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CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION BREAKDOWNS: CASE STUDIES FROM THE FIELD OF INTERCULTURAL MANAGEMENT

Abstract:

Today's business environment has become highly complex, dynamic and globalised. In today's global world an understanding of what happens when people from different cultures meet and work together is quite essential for managers and leaders.

This paper employs a qualitative approach to case studies collected from Hungarian managers who are in business contact with people belonging to various cultures.

Over the last decade, research in intercultural management topics has received increased attention in literature. After reviewing the previous studies regarding cross-cultural misunderstandings, the author presents case-studies focusing on intercultural interaction issues in workplaces in Hungary. The paper summarises the differences in (1) management style, (2) staff behaviour and (3) attitudes and values. The findings of this study prove that the barriers of communication come from the national culture's influence in the workplace on the behaviours of people with different identities. Moreover, culture also influences people's way of thinking and results in different understanding toward the vision and the purposes of enterprises. The findings show that the current challenges caused by the globalisation pressures in the realm of economics result in the need to review leaders' management practices. The findings also indicate that further research is needed to support work communities in order to successfully cope with increasing cultural diversity.

Keywords:

international business setting, cultural diversity, intercultural misunderstanding, critical incidents

JEL Classification: F23, J24, D22

“Culture is the pattern of taken-for-granted assumptions about how a given collection of people should think, act, and feel as they go about their daily affairs” (Joynt & Warner, 1996: 3).

Introduction

Today's business environment has become highly complex, dynamic and globalised. In today's global world an understanding of what happens when people from different cultures meet and work together is quite essential for managers and leaders. Actually, in the entire world there are approximately 80.000 multinational firms and each has in average 10 affiliates abroad, forming this way a vast planetary net (Botescu 2010). The contemporary companies in global economy need competent management with willingness, awareness, knowhow and skills to communicate and operate across cultural borders (Grušovnic – Jelovac 2014). On the other hand, the consequences of the globalization of the economical activity are on cultural values specific for different countries, some specialists sustain an accentuation of cultural differences between countries.

Successful communication between human beings, either within a culture or between cultures, requires that the message and meaning intended by the speaker is correctly received and interpreted by the listener. Sustainable error-free communication is rare, and in most human interactions there is some degree of miscommunication. In understanding communication, a listener must pay attention not just to what is said and when, but also to how many times something is said, under what circumstances, and by whom.

Difficulties in intercultural communication arise when there is little or no awareness of divergent cultural values and beliefs. In intercultural interaction, speakers sometimes assume that what they believe is right, because they have grown up thinking their way is the best (Zhang 2008).

In general, cross-cultural miscommunication can be thought to derive from the mistaken belief that emics are etics, that words and needs mean the same thing across cultures, and this miscalculation is perhaps more likely when cultures are similar in surface attributes but different in important underlying ways. In this case miscommunication may occur instead of non-communication.

I am convinced that it is necessary to manage cultural differences if you work in international business setting because culture teaches human beings to attach meanings to situations, people and things, and therefore influences them in the way they construct meaning when dealing with otherness (Glaser 2007, 60). When we understand our own values, attitudes, beliefs, assumptions, and behaviours, we are able to compare and contrast them in a face-to-face interaction or experience. That is

why that we have to develop a deeper understanding of issues of cross-cultural differences (Stewart & Bennett 1991).

The findings presented in the paper are based on a qualitative research conducted by the author and her students (from Marketing, International Economy and Management and Enterprise MSc courses). In our research we gathered information how Hungarian business people think about communication difficulties with people belonging to various cultures. Qualitative interviews as a means can help to understand the world of interviewees and to see reality, i.e. in our case business behaviour from Hungarian business people's perspective.

Three aspects are discussed in this study as follows, communication system, management style, and staff behavior.

Theoretical background

Cross-cultural research is tricky and difficult. The researchers take full advantage of methodologies developed during the past 50-60 years to do their research in a sophisticated way (House et al. 2004, 1).

Over the last decade, research on intercultural management topics has received increased attention in literature. Several streams can be identified:

- The first group deals with the meaning of the notion of *culture* additionally with stereotypes, cultural symbols and cultural metaphors (See for example: Geertz 1973; Cacciaguidi-Fahy & Cunningham 2007; Onea 2010)
- The second dominant theme involves examining the intercultural communication in general: presenting Hofstede's (1980), Hall's (1976) and Trompenaars' (1993) dimensions, saying that national factors definitely determine management practice (See for example: Scollon 2001; Ablonczy-Mihályka 2009; Derkun et al 2010)
- The third analyses examines the role of English as a lingua franca in business communication and the culture-related English for special purposes (See for example: Tompos 2003; Louhiala-Salminen et al. 2005; Du-Babcock 2013)
- The fourth deals with investigating the cultural differences between two culturally divergent partners (See for example: Hamburg 2013; Baric 2013;) and focusing on cultures clashes – referring to values and norms. (See for example: Szőke 2009; Tompos 2014; Szőke-Kovács 2014).
- The fifth explores issues relating to the intercultural competence, the business negotiation skills (See for example: Tompos 2009) and the importance of nonverbal communication in intercultural context (See for example: Samovar et al. 2007).
- The researchers' sixth group studies the cross-border situations taking into consideration that the national border separates countries, regions, cultures and economies but at the same time connects them creating common interests, insisting cooperation, helping to find new resources to work together, i. e.

generating a great number of cross-border relations (See for example: Rechnitzer 1999; Konczosné 2013; Konczosné 2014).

- The seventh trend approaches the topic in question from the marketing's (see for example: Ercsey 2012; Ercsey 2013) and the management's points of view, i.e. researchers examine practical issues (See for example: Csath 2008; Ablonczy 2008; Ná dai 2012; Sző ke 2015).

As it is seen intercultural communication can be investigated from several points of views. Some researchers can mainly focus on face to face encounters between individuals from different cultural backgrounds, while others pay special attention to „*the underlying communicative style differences in interethnic communication*” (Connor 2008: 309). The present article shows examples bringing together case-studies referring to misunderstandings in communication and presents critical cultural incidents including a story about cross-cultural miscommunication.

Aim, method and research questions

This article seeks to prove that the national culture can still influence communications in organisations and the research presented here focuses on Hungarian respondents who regularly meet people with different cultural backgrounds. The general character of the research was a qualitative case study approach to attain an understanding of the characteristics of communication misunderstandings in multicultural business settings.

The research data were gathered in 2015 through semi-structured interviews. 147 interviews were carried out by MA students taking part in the author's intercultural management courses. The respondents were businessmen who have had business relationship with foreign partners for between 9 months - 16 years. It is important that we have interviewed people who have routinely been taking part in business interactions (at least on weekly basis). We excluded knowledgeable informants (teachers, trainers, public servants, erasmus students etc.) since interviewees need to have a very similar background in order to have 'comparable' results. The interviewees' replies were processed manually.

Usually researchers have to decide how much background the respondent should be given on the purpose, methods, existing findings, etc. of the investigation at the beginning of the interview. Practice has proven that it is beneficial to inform the interviewees prior to the interview, so in this research the interviewees have been given an interview sheet.

The research questions are that people who have different cultural backgrounds

- will not still behave in the same way in international business setting, i.e. global business behaviour does not exist and

- will adapt their own norms and values concerning communication rules, decision-making process and conflict-handling.

The Table 1 shows where the business contacts are from.

Table1. Business contacts

Germany	36
Austria	19
China	18
The United States of America	13
Great Britain	13
Italy	13
France	11
Japan	4
India	3
Turkey	3
Spain	2
Poland	2
Scandinavian countries	2
Others (Brazil, Croatia, Czech Republic, Israel, Slovakia, Switzerland Russia, Ukraine)	8

It is necessary to mention that within the frame of this qualitative research critical incidents caused by cultural differences were investigated but the findings reported in this paper will contain only the results regarding German culture. This choice seems to be evident not only because most of the respondents mentioned that they had been involved in business relationship with German counterparts but Germany is the first business partner of Hungary and German investments have been at the top since 1990.

Findings and Discussion

We have to emphasize that the aim of data collection by means of interviews is to investigate business behaviour and miscommunication patterns in intercultural settings from the Hungarian business people's point of view. In the interviews we focused on questions as follows: *What expectations did you have when you started to work with foreigners? What were these expectations based on? What do you think explains the foreigner interactional partner's unexpected behaviour? What strategy did you employ to sort out a conflict? What kind of advice would you give the Hungarian business people if they wanted to do business with foreign business people? Can you mention some absolute do's and don'ts for other cultures?*

The respondents, however, were encouraged to express themselves freely (while the general direction and the shape of the interviews was maintained) and it is seen in the style of the cited replies below.

Communication style

Most of the Hungarian respondents mentioned that Germans' seemed to be *arrogant*, *nervous* and *impolite* during the communication and Germans' tone and intonation are too forced and loud. In every interaction Hungarians felt that they themselves *had done something wrong*. The Hungarians were surprised when German partners and/colleagues communicated in a much more direct way than Hungarian people do.

I started to work for a German company (automotive industry) 2 years ago. The only advantage is to work there that the salary is much higher than at the firm I used to work. I can't stand my direct boss (male, 31) who never let me enter the room first, never opens the door when we arrive there at the same time. I know that he is responsible for our department but there are 18 Hungarians and he is the only one who is from Germany.

(female, 34)

My enterprise has been working with business partners in Germany. Since I have worked for my firm for a long time my Hungarian boss wanted me to be the "contact person". To tell you the truth communication is in English but our German partners doesn't know how to make a polite question, how to communicate in a polite way. I have known them for more than 10 years and they have never asked me about my children (I am a proud dad), they didn't asked me how I was when I started to work after a car accident (1 month in hospital, 6 weeks at home).

(male 41)

First I thought that my German boss is aggressive because also in informal interactions behaves as it would be a fight. I did not react on the same way and it took a lot of time when I realized that his behaviour is accepted by German communication rules.

(male 28)

I think my German colleague is not good at English. I told him that I have a problem with my job. He did not help me. Somebody told me to ask him directly to help me to solve the problem. But I think he does not understand my question or he is simply impolite.

(male 48)

Concept of time and time management

Due to the research work of Hall (1959, 1976) we know that cultures may have a very different attitude to time and perception of it. While in some cultures everything is dominated by time, people plan their actions, live and act according a certain schedule,

for other nations time is just a framework, it has no dominating rule and delays are natural.

We started a joint project with German, Austrian and Croatian partners 1 year ago. The lead partner was a company from Germany but the kick off meeting was organised by us in Hungary. In advance the German partner sent us an agenda in details (greetings – 5 minutes, two breaks – 2x10 minutes, presentations – 15 minutes, question time 20 minutes, etc.). First we thought it is only a framework and it can be modify in case of new ideas or new issues to be discussed. But I was surprised when the German colleague told me: it is not question time now (I wanted to ask something when he was presenting).

(male, 33)

My German colleague was on the phone and sitting when I entered his office (he wanted to speak to me. He kept on speaking and did not told me to sit down. I was standing in front of his desk 12 minutes and when he finished telephone conversation he told me smiling: Deadline is deadline. It was urgent to speak ... I think a situation like this does never happen with Hungarians.

(female 30)

When I started to work at a German company based in Győr (Hungary) the first months were horrible. Every Monday morning there is a meeting with all the colleagues from my department – for nothing. We are told to be creative, relaxed and so on. I thought it would be a slogan. I did not understand the content of this message. These meetings seem to be so childish.

(male 35)

Cross-cultural differences

I think that we need to be able to understand what processes come into play when people with different cultural backgrounds interact with one another. It is obvious that intercultural interaction as an everyday experience requires special competence to manage anxiety caused by cultural differences in interaction with people who see the world from perspectives which may be different or even in conflict with one's own personal values and beliefs.

I like my job very much. I work for a firm which produces robots. I have been working with engineers from Germany for 9 month (they are not the only "foreigners" at our company). Some time ago two test robots clashed and the Germans started to discuss, tried to find out why the robots had clashed, etc. I saw that it was not a big problem, it can be solved in a short time – I could have done alone without any discussions and problem analyses. It is useless to speak a lot about a technical problem if you solve it on your own without any delays (I thought).

(male 39)

I did not understand when my German colleagues wanted to speak about work during lunch breaks.

(male 26)

I like working on my own. I do not want anybody to work with. I think I am responsible for my tasks and that is all. Why does my boss (who is German) say that teams are presumed to make better decisions than individuals.

(male 43)

It is so embarrassing that one of my German colleagues communicates in a very formal way in the office and when we go out to have beer he seems to be my best friend. It is strange because I do not know how to behave with him.

(male 36)

This story happened some years ago. I am an engineer and at that time I worked for a family-run enterprise (the family in part was from Austria in part from Germany). The family was not satisfied with our efficiency and decided to send "experts" to Hungary. One of them was Herr Bock, i.e. Mr Bock who was an "oberschlosser", i.e. a locksmith who was shouting all the day, he did not do anything else and of course we were offended: it is impossible in Hungary that an undergraduated says what to do.

(male 52)

I think that I am an open-minded and tollerant person with a high level of empathy, I studied intercultural communication at the university and I know what happens when people from different cultures come together to share ideas, feelings, and information. Thus, after graduating I started to work at a German company in Hungary. My superior was a German man so I could see that stereotypes for Germans' are true. My boss was the master of planning. "Careful planning" was his favourite expression. When he was not able to explain something he said "it is a rule or there are some regulations", he was not flexible (for example for the deadlines), he was not at all spontaneous or creative in attitudes and values (and he did not let us to be spontaneous or creative either). Thus, after a year I left that German company.

(male 26)

German does not like supprises. I always thought and learned that sudden changes in business are welcome, they can improve not only the income but the reputation of a company. My German collegaues do not agree with me, in addition they do not appreciate humour in a business context. I think they are not right. Humour is important in life.

(female 38)

I know that punctuality is important for German people, I accept that it is a necessity at work as well. One day I was late (15 minutes) because I had to take my daughter to the doctor and my boss was angry and he did not accept the reason. He kept on telling me to change my behaviour if not

(female 33)

My German colleague is unfriendly. We have been working together for 3 years and he has never asked me how I am, why I sad or excited, how I spend the weekend, etc. It has never happen if two Hungarian work together for such a long time.

(male 37)

Conclusion

Culturally-specific behaviour can be explained on the basis of cultural standards. This can aid in understanding what would otherwise be irritating, unusual and strange events. This knowledge is therefore an important basis for constructive cooperation between members of different cultures.

The results of this investigation show that the work communities should be helped to deal with increasing cultural diversity. In theory everybody knows that there are “new” challenges caused by the globalisation but in practice every enterprise has to review its management practices to handle culturally-different people in a right way.

The purpose of this investigation is, from one hand, to examine if cultural differences influence cooperation between group members in multicultural groups, from the other hand to analyse different behaviour, norms and values in external business cooperation. The findings show that even though misunderstanding is prevalent and inevitable in our daily life, it has been especially emphasized in intercultural situations. Conflicts and challenging interactions may occur in the name-calling, in the use of offensive language, in shouting and/or isolating. The best advice is to make an effort to sensitively resolve differences and taking account of cultural considerations.

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