

RECOGNIZING CULTURE IN THE WORLD OF BUSINESS

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Abstract: The author starts from the idea that there has been a significant change in the way of doing business in Romania and that culture plays an important role. The paper presents some of the effects that business people might have to deal with if they are not aware of the cultural differences and the competences they need when working for international companies. The author highlights the need for developing adequate training tools to enable people working for multinational companies to deal efficiently with the distinctiveness of living and working in a foreign country.

Key words: culture, cultural awareness, social context, cultural diversity, multiculturalism, cross-cultural communication.

1. Introduction

In the last decades Romania has witnessed a significant change in the way of doing business. Many people work for international companies. Some of them, who cannot find well paid work locally or for different reasons they cannot leave their homes, decide to work for distant employers on a teleworking basis. Thus, they do not have to commute to work. Multinational companies employ people from different countries and different nationalities which have to work together in order to accomplish their assignments. These kinds of employees never meet their colleagues “face to face” and still they team up and solve their job problems irrespective of their nationalities or of those of their business partners.

In the current global marketplace, in order to get a job in an international company one has to speak at least a foreign language, to master effective communication skills, to be familiar with best practices in international settings, to recognize cultural differences, to overcome ethnocentrism, to develop effective intercultural communication skills, to be familiar with codes of ethics, etc.

In this article we focus our attention only on the range of problems employees have to deal with from the cultural point of view.

2. Recognizing cultural diversity

Culture can be a powerful force that can undermine or increase a business and that is why it is imperative to identify and diagnose the cultural differences. In the world of business we have to examine the specific issues involved in international communication in order to avoid communication breakdowns.

Susan Schneider and Jean-Louis Barsoux, in their book *‘Managing across cultures’*(2003:9) give two eloquent examples in favour of cultural training for business

people, in order to be able to anticipate potential misunderstanding.

The first one is the case of a Franco-American joint venture where the problem was only recognized after eight years of collaboration. A French consultant, called to investigate problems of cooperation, while interviewing American managers was shocked at the litany of complaints aimed at their French counterparts. The complaints which might seem trivial at first glance were apparently rather important, since eight years of collaboration had not resolved them.

The second example, with disastrous consequences, is the case of an American oil company which set up a drilling operation on a Pacific island and hired local labor. Within a week, all the foremen were found lined up on the floor, their throats cut. The cause of the tragedy was a cultural difference. The tragedy was caused by the fact that the company used its own cultural criteria for recruitment instead of taking into account the fact that: "hiring younger men as foremen to boss older workers was not acceptable in a society where age indicates status".

3. Cultural awareness

Any international communication carries a cultural message that cannot be properly understood unless the language of the discussion is mastered. It goes without saying that speaking a foreign language fluently does not guarantee a successful communication in an international setting. There are cases when, on the contrary, the ability to communicate is reduced the greater the knowledge of a language is. The explanation is rather simple: the better one knows a foreign language the more aware is of the intricacy of the international communication which involves the dos and don'ts of other cultures and is careful to express his/her intentions in an appropriate way.

But in order to be able to find out how one can communicate successfully with other nations, it is important to grasp one's own cultural standards first. It is generally agreed that culture is "learned and forgotten". Generally, people are unconscious of its influence on the manner in which they perceive the world and interact within it. It is not advisable to assume that the widespread understanding of a language means a corresponding understanding of that particular people or of its customs. It is said the British were among the people who made the mistake of assuming that the widespread understanding of their language meant a corresponding understanding of English customs.

Richard Lewis begins his book *When Cultures Collide* with the mistake made by Christopher Columbus. When he sailed to find trade routes to Asia, he landed in the Americas instead, discovering a "new world." But this new world was not so new to everyone. Native Americans had been living on this land for more than 10,000 years and when these cultures collided, "neither was left unscathed".

Communication is not intelligible if it is treated as a process detached from the social context of which it is a part. There can be no doubt that communication must be analysed in terms of its total setting: relationship of the participants to the code,

relationship to one another as members of a communicating society, the manner in which the message acts as a link between source and receptor.

4. Understanding culture

Culture understanding is partly achieved by becoming aware of the cultural information about the new culture from the perspectives of the natives of that culture. "When in Rome, do as the Romans do" is a well known proverb, but observing behaviour is not enough. What is important is the meaning of that behavior. This distinction is important as the same behavior can have different meanings and different behaviors can have the same meaning.

Clifford Geertz defines culture as 'systems of shared meaning or understanding' ('web of signification') which drive or explain the behaviour observed. The meaning given to our behaviour by people who share our culture may correspond, more or less, with our own view of its significance; the meaning given to that behaviour by people from different cultures may be substantially different. For example:

- in one culture, pork is forbidden meat dictated by religion, and in another it is the meat of high esteem for festivals;
- in England, it is culturally normal for a father to kiss his daughter on the mouth, but a similar action would be culturally unacceptable in other countries;
- maintaining eye contact in Western cultures signifies paying attention, being open and honest. The eyes are considered to be the windows of the soul. Whereas in Asia and in Latin America, maintaining eye contact may be taken as a sign of disrespect and aggression, particularly between people of different status levels. Therefore, Asians are quite uncomfortable when Europeans seem to insist on direct eye contact, and Europeans may feel they cannot trust someone who 'won't look them straight in the eye'.

By observing any rituals of daily life we can derive possible interpretations of what we see, but it is necessary to go beyond what we see, to search for the meaning beneath the activity. But the meaning may not be readily apparent. In certain cases when people say they:

"...understand" a sentence, generally their comprehension can be considered incomplete, because they do not know and understand all it actually says in the context... The subjective feeling of comprehension that may arise in a reader's or listener's mind is not necessarily a reliable indicator of the actual level of comprehension achieved." (Gile, 1995:78-81)

Generally, comprehension integrates information from the lexical, syntactic and semantic levels. When we encounter a sentence, we typically bring all our past knowledge and experience to deal with that sentence. General knowledge of the world interacts with our knowledge of the grammar of the language, and is reflected in our probability rankings for the various meanings that words can have in that particular language.

5. Conclusions

Even after a brief overview of the matters, we conclude that it is essential for business people not to minimize the importance of the cultural diversity, because this is not something temporary. The failure to pay attention to culture may have dramatic consequences. Therefore it is important to keep in mind what cultural differences are relevant for a particular situation and to take measures to train the personnel adequately.

Culture is significant because, as we work with others, it both enables us and impedes us in our ability to understand and perform effectively together. Culture is vital because it enables a community to function without the need to negotiate meaning at every moment. People of different cultures share basic concepts but these can be seen from different perspectives and consequently the adopted behaviour is different.

Those who are employed by international companies should be extremely competent both in their field of activity and in effective intercultural communication. In order to be successful in an international company an employee has to keep on improving communication skills for business as well as practicing and building team-spirit and has to be aware of the best practices in business settings. Since the whole concept is new for Romanian business life, there is still a need to develop adequate training tools to enable both Romanians working for multinational companies and foreign workers in Romania to deal efficiently with the distinctiveness of living and working in our country.

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