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Role and Barriers to Cross Cultural Communication in Business Firms

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Abstract - In this world of globalised economy, appreciating and comprehending the different cultures has gained increasing prominence. Misinterpretation related to culture and language can be avoided only by elevating our level of understanding the various cultures and values. In international business, firms must have this significant skill of understanding cultural differences to get more benefits. Cross cultural communication is indispensable for the firms having diverse workforce and employees of these firms should recognize the factors responsible for an effective communication. There are some barriers which can hinder the growth of an organization so an exposure to other cultures and an adequate training in cross cultural communication is essential to overcome these blocks. This paper will focus on the vital role of cross cultural communication, blocks to cross culture communication and the strategies to overcome these barriers.

Keywords - *Cross Cultural Communication, Globalization, Communication Barriers, Diverse Workforce*

Introduction

Globalization has opened many opportunities for the people to get mingled in varied ways. The working culture within and outside an organization is a blend of different working styles of the people who belong to different cultures. Cross cultural communication plays a vital role in these types of firms having diverse workplace to have better relationships with international customers, employees and business partnerships. Even it encourages international team working and helps in sharing common goals. Poor communication can be resulted in poor organizational performance. For the effectiveness of cross cultural communication, better understanding of the elements related to a culture, obstacles involving in the process of cross cultural communication

and recognizing the measures to overcome these obstacles, is very important for a business. (qtd. in (Adler & Nancy1983).

Nowadays companies have diversified workforce where people from different regions and cultures work together in teams and these multicultural teams face many challenges, cultural issues rising conflicts and disagreements. The firms should ensure the understanding of different cultures to avoid these barriers in communication in order to have an effective cross cultural communication. In global business practices, the good rapport between the managers and the team members is important for the multinational companies. Diversity in membership can be helpful in increasing the number of solutions offered and substitutes considered so for creating innovations, the focus should be put on utilizing individual differences.

Cross cultural communication has a significant role to play in bringing desired results for the business firms in global market. Internationally collaboration provides an access to the wide range of information which as a result assists everyone to keep their work up-to-date. Research has shown that heterogeneous teams, having a mixture of life experiences and cultures, are more creative than the homogeneous teams .Heterogeneous groups can create a stronger dynamic within a team and thus promote the greater creativity. Cross cultural communication is also helpful in increasing the flexibility and responsiveness of the companies. Cross cultural communication is crucial in making an organization boost the significance of its products to its customers because intercultural teams can help to present their most appropriate products in a way that is relatable to people.

Barriers to Communication

Cross cultural communication provides good opportunities to foster prosperity and peace in global market but unpleasant consequences should also not be forgotten if it is not well managed. As diversity imposes blockades like stereotyping, uncertainty, ethnocentrism on the cross cultural communication so many problems can also arise. These barriers mainly occur due to lack of intercultural communication skills , an inadequate knowledge of cultures, different management style, varied expectations by management , expectations of the workers ,prevailing power distance and language barriers etc. so that is why an adequate training is essential in cross cultural communication. Barriers are those issues which affect the productivity and progress of

global business. "Broadly the communication barriers can be identified as issues that have to do with the management & issues owing to the behaviour of the staff." (Ybema and Byun, 2009)

Cultures are also classified on the basis of high context and the low context cultures and accordingly, the messages are preferred. The preference made by the people for messages in communication context can be taken as the source to classify the high context and low context cultures. In high context culture of communication, meanings attached to the used or uttered words can carry different interpretations and also the words expressed by use of body language may acquire a new meaning when used in different situations.

On contrary, ideas and feelings are expressed directly in a culture of low context communication where a person can frankly assess the situations. Managers belong to   low context culture often give direct and blunt comments without any hidden meanings. In these types of situations, people can easily understand the expressions as the messages contain clarity for everyone to attach only the universal meaning which in turn saves the precious time in business transactions. In this fast changing global business scenario, MNCs prefer low context communication in their operations. So these cultural contexts can arise as barriers where the management and the employees are from different cultures and operate with divergent objectives which influence communication process. Internal communication system as well as external communication would be influenced by the variance of national cultures.

Individuals must have some knowledge of non-verbal communication which is beneficial for establishing the effective communication rapport within intercultural environment. Non-verbal communication comprises facial expressions, gestures, body movements, paralanguage, chronemics and proxemics. These non-verbal codes are displayed through emotions and speaking style while communicating verbally. Non verbal differences can occur as communication barrier as non-verbal code in one culture can be different from the other culture. For instance, Eye contact is considered to be good and a reflection of honesty and straightforwardness in U.S. However, in some Asian countries, if a person is having prolonged eye contact then this can be seen as boorish, rude or aggressive.

Language acts as a barrier in communication when people from different cultures use different languages because even misunderstandings can arise among those people who use the same language. Although English language is used as the international language but not all business

firms use English in routine as they prefer using their own language which as a result can bring ambiguity in understanding ideas and knowledge.

Cultural blindness and cultural imposition are also considered as communication barriers. When a person follows the values and traditions of the culture without even thinking about whether it is good or bad then can have a problem in effective communication as the differences are ignored. There are also some persons in   organizations whose tendency is to impose their own values and beliefs onto other persons.

Ethnocentrism also brings obstacles as one feels the superiority of his or her own culture and generally ethnocentric person shows the inclination to understand the other cultures and values on the basis of his own cultural ideas and values. A leader can deem his own mother tongue as the "finest" and will not be ready to become skilled at another language as he may feel another language as illogical or inferior. An ethnocentric person will straightforwardly reject the other non verbal codes as he/she considers his/her own non verbal codes as the most civilized. In this way this ethnocentrism and lack of sympathy can arise as an obstacle in cross cultural communication and can demolish the effectiveness of communication which sometimes leads to enmity also.

Each society or community has its own language, lifestyle, values and culture and according to their set systems, they interact and work together. There is nothing good or bad to have eastern or western cultural values but the method of doing the things may be different. Ethnocentrism is an absolute set of standard value system and a firm belief in one's own culture which is often considered for making judgements about another culture. Bennet (1993) defines ethnocentrism as "assuming that world view of one's own culture is central to all reality".

Stereotyping is another block to cross cultural communication. Stereotypes are defined by Samovar and Porter (1991) as "the perceptions and beliefs we hold about groups or individuals based on our previously formed opinions and attitudes". When there is an inadequate knowledge about the people then it leads to misunderstandings. If our perception about a group is that it is coward then we start considering everybody in that particular group as coward irrespective of individual natures. Many other examples are there as the one is that women, generally, have lack of physical strength so they are not fit and healthy for army so these types of beliefs may cause women in turn to avoid joining such professions.

Scollon and Scollon (1995) give their opinion in order to overcome the problem of oversimplification and stereotyping "comparisons between groups should always consider both likenesses and differences, that is, they should be based upon more than a single dimension of contrast, and it must be remembered that no individual member of a group embodies all of his or her group's characteristics" (p. 157). Indeed, an issue to keep in mind, as McKay (2002) explains, is that a contrast of especially western versus eastern assumptions of cultures of learning "can perpetuate differences, promote the concept of otherness, and lead to simple dichotomies and stereotyping" (p. 121).

Culture shock acts as barrier in communicating with others, especially, in a global environment. Cultural shock is that psychological phenomenon which is experienced by the people after moving to a new environment. When a person shifts to unfamiliar lifestyle and culture from his own then he experiences a feeling of disorientation, emotional and physical discomfort which further leads to sadness,depression,loneliness,insomnia,anger,irritability,unwilling to interact with others. Though culture shock is inevitable but it can be managed with conscious awareness of one's own reactions.

Communication barriers generally arise due to the absence of understanding between parties to the dialogue. Culture tends to create different attitudes and approaches to problem solving. There might be different approaches to solving a problem by the management and staff. When management and staff hail from different cultures their understanding of issues may turn out to be different. This ultimately compounds the process of arriving at a common understanding of the issues at stake. (Richardson and Smith, 2007)

Power distance is also considered as barrier .Since western thinking focuses on individuals' right to property ownership, individuals are expected to protect the individual domains earmarked for them & any unobtrusive foray to others' domain is not seen as unwarranted. In eastern thinking, leaders are supposed to take the power of taking decisions on behalf of others. Under this type of leadership, workforce feels reluctant in sharing knowledge and even employees may not show that much enthusiasm in taking part in the decision making process. Managers hailing from a western cultural background may be receptive to the feedback by the staff while Asian managers may not think listening as mandatory or an essential prerequisite for decision making. (Richardson and Smith, 2007)

Values, practices, rules and philosophy of the business influence the communication system of a business organization .Communication system acts as link in transmitting values & norms associated with different cultures in an organization. Here an effective system of cross cultural communication plays an important role to transfer knowledge with clarity so that organization functions smoothly without being disrupted by cross cultural differences. Due to the divergence of the work force and management, MNCs have to adopt such effective communication system to confront certain restraints. It is essential for the MNCs to overcome the blocks and differences in cross cultural communication by establishing a uniformed pattern through an effective communication system. In order to attain the organizational objectives successfully and effectively, MNC must ensure that necessary steps are carried to overcome the cross cultural barriers. Business organizations may consider many actions to get rid of the restrains which hinder cross cultural communication. (Martin and Nakayama, 2012)

Measures to overcome barriers in cross cultural communication

In the world of globalization, multiculturalism is prevailing at the workplace and at the global business and which has really increased the necessity of effective intercultural communication where a communicator has to be proficient in communicating. Organizations must have this skill of communication to achieve objectives while taking into consideration the different values, norms and beliefs of the people working for the organizations because by developing this intercultural competence, a business organization can become successful in overcoming the barriers to cross cultural communication. Proper knowledge of cultures, attitudes and skills can enable people for flourishing development of intercultural competence.

Intercultural awareness is the cognitive facet of intercultural communication. There are some inherent customs in a particular culture which govern the conduct of people and in this way; they are influenced by their own culture. If an individual has intercultural awareness and the ability to understand the values of other cultures then an effective communication can be ensured. Intercultural awareness results in enhancing not only cultural-awareness but also self-awareness in the process. (Linghui and Koveos, 2008)

The behavioural facet of cross cultural communication characterizes intercultural deftness. The development of deftness focuses on boosting the skills required endorsement of successfully intercultural transactions and which can bring about the desired results to an MNC. Interactive

management developing social skills especially etiquettes, enhancing the quality of self expression are some of the key results areas where progress is expected to be made. (Dues and Brown, 2003)

Organizations should develop the ability to understand and appreciate the other cultures how they feel or act. An adequate training can be provided to the employees to tackle the blocks in intercultural communication as they at workplace come across them. Positive attitude is must in solving these cultural barrier issues and this type of attitude brings respect, openness and better understanding of the varied cultures. Intercultural development trainers emphasize the significance of attitudes as they largely shape responses in cross cultural communication. (Linghui and Koveos, 2008)

It is very important for the persons to be aware of their behaviour while working with the people who are from different cultures and should give due respect to the different cultural norms and values by treating them with dignity. Be supportive and try to give encouragement to those who find difficulty in speaking foreign language because when expressing oneself it may not be easy to use different language. If there is any doubt in understanding some of the figures then write it down and get it checked .For example ,a billion is 1,000,000,000 in United States which is different figure in United Kingdom.

To overcome the problem of any ambiguity, speak slowly and clearly. "Many misunderstandings arise when there is a use of negative questions and answers. For example, In English, we say yes if the answer is affirmative and no if it is negative but in India, people often use yes if they think a negative question should be answered in the affirmative. For instance, if someone asks, "Is Neha not coming?" one should say "No, she is not coming." if Neha is indeed coming but people tend to say, "Yes, she is not coming." This response is based on the thought that "you are right that she is not coming," hence the answer begins with "yes"."(Kanchan Malhotra, Tamanna Arora) This can lead to confusion so such questions should be avoided. Listening is a good skill which should be used properly to enhance cross cultural communication and to overcome the anxiety, Emotional Intelligence must be acquired by the managers and their team members to manage their emotions and feelings while dealing with the people who belong to diverse cultures.

In today's global business scenario, cross cultural communication has a significant role to play in the growth of an organization and it depends on the managers how successfully they manage a diverse workforce. Managers have the responsibility of showing admiration for cultural differences and making the communication effective at all levels. Due to the advancement in technology, different cultures have come on one platform today so there is the major role of managers in managing a multicultural workforce successfully and for that they must ensure the effective communication at all levels with the people from different backgrounds, cultures and nationalities by showing respect for all cultural differences. Inability of the managers in understanding the varied customs, values, language and business etiquette, which are required to make dealings at the international market, can bring failure. Fostering a broad organizational culture by overcoming the blocks in cross cultural communication is always beneficial to the employees as well as the organization. That is why, it is necessary for the managers to develop the global mindset and multicultural sensitivity and also to cultivate cultural awareness, attitude and skills for the sustainable progression of their companies in international business.

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