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THE HIDDEN DIMENSIONS IN COMMUNICATING ACROSS CULTURES WHEN USING
TECHNOLOGY: "I" OR "WE" CULTURES, AVOIDANCE OF COMMUNICATION

BREAKDOWN

Session DP89D

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Running Head: Hidden Dimensions in Communicating across Culture Using Technology

Abstract

The article highlights the importance of understanding our deep-seated values, beliefs and assumptions of our own culture and those of the other cultures as well in order to communicate clearly across cultures.

Introduction

The way we interpret a given message is often influenced by the learned and unstated assumptions that we have acquired in our process of growing up in a particular culture. As an



example, Malaysians who visit a restaurant with the name "Banana Leaf" in Guangzhou, China might expect to be served with some Indian *makan* (food) of rice, mutton curry, fried fish and papadam.

However, they may be surprised when what they are given to eat are several Asian dishes served on porcelain plates, and the only banana leaves they see are the large banana plants painted along the walls as part of the house decor.

This is one of the flaws in communicating across cultures; what we encode in our culture of orientation may not always be similarly decoded in another culture. As the saying goes, "One man's meat is another man's poison". A message conveyed may often be interpreted in many different ways. The accuracy with what is meant depends on how we encode the message and on what the receiver has previously learned to attach to the message that we are transmitting. Such is the case in the recent international blunder when an American politician came to Kuala Lumpur to preach his message of democracy and liberty and to highlight a rhetoric which has become somewhat synonymous with his own government's political agenda.

It is clear that Malaysians regard benevolent authoritarianism and democratic civilities in not quite the same way as the visiting politician. In addition, while Malaysians are used to foreign criticisms of their ways of doing things, they certainly do not expect those who are "house guests" to articulate their critical points of views so openly. Such behavior is certainly out of context, out of place and indeed out of sync. A person who fails to read the hidden nuances, sensitivities and social context is seen as having no social finesse and grace which is tantamount to poor breeding. Hence the Malaysian outburst of emotions and name-calling through the print and electronic media was laced with the word *kurang ajar* (literally, "not well bred").

In conveying a message - whether it is complimentary or constructive - in a way that will be accurately interpreted, we need to know who are the recipients - their background in terms of culture and experience. After all, it has been said that effective communication is the act of the receiver. The measure of communication effectiveness in any form of communication - verbal or written - is in the response we get, not the intent with which it was sent. We have to encode the message according to the symbols and values of the recipient's culture as they will be decoding our message and deciding how to respond to or act upon it. For example, the phrase *kurang ajar* may not be decoded by another culture in the same way as in Malay culture. To a Malay, it may mean that our Ma and Pa have not done their job of educating us in a WE *kita* culture, while those who are brought up in an I (*aku*) culture it may mean something different.

Say what you mean

Behavior that we perceive as despicable in Malaysian culture may not be viewed in the same way in a culture that promotes a "telling it as it is" kind of communication style as found in I - oriented culture. In fact, being *kurang ajar* may be tolerated and even encouraged in cultures where speaking up is an undisputed right of an individual. To say "what you mean and mean what you say" is indeed a valued trait for those programmed from an early age to formulate and express opinions. In this instance, what we have is an example of the misunderstanding and negative feelings that can result when symbols encoded in a culture which values individual ruggedness, equality, openness and forthrightness are decoded in a We culture which is more group oriented, face-saving and hierarchical in nature.

Of course - this will not be the last of our communication breakdowns with those who are not familiar with our values and unstated assumptions. There will be more as long as people in one culture assume that what they intend to say will be accurately interpreted by recipients in



another culture, especially when they decode the behaviour of a person from the other culture based on their own values and assumptions.

For the ordinary person or anyone for that matter, communication is not an easy process. We have the tendency to begin with a mindset of stereotypes, prejudices and judgement, especially when communicating across cultures. When there is difficulty in understanding, we do not perceive that "we" are the problem; we think that it is the "other" who is at fault.

So - how do we respond to this situation, knowing that communicating across cultures is now taking centre stage under the impact of media globalization, Internet connections, and ease in face to face and virtual interactions? There are no magic recipes, but one thing is for sure: we can start by developing our own version of cultural literacy, as it is now a valued human currency across cultures.

What this means is that we have to strive to become equally conversant not only with our own commonly used symbols, rituals, values and codes in communicating, but also with the symbols, rituals, values and codes that belong to people who are not like us. We have to learn to understand the deep-seated values, beliefs and assumptions of our own culture and that of the other cultures as well. The more similar the values, beliefs and assumptions are between the sending and receiving cultures, the better the chances are of intercultural understanding; the more different they are, the more likely it is that communication will result in misunderstanding. This task is not simple, because these values, beliefs and assumptions are often not written in bold print. They are never so clearly stated until someone seemingly "breaks" an implicit and sacred law.

As we build our cultural literacy we will be better able to accurately interpret the messages we receive from people of other cultures and be less surprised if the Banana Leaf

restaurant in another country serves us something we do not expect. In addition to improving our fluency in culture, we also have to develop our ability to effectively encode the message we send to people of other cultures. This we do by framing them in a way that will allow people from another culture to decode our messages accurately.

Communicating with people who are not like us begins with an empathy, refraining ourselves from evaluating them based on our own form of collective programming. By having a clear understanding that values and behaviors are not always universally interpreted (especially those that relate to human rights, democratic institutions, authoritarianism and empowerment, etc) we are taking one sure step towards overcoming our cultural ignorance or at its worst arrogance - the two traps that can get us into the "hot soup" of intercultural and even international misunderstanding.

The next time we decide to be critical of an idea or action of a person programmed in another culture - be sure to encode the message in a way that the receiver will decode it the way it is supposed to be received. However, if the receiver from another culture decodes it differently and feels offended with what we had encoded -- then we have not communicated the way we had intended it to be received. In this case, it is better that we keep our mouth shut and appear a fool than to open our mouth and prove it!!

Author

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