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The Impact of Cultural Communication on Team Performance

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Citation Details

Hunley, Bret; Chakraborty, Smarajit; and MacDonald, Stephen, "The Impact of Cultural Communication on Team Performance" (2018). *Engineering and Technology Management Student Projects*. 1914.

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The impact of cultural communication on team performance

Course Title: Team Building and Communication

Course Number: ETM 522 / 622

Instructor: Dr Weber

Term: Winter

Year: 2018

Author(s): Bret Hunley, Smarajit Chakraborty, Stephen MacDonald

ETM OFFICE USE ONLY

Report No.:

Type: Student Project

Note:

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Abstract

The trend in today's corporate workforce continues to move towards becoming more culturally diverse; while beneficial, to maintain competitive edge this element also increases functional challenges between working group members. In order to achieve a high performing team, it is imperative management understands the cultural and lingual differences among the individual members, and develop practices that diminish these challenges. Workforce diversity has been identified as being able to add value to the overall outcome; however, success ultimately depends on the team's ability to interact culturally, communicate effectively, and understand the mannerisms unique to each team member's individual culture.

Examining Geert Hofstede's work; a model that quantitatively measures cultural differences, the authors start their discussion on factors that lead to cultural norms and highlight, through management practices, ways to minimize challenges and increase interaction in the team environment. Once members understand the individual nuances of culture midst their counterparts, the team can focus on an equally important aspect to becoming a high performing team; effective communicating.

Next, the authors move the analysis to address the hurdles centered around team member's linguistical challenges. This facet too presents a set of unique challenges; which, if not addressed properly, can lead to poor performance and a lack of trust amongst the group. Finally, the authors conclude by identifying the unique nonverbal communication norms, among cultures, which too can adversely affect a team's performance. This paper looks to synthesize the literature which highlights these three aspects of communication in the team environment.

Introduction

Since the 19th century, cross-cultural management research (CCMR) has endured great advancement from the subject matters' genesis. Today, given the state of international business, one can argue the subject is as rich as it has ever been. If one were to conduct a genetic test on the subject, the results would lead straight to the works of the famous anthropologists like; Edward Tylor (1832/1917) and Charles Darwin (Peterson, 2007). At the heart of the subject, trying to understand how someone, or groups of individuals, not like yourself: thinks, acts, and derives their thoughts from, so you can maximize the output of the interaction is what CCMR is focused around.

In the contemporary setting, contributors such as George Murdock and Max Weber, positioned the topic-centric to economics and productivity of multinational entities. Murdock set the stage by developing a 'Cross-culture Survey', and Weber's work combined sociology and economic characteristics while examining the effects form society as a whole. Building off the framework laid by these pioneers, the largest breakthrough in CCMR can be attributed to Geert Hofstede, and his work in *Culture's Consequences* (1980). Until Hofstede's publication, researchers analyzed cultures from a distance, and drew on generalizations to develop conclusions around social norms; conversely, Hofstede's work resulted in a model that placed quantitative conclusions to his hypothesis while studying multiple cultural interactions at the same time. (Peterson, 2007) (Hofstede, 1980)

As companies continue to proliferate commerce into and from new markets; as well as, create subsidiary entities to add resiliency to their supply-chain integrity, the literature suggests cross culture management will continue to become an increasingly important subject.

In the last three decades; globalization, web-access, cheap travel, and trade acts have caused national brands to expand from regional brands into global brands. This paper sets out to synthesize leading literature discussing the three major underpinnings of cross-culture team communication and its effects on team performance. These areas consist of: cultural dimensions, linguistical differences, and non-verbal mannerisms and cues.

Cultural Dimensions

As corporations expand and become global entities, in order to maintain competitiveness, the onus to understand professional expertise and cross-cultural diversity challenges lies squarely on those corporation's management teams. Research has been presented that suggest workforce diversity can improve team performance (Cox, 1991). However, to work effectively on a multicultural team it has also been identified that members need to know about and appreciate, the other culture's dimensions they will be interacting with (Triandis, 1998). To understand these dimensions, one has to start with understanding what Geert Hofstede's described in his publication *Culture's Consequences* as "the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another", known as cultural dimensions¹ (Hofstede, 1980). Hofstede's work, conducted throughout the 1970's, became the leading authority on the subject of international business management because his analysis expanded the subject matter of cultural norms into their effects on the multinational business environment (Peterson, 2007).

Until Hofstede, most experts narrowly focused on intercultural communication from the perspective of one culture and its related norms. However, Hofstede exhaustively analyzed and concluded his findings for observing for a decade the interaction of these norms in the setting of a multinational corporation; operating in 39 countries (Peterson, 2007). Hofstede designed a quantitative model formed around four major dimensions which concluded shaped our work attitudes and values among different cultures: a) power distance b) uncertainty avoidance c) individualism-collectivism d) masculinity (Hofstede, 1980). These dimensions are the lenses through which cultures view directives, timelines, productivity metrics, fairness, and other parameters related to the work environment. Centric to these elements is communication, to be an effective corporation; owners, management and team members; all need to exhibit cross-cultural communication competence (Matveev, 2004).

In order to gain this competence, you have to start with a clear definition of each dimension: a) *power distance* is defined as the degree to which members of a culture expect power to be distributed unequally; b) *individualism-collectivism* describes whether the culture values individual goals or group goals; c) *uncertainty avoidance* indicates whether uncertainty and ambiguity are perceived as threatening within a culture; d) *masculinity* refers to how much a society sticks with, and values, traditional male and female roles. Once you have a clear understanding of the dimensions, the next step is understanding the scoring range; as well as, how the individual cultures ranked in each range; gain competence (Hofstede, 1980). (See Figure 1, Appendix A)

Once cultural communication competence is achieved, to obtain high performing teams, it is the responsibility of ownership and management to convey these elements amongst team

¹ It should be noted: Hofstede's original work only cited the four dimensions, however, in follow-on work (2001) he introduced a fifth dimension. The authors thought while only concentrating on synthesizing corporate communication in multinational entities this dimension was redundant and not needed to be highlighted.

members and develop internal policies such as: team building activities, grievance policies, hold webinars around workplace interaction, and post infographics in the office that remind individuals of these nuances. This list of practices is not exhaustive; however, they illustrate procedures how to ensure all organizational members retain cross-culture communication competency; which in return reduces the impact due to cultural barriers.

Language barriers & Trust

International teams, by default, have members from different parts of the globe. This means the members are likely to speak different native languages. These languages may have varied styles and contexts. However, for the team to be effective, it is important that the members use a common language for general communication. This often means that members are using a language that is secondary to their native language. The use of a secondary language can be challenging and can lead to frustration and mistrust within the team. Therefore, language, for the purposes of this section, is viewed as an enabler of team formations, but also as a disruptive element that leads to ineffective teams (Tenzer, 2014).

For example, one of our team members (Hunley, 2018) works for a large international company that regularly uses cross-functional teams which have members from the US, Mexico and Germany. In these teams, it can be hard to carry a concise conversation. This lack of clear communication leads to frustration within the team, as goals and deliverables are jeopardized due to poor communication (Hunley, 2018). This frustration leads to mistrust within the group and a less effective team environment. This lack of trust can be linked back to group member accountability. This can be considered to be a major issue since trust and accountability are key pillars in any team (Katzenbach, 1993).

This experience seems to be supported by the literature (Tenzer, 2014) as it states, “[s]everal scholars have noted that language-related issues can significantly impact trust formation.” (Jonsen, 2011) The literature breaks the trust issue into two different categories: emotion-based trust and cognition-based trust (see Figure 2, Appendix A). These two different types of trust are impacted differently by the team’s language use and will be examined with a focus specifically on their communicational impacts.

Trust impacts

Emotion-based trust is defined to be, trust that forms between members based on their interactions with each other. Emotional trust is based on the fact that it is reciprocated (McAllister, 1995) and will “increase with the frequency of interaction.” (Tenzer, 2014) This theory is based on McAllister’s (1995) trust theory. However, by nature, multinational teams struggle with emotional trust due to their limited interactions. Additionally, as these interactions do happen, the language gap keeps the trust formation process slow and sometimes unsuccessful (Tenzer, 2014).

Cognition-based trust, as explained by Mayer (1995) and Schoorman (2007), is broken down into three subcategories: ability, integrity, intentions.

Ability based trust is based on the perceived competence in the subject matter at hand and is based on the ability of the team member to prove they are competent in the area of focus. This is a difficult task for most members of a multilingual team as their communication limitations limit their ability to prove competence. This doesn’t mean that the members of the team aren’t competent, rather that they struggle to convey their competency. This leads to

members being underappreciated and underutilized for fear that they will not meet the needs and goals of the team.

Integrity based trust is related to the belief between team members that a set of principles will be followed which are found to be acceptable to all members of the team. When taken into context of multinational teams, this is a complex topic and is a difficult type of trust to build. This trust type is difficult to build since team members don't necessarily know the other members well enough to know where their ethical stances are. However, in our team experience it is common that team members, while possibly strangers, will leverage the companies ethical and integrity codes as the basis for this type of trust. The teams will use whatever communication skills they do have to align with the company's ethical standards. While this doesn't always lead to successful trust formation, it does give the team a common basis to work from.

Intention based trust, also known as benevolence-based trust, is trust based on the fact that all team members have good intention and are working towards the team's common goal. This type of trust might be the easiest for multinational teams to build as it requires little in the way of communication. Since all members, in an idealized team, should be working toward the same goals at the best of their abilities, this type of trust is usually more of an expectation, rather than a possibility.

While all types of trust are important to team formation, it is critical that team members be on the same page and have mutual trust in each other in order to be successful. For multinational and especially multilingual teams, trust can be difficult to form due to many factors, but the most critical factor is communication. Challenges in communication can lead to team dysfunction and low performance. It can also promote a lack of willingness by team members to be part of future teams. This makes trust formation through effective communication a key factor in all team activities.

Language mandates

In an effort to manage the effects of language and communication within multinational companies, many teams and corporations have started to implement mandates for language use in an effort to eliminate some of the stressors present in multilingual teams. Many US companies have mandated that English is their preferred language; while other companies, like Rakuten in Japan, have mandated a language shift to English without the option for any other languages (Neeley, 2017). This is done under the context that "establishing a singular corporate language by which all employees operate" is "[o]ne essential factor in developing global leaders." (Kelleher, 2016)

While this is done in an effort to streamline and create common corporate language, there seems to be some debate as to whether this is an effective strategy to manage the issue. Tsedal Neeley (2017), associate professor in the Organizational Behavior unit at the Harvard Business School, has completed studies that "demonstrated that a corporate language mandate can lead non-native speakers to distrust native speakers, fearing the latter might deceive them because of their superior language ability." (Neeley, 2013) Based on this study, there seems to be a stark contrast between the intent of the mandates and the true result.

From the experience of our team member (Hunley, 2018), both sides of this finding seem to be validated, but only when reviewed from both sides of the language gap. For the native speakers, the change to a standardized communication language is viewed as a positive.

This positivity has led to the formation of more and more multinational teams and ever-increasing numbers of team members that speak English as a second language. However, while this has increased the number of teams, it has also decreased the overall effectiveness of those teams. This is especially true in teams where the team leader has a different native language than the majority of the team members. This tends to result in meetings where significant portions of the time are spent trying to understand the message topic, rather than producing any real results and/or content. The literature also links language disparity to lower perceived competence levels of the team members (Tenzer, 2014).

In contrast, the non-native speakers have pooled together to meet the mandate and have put together a significant effort towards that goal (Hunley, 2018). However, as non-native speakers, they often struggle with translation and understanding the key concepts in a quick manner. This leads to frustration on the non-native side as they are repeatedly asked the same questions and/or criticized for not answering questions completely or as correctly as is expected by the native speakers. This leads to some credence behind the old saying, “something got lost in translation”.

While mandates have been put in place to help build up and strengthen teams, there seems to be some debate within the academic community about the effectiveness of this method. When reviewing these mandates, it is important to review both sides of the affected parties. This is one area that could use some significant future research and development as much of the literature is scattered and only looks at individual components of trust and communication and does not look at the overreaching impacts and implications of these shortfalls and improvements.

Nonverbal and mannerism communication

Multinational and cultural diversity in teams can have both positive and negative effects. From records, it can be established that most negatives effects in a multinational team are likely to be caused by the cultural differences among the team members. Individuals coming from different backgrounds can end up making different decisions for the same problem as they might have a different way of looking at the world. Culturally diverse teams can be creative, but also are found to be teams with the most conflicts, confusion and ambiguity. On top of those issues, different cultural mannerism and nonverbal cues make communicating difficult (Scachaf, 2008).

Nonverbal Communication by humans is beyond the sake of communication, it is more of an interpersonal way of expressing where individuals show likeness or hatred, acceptance or rejection, respect or rudeness (Adetunji, 2012). It is that mode of communication where our actions speak louder than words and may impact the overall comfort of our team members. What is a positive gesture in someone’s culture may not make any sense in someone else’s culture or even might be offensive. Like the hand gesture for “okay” in America is extremely offensive in Germany, means “not okay” in South America and translates to “money” in Japan. Cases like this can cause potential conflict and confusion in a team environment (Verderber, 2009).

A classic example of conflict due to the cross-cultural difference is eye contact. In American culture, when having a conversation with a someone in a superordinate position, looking into the person’s eyes is seen as a sign of respect, transparency, honesty, attentiveness, and interest. In contrast, people who come from cultures that give importance to hierarchy; Hispanic, Asian and Middle Eastern cultures for example; tend to look down while talking to a

superordinate as that is a sign of respect and submission. Looking into the eye for conversing can often be seen as offensive for these hierarchical cultures. Moreover, some of the men from these cultures avoid direct eye contact with women superiors, coworkers and subordinates. Eye contact is avoided in many of these interactions so that it is not mistaken for sexual interest. Similarly, touching between opposite sexes in certain Muslim cultures is unlawful (Adetunji, 2012). Working in a cross-cultural team can be difficult, especially for teams with members from the opposite genders or working classes.

Another common example is the sense of personal space. Cultures which originate closer to the equator do not mind hugging or touching each other frequently. Putting an arm around a coworker in a friendly way or a pat on the back to a subordinate is very common. Whereas cultures that originate further away from the equator, are usually from colder regions, do not entertain physical interaction with their fellow teammates or coworkers and consider it an intrusion into their personal space. Studies show that people from colder regions historically spent more time collecting supplies and preparing for winter. In contrast, people who are from warmer regions, closer to the equator, spent less time on preparation activities and therefore had more time for interpersonal bonding. These differences in time spent developing relationships has had a direct impact on how their cultures interact. Due to these stark differences, cross-cultural teams in today's world, with people from these two types of cultural backgrounds, often create uncomfortable situations (William, 2003).

With the introduction of modern day technology, the world has become a smaller place and working in a global team is common. When it comes to written nonverbal communication through mediums like emails, most of the world is unified. Teams use a standard international format and follow a common language to communicate with each other in these types of platforms. As mentioned previously, these teams, due to their diverse experience and point of views, can be extremely creative and effective. However, when these members come face to face in one room their cultural differences can come alive and introduce additional points of conflict. For example, one of our team members (Chakraborty, 2018), when he first arrived in the USA, he couldn't understand the body language of the people to the extent where it hindered his verbal communication. He shares his experience saying:

“One of my classmates, from Spain, while greeting me in class winked at me. In my culture people usually don't wink, and when they do it is usually a sign of flirting/romantic interest. I was confused and it was awkward for me to talk to him about it. Initially, I was extremely uncomfortable and him being a team member of mine probably made it worse. Later on, further research, I found out that a wink can be used as a casual friendly gesture in his culture.”

Not all intercultural nonverbal communication has a negative impact on team effectiveness. Not all nonverbal cues and mannerisms are limited to body language, gestures, and cultural symbolism. Sometimes genetics can take a part in it too (William, 2003). It has been found that individuals are more likely to comply with another individual who is more attractive. Many studies (Burgoon, 2002) confirm that persuasiveness is associated with attractiveness. Also, it has been observed that team members are more likely to comply with other members who dress similar to them irrespective of their cultural differences (Peters, 2006).

As we see here, non-verbal communication can range from facial expressions to genetics and is extremely impactful when it comes interpersonal communication in teams. The

effects of non-verbal cross-cultural communication can either be negative or positive depending on cultures and individuals interacting. Because of cultural biases and sensitivity towards intercultural differences this type of communication is mostly a restricted type of communication (Adetunji, 2012) and reduces team effectiveness, and the only way we could improve cross-cultural nonverbal communication is by educating ourselves and making ourselves aware of the cultures we might have to interact with and at the same time keep in mind to not stereotype individuals based on their cultures.

Conclusions

As the corporate world moves into new markets and demographics, the international team is becoming more of the norm. In order to exhibit high performance research has identified the importance behind understanding cultural and lingual differences of the members of that team. Team diversity can lead to strong results; however, diversity creates challenges not present in traditional teams. Beyond standard verbal communication; cultural, multilingual and nonverbal communication are just as important to the success.

To maintain competitiveness, corporation's ownership and management must understand the cross-cultural challenges that come with multinational teams, and work to effectively set policies to foster productive interaction among team members. The research performed by Geert Hofstede led the way for defining and quantifying the causes that form cultural norms. Hofstede's model centered around four main dimensions: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism-collectivism and masculinity. Using these dimensions, a team can measure their cohesiveness to increase team effectivity while simultaneously minimizing the impacts of cultural hurdles.

While cultural roles play a part in team dynamics, so does the language the members speak. The implications of these multilingual teams were shown to be mixed and have a significant impact on team trust formation. The different native languages spoken by the team have direct impacts on how other members of the team perceives credibility, trustworthiness, competence and ethics. Due to this impact on team trust formation, many companies have begun to implement language mandates that dictate what languages are allowed to be used within a group's interactions. While these mandates have streamlined communication standards, they have had mixed results. Additional research is needed into the impacts of these mandates to truly determine if they are an effective tool in resolving the language barrier issue.

Finally, non-verbal communication is just as important as verbal communication and can have both positive and negative effects. Cultural differences seem to be the primary driver for the negative impacts within a multinational team. These impacts seem to be directly related to the social and cultural backgrounds of the team members and have lasting impacts on the team member interactions. The positive implications of the diversity are also impacted by these non-verbal interactions. Whether its eye contact, gender interactions, personal space or hierarchical roles, non-verbal communication plays a key role in how our teams work and how well they perform.

As the world continues to grow and evolve, how society and our teams communicate has changed with it. With the implementation of ever more advanced technology, the distances between individuals has begun to be bridged by that technology, and the importance of clear and concise communication has become an ever-increasing portion of a team's interaction. While most people, when thinking about communication, focus on the verbal aspects of the team interactions, this paper has looked at the implications of the team member's cultures and

backgrounds and more specifically, the impacts of cultural differences known as cultural distance, implications of language barriers, and non-verbal cues and mannerisms on team dynamics.

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Appendix A

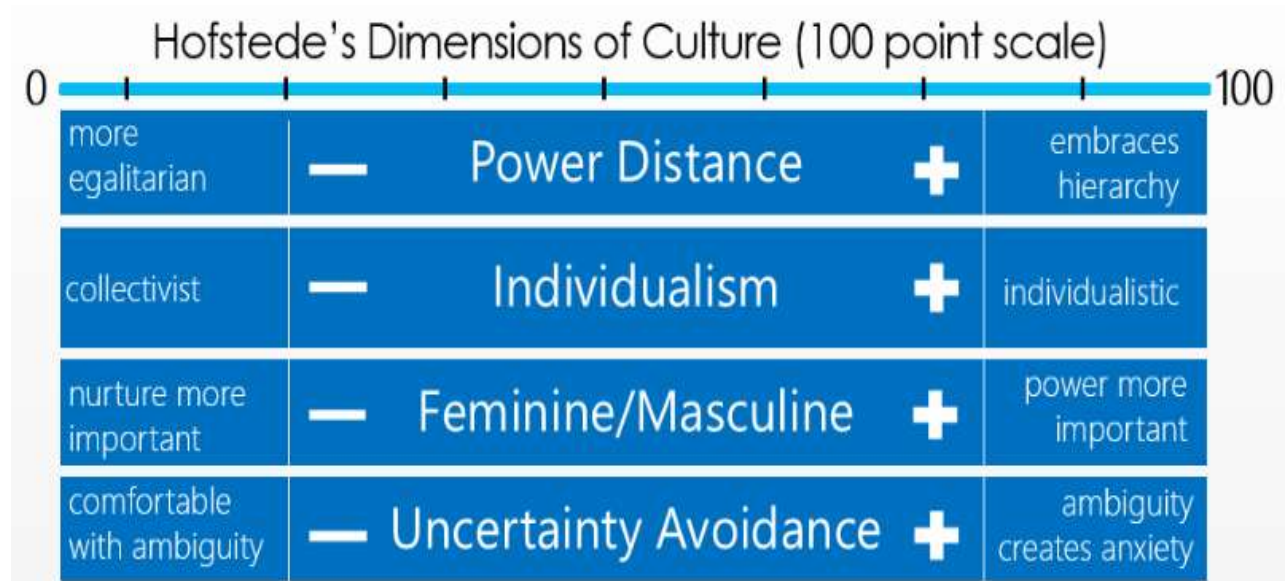


Figure 1: Hofstede's Scoring Scale

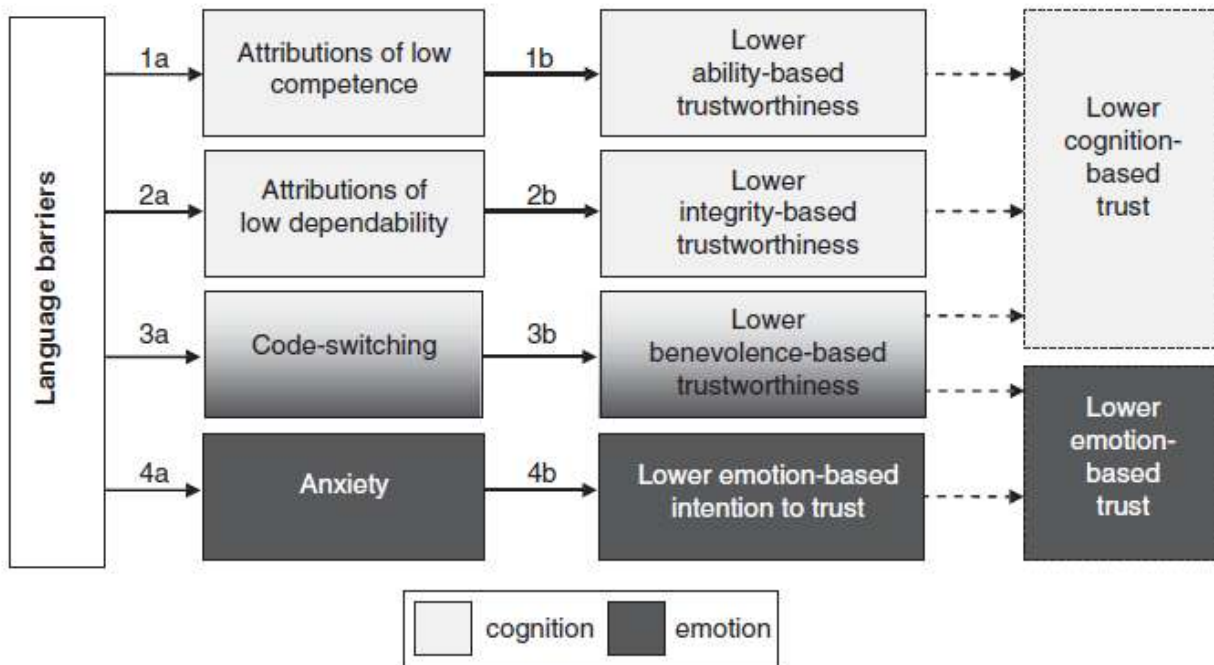


Figure 2: The impact of language barriers on trust (Tenzer, 2014)