CULTURE AND COMMUNICATION

Perhaps more than any other human or organizational process, communication is profoundly affected by culture. Not only what one communicates but how they do it appears to be affected by culture. As a behavior, communication is influenced by values, beliefs, and attitudes that appear to vary among cultures.

Communication is the process of conveying information between two or more persons. These include both verbal and nonverbal communications. Verbal communications are transmitted via oral and written media of various types. Nonverbal communications consist of facial expressions, tone, gestures and other body language. While both types of communication are influenced by cultural differences in assumptions and values, this section will focus only on certain aspects of verbal communications.

In the classic model of communications (see figure below) a sender conveys a message via a certain medium to another, the receiver (of the information). Thus, if I call my wife on the phone to find out if an express mail has arrived, and she understands the message in the manner intended, she will respond with the answer yes or no to my message.

According to Haworth and Savage (1989), there are five dimensions of communications that apply to all cultures.

1. It is a process - an on-going exchange between people .
2. Communication involves purposive (factual, goal- oriented) and expressive (mood, emotions, feelings) information that is both intended and unintended.
3. Communication is made up of multiunit signals e.g., verbal and non-verbal.
4. Communication depends on its context (surroundings) for its meaning - a common/shared background or experience between the sender and receiver.
5. Communication depends on the competence of the communicator which enhances the understanding between the sender and receiver of communication.

Communication across borders involves different signals shaped by differences in language and behaviors. Regarding language, native speakers have a more profound understanding of their language compared with non-native speakers; therefore, even though we are both speaking the same language, we may not be ascribing the same meaning to the same words due to slang, idiomatic expressions and the like. If one is working through interpreters, then the sender has to be clear to at least two receivers to be accurately understood; these receivers include the intended recipient of the message as well as the translator. When you add differences in context between each culture, creating uncommon ground between the sender and receiver from different cultures, the probability of communication breakdowns (misunderstandings) increase when communicating across borders.

This section examines the effect of cultural assumptions and values on both communication processes as well as content. In both cases only selected processes and content issues are addressed here based on their frequent appearance in the literature on intercultural communications.

Two general processes are examined. The first includes the interaction pattern between the sender and receiver such as the physical distance between the speakers, one-on- one versus other patterns, and the formality of the exchange. The second process examined is the verbal style of the communicators such as conciseness (use of few vs. many words), purposive vs. emotion, and degree of confrontation/conflict in their style. An "other" process category includes the volume of the communication as well as the medium used (verbal vs. Non-verbal).

Two general content categories examine culture's influence on how the message is structured/organized from being explicit to being more implicit and the degree of detail provided. Culture also seems to influence the appeal of the message one sends that is the degree to which the message appeals to certain values and beliefs especially when the message is intended to be persuasive.

Cultural Assumptions and Communications

The assumptions examined here appear to influence communication processes more than content, and the assumption of context has the most profound impact on communications across cultures since it defines what is meaningful to people.

People from cultures who submit to their environment structure their messages more implicitly and with less

detail since one does not have control over their destiny. Their persuasive messages tend to appeal to good fortune or luck reflecting the environment's control over them. People from control cultures structure their message more explicitly and with more detail to provide greater control over the receiver's understanding. Such cultures find messages that emphasize perseverance more appealing because their culture teaches them that they can control their destinies if they persist. Assumptions about human nature do not appear to affect the communication processes and content examined here.

Monochronic cultures prefer to work on tasks sequentially and as a result prefer one-on-one interaction patterns; whereas, people from polychronic cultures are comfortable with communicating to more people about different topics simultaneously.

People from private space cultures prefer to maintain and arms length distance in non-intimate communications and are more comfortable communicating with individuals in private. Public space cultures are comfortable being more proximate to their receiver even in business settings and prefer to communicate in the open often with several receivers.

Since context refers to what is meaningful to people, it is not surprising that this assumption influences a variety of communication processes and content. Low context cultures tend to rely more on the words/language to obtain meaning; therefore, they use a more direct interaction pattern in which they get down to the purpose of their communication almost immediately. A low context verbal style is exact using sufficient words to get the full idea across. Their words are task-oriented or sender-focussed seeking to persuade the receiver about the matter at hand. The medium used is almost exclusively verbal.

Low context cultures are explicit in organizing their message with clear links from the facts to their conclusion. Message appeals are focused on precise facts about the topic.

High context cultures derive meaning from both the words as well as the situation of the two communicators. Consequently, they use a fairly ritualistic interaction pattern in trying to first get to know their receiver. They communicate with both verbal and nonverbal language using a concise verbal style conveying both facts as well as personal information to build a relationship with the receiver. High context cultures prefer to be more implicit in organizing their messages providing the context first, rationale ,and then their conclusion (often seen as circling around the topic). The reason for this is they rely more on the background between themselves and their receiver so the crux of the message need not be directly spelled out as the receiver will already have an idea how the sender feels about the topic. A high context message will appeal to certain internalized beliefs of the receiver or some characteristic of their shared setting or experience.

ASSUMPTI0NS AND COMMUNICATIONS

	PROCESS		CONTENT	
ASSUMPTIONS	Interaction Pattern	Verbal Style	Message Structure	Message Appeal

Environment
  Submit
 	
  Control
	–
	
	–
		–
		
		–
			Implicit
			Less detailed
			
			Explicit
			Detailed
				Luck
				
				Perseverance

Human Nature
  Evil
 	
  Good
	–
	
	–
		–
		
		–
			–
			
			–
				–
				
				–

Time Mono	One-to-one	–	–	–

Poly	One- to-many			
Space Private	One-to-one Wider distance Privately	–	–	–
Public	One to many Close distance Openly	–	–	–
Context Low	Less ritual	Mostly verbal; Mod. Amt. of talk; Task oriented words	Explicit connections Conclusion then support	Precision & facts
High	Ritualistic	Verbal & nonverbal Low amt. of talk Task & personal words	Implicit connections Support then conclusion	Beliefs & setting

Values and Communication

People from low power distance cultures downplay status differences, and this is reflected in an informal interaction pattern. In organizations alot of communication is initiated by subordinates to superiors as the latter seek their sub's input. Everyone should be heard so they tend to speak loudly. High power distance cultures maintain status differences and tend to be more formal when speaking to people of different rank. Communication is initiated more by superiors than subordinates. High PD persons tend to speak in lower volume particularly when speaking with someone of higher rank to show deference.

Uncertainty avoidance appears to affect both the process and the content of communication. Low uncertainty avoidance cultures tolerate the unknown and use a more direct interaction pattern and speak a moderate amount of words particularly in new situations; they favor using verbal media. The messages from low UA cultures are less detailed because they can tolerate some uncertainty and try to appeal to the receiver by emphasizing a challenge or a risk. To reduce uncertainty, high UA peoples tend to be ritualistic in their interaction patterns (use similar routines) and use both verbal and non-verbal media to try to reduce any misunderstanding that might arise from using words alone. In new situations high UAs talk less given their uncertainty about the situation and use nonverbals. High UA cultures provide more detailed information in their message to reduce uncertainty, and their persuasive messages try to appeal to the security needs of their receiver.

Collective cultures value group harmony; their interaction pattern seeks to avoid confrontation to maintain group harmony . A collective verbal style conveys personal information to reflect their concern for the receiver . To maintain group harmony , collective cultures tend to structure their messages implicitly (so as to acknowledge the receiver has knowledge about the topic and not insult them if they do not). Persuasive message appeal to group rewards. Individualist cultures do not avoid confrontation if necessary and use a more purposive or task-oriented (personal achievement) verbal style. Individualist cultures are more direct/explicit in structuring their message (sender more concerned about getting the point across rather than hurting or insulting the receiver), and their persuasive messages appeal to individual achievement.

People from feminine cultures prefer to maintain cooperation and harmony with their receivers; therefore, their verbal style is to avoid confrontation, speak in lower tones, and their persuasive messages appeal to satisfaction or altruism consistent with their value on the quality of life. Masculine cultures are more competitive and ,as a result, may use a confrontational verbal style and speak more loudly when necessary; their persuasive messages appeal to material rewards consistent with their emphasis on results.

Communication is a complex process; this section reveals, in part, how profoundly differences in beliefs and values may affect not only how information is communicated (i.e., processes) but also what is communicated (i.e., content).

VALUES AND COMMUNICATION

VALUES	PROCESS		CONTENT	
	Interaction Pattern	**Verbal Style**	**Message Structure**	**Message Appeal**
Power Distance Low High	Informal Bottom up Formal Top down	Loud Low volume	– –	– –
Uncertainty Avoidance Low High	Less ritual Ritualistic	Verbal Mod. Amt. Of talk Verbal & non-verbal Low amt. of talk	Less info. More detailed info.	Challenge Risk Security
Self-orientation Collective Individual	Avoid confrontation Confrontational	Personal words Task-oriented words	Implicit Explicit	Group rewards Individ. Achievement
Assertiveness Feminine Masculine	Avoid confrontation Confrontational	Low volume Loud	– –	Altruism Happiness Material rewards

[Return to Culture and Mgt. Home Page](#)

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