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DIFFICULTIES OF INTERCULTURAL BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

Sometimes we are facing with the need to communicate with people very different than ourselves. The more differences there are between the people who are communicating, the more difficult it is to communicate effectively. The major problems in intercultural business communication are language barriers, cultural differences and ethnocentric reactions.

If we are doing business in London, we obviously won't have much of a language problem. We may encounter a few unusual terms or accents in the 29 countries in which English is an official language, but our problems will be relatively minor. Language barriers will also be relatively minor when we are dealing with people who use English as a second language. Some of these people are extremely fluent; others have only an elementary command of English. Although you may miss a few subtleties in dealing with those who are less fluent in English, we'll still be able to communicate. The pitfall to watch for is assuming that the other person understands everything we say, even slang, local idioms and accents.

The real problem with language arises when we are dealing with people who speak virtually no English. In situations like this, we have very few options: we can learn their language, we can use an intermediary or a translator, or we can teach them our language. Oral communication usually presents more problems than written one. If you have ever studied a foreign language, you know from your personal experience that it is easier to write in a foreign language than to conduct a conversation. Even if the other person is speaking English, you are likely to have a hard time understanding the pronunciation if the person is not proficient in English.

In addition to pronouncing sounds differently people use their voices in different ways, a fact that often leads to misunderstanding. The Russians for example speak in flat level tones in their native tongue. When they speak English, they maintain this pattern, and Westerners may assume that they are bored or rude. Middle Easterners tend to speak more loudly than Westerners and may therefore mistakenly be considered more emotional. On the other hand, the Japanese are soft-spoken, the characteristic that implies politeness or humility to Westerners.

Misunderstandings are especially likely to occur due to cultural differences. Such problems arise because we ignore the fact that people from other cultures differ from us in many ways: in their religion and values, their ideas of status, their decision-making habits, their attitude toward time, their body language and manners, etc. "Although North America is populated by people with different religions and values, the predominant influence in this culture is the puritan ethic: If you work hard and achieve success you will find favour in the eyes of God" [2]. They tend to assume that material comfort is a sign of superiority, that the rich are a little bit better than the poor, that people who work hard are better than those who don't. They believe that money solves many problems. They really believe that people from other cultures share their views.

Culture dictates the roles people play, including who communicates with whom, what they communicate and in what way. In many countries, for example, women still do not play a very prominent role in business. As a result, female executives from American firms may find themselves set off to eat in a separate room with the wives of Arab businessmen, while the men eat all together. Gestures help us clarify confusing messages, so differences in body language are a major source of misunderstanding. Sometimes people from different cultures misread an intentional signal and sometimes they overlook the signal entirely or assume that a meaningless gesture is

significant. People should remember that something which is polite in one country may be considered rude in another.

Although language and cultural differences are significant barriers to communication, these problems can be resolved if people maintain an open mind. Unfortunately, many of us have an ethnocentric reaction to people from other cultures – that means that we judge all other groups according to our own standards. Generally, ethnocentric people are prone to stereotyping and prejudice. They generalize about an entire group of people on the basis of sketchy evidence and then develop biased attitudes toward the group. As a consequence, they fail to see people as they really are. An example of intercultural experience is contained in the old proverb “when in Rome do as the Romans do”. It also necessitates the development of a knowledge and understanding of the cultural and subcultural norms, beliefs, values and responses of those with whom we are interacting.

LITERATURE:

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