goals of a colleague in their work team from another country (4). In every case the managers assumed that their foreign colleagues were more like themselves than they actually were. Projected similarity involves assuming, imagining, and actually perceiving similarity when differences exist. Projected similarity particularly handicaps people in cross-cultural situations. As a South African, I assume that my Greek colleague is more South African than he actually is. As an Egyptian, I assume that my Chilean colleague is more similar to me than she actually is. When I act based on this assumed similarity, I often find that I have acted inappropriately and thus ineffectively.

At the base of projected similarity is a subconscious parochialism. I assume that there is only one way to be: my way. I assume that there is only one way to see the world: my way. I therefore view other people in reference to me and to my way of viewing the world. People may fall into an illusion of understanding while being unaware of [their] misunderstandings. "I understand you perfectly but you don't understand me" is an expression typical of such a situation. Or all communicating parties may fall into a collective illusion of mutual understanding. In such a situation, each party may wonder later why other parties do not live up to the "agreement" they had reached.

Most global managers do not see themselves as parochial. They believe that as world travelers they are able to see the foreigner's point of view. This is not always true. While it is important to understand and respect the other culture's point of view, it is not necessary to either accept or adopt it. Understanding and respect do not imply acceptance. However, a rigid adherence to our own belief system expresses a form of parochialism, and parochialism underlies projected similarity.

Cross-Cultural Misevaluation

Even more than perception and interpretation, cultural conditioning strongly affects evaluation. Evaluation involves judging whether someone or something is good or bad. Cross-culturally, we use our own culture as a standard of measurement, judging that which is like our own culture as normal and good and that which is different as abnormal and bad. Our own culture becomes a self-reference criterion: Since no other culture is identical to our own, we tend to judge all other cultures as inferior.

Evaluation rarely helps in trying to understand, communicate with, or do business with people from another culture. The following example highlights the consequences of misevaluation:

A Swiss executive waits more than an hour past the appointed time for his Spanish colleague to arrive and to sign a supply contract. In his impatience he concludes that Spaniards must be lazy and totally unconcerned about business. The Swiss executive has misevaluated his colleague by negatively comparing him to his own cultural standards for business punctuality. Implicitly, he has labeled his own culture's behavior as good ("The Swiss arrive on time and that is good") and the other culture's behavior as bad ("The Spanish do not arrive on time and that is bad").

Communication: Getting their Meaning, not Just their Words

Effective cross-cultural communication is possible; however, global managers cannot approach communication in the same way as do domestic managers. First, effective global managers "know that they don't know." They assume difference until similarity is proven rather than assuming similarity until difference is proven.

Second, in attempting to understand their colleagues from other cultures, effective global managers emphasize description, by observing what is actually said and done, rather than interpreting or evaluating it. Describing a situation is the most accurate way to gather information about it. Interpretation and evaluation, unlike description, are based more on the observer's own culture and background than on the observed situation. My interpretations and evaluations therefore tell me more about myself than about the actual situation. Although managers, as decision makers, must evaluate people (e.g., performance appraisal) and situations (e.g., project assessment) in terms of organizational standards and objectives, effective global managers delay judgment until they have had sufficient time to observe and interpret the situation from the perspective of all cultures involved.

Third, when attempting to understand or interpret an international situation, effective global managers try to see it through the eyes of their international colleagues. This role reversal limits the myopia of viewing situations strictly from one's own perspective.

Fourth, once effective global managers develop an explanation for a situation, they treat the explanation as a guess (as a hypothesis to be tested) and not as a certainty. They systematically check with colleagues both from home and abroad to make certain that their guesses—their initial interpretations—are plausible. This checking process allows them to converge meanings—to delay accepting their interpretations of the situation until they have confirmed them with others.

Understanding: Converging Meanings

There are many ways to increase the chances for accurately understanding businesspeople from other cultures. Each technique is based on presenting the message through multiple channels (for example, stating your position and showing a graph to summarize the same position), paraphrasing to check that colleagues from other cultures have understood your meaning (and not just your words), and converging meanings (always double-checking with the other person to verify that you have communicated what you had intended to communicate).

Endnotes

1. Individual country quotes taken from J. P. Feig and G. Blair, *There Is a Difference*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: Meridian House International, 1980).

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