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Cross-Cultural Communication within American and Chinese Colleagues in Multinational Organizations

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One of the challenges facing multinational organizations is the increasing diversity of the workforce and, similarly, complex prospective customers with disparate cultural backgrounds. Language barriers, cultural nuances, and value divergence can easily cause unintended misunderstanding and low efficiency in internal communication in a multinational environment. Cross-cultural communication (intercultural and trans-cultural communication) serves as a lubricant, which mitigates frictions, resolves conflicts, and improves overall work efficiency serving as a coagulant, integrating the collective wisdom and strength, enhancing the collaboration of team work, uniting multiple cultures together between race and ethnicity, leading to a desirable virtuous circle of synergy effect. This paper identifies three aspects of culture that constitute people's understanding between each other in professional settings: language and non-language code; cultural values and beliefs; as well as cultural stereotypes and preconceptions.

Globalization is a mantra nowadays that has been employed to describe the highly active exchange activities between countries and regions across the globe. It takes a multidimensional form, connecting people and things regardless of spatial and temporal confines, and permeating all walks of life ranging from politics to finance, from information to ideology, and from media to technology. Along with changes brought about by this dynamic international interaction, a myriad of organizations, no longer isolated and static, are beginning to ride on this gravy train by expanding tentacles into every nook and cranny of the globe.

With an impressive population of 1,328,020,000¹, about half of which are urban, and 69% of which are principal consumers aged 15 to 59 years old, China figures prominently on the international arena. After Deng Xiaoping, late 20th century President of China honored as Times magazine's "Man of the Year" for 1985, launched a reform of the economic system combining communist social structure with an emerging capitalist market, China experienced rapid economic development in the 1980s and 1990s. . The standard of living for the Chinese people had been greatly improved. According to the new World Bank's report, China's economy was listed as the world's second-largest economy in terms of purchasing power, even ahead of Japan. As indicated by the World

¹ According to statistics published by National Population and Family Planning Commission of People's Republic of China at http://www.chinapop.gov.cn/wxzl/rkgk/200903/t20090309_166730.htm

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Factbook published by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) of the United States, China's Purchasing Power Parity was \$7.992 trillion in 2008, and in 2007, China's per capita GDP had already surpassed \$2,000, which illustrates its robust domestic consumption. As a result, it is not surprising that among other developing countries, China has become one of the most desirable investment destinations for American enterprisers who want to go overseas.

One of the challenges facing those multinational organizations is the increased diversity of the workforce and similarly complex prospective customers with disparate cultural backgrounds. After all, language barriers, cultural nuances, and value divergence can easily cause unintended misunderstandings and low efficiency in internal communication in a multinational environment. It leads to conflict among employees and profit loss in organizational productivity. Therefore, effective communication by people from different cultures stands out significantly to American companies who want to make inroads into Chinese markets, take advantage of multiculturalism, and avoid possible side effects. As Charlene Solomon and Michael Schell wrote in their book, *Managing across Cultures: The Seven Keys to Doing Business with a Global Mindset*, "in the twentieth century, you needed to be culturally adept to do business 'over there,' but now, in the twenty-first century, you need to understand culture to do business 'over here'" (2009, p. 8).

Cross-cultural Communication

Culture is "the manifold ways of perceiving and organizing the world that are held in common by a group of people and passed on interpersonally and inter-generationally" (Yuan, 2006, p. 5). According to David Victor, it is "the part of behavior that is at once learned and collective," and is therefore, "taught rather than instinctive or innate" (2001, p. 30). Starting at birth, "the infant mind is somewhat like a blank tape, waiting to be filled," culture plays a large part "in the recording process" (Fisher, 1988, p. 45). Handed down from members within the larger community, it is gradually reinforced and imprinted into individual's mind as time progresses. Culture directly influences the way in which people within the context communicate, and the way in which they perceive each other (Victor, 2001). As a result, one organization's conduct, developed in a particular environment and reflecting the local staff's cultural identity, may not be applicable to another culture.

Cross-cultural communication, also known as intercultural and trans-cultural communication, indicates the exchange of ideas, emotions, and information by means of language, words, and body language between people from different cultural backgrounds (Xu, 2007). In international organizations, it serves as a lubricant, mitigating frictions, resolving conflicts, and improving overall work efficiency; likewise, it serves as a coagulant, integrating the collective wisdom and strength, enhancing the collaboration of team work, and uniting multiple cultures together between race and ethnicity, hence generating a desirable virtuous circle of synergy effect. In the following paper, I identify three aspects of culture that constitute people's understanding of each other in

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professional settings, namely: language and non-language codes; cultural values and beliefs; and cultural stereotypes and preconceptions.

Language and non-language code

Language, as the medium of culture, constitutes a key part of culture. It possesses a unique cultural connotation. The differences between languages is a marked characteristic of cross-cultural communication. These differences also present a pivotal obstacle.

Language code

Encompassing 56 ethnic groups, mainland China has more than 80 dialects still in use today. These sub-languages are not interchangeable or mutually intelligible to varying degrees with one another. In spite of being the same nationality, Chinese people cannot communicate with each other when they are from disparate geo-linguistic places, such as the southern part of China where Cantonese and Minnan Language are prevalent, and the North where Mandarin, the official language of China, is adopted.

However, Japanese and Korean companies may have a linguistic advantage when entering Chinese markets, compared with American counterparts. Thanks to the intertwined ancient history and ancestry, China, Japan, and Korea, even with totally different languages, are united literally by the sole common system of written characters—Zhongwen. The Chinese government's mandate of promoting Mandarin as the only official language also, to some extent, simplifies the linguistic complexity in China. Therefore, despite the high level of internal diversity that distinguishes spoken Chinese, a shared written system and universal official dialect help the seemingly complicated communication in China.

There are two respects to the linguistic challenge: semantics and context. It is important for companies to truly understand both the meaning of words and their usage context in order to successfully enter into another market.

For instance, before Pepsi came to China, it first conducted a market research on Chinese consumers' cultural psychology. They found out that Chinese people tend to purchase brands associated with auspicious meanings, given that the other qualities are similar. As a result, instead of phonetically translating Pepsi into Chinese which is the common practice of most foreign companies, it names itself "Bai Shi Ke Le." It means everything is enjoyable in Chinese, and thus became an immediate success upon its debut in Chinese markets.

In contrast, a Chinese battery production company, without considering idiom or semantics, literally translated its product name into "White Elephant." Unlike its Chinese version, this phrase has negative connotation in English. Unsurprisingly, the name doomed the product's oversea sales from the beginning (Zhang and Xu, 2007).

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Non-language code

Non-language code is also closely related to culture. In cross-cultural communication, it supplements language, and helps people to interact and get meanings across to the other side. As Edward Hall suggests, “high context” cultures employ implicit methods such as facial expression, body language or symbolic objects to interpret messages as opposed to more explicit “low context” cultures (1976, p. 105). For instance, giving a lotus as a gift in Chinese culture means glorifying the receiver’s integrity since the lotus is a symbol of purity, whereas in Japanese culture, it is read as cursing since the lotus is regarded as a bad omen. Subtle, and insignificant as it may seem, non-language code has the power to “make or break” efforts in business settings to some degree. For example, Chinese business women may unwittingly leave a negative impression on American negotiators due to their lack of eye contact and firmness of handshake resulting from adherence to the long established tradition of “Three Obediences and Four Virtues for Women.” In accordance with the imposed behavioral norms of feudal society, Chinese women were expected to practice Three Obediences—obey her father before marriage, her husband after marriage, and her sons in widowhood; and Four Virtues—proper virtues, speech, countenance and conduct. While somewhat obsolete, these codes still exert an insidious effect on the behavior of Chinese female professionals, investing the Chinese women with docile personalities and negative views of aggressiveness in women. Consequently, Chinese businesswomen are subconsciously inclined to avoid direct gaze. This is often misread by Americans who culturally consider eye contact and a firm grasp as connoting honesty, confidence and trustworthiness. A doubtful and suspicious atmosphere is therefore created even before a negotiation occurs. The outcome and the interests of the two parties is very likely to be further jeopardized.

Cultural values and beliefs

People evaluate things around them based on systematic cultural values. Despite an increasingly interconnected globe, cultural divergence still exists and plays a key role in people’s ideology.

Individualism versus Collectivism

American organizational culture values individualism, which emphasizes individual productivity, independence, competence, and achievement. The slogan of “be the best YOU can be” best captures its characteristics. Individual autonomy and task-oriented mentality is what is expected, and individual goals are sanctioned in relation to group interests. In contrast, in Chinese organizational culture, collectivism takes precedence over individualism. Nothing is more valued than the overall harmony. Personal matters can never take priority over the group objectives. Communal and collective harmony outweighs the specific need of individuals. Originating from Confucianism, this philosophy instructs people to view themselves as a part of a larger community. As a member of that community, people are expected to follow the rules of the group, conform

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to the other members' behavior, and avoid being obtrusive. In short, harmoniously merging into the group without calling attention to oneself is the key to success according to collectivism. As the Chinese saying goes: it is the sticking-out rafter that rots first (Beamer & Varner, 2009).

As a result, Chinese employees may feel the American corporate culture as cold, indifferent and not caring. Similarly, the outwardly confident and self-reliant American coworker may have a hard time adapting to Chinese workplace where a people-oriented work atmosphere is prevalent.

Straightforwardness/Confidence versus Reticence/Modesty

The differences between individualism and collectivism also affect people's communication styles. "Individualistic cultures encourage people to speak up and express themselves openly; collectivist cultures teach people to control their feelings and express them in a subtle way" (Yuan, 2006, p. 6). Thus, American employees tend to be straightforward in their actions. As described by the catchphrase: "getting to the point," and "getting the job done," being straightforward and assertive represents the individual's competitiveness, self-assurance and efficiency. However, in a more retiring Chinese culture, the convention of "indirect maneuver" is viewed as politeness and respect, although the process of "beating around the bush" to sound out others is often time-consuming. Being straightforward or direct tends to come across as being overbearing, aggressive and abrasive.

Furthermore, due to the influence of Chinese traditional values, Chinese employees have the predisposition of showing modesty in personal achievement. Thus, when praised by American supervisor, they behave abashed and respond with remarks such as "I feel ashamed," "no, I did not do a good job," which not only confuses their American supervisor, but also leaves a negative impression of the employee as not confident and competent, compared with their American counterparts. It is especially the case with Chinese females who, profoundly influenced by Chinese traditional ideology, are more subdued in their personal contact, afraid of being viewed as "iron maidens" if they assert their viewpoint strongly. Just as the averted eyes mentioned earlier, this dispositional characteristics also tends to be interpreted as incompetency, lack of confidence, and perhaps even deceit in some circumstances.

Overall, from the American perspective, the U.S. business culture has traditionally been more "masculine," which underscores independence, activity, strength, competitiveness, and directness. It is painted by terms such as "stabbing people in the back," "taking the upper hand," and "going in for the kill." Chinese culture, on the other hand, reflects feminine behaviors, since it involves connection, passivity, emotion, compromise and taciturnity. "Revealing the soft underbelly" is what American business men perceive in this culture. Their direct individualism demands they "take advantage" of this seemingly feminine cultural phenomenon. In contrast, Chinese business people may not identify

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with their behavior as being “feminine” since, in their eyes, it is more of a conformation to the culture which demonstrates respect and honesty in professional settings. Therefore, lack of awareness of this cultural difference is likely to let American supervisors come to a hasty conclusion that depreciates their Chinese employees’ capability and thereby discourages workers from operating efficiently since their humbleness and modesty are read as weakness (Yuan, 2006).

However, exceptions do occur when China’s diverse ethnicity is taken into consideration. For example, compared with more delicate southern culture, the Chinese in the North are famous for their forthright and blunt personality. Hence, automobile companies are more often located in the North whereas light industry such as manufacturing and family enterprise congregate in the South where the business atmosphere is more meticulous and detail oriented.

Initiatives versus Chinese Philosophies

Leadership skill is often mentioned in the American job market. Recruiters usually prefer candidates who are inclined to take initiative or push the status quo to change, rather than passively wait. Nevertheless, this commendable quality may not be seen as favorably by Chinese management culture, where following the prescribed order and keeping the working routine are the norm, and taking initiative to effect changes is viewed as going beyond one's duties and meddling with another's affairs. This kind of cultural atmosphere is especially apparent in Chinese governmental organizations where authoritative culture is prevalent and the leaders are at the helm, shepherding the subordinate to follow orders (Chen, 2009).

This “obedient” ambiance is dominant in China. For example, let us examine an ethnic minority in the southern part of China, since that is where many ethnic groups congregate, preserving Chinese traditional values due to their living environment’s relative isolation from highly urbanized metropolitan areas. The ethnic minority Miao, who inhabit a mountainous area in the west of Hunan Province, is famous for its long history of Chu culture, which constitutes one of the two major Chinese cultures, the other being the dominant Northern Han culture. It resembles the ancient Chinese Daoism: only by holding oneself aloof from the eventful world that is laden with a myriad of struggles, could man be relieved from the severe, worldly reality. According to this “peaceful” philosophy of Miao, it is not surprising that people in the South are predisposed to maintain and accept the status quo rather than actively seek out solutions for change.

Another prevailing cultural philosophy—Buddhism—also explains the Chinese employees’ relatively passive behavior. First brought to China from ancient India in the first and second centuries, Buddhism has grown dramatically and has significantly influenced the Chinese people’s way of life. Buddhism teaches that human beings are temporal creations. We are born to live and suffer in life. This inescapable suffering is due to the selfish desires that chain and trap people to insubstantial and impermanent

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things. As a result, practicing Buddhism requires that one eliminate these cravings and become immortal through the blessed Nirvana. Life is replete with agony and anguish, and unfortunately the suffering is universal. We have to endure the affliction until sacred deliverance is achieved, and people discover the truth through the circle of rebirth, aging and death. This brings us to the philosophical conclusion that it is of little avail to fight in life, but to endure and stay calm in pain. Desperate struggles and soul-stirring fights are replaced by self-fulfillment and self-restrained living.

These philosophical views are imprinted on Chinese people's mind creating a culture that values conforming rather than taking "unauthorized" initiatives. It explains why Chinese employees could be so tolerant of an authoritative organizational culture, and appear obedient, or even subservient in their American counterparts' eyes.

Law and Order versus Expedience and Face

As a nation that is built on a Constitution from the beginning, the United States is famous for its well-regulated legal system in the public sphere. Nothing carries more weight than the black and white words written in law. As a result, people generally behave lawfully.

In comparison, China, a country with a long history of feudalism based on authority's "whim" rather than law, has a tradition of exercising discretion in consideration of the circumstances. It means that special treatment will be granted considering particular situations, regardless of what the order dictates. In other words, morals, ethics or human emotion take primacy over the "relentless" and lifeless words commanding legal conduct. Measures such as bending the rules are considered being "flexible," meeting the expediency rather than the principle (Beamer & Varner, 2009).

For example, it may not be uncommon to see that leaders who are regarded as the face or image in Chinese organizations are excused from their wrongdoing, and find another subordinate employee to be their scapegoat. The reason is that in the Chinese business world or any other public enterprise, nothing is more significant than saving face. Face, in Chinese culture, represents respectability, dignity, status, and authority. It serves as the symbol of social prestige that is employed as the yardstick by all to measure how trustworthy and reliable an organization is (Guan, 2008). Likewise, face, as public self-image, is also crucial at a personal level because it illustrates an individual's status in the social network, and explains the unique Chinese cultural phenomenon of "guan xi" (inter-relations or nepotism); that is "built up by a history of socially sanctioned behaviors" (Cardon, 2008, p. 21). People are afraid of losing face for not being able to give favor to their friends, since helping friends boosts their self-esteem and harvests higher praise from the grateful helped.

"The understanding of this core element of Chinese culture is particularly important given the importance of China as the United States' largest trading partner outside of North America" (Cardon, 2008, p. 20). Therefore, to do business effectively in China, it

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is indispensable to be aware of this cultural norm and give face, such as hosting banquets, giving gifts and praising the Chinese negotiators, to achieve successful results.

Instrumental Communication versus Affective Communication

In Condon's (1985). "When People Talk with People," instrumental communication is "when we say something and something happens as the result of our speaking then our comments have been instrumental in causing that event to happen" (p. 168). The faint similarity between manner of speaking and the requested action per se characterizes this kind of communication style (Condon, 1985). Due to American people's straightforward temperament, instrumental communication tactics are more commonly used in business settings. For example, to encourage employees to maintain their outstanding job performance, American supervisors would directly demonstrate their anticipation while praising their subordinate, such as "I hope next time you will also do a great job on your task."

In contrast, their Chinese counterparts would prefer indirect remarks to insinuate their expectation. Moreover, the strategy of affective communication, i.e. "communication in which the message is the emotional feelings of the speaker toward a listener is known as affective communication" (1985, p. 169), is adopted more in daily discourse. Especially in the case of Chinese female employees who traditionally have not been given much authority and have to resort, in the professional world, to affective communication as a means to an end in the hope of achieving their "ulterior" goals indirectly. Apart from instrumental connotation, female workers also tend to socialize more with their colleagues and involve themselves with others' lives, to seek out connection and a sense of community and support through affective communication. In addition, people prefer to do things they think they want to do, rather than things they are told to do. Therefore, Chinese leaders like to use affective communication to nurture a warm atmosphere first, and to build up a cordial relation with their subordinate before sending out stark and flat orders like an emotionless authority figure.

Thinking Outside the Box versus Thinking Within the Box

Founded on the spirit of liberty and free speech, the United States has the reputation of valuing creativity and originality. A nation that is famous for its "American dream" encourages people to think freely and come up with creative ideas to excel and succeed in a multicultural society. "Everything is possible in the U.S," as people would usually say, and blind conformity is the last thing a person would like to do if he or she wants to stand out from the crowd.

In contrast, China, as a nation that has undergone a long history of feudal autarchy, has a hierarchical culture with an inclination to rely on authority and value conformity. Like the proverb says, too many cooks spoil the broth. Chinese supervisors appreciate the subordinate who does what he or she is told to do obediently and promptly, instead of the

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one who proposes “brand-new” ideas and overrules what the boss asks him or her to do. However, it does not mean that the Chinese leaders do not like novel notions; they just prefer limiting new ideas in case they go too far. To summarize, thinking is welcome, but better within, not outside the box.

Cultural stereotype and preconceptions

Stereotype refers to the simplified viewpoint that one social group holds for the other. Cultural stereotype is attributed to over-generalization, which claims that the cultural characteristic of one individual can also be applied to the group, and ignores the mobile and changeable nature of culture as a whole (Beamer & Varner, 2009).

Considering mankind’s limited capacity to process messages, and today’s overwhelming volume of information, it may be helpful for people to try to summarize cultural differences, and establish cultural models. In this sense, some extent of qualified stereotype could be instrumental for it facilitates mutual understanding and learning between cultures. However, when this strategy is adopted generally, undesired effects arise. Labeling and simplifying cultural divergences create man-made screens which preclude people in diverse cultures from communicating and understanding each other efficaciously. Stereotype has merit in observing cultural characteristics, but it also leads us to expect the “norm” of a certain culture. Generally, because of the stereotyped preconception in our mind, we want to see what we think we will see. “One’s cultural belief system learned during socialization, one’s experiences, and one’s currently salient roles all contribute to the composition of what Bruner has called the individual’s ‘expectancy set’; what he is set for perceiving in a situation and in other people” (Simmons and McCall, 1966, p. 63). Furthermore, due to this mentality, we are not only attracted to things that we anticipate seeing and try to interpret them based on our limited knowledge, but we also disregard or belittle things that deviate from expectations.

Cultural Prejudice

Cultural prejudice refers to the formation of opinion on certain members of the group grounded on the previous perception, attitude, and viewpoint of the group, heedless of the particular characteristic of the individual (Zhang and Xu, 2007). In cross-cultural communication, people often rely on their first impressions and assumptions, drawing on previous knowledge of the common features of a culture to make conclusions about an individual instead of analyzing behaviors specifically. As a result, it is not uncommon to hear comments such as “you are from China, so you must never have had human rights,” or “as an American, you must never feel safe to go outside at night since everyone is allowed to have guns.” These conclusions are easy to make since they require little effort in observation, and eliminate the need to process a large amount of information. Although it is true that it speeds up message processing, improves communication efficiency, and provides timely convenience, cultural prejudice also ossifies our belief into rigid patterns

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and colors our perspective, which are difficult to then change or update. Consequently, it prevents meaningful and openhearted communication between people with divergent backgrounds. Moreover, another insidious, harmful side is that after repeating and emphasizing this cultural mindset, the fixed prejudice is likely to become “the eternal verities,” which take root in people’s minds and further hinders future communication. Relevant examples are analyzed in the next section to illuminate and apply aspects mentioned to specific situations within the Chinese or American multinationals.

Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism means that “a tendency exists within every individual to view his or her own culture as intrinsically better than other cultures” (Victor, 2001, p. 36). When we grow up in a particular culture, not only does it shape our disposition and insert certain values and beliefs into our minds, but it also teaches us how to navigate within the environment. The older we grow and the deeper we immerse ourselves in one culture, the more likely we will see the world through a stained-glass window. Thus, it is natural for people to establish a sense of superiority regarding one’s own culture over the “other,” generating a comfort zone in which we live and with which we are familiar. Moreover, self-reference criterion is employed in evaluating the surroundings. Nevertheless, this subconscious sense of cultural supremacy acts like a stumbling block in cross-cultural communication in that it forms a narrow-minded and defensive cultural identity that affects meaningful cultural exchange. In addition, it trains people into the mindset of drawing on a finalized conception to perceive other cultures. Fixed quality is imputed, and cultures that are different from their own are depreciated and repelled. Moreover, it even leads people to regard one’s own culture as normal and natural while that of the other is viewed as abnormal and bizarre in comparison. One upholds one’s own traditions while degrading that of the other. Just as cultural scholar and organizational sociologist Geert Hofstede, once said, “everyone is used to seeing the world from their own living room’s window; everyone has the tendency to view foreign cultures as strange while consider their own features as standard. This narrow mentality opens the door for future cultural imperialism, abasement, isolation and dependence which disrupts cross-cultural communication” (Yang and Yi, 2006, p. 77).

For multinational organizations, the cost of being ethnocentric is too high. It is always to the companies’ interests to remember that the success of one business model is by no means omnipotent and universal. Targeted measures are supposed to be made before changing the applied context.

Case analysis

Having identified and compared the cultural differences between the American and Chinese professional workplace, it makes more sense to apply them in real life examples and illustrate further the impact of cross-cultural nuances on business, and how

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companies can take advantage of the potential synergy effects of an intercultural workforce.

A Marginalized Insider

In general, people are predisposed to maintain that a Chinese supervisor who has been educated in the US would be a better candidate than an American to work in a subsidiary in China, given that language proficiency is perhaps a crucial criterion for the job. Although this assumption has merit, considering that someone Chinese would be more familiar with the local culture and know the ins and outs of how business is conducted in China, it is nevertheless a naïve and over-simplified assumption for all circumstances.

An acquaintance's personal story provides an excellent example. Having studied and lived in the U.S. for almost ten years, Ming (alias) considered herself bicultural, and sometimes even felt more at home with American culture, as she spent most of her formative years as an undergraduate and graduate student in the States. She speaks English very well, and lives much like an American does. However, her coworkers at an engineering company in the U.S. still see her as more of a foreign Chinese employee. Naturally, when it came to sending someone to supervise a newly recruited team in China, she became the best fit for the job in her American colleagues' eyes. In addition, the new subsidiary was located in her hometown. Full of expectation and excitement at the prospect of returning to her home, Ming embarks on the journey, and comes to China, in charge of training the new Chinese team, supervising production, and reporting their performance to the American headquarters. However, the reality is not as rosy and romantic as both sides expected.

After Ming began her work at the new subsidiary in her hometown, she found that, ironically, she had a hard time transitioning back and adapting to the local culture, one she was familiar with in the past. Her Chinese colleagues did not accept her easily just because she was a Chinese. Quite the contrary, she felt isolated because, in the eyes of her Chinese employees, she was regarded as a renegade who was sent from the U.S. to spy on her own compatriots and not someone whose common nationality was supposed to make things easier. To make matters worse, the Chinese and Americans have different ways to refer to a person in the company. The Chinese have a less visible emphasis on title than the Americans. Immersed in the high context culture, Chinese employees prefer to be aware of one's status in the company at heart to having it appear obtrusively, perhaps upsetting the communal harmony. When Ming arrived, she was introduced to her cohorts in China by her American job title, which sounded superior to the others and distanced hers from the team at the outset.

On the one hand, Ming was marginalized by her Chinese colleagues, and their performance was barely satisfactory due to the interpersonal tension and unfavorable atmosphere. On the other hand, her American supervisor was disappointed by the results as he had high expectations of her performance and believed that it should have been

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relatively easy for a Chinese person to train other Chinese employees. According to Ming, she was caught between the Chinese native and the American headquarters' culture. In short, an absolute insider initially becomes a marginalized outsider in the end.

Western versus Eastern Journalism

Except for identifying the general cultural divergence between American and Chinese colleagues, it is even more instrumental to see how ignorance of cultural knowledge affects the workplace in a specific industry.

During the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, a myriad of American media companies sent journalism crews to Beijing to cover the event. At the same time, they also recruited quite a few local Chinese to assist the American professionals in reporting.

However, there is a distinct difference between American and Chinese journalist practices. According to Beamer and Varner (2009) in "*Intercultural Communication in the Global Workplace*," since Chinese business organization is established on the concept of collective ownership in the socialist system, it is not very easy to lay off an employee unless he or she has made serious mistakes. This social phenomenon is attributed to the Chinese culture that employment sometimes is obtained through personal relations, and it is unfavorable both to the worker and the company to dissolve this tie owing to "face" consideration. As a result, Chinese employees enjoy a relatively greater sense of security once they are hired than their American counterparts. Hence the mentality of "iron rice bowl" in the job market, which describes the stability one may feel about one's employment, like a rice bowl providing living necessities, and unbreakable at the same time.

In spite of being a bit obsolete in today's modern China, this practice, and its accompanying mentality is still at work. The heroine in our story was recruited by an American media company to assist an American journalist during the Olympics. She shared this way of thinking. Unsurprisingly, her lack-luster performance, created by a sense of entitlement and no sense of urgency, gradually drew her to the attention of her American supervisor. One day a error in the number of medals reported was the last straw and her supervisor decided to take action. However, due to the high volume of information waiting to be processed on a daily basis, he did not immediately find an opportunity to talk with her face-to-face until he met her in a hallway days later. Pressed by the shortage of time, her American supervisor voiced his dissatisfaction with the quality of her work, criticized her, and warned her of possible consequences if she did not improve in the future.

From an American's point of view, the supervisor's behavior is understandable. However, while issues affecting the work performance need to be dealt with in a timely fashion, it would have been more appropriate if the supervisor had let his subordinate come to his office to discuss the matter with her in private. Unfortunately, circumstances at that

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moment did not allow much luxury of time. Moreover, in the US, journalists are trained to have an efficient work style, an objective viewpoint, and an ability to exercise critical thinking. It is not their job to take time to figure out a more diplomatic way to tackle problems, but to confront issues head-on. In fact, bluntness is often valued in this profession as it embodies rational thinking, boldness and objective reporting.

In contrast, from a Chinese employee's perspective, the argument of having no time is a poor excuse. The supervisor's conduct was too rude to be acceptable. No doubt, being efficient is important, but it should not be achieved at the expense of hurting the other person's self-esteem and losing face in public. In China, the significance of saving face to an employee cannot be over exaggerated regardless of the person's profession. Losing face also leads to harming collective group harmony. Being criticized in public is an insult, and the ensuing sense of shame is inevitable. It becomes "a terrible ordeal since it means punishment for not being a cooperative member of the group" (Beamer & Varner, 2009, p. 36). Worse still, it was a Chinese female who was scolded in public by a male supervisor. The shame would be even more deep-felt and harder to recover from.

If the American journalist was aware of this cultural norm, and took a little extra time to discuss this matter with the Chinese subordinate in private, she might have understood better her supervisor's concern of the compressed schedule and his dissatisfaction with her work. It is likely that she would appreciate the extra effort made by her supervisor to remind her in private, and, would therefore feel obliged to change and improve her work performance afterwards. However, the result was that the Chinese female, feeling belittled and humiliated, quit her job a few days later, and her American supervisor had to immediately find someone to replace her in order to continue the busy workflow. Like the old saying shared by both Chinese and English language, "more haste, less speed." Ironically, the intention of saving time to point out the discipline matter directly backfired and caused the American professional to have to spend more time to find another suitable subordinate and provide necessary training so as to keep up with the incessant workload.

World Expo

Another way to understand different cultures is to see what people of a particular culture say about themselves, how they choose to represent themselves, and how they demonstrate those self-perceptions to a wide range of audiences. The 2010 Shanghai World Expo is a case in point.

Serving as a bridge between the East and West, the World Expo signaled China's grand entry onto the world stage. Boasting a population of 18.15 million, and dedicating a 5.28-square-kilometer area at the core of the city to exhibitions, Shanghai brought together within its splendid Chinese harbor exhibits from more than 230 countries and international organizations, as well as tens of thousands of visitors from all over the world (Song, 2008). It offered a magnificent platform for different nations to introduce their cultural characteristics on the world stage, to brainstorm solutions together for

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bilateral conflicts, and to share experiences in their national development. Through video, pictures and words, countries narrated their national stories, and educated the international audience about their cultural uniqueness. Instead of being geographically isolated on the earth, divergent national identities were featured, and meaningful international dialogues between nations are enhanced.

On the whole, it is by means of this direct, open and intensive interaction between participants with diverse backgrounds that cross-cultural communication can be realized, which has the potential to diminish unintended misunderstanding and conflict created by disconnected boundary barriers, and that people are able to learn about other cultures, develop cultural sensitivity, and lay the very foundation for future cooperation.

Recommendations

Be Open-minded and Tolerant

It is natural for people to judge others' words and deeds from the standpoint of one's own and to such an extent that we may impose our standard on other social group without our even being aware of the far-fetched analogy. As a result, it is important to acknowledge the limits of our insight into the motivations of others, and divest ourselves of self-referencing criteria, or cultural solipsism when we try to relate to people from different ethnic and class cultures. Being open-minded allows us to "avoid the mistake of imposing our meanings on others' behaviors and to open ourselves to learning about meanings and communication styles that differ from our own" (Houston and Wood, 1996, p. 50).—in a word, to understand that we may not understand, to be open-minded and accept what may differ from what we know, and to be willing to learn what we may not know.

After having an open mind, the next step is to hold a tolerant spirit—to understand the fact that not all people would be mentally equipped with the knowledge of cultural differences, to allow others to make unwitting mistakes, and take advantage of that moment to educate them about cultural diversity. An ancient Chinese proverb instructs us that "the sea can hold the water from thousands of rivers. It's big because of its capacity; a person is great when he can be tolerant and forgiving to many other people."

For example, it is already common knowledge in China that Christmas is a significant holiday in the U.S. However, the ordinary Chinese may not know the details of the cultural fact that Christmas is also a Christian religious celebration and not all Americans are Christians. So, it is likely that a Chinese employee might offend an American counterpart who is Jewish by greeting them with "Merry Christmas" on December 24th. Despite a genuine intention, and purely out of respect for the American colleague's tradition, the effect of the Chinese employee's wish may actually be awkward, as the Jewish American might take his own religious belief seriously, and would not be receptive to a Christmas greeting. Hence, in such a circumstance, a tolerant spirit can play a key role for both sides to avoid any potential misunderstanding and smooth out

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this matter in a friendly way. In doing so, not only is unnecessary conflict avoided, but people will come to know more about each other and contribute to the overall community spirit if they would share this experience with their circle of friends in the future. The strength of cross-cultural communication is expanded by recognizing these cultural differences.

Listen

In addition to being open-minded in cross-cultural communication, it is also indispensable to develop curiosity toward divergent social groups instead of glossing it over, and be keen on listening the other side of the story. Do not rush to a hasty conclusion before we listen to another's voice and unique perspective. It is through respectful and careful hearing that we broaden our understanding of diverse cultures, expand our cosmology in communication styles, and achieve personal growth. The ultimate goal of listening is to develop a sense of cultural empathy, which would further facilitate a constructive message exchange between international employees. In addition to listening to others, it is important to listen to oneself. The communication within the self, known as intrapersonal communication, also contributes to interpersonal communication since it enhances our self-understanding and lets us realize our limits and preconceptions (Lederman, 2001).

Agree to disagree

Being open to different cultural values and behaviors does not equate to surrendering one's own views. It is not impossible and contradictory to affirm the values of our own while acknowledging those that differ (Houston and Wood, 1996). As the former Chinese premier Zhou Enlai once stated that in international matters, it is instrumental to hold on to the spirit of "agree to disagree," to seek common ground while reserving differences. This assertion also echoes Houston and Wood's theory of "unity of contraries," which refers to "appreciat[ing] the worth of our own patterns and beliefs and, at the same time, to respect[ing] others and their ways of seeing and acting" (1996, p. 52).

A kaleidoscope attracts a child's attention by virtue of its varied patterns; a rainbow is beautiful because of its colorful display. Similarly, another culture is intriguing and can appear exotic. Hofstede advised that "the principle of surviving in a multicultural world is that one does not need to think, feel, and act in the same way in order to agree on practical issues and to cooperate" (Beamer & Varner, 2009, p. 13). We can just be different and thereby enjoy diversity.

Avoid Overstressing Diversity

The U.S. has a reputation for being a "melting pot," mixing people from all over the world in one large geographical location. Especially in metropolitan cities like New York, with immigrants from Europe, Asia, Africa and other continents, people find it hard to define what particular culture belongs to such a diverse population. Some Americans,

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when asked, “What is American culture?” might come to the conclusion that the U.S. hardly has a culture of its own in the way that China has a distinct Chinese culture and France has a decidedly French culture.

As a result diversity, ironically, becomes a key word in the States. From the larger society to private companies, the emphasis on diverse representation of race and cultural identity is widespread. It may sound egalitarian, yet it is the over-stressing of diversity that separates Americans from each other since it pushes people to pay more attention to what differentiates them instead of what they have in common (Beamer & Varner, 2009). The advantage of multiculturalism is twisted into the root reason of unsolvable cultural conflict and the source of division and clique. After all, the goal in managing a diverse workforce is to unite employees with different backgrounds together, and to work towards a common interest, rather than slipping into the opposite.

As with biodiversity, the long history of civilization gave birth to cultural variety. For an international company, it is desirable to acknowledge diversity so as to let employees feel at home, represented, and have the opportunity to have their unique voices heard. However, it is never in the company’s interest to overdo this strategy. Being different is intriguing and attractive, but it is shared commonality that propels agreement to be reached and objectives to be achieved.

Allow Silence to Do the Talking

Although in English there is a phrase “a pregnant silence,” it is usually not to the Americans’ liking to endure silence in conversation. The empty pause renders people in low context culture feeling unsure and uneasy of what is to be expected next, and whether they should change to another topic before the other party completely loses interest in talking. “Silence is deafening,” they may say, their first reaction wondering “what has gone wrong.”

In contrast, the Chinese, immersed in high-context culture, integrate silence into their way of talking. Unlike their American counterparts, who value words, the Chinese think that words, often used to disguise one’s real intention, can be deceptive. Silence is more innocent for there is nothing to hide. Moreover, silence can be informative as well. For instance, Buddhism teaches its believers through quiet meditation, in lieu of loud lecturing. This distinction is also visible in painting where the Chinese artists like to leave blank space to arouse and nurture the imagination. Most Western artists prefer to fill every corner of the canvas with paint, otherwise it might appear to be an incomplete artwork in their eyes.

Conclusion

In today’s highly globalized business world, we are confronted with a mix of race, culture, and gender. “Individually and together, our social groups shape how we see

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ourselves, others, and our experiences” (Houston and Wood, 1996, p. 53). Therefore, effective cross-cultural communication presupposes the suspension of ethnocentric biases, prejudiced preconception, and values of right and wrong rested on one particular standpoint or standard. As Victor suggests, “cultural relativity and communicative flexibility are at the heart of cross-cultural communication” (2001, p. 37). It helps us to recognize the sign of simmering problems, and nip them in the bud before full-blown conflicts erupt in multinational organizations. When opening our hearts to a wide range of cultural differences and communicative views and styles, we will be amazed by how far we can advance beyond the frontier of our own perspectives.

It is a commonplace to say that ethnic variety contributes to group performance in all walks of life, but “whether such an advantage to diversity will endure depends on whether we are engaged in a worldwide homogenizing process” (Nisbett, 2003, p. 217). After all, adapting to another culture does not mean that one has to abandon one’s own values and beliefs, and reconcile or sacrifice oneself to another culture. Instead, as the proverb suggests, we can actually try walking for a bit in the other culture’s shoes. Being bicultural is not an attribute people are usually born with, but it is a mindset we can nurture and possess. In essence, it takes addition to solve the problem, not subtraction.

What is more, it is also worthwhile to note that there will always be an ellipsis in the end rather than a simple and definite period. The effect of the one-child policy in China adopted in 1979 will soon be felt as the bulk of that generation have already reached adulthood and started entering the workplace. Nurtured and doted on to some extent by two parents and accustomed to being at the center of family attention, they have quite a divergent work ethic and high expectations for their careers, unlike their parents’ generation, who underwent a series of hardships and political upheaval. Whether the cultural differences discussed above will become blurred or more distinct is arguable, but one thing is sure: like rowing a boat in the flowing water, it takes a resilient and learning heart to spot the changes and avoid bumping into both banks.

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