CROSS CULTURAL COMMUNCATION SKILLS

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Abstract: With liberalization of national economies and increasing pace of globalization, communication levels have increased among individuals, groups and companies across communities, countries and continents. People with different backgrounds, mindsets and cultures are interacting through conferences, correspondence and non-verbal communication leading to more willing cooperation. Human civilization is developing, progressing and moving forward at a much faster rate than ever before, removing age-old disparities of race, religion and color. The differences in culture occupy the central stage of emerging global world where progress would largely depend upon how well managers and leaders are able to communicate across varied cultures to achieve common goal of progress for all.

After learning this unit, students shall be able to: Appreciate the increasing relevance of cross cultural communication skills in the emerging global economy Understand the central role of culture in communications as it deeply influences everyone's‟ thoughts, speech and actions Grasp the strategic importance of becoming excellent cross cultural communicators Identify layers of culture that influence interactions with own surroundings Describe the distinguishing traits of culture that enable recognition of differences among cultures Explain the boundaries of personal spaces that vary with culture and individuals are very protective about Describe how cultural influences the non-verbal, oral and written communication processes Central role of culture: Culture has a powerful influence on individuals‟ way of thinking, saying or doing things: Thinking encompasses beliefs, assumptions, values, myths and folklores Saying, being the essence of living, determines the way of interacting with ones‟ surroundings – machines, tools, natural resources, food, clothing, shelter etc Doing signifies norms of behavior that include own customs, laws, regulations, ceremonies, fashions, etiquettes etc Culture provides the meaningful context in which people gather together, think about themselves and interact with the surroundings. It must be remembered that a culture is rational and logical to a community although it may appear irrational and illogical to any one outside that culture. Thus working across culture presents both the biggest challenge and opportunity in a world that is shrinking in terms of time, distance and ability to communicate. Modern managers are required to acquire and possess high degree of skills in communications across diverse cultures. Increasingly managers are interacting with persons from different cultures and learning the ways they meet, greet, and communicate with others creates a lasting influence and paves the way for mutually beneficial encounters leading to productive cooperation to accomplish common, agreed objectives. importance of cross cultural communication skills In the modern world of business, acquiring and sharpening cross cultural communication skills is a strategic asset as it can: Propel ones‟ career path Prop ones‟ success in competitive environments. Reflect ones‟ commitment to quality and excellence. Make one confident in diverse settings of people from all walks of life. Help develop an admirable code of conduct for groups and enterprises.

Understanding culture: Understanding a culture is like peeling an onion. It has several layers that can be peeled off to develop a keen insight of the culture. Broadly, we think in terms of following three layers: Outer layer ,It is what other people associate with that culture, its visual realities: Behavior ,Dress ,Food ,Language Habitats It is also referred to as the „Explicit Culture‟. Middle Layer, It refers to the values and norms the community holds – these may be right or wrong, good or bad. Inner Layer, It is the deepest level and understanding - it leads to the core of it. It is the key to working successfully with other cultures. The core consists of: Basic assumptions: Rules, Methods of solving or coping with problems: These rules and methods become so embedded in the members who take to it much like breathing, without even stopping to think about them. It is very difficult for outsiders to recognize these. It is also known as the „Implicit Culture‟. Distinguishing culture and recognizing differences: Since culture has profound impact on all aspects of communication skills, everyone must develop a good understanding of the cultural background and recognize the differences between own culture and the one they are interacting with.

Distinguishing traits of culture: Members of a group would have a lot of similarities in the way they think, speak and do work. A major culture may have several subcultures too. Culture can be identified with

geographical areas, professions, hobbies etc. Culture of a management group may be different than that of accountants or lawyers. There may be some common features between football fans and cricket fans. Several distinguishing traits are: Stability of culture Whether culture is stable or it is changing rapidly.

Complexity of culture: Whether it is easy to discern or has several layers that take time to grasp.

Composition of culture: Whether it has several subcultures as in India or it is homogenous as in USA. Acceptance of outsiders Whether it is closed to outsiders or it accepts outsiders readily. Everybody needs special training before they become comfortable with a different culture. Recognizing cultural differences: It is useful to be able to recognize cultural differences. A person in south India nods his head in affirmation differently from a north Indian. If one is not aware of it, it is very easy to take no for yes. In USA, one cannot call a spade a spade because in the American slang, spade is used for black American. Similarly an Australian may compliment someone by saying that „he is a good bastard‟ whereas it may offend an Indian. A few major aspects of culture that distinguish them are: Religion North Americans in USA and Canada follow puritan religion and are influenced by their ethics although both the countries have a large number of immigrants settling from many countries of the world. They view material comfort as a sign of superiority and believe money can solve many problems. There are also many societies who condemn materialism.

Values: People in countries like USA and Canada are more goal-oriented and want work to be done efficiently. It may not be so in India and South Asian countries where unemployment is very high. Managers tend to employ two persons where one would suffice.

Role play: Culture determines the role people play – what they communicate to whom and in what way. For example in some cultures women play a significant role in business whereas it is not so in Middle East and North African countries.

Decision making: In many countries in the west, business is dominated by one person, often the CEO who says yes or no to many decisions / deals as is the case in USA and even in Pakistan. In China and Japan, decision-making is a laborious process of reaching consensus otherwise they do not feel comfortable with the decision.

Social behavior and etiquettes: Culture has deep influence on the social behavior and etiquettes of the people. Polite manners in one country may be considered to be rude in another. These rules of etiquettes may be formal or informal. Formal rules can be learnt and taught, for example, table manners etc. Informal rules are more difficult to identify and are learnt by observation and then emulating them. Informal rules relate to: How males and females should behave ,When and how people can touch one another,When it is appropriate to call a person by first name ,Violation of these informal rules can cause a great deal of discomfort although people loathe talking about them. Concept of time: People from USA and Europe tend to be more particular about time – they also want to clinch deals quickly. It is not so in most of Asia, Mexico and Latin America. Japanese are aware of American impatience and say, „You Americans have one terrible weakness. If we make to wait long enough, you will agree to anything‟. Also called „chromatics‟, it is emerging as a new area of interest for distinguishing the attitude of people from different cultures towards time and timing.

Proximics or language of personal space: Animals, birds and fish guard their territories rather aggressively and so do nations. Within a nation, there are well-defined boundaries among different smaller communities. People living within these territories have an allegiance to it and protect these territories even ferociously American anthropologist, Edward T Hall, concluded that every human being has a territory that it considers to be its own. The area or the space delineated around the 278 Body is claimed to be his own like the air space around him. Edward T Hall called it „Proximics‟ – study of the spatial needs of human beings. Personal space around each one of us have a critical implication for communication and interaction with others and consequently on our behavior and relations with them. Like all other living beings, humans carry a kind of air envelop around them all the time. However, size of the air-envelop can vary among different cultures. It can also vary between a villager and a city dweller. Besides, status of a person also influences the distance at which a person stands with respect to that person.

Spatial Zones: Edward Hall has identified following four zones that are in the form of concentric circles around human body. Since the distances vary among cultures, density of population and status, each zone has been indicated with a range of distances: Intimate zone: This zone extends up to 0.5 meter from the body and is considered to have the most important influence on the behavior of individuals. This is a zone that an individual guards as if it is his own property. Only those very close to the individual are permitted to enter this zone viz., spouse, parents, lovers, close friends and relative. With these persons, not many words are used in communication – whispers take the place of spoken words. Eye contacts, handshake and pat at the back are noticed often. Nature of communication is moreintimate. It

has a sub-zone extending to first 0.15 meter from the body. This is a close intimate zone that can be entered only during physical contact. Personal zone: This covers the space from 0.5 to 1.2 meters from the body. This is the distance observed during friendly gatherings, social functions, office parties etc. People speak in monotones or use low pitch voice with close friends, colleagues, associates and visitors. Communication is more personal and is carried out in a relaxed and casual way. Much of the responses are spontaneous, leading to important decisions which is the hallmark of this space. Social zone This space extends from 1.2 to 3.5 meters. This space is ideal for formal parties and relationships are mostly official. Most of the business is carried out in this space - a lot of reason and logic comes into play and much of the future planning is done. A man is a social being and this space becomes critical for a person on the move in the hierarchy of business and thus forms the most critical zone. Public zone This zone covers the space beyond 3.5 meters from the body and covers the distance at which people can hear and see. The distance between the person and the group he is addressing or making presentation to would be over 3.5 meters. This zone requires use of more formal language; communication is more detached and impersonal in perception. One has to raise the voice to be heard clearly. Organizational Proxemics The subject of proximics is expanding to cover the contents in the spatial zones as they have major influence on dealing and interacting with people - this area of specialization is referred to as „Organizational Proxemics" and covers the followings: Landscaping,Color schemes and other physical settings,Ergonomics ,Signs, signals, paintings, sculptors and other arte-facts ,Furnishings and interior decoration etc.

Implications of Proxemics: Knowledge of Proxemics is being used to secure following advantages in business: Every culture has a well-defined personal space; violation of spatial zones can create wrong impressions, leading to loss of business. In multi-cultural groups, individuals should observe the spatial zones of different groups and interact with them accordingly. Even in small groups, one must find out the boundary limits of spatial zones so as to preclude „bubble-bursts" arising from irritation and iscomfort.280 According to Gary Kreps, people has strong territorial emotions about their possessions or objects of which they claim ownership viz., clothes, books, homes and automobiles. Since they protect these territories vigorously, people should ensure that they do not step on someone's toes. People from high-context cultural countries including India prefer greater distances that low-context culture nations who have carefree and casual approach to it. The concept of proximics is also reflected in the way meetings are arranged – a round table encourages participation among members.In organizations, people are very sensitive about their seating places, furniture and equipment. Small offices with low ceilings and no windows can generate a feeling of being boxed up, sullen and depressed. Open offices are becoming more popular now as they facilitate greater communication, instant feedback and improved inter-personal relationships. Impact of culture on non-verbal communications: Culture influences non-verbal communications as much of the gestures, expressions etc result from „clan culture". Besides, experts in communication are now convinced that non-verbal communications play a very critical role in every day living: They form an integral part of oral, face-to-face communications. They form the backbone of written communication in terms of layout and other visual aspects of written communication. In modern business communications, non-verbal communications can be at the conscious and unconscious levels. Managers must be conversant with both to be able to use them effectively in cross cultural interactions. Conscious forms of non-verbal communications There are several aspects of conscious non-verbal communication that help to create the „first impression" on the people. Although these aspects are largely influenced by the climate and other specific conditions, local culture has a profound impact on: Dress Most people form opinions about others in the first seven seconds of their meeting. A good sense of dressing contributes greatly to making the right first impression. Dressing appropriately is an art that needs to be acquired although changes in dress codes are happening in many countries rather fast because as the world globalizes, dress sense is also becoming global. Dress should also include footwear, accessories and even cosmetics / perfumes used. Business Attire for men Professional dress may include suit, trousers, sports coat, shirt with collar, necktie etc. Many companies are allowing staff to wear casual dress at work once a week. This may include sports shirts, polo shirts, trousers, sweaters that can be stylish as well as comfortable.

Business Attire for women: Attires for business women include dresses, suits, skirts no shorter than three inches above the knees, pants with blouses etc. Inappropriate dresses are: too tight or too loose blouses, sleeveless, denim, shorts, backless / strapless dresses, sweatshirts, hats etc. Jewellery, accessories etc should be minimal. It is better to stick to ear studs; make up, to suit but should appear natural.

Grooming: Besides dressing properly, one should not forget to wear his smile. Remember that one is not dressed for the day until he has worn his smile.

Attitude at work should be positive, cooperative and willing to accept responsibilities. Business cards: Business card is ones" calling card. It represents the person when he is not there; it speaks of the person and his business. Ensure that the business card is attractive, appealing and easy to read. It should convey the message that the person wants people to remember. Handshake: Handshake is a common form of greetings when one meets someone. Ones" style of handshake tells a lot about him. The correct form of handshake is „to keep thumbs up and toughing webs before wrapping the fingers around the other persons" hand. While introducing oneself, the person is expected to offer his hand irrespective of the man or woman except in certain cultures that prohibit women shaking hands with men. Other forms of greeting like embracing or kissing on the cheeks should be avoided in business gatherings. Unconscious forms of non-verbal communication

There are several of them and involve: Facial Expressions, Eyes, Head Shoulders,Hands and fingers,Body posture Gestures, expression etc provide cues and clues that supplement ones" oral communication. They are vital and yet they should not be learnt as they look artificial. They are not consciously worn as they are intuitive, outward expressions of inward feelings or thoughts. Gestures should be read in clusters and in the context they are made. Single gesture is like a single word that can have many meanings. Following gestures are best avoided: A pointing finger A clenched, raised fist A finger raised and put vertically on the lips, Frown on the face.

Impact of culture on oral communications: It is more difficult to deal with problems arising from the way people speak a language. They continue to speak the foreign language in the same way as they speak own language. Those who have tried learning a different language would know that it is easier to write in the language than to speak in it. Another source that adds to the difficulty of understanding the language is when the speakers use idiomatic expressions. These expressions may be well understood in one country but may not make any impression on people from another region. A few useful tips for oral communication in cross cultural environments are: Clear pronunciation of words Foreigners should put in a little extra effort in pronouncing words by pausing at every punctuation sign. This eliminates „noise" in communication. Look for feedback from listeners Be alert and sensitive to the expressions and gestures of the audience by maintaining good eye contact. In case they show signs of confusion, do not hesitate to check back by asking a straight question like, „Is it clear? Rephrase sentences. If speakers feel that audience has not understood them, they should rephrase their sentences in simpler language by choosing words that are easily understood. Do not repeat the same sentence more loudly. Avoid talking down to audience Do not blame the audience for lack of comprehension. It is more appropriate to ask, „Am I going too fast? Allow people to finish what they have to say. If interrupted, audience may miss something useful. Similarly, speakers should not let others complete their sentences. Impact of culture on written communications: Written communication is the art of correspondence. Written language is the vehicle of the cultural ethos of the country or region. Although it is a common practice to translate the written message in to the local language, it is well known a good translation requires mastery of both the languages and more importantly, a deep understanding of the cultures and cultural differences involved. Although English has emerged as the language of business internationally, we do come across correspondence in French, Spanish, Chinese, Japanese, Arabic, Hindi, Urdu etc. It is a major challenge to translate the product catalogue, literature and advertisements in other languages.besides, translations are required for documents relating to strategy, systems and procedure. In the contemporary business scenario, people are learning foreign languages to bridge the gap between consumers and product offerings. Even so problems abound and until a good understanding of the cross cultural issues develops, constraints / impediments to communication across cultures would continue.

A few guidelines are: Use simple, short words Select simple, short words that do not have multiple meanings. Rely on specific terms Specific terms improve understanding. Avoid abstractions and illustrate with examples. Avoid slang, jargons and idioms Slang, jargons and idioms do not translate well. Even abbreviations are not understood well across cultures; avoid them. Construct simple short sentences Simple short sentences also improve comprehension compared with the long sentences one uses in language one is fluent in use short passages Stick to the rule of one idea per passage and make it short.28 4 Use transitional devices to facilitate understanding train of thought Use of transitional words likes „In addition, besides, first, second, third etc" makes it easier for the reader / listener not conversant with the language. use numbers and pre-printed forms Wherever possible use numbers and pre-printed forms as they are easy to understand. Emphasize neatness in layout and presentation Printers and publishers are using different colors for heading and adding other embellishments in printed, written matters to attract attention of readers and retain their interest by

inducing them to read on. Summary: With globalization of businesses and economies, people with different background, mindsets and cultures are interacting more frequently and human civilization is moving forward faster overcoming disparities of race, religion, color etc. Progression of modern global managers would increasingly depend upon how well they are able to communicate across varied cultures to achieve common goal of progress of all communities, countries and continents. Culture has a powerful influence on individuals" way of thinking, saying and doing things. It provides a meaningful context on the way people meet, greet and communicate with others for productive cooperation to accomplish common, agreed goals. Acquiring and sharpening ones" cross cultural communication skills assumes strategic importance as it can propel ones" career, prop success in competitive environments, reflect individuals" commitment to quality / excellence, make them more confident in diverse settings of people from all walks of life and help develop an admirable code of conduct for groups and enterprises. A culture has three layers – the outer layer or the explicit culture relates to visual realities of dress, food, language, behavior, habitats etc, the middle layer relates to Values and norms of community and finally the inner layer or the implicit culture comprises of assumptions, rules and methods of solving / coping with problems. Culture may also be identified with geographical areas, profession, hobbies etc. Distinguishing traits of a culture are its stability, complexity, composition and acceptance of outsiders. Culture may also be distinguished on the basis of religion, values, role play, process of decision-

making, social behavior / etiquettes and sense of time and timing. Like communities and countries, every individual has a territory around himself that he considers as his own. Called „proximics" – the study of spatial needs of human beings, it recognizes four spatial zones – intimate, personal, social and public. Their distances vary among cultures and over time, it is now recognized that even contents of these spaces – landscaping, color schemes, ergonomics, sculptors, artifacts, furnishing, interiors etc, also influence the quality and experience of human interactions. Culture impacts on non-verbal communication both at conscious level covering dress, business attire for men / women, grooming, business cards, handshake etc and at unconscious level relating to facial expressions, eye-contact, movements of head, shoulders, hand, fingers, body postures, walking etc. Culture also influences oral communications as people continue to speak foreign language is the same way as they speak own language. It is easier to learn to write than to speak in a foreign language. Speakers must use clear pronunciations of words, look for feedback from listeners, rephrase sentences, avoid talking down to audience and not allow people to finish what they have to say. Written communications reflect the cultural ethos of a country or region and a good translation requires mastery of both the languages and cultures involved. A few useful tips for writers are using simple / short words, sentences and passages, relying on specific terms, avoiding slang, jargons and idioms, using transitional devices to assist grasping the train of thought and using numbers and pre-printed forms.

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