

outcome for both sides, they must use communication and trust to break down this wall and realize their full potential—a win-win outcome. We will discuss the role of trust in intercultural communication in more detail in Chapter 10.

Thus, the key to reaching the optimal outcome in intercultural communication is for people to work not against, but with, each other. During this process, people from one culture might find out that their positions and interests differ from another culture's. However, clearly stating one's positions and defending one's convictions, based on accurate categorization and judicious reasoning, is not the same as stubbornly sticking to one's stereotypes and prejudices, refusing to change, and failing to accept change in others. Discussion does not make conflict go away, of course, because in every intercultural encounter conceptualizations and appraisals still differ, creating tensions. However, management of intercultural tensions becomes more rational, with a higher chance of success.

So, there is a difference between overgeneralization (stereotyping) and generalization (typifying); all people must be willing and able to explain why they think that Spaniards like bullfighting or that swans are white, changing their original conceptions if necessary. By the same token, there is a difference between prejudices and convictions; all people must be willing and able to defend their argument that their country's soccer team is better, changing their judgment if necessary. Categorization and convictions are natural and necessary parts of effective intercultural communication, allowing differences to be voiced and settled peacefully, and not on a real battlefield.

People from different cultures can create accurate categorizations and appraisals of each other only through a mutual dialogue. If people from one culture set their collective mind once and for all, refusing to change their conceptualizations and judgments and failing to listen to people from the other culture, they fall victim to stereotyping and prejudice.

Thus, stereotyping must give way to generalization (typifying); prejudice must be fought and ideally eliminated; and cultural differences must be respected and managed peacefully through communication. In Chapter 7, we spoke about the importance of voice in intercultural communication. Now it is clear that we must listen very carefully to voices of people from other cultures and our own voices so that we can manage our differences together.

Introducing the Synergy Principle

The discussion above provides the basis for the ninth principle underlying intercultural communication—the Synergy Principle. As with the previous principles, we will isolate three parts that make up this principle. Each part deals with intercultural communication as a process of synergy. First, we will discuss intercultural communication in terms of flow dynamics. Then we will look at intercultural synergy as nonsummativity. Finally, we will present intercultural communication as a search for Pareto optimality. We will discuss each part separately and then formulate the Synergy Principle as a whole.

Intercultural Synergy and Flow Dynamics

The word *synergy* is derived from the Greek *synergos*, which means working together (*syn* meaning together and *ergon* meaning work). You are perhaps more familiar with the word *energy*, which refers to forces of isolated objects; in this sense, it is possible to speak of forces (or energies) of separate cultures. Intercultural **synergy** represents a process whereby people work with each other, integrating their forces (or energies).

As we saw by looking at the prisoner's dilemma, it is better for people to cooperate with each other, integrating interests, than to go against each other. Whenever we look at an example of ineffective intercultural interaction (and we have discussed quite a few in this book), we realize that the interaction was ineffective because people did not see the need or simply refused to work together. They spent a lot of their energy trying to accomplish a task, yet never completely succeeded or completely failed. Somehow, intercultural communication in such cases did not flow. The problem is that a flow is synergistic by definition: It requires that people work together, not without or against each other.

Some of the best-known research in the area of flow dynamics has been done by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1996), who defined and described **flow states**—those peak experiences when people realize their potential and find optimal solutions. Every flow state involves a sense of discovery, a feeling of creating a new reality and moving to a higher level of performance. In such states, a new level of attainment is reached and new strengths are discovered, so whatever we do just "flows." Then a solution becomes a pleasurable and triumphant experience. As Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner note, the word *solution* means, among other things,

a combination formed by dissolving something into a more fluid medium. When a solution is found to a problem, the hard edges of that problem dissolve and the separate identities of skills and challenges are transcended. The one flows into the other like an onrushing stream of energy. (2002: 116)

This is exactly what takes place when people from different cultures work together, realizing their potential. People may, and often do, put tremendous effort into resolving their intercultural tensions, but the overall flow state is still desirable and enjoyable because everyone is satisfied with this optimal experience.

Thus, intercultural communication can be viewed as a synergistic process directed toward achieving flow states, when people realize their potential and the outcome of their interaction reaches a new level. We should not be deceived by the word *state* into thinking that this is a destination that can be reached once and for all. Every state is part of the overall and never-ending process of intercultural interaction; it is dynamic by nature. Every state is a point in the continuous movement of the intercultural pendulum. If tensions are managed successfully and cultural forces are integrated into flow states, the intercultural pendulum swings smoothly; that is, it flows.

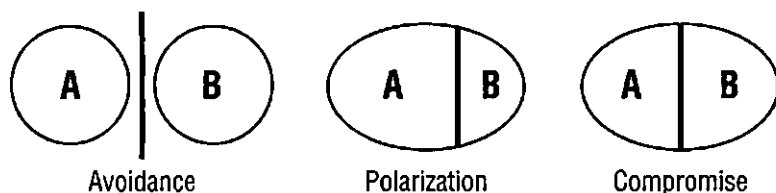


FIGURE 6

When people attempt to work without each other (avoidance approach), against each other (polarization approach), or not quite with each other (compromise approach), their interaction is not effective, because no shared space is created where intercultural communication can flow. Intercultural interaction comes down to one fixed line, as shown in Figure 6. When you have one fixed line, one culture can only move into what the other side considers its own territory. The result is a tug-of-war: distributing but not sharing cultural resources.

With integration, people are able to cross this line in both directions, so we now add two dynamic lines—and an area in between, as shown in Figure 7. In the space thus created, people can move back and forth and exchange meanings—intercultural interaction can flow. This situation can also be represented as shown in Figure 8. The common area can be seen as the shared continuous space (continuum) discussed in Chapter 6, as the pendulum movement discussed in Chapter 7, or as the negotiation zone discussed in Chapter 8. Because this area continually changes, it must be established through a process of transaction by the interacting cultures. People must choose a mutual solution to their tensions and establish lines between themselves. If people agree on where to draw these lines, they establish an effective solution. “An established solution is said to be stable if or to the extent that incentives to defect are absent” (Underdal, 2002: 118). In other words, if people are comfortable with the solution and do not feel any need to defect, or change the situation, we have a win-win situation. With true synergy, the prisoner’s dilemma is solved. As long as people from different cultures can manage to continuously redraw the lines between themselves to their mutual satisfaction, their interaction will be successful and their development stable. If their development is stable, they are able to draw on their resources and function freely, without feeling any need to oppress the Other or blame the Other for their own problems.

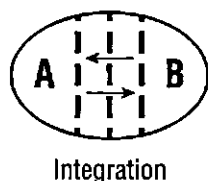


FIGURE 7

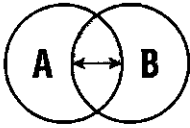


FIGURE 8

Thus, we have come full circle and returned to the importance of the boundary lines discussed in Chapter 1. As we discussed then, every boundary line is an idea. Now we see that the most constructive way to envision a boundary line is in terms of synergy. By crossing over the imaginary dividing line and sharing a space, people from different cultures are able to achieve a result that they cannot achieve on their own.

Intercultural Synergy and Nonsummativity

Intercultural synergy is based on the idea of nonsummativity. The idea of **non-summativity** is that separate entities working together and integrating their resources can achieve results that none could achieve individually. In simple terms, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

People cannot achieve intercultural synergy simply by adding their forces together; they must integrate their forces. The difference between adding and integrating forces is crucial. If we *add* something and something else (say, the numbers 2 and 2), we get their sum ($2 + 2 = 4$). If we *integrate* something with something else, we get a new entity that does not equal the sum of its parts; it is qualitatively different. In that case, 2 plus 2 does not equal 4; rather, it might be 5 (or more!). If we put flour, eggs, oil, and sugar in a bowl, we get exactly that—flour, eggs, oil, and sugar. However, if we mix them all together, integrating these ingredients, we get batter for a cake—a new entity with a unique taste different from the taste of each individual ingredient.

When people from different cultural groups come into contact but no exchange takes place between them, we cannot speak of intercultural communication as a genuine synergistic process. Their “interaction” is reduced to a tug-of-war, as they push the line between them, each culture trying to get as many resources as it can. At best, people from the interacting cultures might settle on dividing the resources exactly in half, reaching a compromise. But, as you might remember, unless people from different cultures venture—and are allowed—into each other’s territory, they do not integrate; thus, they do not really share any ideas, which is to say they do not really communicate. Intercultural communication is an integration of ideas and presupposes a dynamic effort—and change—just like making a cake.

Take as an example an intercultural family: When people from different cultures marry, a new entity is formed with its own beliefs, values, and norms. Or take the example of the acquisition of a U.S. firm by a Swedish manufacturer of high-precision metal products. As engineers from the two firms came to know and

trust each other, both sides incorporated elements of the other firm's processes; as a result, the facility's output was significantly boosted (Stauffer, 2003). Thus, by working together, people from different cultures can attain optimal outcomes that cannot be achieved by any one culture individually.

Toward Pareto Optimality

As you remember from Chapter 8, people can take several routes as they manage tensions and strive for resolution.

The first route is one of avoidance, in which cultures choose not to address tensions. This approach can be dangerous because it fails to resolve the source of tensions. People do not know how to set their goals and create a negotiation zone; in a way, they are defeated by the situation. People fail to use its potential for mutual benefit; in other words, they lose an opportunity to change and integrate their potential. In this case, neither culture really wins; this "neither/nor" approach to tensions is a lose-lose situation.

The second route is one of polarization, in which each culture views the Other as the enemy and tries to undermine and eventually destroy its position. Here, the zone of potential agreement turns into a war zone: People from one culture can win only if people from the other culture lose. This approach is dangerous because it may end in eliminating the Other; then Self is left without any culture to interact with. This "either/or" approach to tensions is a win-lose situation.

The third route is one of compromise, in which people from different cultures agree to disagree. Here, the negotiation zone is split 50/50. In the Arabic language, compromise is translated as two words, literally meaning halfway solution (Heggy, 2002); this is a good way to describe the compromise approach to resolving intercultural tensions. Sometimes compromise is even perceived as a negative approach to conflict, associated with defeat, weakness, and capitulation. Compromise is better than no solution at all (avoidance) or a lopsided solution (polarization). However, it is still a halfway solution because people from each culture have to give something up. Here, people from both cultures seem to win, yet neither culture completely reaches its goal; this "both/neither" approach is a no lose-no win situation.

The fourth route is one of integration, in which cultures show a high concern for each other as they strive toward a resolution that benefits both sides. In this case, people from both cultures reach their goals and do not lose; this "both/and" approach is a win-win situation.

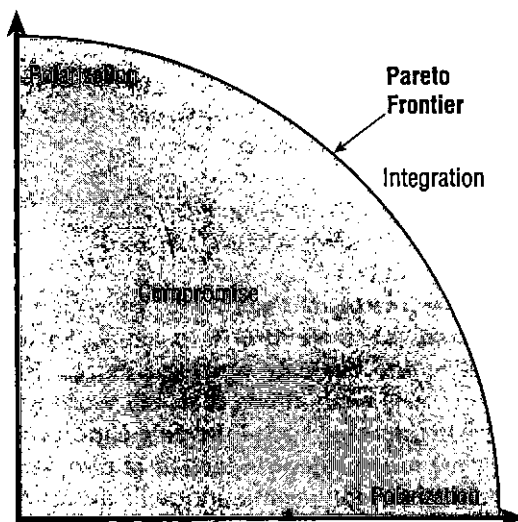
Thus, in intercultural communication, people must (1) move from the "neither/nor" approach of avoidance, (2) avoid the trap of the "either/or" approach of polarization, (3) build on the "both/neither" approach of compromise, and (4) strive for the "both/and" approach of integration. People must move toward this upper limit by making the most of their negotiation zone, thereby reaching the optimal agreement.

The term used to denote this upper limit of creative options, or optimal agreement, is *Pareto optimality* (Lax & Sebenius, 1991). In simple terms, **Pareto**

optimality is a solution that cannot be improved on without putting one of the sides in a worse position. After determining and trying all options, people agree on a joint resolution that satisfies all sides and that cannot be improved upon any further without making the position of one of the sides worse. It is easy to see that, of the four routes we have discussed, the approach closest to Pareto optimality is integration; here, a decision is made jointly that satisfies people from all interacting cultures. If this resolution cannot be improved upon any further, people from all interacting cultures have made the most of the zone of potential agreement.

Pareto optimality is not a real point that can be reached; rather, it is an ideal toward which people must strive. That is why Pareto optimality is often called the efficient frontier (Watkins & Rosegrant, 2001) or Pareto frontier (Sebenius, 2002: 237). In Figure 9, the Pareto frontier is shown on the dual concern model, along with the locations of the four approaches to managing intercultural interactions.

The shaded zone in Figure 9, between the two axes and bounded by the frontier, is the negotiation zone, or the zone of possible agreement. Overall, effective intercultural communication as a synergistic process is directed toward Pareto optimality—the frontier that is never really reached but is always out there. It is an idea, an ideal. The more synergistic intercultural communication is, the closer people from different cultures come to this frontier.



Avoidance

FIGURE 9

But what exactly is this idea, this ideal frontier? The concept of Pareto optimality might seem a bit abstract. Can it be presented in more exact terms? We will discuss this optimal outcome in the next chapter.

The Synergy Principle Defined

Now we can give a more concise formulation of the Synergy Principle, based on the above discussion of its three parts.

First, intercultural communication can be viewed as a synergistic process directed toward achieving flow states, when people from different cultures realize their potential and the outcome of their interaction reaches a new level. For intercultural communication to flow, people must work together, not without or against each other.

Second, as people from different cultures work together and integrate their potential, they are able to achieve an outcome that cannot be achieved by any one culture individually. This idea is known as nonsummativity.

Third, nonsummativity allows people to reach the optimal agreement for all sides. Such an agreement is reached when all options have been tried and the solution cannot be further improved upon without making the position of one of the sides worse. This outcome is known as Pareto optimality, or the efficient frontier.

In a nutshell, the Synergy Principle can be formulated as follows:

Intercultural communication is a process whereby people from different cultures integrate their resources, striving toward an optimal result that cannot be achieved by any culture individually.

The Synergy Principle teaches us that the optimal way for people from different cultures to interact is by cooperating with each other. Collaborating and integrating resources is the right thing to do.

Summary

We started this chapter by looking at the role of perception in intercultural communication. We noted that, when we come into contact with people from another culture, we conceptualize and evaluate our experiences. Naturally, we want to create conceptualizations and evaluations that will work in all situations. However, there are dangers in adopting such inflexible conceptualizations and evaluations—they might prove inaccurate. We looked at two dangers: stereotype and prejudice. We showed that stereotype and prejudice distort our perceptions of interactions with people from another culture. It was emphasized that the best way for people from different cultures to develop reliable conceptualizations and evaluations of each other is through collaboration, or open dialogue. In open dialogue, stereotyping gives way to generalization, and prejudice is replaced with convic-

tion. When people from different cultures work together, relying on generalizations and convictions, they can achieve the optimal outcome, as was demonstrated using the example of the prisoner's dilemma.

Thus, we presented intercultural communication as a synergistic process directed toward achieving flow states, when people from different cultures realize their potential and the outcome of their interaction reaches a new level. We noted that intercultural synergy is based on the idea of nonsummativity: People from different cultures working together and integrating their resources can achieve results that no culture can achieve individually. By working together, people from different cultures can attain the optimal outcome known as Pareto optimality. After determining and trying all options, people from different cultures agree on a joint resolution that satisfies all sides and that cannot be improved upon without making the position of one of the sides worse.

Based on these ideas, the Synergy Principle was formulated.

So, the optimal way for people from different cultures to interact with each other is synergistically. Cooperating and integrating resources is the right thing to do. But, *why* is it the right thing to do? There must be something about intercultural synergy that people in all cultures can benefit from. Why, in the final analysis, is synergy the right approach to intercultural interactions? We will discuss this question in the next chapter.