

RELEVANCE OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION FOR HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGEMENT

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Abstract. *We live in a globalizing society. The development of communication and transportation technology has shrunk the world in which the global interdependence for people and cultures becomes a norm of life. Therefore, intercultural communication competence becomes a critical ability for adjusting people to the demands of the 21st century. The aim of this article is to emphasize the necessity to develop intercultural/global communication competence, in order to function effectively and successfully in our everyday and particularly in our professional lives. The paper is divided into three parts. The first one offers a brief overview of the concepts of HC/LC cultures. The second part highlights the relevance of the HC/LC dimension for the Human Resource management. The fourth part presents instances from literature on the German and Romanian cultural models in an attempt to classify them as HC/LC cultures respectively. Finally the article provides instances from a research I conducted to identify cultural differences between Germans and Romanians, illustrated by excerpts on HC/LC communication from job interviews held with German and Romanian Human Resource Managers.*

Keywords: intercultural communication, high context/low context cultures, globalization, human resource management, job interview.

Introduction

The trend of globalization, triggered by the rapid development of technology and economic transformation, is ceaselessly moving into the human society. Global interdependence and interconnectivity has become a norm of life in the new millennium. On the one hand, communication between people from different cultures was simplified enormously, as contemporary international business has greatly reduced the influence and significance of national borders. (McDaniel, Samovar et. al, 2005). A strongly increasing number of intercultural interactions emerges, with intercultural communication playing a role of growing importance (Schmidt, W.V., Conaway et. al, 2007). In addition new media with ever quicker flow of information makes it easy to bridge geographical distances. The internet and the world wide web are clear indicatives of a development which has changed the face of communication across borders drastically. As a consequence, to shape a human personality and life style in order to face the impact of a multicultural coexistence in the globalizing society, individuals are required to foster the ability of intercultural communication competence.

Particularly in business, efficient communication matters because organizations are made up of people. Although often termed a „soft” skill, the

changing environment and increasing complexity of the 21st century workplace make efficient and effective communication in a business organization even more important. Flatter organizations and greater use of teams have all made communication essential to organizational success. Flatter organizations mean managers must communicate with many people over whom they may have less formal control. The autocratic management model of past generations is increasingly being replaced by participatory management in which communication is the key to build trust, promote understanding and motivate one's employees. Teams are the operational way in the 21st century workplace and teams involve communication.

As world's economy is becoming increasingly internationalized, the global marketplace has become more than a catchphrase, it is a most important part of world business today. Success in almost any kind of business relies on an understanding of, and connection with international markets. The language, specific needs and cultural differences of international business partners or clients play an enormous role in determining the success of the business relationship.

Thus, given the above aspects of today's business world, the overall importance of intercultural communication competence appears to be vital. And, from among the various departments of an organization nowadays the Human Resource Department is the most affected by intercultural communication. Because of the constraints of this article I am going to refer myself to only one dimension of intercultural communication, namely that of High/Low Context (HC/LC).

The paper is divided into three parts. The first one presents a brief overview of the concepts of HC/LC cultures. The second part highlights instances from literature on the German and Romanian cultural models in an attempt to classify them as HC and LC cultures respectively. Finally the article provides instances from a research I conducted to identify cultural differences between Germans and Romanians illustrated by excerpts on HC/LC communication from job interviews held with German and Romanian Human Resource Managers.

1. High vs. Low Context Cultures

Cultures vary dramatically as to how much of the total environment, or context, is meaningful in communication. The dichotomous concepts of High context (HC) culture and the contrasting **Low context (LC) culture** are presented by the anthropologist **Edward T. Hall** in his book **Beyond Culture** published in 1976. They are located at the intersection of cross-cultural management and intercultural communication. A review of the literature and textbooks on the topic (Chaney & Martin, 2005; Chen & Starosta, 1998; Gudykunst, W.B. & Kim, Y.Y., 1992), reveals that the terms are still influential and widely used today, making them a core concept to explain differences in communication across cultures. Independently of their ultimate explanatory value, the concepts are mostly used as a classificatory device of communication styles among individuals and/or communication patterns among cultural groups. The division of cultural groups and the individuals who belong to

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those groups along the HC/LC divide has become a way of labelling individuals and groups from different cultural backgrounds.

Hall depicts context as the situational and informational aspects of message sharing. Context enables the interactant to recognize patterns, determine schema, and apply the appropriate script (Hall, 1976). Context refers to the entire array of stimuli surrounding every communication event and how much of those stimuli are meaningful.

In HC cultures people have close connections over a long period of time. Many aspects of cultural behavior are not made explicit because most members know what to do and what to think from years of interaction with each other.

High Context

Less verbally explicit communication, less written/formal information

- More internalized understandings of what is communicated
- Multiple cross-cutting ties and intersections with others
- Long term relationships
- Strong boundaries – who is accepted as belonging vs. who is considered an „outsider“
- Knowledge is situational, relational
- Decisions and activities focus around personal face-to-face relationships, often around a central person who has authority.

In LC cultures people tend to have many connections but of shorter duration or for some specific reason. In these societies, cultural behavior and beliefs may need to be spelled out explicitly so that those coming into the cultural environment know how to behave.

Low Context

Rule oriented, people play by external rules

- More knowledge is codified, public, external, and accessible.
- Sequencing, separation of time, of space, of activities, of relationships
- More interpersonal connections of shorter duration
- Knowledge is more often transferable
- Task-centered. Decisions and activities focus around what needs to be done, division of responsibilities.

While these terms are sometimes useful in describing some aspects of a culture, one can never say a culture is „high“ or „low“ because societies all contain both modes. „High“ and „low“ are therefore less relevant as a description of a whole people, and more useful to describe and understand particular situations and environments.

High and Low Context cultures differ in the *structure of relationships*:

- ***High: dense, intersecting networks and long-term relationships, strong boundaries, relationship more important than task***
- ***Low: loose, wide networks, shorter term, compartmentalized relationships, task more important than relationship***
- and in the main *type of cultural knowledge*:

- *High: More knowledge is below the waterline, implicit, patterns that are not fully conscious, hard to explain even if you are a member of that culture*
- *Low: More knowledge is above the waterline, explicit, consciously organized.*

The following spectrum of levels of context in various cultures was determined in 1986 by [Copeland & L. Griggs](#).

High Context

Japanese

Chinese

Arab

Greek

Mexican

Spanish

Italian

French

French Canadian

English

English Canadian

American

Scandinavian

German

German-Swiss

LowContext

2. Human Resource Management and High/Low Context

In broad terms Human Resource Management (HRM) refers to those activities undertaken by an organization to effectively put to use its human resources. The Human Resource Management (HRM) function includes a variety of activities, among which is deciding what staffing needs the company has and whether to use independent contractors or hire employees to fill these needs, recruiting and training employees, ensuring they are high performers, dealing with performance issues and ensuring that the personnel and management practices conform to various regulations. Activities also include managing the company's approach to employee benefits and compensation, employee records and personnel policies.

HRM has undergone tremendous change over the past 20-30 years. Many years ago, large organizations looked to the „Personnel Department“ – as it was labelled –, mostly to manage the paperwork around hiring and paying people. More recently, organizations consider the „HR Department“ as playing a major role in staffing, training and helping to manage people so that people and the organization are performing at maximum capability in a highly fulfilling manner. Trade liberalizations, change and competition characterize today's dynamic global economic environment.

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Organizations react to these transformations by reconfiguring the structure of work and labor arrangements. Those that strive to get a competitive edge in this modern work environment attempt to adjust their human resource strategy to support these developments and adopt a modern human resource management perspective. Companies worldwide, particularly MNCs must rethink and adjust their human resource strategies to devise more workable coping strategies (Cooke, 2003). One of the challenges HRM needs to confront nowadays is cultural awareness and this is essential not solely to international, but also to domestic HRM. However, acknowledgement of other cultures and empathy does not involve adopting them in their entirety, but taking them into account, as an integral part of the management, of the organizational and managerial choices (Deaconu, 2007).

A High/Low context can also be identified between different professional and functional cultures within a single primary culture. Indeed, context differences between work functions can be worlds apart and can, under circumstances, generate conflict.

High/Low Context by Profession

From HC to LC: Human Resources, Marketing, Manufacturing Products, R & D, Technical, Information Systems, Engineers, Finance. (O'Hara-Devereaux, M., Johansen, R., 1994)

The human resource culture is driven by rapport-building practices that attach high values to relationships. The best human resource people are good at understanding, accepting, empathizing. On the other hand, engineers tend to be driven by analytical thinking. They value precision and skepticism. To the engineer, the human resource people may look unpractical and excessively intuition-driven, from the human resource perspective, engineers often seem insensitive, unimaginative and rigid.

Consequently, awareness of the HC/LC cultural dimension is essentially important to the Human Resource Management.

3. The German vs. the Romanian Culture along the HC/LC dimension

3.1. The German communication style The German communication style focuses on the objective communication event, is characterized by directness, by formal, explicit, accurate information and is consequently LC. Germans express themselves clearly, directly, trying to avoid misunderstandings. The mass of the information is vested in the explicit code. Leaving room for interpretation is not desirable, the message itself means everything. "Germans mean that what they say and they say that what they mean. They communicate without hidden agenda, embellishments or gift paper". (Schroll Machl, 2003, p. 164)

When decoding the message Germans also perceive only what has been said explicitly, allusions and euphemisms simply do not come across. In the German communication style a high degree of objectivity and pragmatism is manifest.

Digressions and small talk are perceived as irrelevant and time consuming. Germans come directly to the point, have a well known penchant for facts and details. „They do not beat around the bush, but come straight to the point, so as to get to the heart of the matter.” (translated from German, Schroll Machl, 2003, 54)

The *Romanian* communication style is indirect, non-confrontational and personal. Most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the explicit, coded part of the message. Consequently, it is HC. „The polite, even delicate Romanian elicits information obliquely, through reminiscence, wit, and inference.” (Codrescu, 1991, 58)

A direct, question-answer style is uncommon to Romanians. They favour indirect, complex answers and tell a whole story till they eventually come to the point. „Ask for directions on a Romanian street and you are likely to get an answer ten minutes long.” (Richmond, 1995, 16.)

Romanians are extremely talkative and sociable. To get to know one another and build a relationship is an important basis for a business relationship. „In Romania one talks a lot. We are an epic, lyric, dramatic people, at any time ready for confession, lamentation, reminiscing or telling jokes. To converse is almost a vice, the passion for story telling has a long tradition.” (translated from Romanian, Pleșu, 2004, 46)

3.2. *HC/LC Romanian vs. German culture in Human Resources.* The following are excerpts from a research I conducted between 2004-2007 to identify cultural differences between Germans and Romanians illustrated by interviews held with German and Romanian Human Resource managers. The interviews were based on a 14-item questionnaire on the unfolding of a job interview and the verbal and nonverbal behaviour of applicants in the respective countries. Out of the 14 items 9 were open-ended questions, 2 were closed questions and 3 provided answer variants. The research corpus included 20 subjects: 10 German and 10 Romanian human resource managers in 10 German companies and 10 Romanian companies respectively.

The excerpts from the research corpus in this article will only provide examples relevant for the HC/LC dimension.

On the question about the structure of a job interview the answers of the HR experts diverge somewhat. While German HR people rigorously abide by the same structure of the job interview, Romanian HR people on the other hand rather adopt a more flexible structure, rather a mixture of standardized and intuitive procedure.

An answer given by a German interviewee: „Customarily we do have a structure for the job interview, which then gets to be repeated every time.” (Düsseldorf Messe, translated from German) and by a Romanian one: „I for one have never liked to adopt a standard structure for an interview, obviously there are some points that need to be discussed, but aside from that I vary according to the position applied for, to the experience of the applicant.” (ING, translated from Romanian).

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On the question to what are do's and don'ts for an applicant, answers as to verbal and non-verbal communication also differed and allowed for placement along the HC or LC coordinate. German HR people found extrovert body language disturbing. „A plus for me, is, if the conversation takes place in a quiet atmosphere. If someone gesticulates a lot or keeps moving about in his chair or tugging at his tie, or a lady sits across me and keeps tugging at her jacket or arranging her hair, I don't find it so nice. I perceive it as negative.” A plus was, if the discourse of the applicant was well structured, clear, to the point. „A person should be able to structure his thoughts and give answers which are concise and to the point. If someone is not able to express his thoughts clearly and also with appropriate calm and tone of voice, I find this to be a minus.” (Deutsche TCom, translated from German).

Consequently both HR people interviewing and applicants interviewed for a job are influenced by their culture. Awareness of and sensitivity to this fact could facilitate transcending the cultural barriers to the mutual benefit of the parties involved.

Conclusions

To conclude, in the age of globalization and life in a multicultural society a global mindset should help people to broaden and expand their perspective, to eliminate the inaccurate stereotypes and prejudices towards people of different cultures. Mapping the culture refers to the process of acquiring knowledge and characteristics of our own and others' culture to reach a cognitive understanding of cultural similarities and differences. Interaction requires individuals to foster the ability of intercultural adroitness, by which they can function effectively and appropriately in the global communication environment without violating their counterparts' norms and rules in order to reach a global civic society.

Nowadays successful business organizations capitalize on the creative potential of a diverse workforce and professional contacts and foster intercultural communication. Awareness of and sensitivity to cultural differences is essentially important to a global workplace, particularly to certain departments, such as Human Resources for instance. Thus, it is increasingly relevant for HR personnel to assess not only the applicants' hard skills and appropriateness to corporate culture, but also to group or national culture. They also need to assess how culture influences the mindset of the applicant and would impact the company culture. In today's globalized society intercultural business communication competence has become of utmost importance and consequence.

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