CULTURAL AWARENESS IN BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

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Abstract:The present paper brings forth the cultural prominence within the realm of business. Furthermore, it touches upon the chasm between polychronic and monochronic cultures. Along the same lines, the paper is aimed at drawing up the profile of a competent business communicator in a highly competitive environment.

Keywords: cultural awareness, business communication, highly competitive environment

1. Understanding Cultures, Subcultures and Approaches to Business and Workplaces

The term 'culture' generally means a set of customs, traditions, values and conventions that are specific to a social group. Naturally where there are humans, there are differences in the way any culture is practised, expressed and reflected. It's the same with business organizations. Each organization has its own individual way of getting work done, its own ways of communicating internally and externally. Sometimes there are even differences between or within departments that can further complicate matters. It's these intricate factors which ultimately have an impact on the level of success a business attains.

Business culture has its own set of subcultures: the further classification of processes and behaviours that make them little cultures unto themselves. There may be a reserved culture where internal communications are strongly relied upon and external communications are kept to the minimum. A reserved culture may also have different connotations based on a hierarchical belief that the individual is subordinate to the organization; that the minority is subordinate to the majority- and that the lower level is subordinate to the higher level.

This business culture prevails in many countries, for example China and Japan. Another facet can be that the individual will do whatever it takes not to be put in a position where he or she would 'lose face'. This reserve may be linked to people not liking to embarrass colleagues by saying 'no' in a meeting and preferring to say 'yes' when they ultimately mean 'no'.

Or there can be the opposite of reserved culture, expressive culture, where openness of internal and external communications is encouraged and the individual is welcome to make his or her personal mark, as in most countries in Western Europe and in the United States. A feature of this expressive culture is the concept of empowerment, where the individual is given authority or power to authorize something.

Another feature of an expressive culture may be effusiveness, for example a US business person might state that a meeting that went well was 'truly awesome' whereas someone from a more reserved culture might comment 'that didn't go too badly'. The UK would rank as a more reserved culture in this respect even though it's in the West. An effusive business culture might expect open and constant praise when things have gone well; the reserved culture, in contrast, may sense insincerity if offered incessant praise.

There are also, of course, *informal* and *formal* cultures, where the level of expression in communication, attire, manners and courtesy vary from one organization to another. Some businesses have the subculture of focusing on relationships with their clientele. Other

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businesses focus on clinching deals and keeping things strictly professional and relatively impersonal – as opposed to professional with a clear personal touch.

On a slightly different point here, the proverb 'to each his own', is not limited to its socio-psychological angle. Not only does every country, city and company have shared customs and conventions, they also have their own uniqueness to distinguish them from one another. Local cultures are bound to have some effect over a company or other professional organization's work culture and its professionals.

In recent years, some companies in the United States and the UK have taken to a more informal approach of staff working as teams, with less demarcation between the boss and his or her subordinates. The boss figure is no longer locked in an 'ivory tower'.

Bigger multinational corporations and conglomerates have followed their Western counterparts and gone open-plan. This creates scope for more open, spontaneous banter and dialogue among colleagues and with bosses.

Both conservative and open-plan approaches work because both yield results.

2. The Three Ss- Smart, Sophisticated and Successful

Today's job markets are becoming less restricted to basing locations in one place from where all the work happens. Modern working life has gone global, requiring professionals to be *smart* in their presentation, *sophisticated* in their style and dealings, and to exude the confidence and 'oomph' that comes with being *successful*.

Smart, *sophisticated* and *successful* are what is called the three Ss, but what do they really mean?

2.1. Smart

The word 'smart' means different things to different people. In the United States 'a smart person' often means someone who knows a lot. In the UK it can mean that, and it may also mean the person is dapper stylish.

We define *smart* as not just about being great in what you do in your daily performance; it is also about really understanding your role and its importance in the grand scheme of things (the company or business infrastructure). Additionally, it's about you valuing your personal effort in your work.

2.2. Sophisticated

The word 'sophisticated' has clear connotations for most. It's about being aware of and able to interpret complex issues. It's also about showing worldly experience of fashion and culture.

Words are the clothes for our logic- and we believe individuals have to choose the right words for the business task in hand and for the cultural sensibilities they encounter.

People worldwide react positively to elegance of expression, so that's another meaning we attach to *sophisticated* in a communication context.

The rise in globalization has left in its wake countless multinational companies that have headquarters in one place, manufacturing sites in other places and trade destinations dotted across the globe. Judgements are always made on whether you are *sophisticated* enough, in the other sense of the word, to show worldly experience of the culture and other issues affecting your audience. Whether you're speaking publicly or privately, or you're just an observer, the way you come across to other professionals carries a great deal of importance.

This rise in globalization has, in turn, brought new concepts like going 'glocal', where global and local cultures merge to ensure that mutual respect and understanding prevail all around. The term 'glocal' was coined in the United States from a phrase 'think global, act local', adopted for the social justice movement.

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Time and time again companies learn that if people don't feel respected, they feel disinterested or even worse, offended. This can translate into loss of business. So, to be *sophisticated* is not just to have good manners, but an assured aura which gives off signals that you and your company or business have credibility.

It's about truly believing in yourself, your capabilities and aptitudes, as well as being an ambassador for your business. If you don't believe in the work that you or your organization does, you'll have less esteem and regard for where your company stands. This won't give off secure and confident cues to the outside world. What's more, if you deliver this *sophisticated* aura, not only does your commitment in doing this help people believe in and respect you, but also they're likely to believe that you understand and respect them.

2.3. Successful

Being successful is an easy concept to understand, but how easy is it to be successful? It does actually rather depend upon your own perception: what does being successful mean to you personally and/ or in your work?

Being *successful* is to do work that brings prospects for further growth, and that ultimately benefits yourself and any organization you work for. Being successful is about positive audience engagement and ongoing interaction, for mutual benefit.

3. The Three Cs –Clear, Comprehensible and Confident

To achieve the three Ss, your use of global business English should have the three Cs- it should be clear, comprehensible and confident. This is where knowing how to use the right business English comes in.

3.1. Clear

We all understand the concept of being clear: sending unambiguous messages that people should find easy to understand. But in a global context we need to factor in that the perception of clarity may vary from reader to reader. Do we use our local idiom when writing to someone not from our locality? Or should we use readily understood global English?

Many major corporations strike a balance between both. They know when they need to come across as a global entity – and when to add that splash of local colour that makes all the difference in making their customers feel at home.

It probably won't take long before this trend becomes a convention in today's world of modern business communications. It's crucial because if you don't use the right words coupled with the right tone, you won't strike the right chord with the people you are doing business with.

3.2. Comprehensible

If the communication that you send is clear, then it's more likely it will be *comprehensible.* It's really about checking that what is clear to you can actually be understood by them.

Negotiations, to take just one example, can be seriously hampered by misunderstandings. Or business deals may even be lost – all because someone, somewhere, failed to understand all, or even just one part, of a message.

3.3.Confident

Confidence is something you need to have in order to communicate clearly and comprehensively, as well as to deal well with any communication you receive. Being *confident* is directly related to being smart and sophisticated in that you need to have faith in your abilities and aspirations to take you further. If every individual in a business organization topped up his or her confidence, imagine the strong positive force this could create to help the organization surge forward and take the business to new heights.

To summarize, the achievable ideal is that your communication is *clear* so you identify key, unambiguous messages, is *comprehensible* so readers understand and can make

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informed decisions, and gives off a strong sense of being *confident* in the manner in which the communication is expressed.

4. Writing and Speaking More Fluently within the Business Realm

Most managers, like most people, find speaking in public and writing well, difficult. Obey simple rules and your performance on paper will pass any normal tests, while you also have the potential to be an effective public speaker for any audience.

4.1. Writing Text

Always use short words rather than long, and active rather than passive verbs, when you are producing text. Seek a smooth flow, with logical transitions from thought to thought and paragraph to paragraph. Never write more words than you need. If you shorten any piece of writing, you will probably improve its quality. It helps throughout to visualize your audience, and to aim your words at that target.

4.2. Speaking Clearly

Nearly everybody speaks perfectly well in ordinary life. There are extraordinary orators, but you are not competing in their league. In your everyday conversation, you make your meaning clear, have an easy flow, and cover all the necessary ground without being long-winded. That is all that is required in speaking for your professional purposes.

4.3.Structuring Your Talk

Any talk consists of three *Ms*: Message, Material, and Manner. What do you want to communicate? Have one overarching, big message you will leave with the audience. Follow the basic sequence of telling the audience what you are going to say, saying it, and finally repeating what you have said. Within the overall message, write down the key points (as few as possible) in bullet form, and allow about three minutes per point. What will you use to support the message? Write down against each key point the slides, statistics, other facts and stories that you will use. The ideal length is between 20 and 40 minutes. Above that, audiences tend to lose concentration.

4.4. Presenting Your Talk

How will the message and material be presented? You have a wide choice of styles: roaming the stage or room, delivering from a fixed point, using notes, reading a script (which is rarely advisable), formal or informal, participative or lecturing, and so on. Suit the choice to your own personality and preference, but above all to the audience. Learn as much as you can about what each particular audience expects and likes. Maintain eye contact so that you can judge the impact of your talk and adjust if necessary. Use audiovisual aids if at all possible. Videos, slides, and overheads make the message much more effective and memorable than words alone can achieve.

5. Cultural Differences

Americans are fond of moving around while speaking, and of trying to become part of the audience. The British are much more likely to use a lectern and to rely quite heavily on audio-visual material. The Japanese can surprise their European or American audiences by giving extremely witty and informal presentations. The Germans, too, can speak humorously, although their humour may be more apparent to German audiences than to other nationalities. The French may be very fluent – even in English.

5.1. Monochronic and Polychronic Cultures

Two different orientations to time exist across the world: monochronic and polycronic. Monochronic approaches to time are linear, sequential and involve focusing on one thing at a time. These approaches are most common in the European-influenced cultures of the United States, Germany, Switzerland, and Scandinavia. Japanese people also tend towards this end of *the timecontinuum.* Polychronic orientations to time involve simultaneous

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occurrences of many things and the involvement of many people. The time it takes to complete an interaction is elastic, and more important than any schedule. This orientation is most common in Mediterranean and Latin cultures including France, Italy, Greece, and Mexico, as well as some Eastern and African cultures.

Negotiators from *polychronic* cultures tend to:	Negotiators from *monochronic* cultures tend to:
1) start and end meetings at flexible times;	*1) prefer prompt beginnings and endings;*
2) take breaks when it seems appropriate;	*2) schedule breaks;*
3) be comfortable with a high flow of information;	*3)deal with one agenda item at a time;*
4) expect to read each others' thoughts and minds;	*4) rely on specific, detailed, and explicit communication;*
5) sometimes overlap talk;	*5) prefer to talk in sequence;*
6) view start times as flexible and not take lateness personally.	*6) view lateness as devaluing or evidence of lack of respect.*

6. The American Negotiator

The USA is a complex multi-ethnic, multiracial, multicultural society. Because of this diversity, it is not possible to predict in detail the negotiating behaviour of any individual American. That said there is such a thing as a mainstream US business culture.

a) The Language of Business. It is the American English. Very few Americans speak a foreign language well enough to handle a complex business negotiation.

b) Making Contact. Perhaps because the USA is an immigrant society with a high degree of geographical mobility, most Americans are used to doing business with strangers. That means that while a referral or introduction is always helpful, in most cases, a prospective counterpart can be approached directly, without going through an intermediary.

c) Deal-Focused. Americans are usually ready to 'get down to brass tacks' shortly after meeting a potential business partner for the first time. It is not that the US negotiators are unaware of the importance of getting to know their counterpart, of building relationship. It is simply that the deal-focused American prefers to build trust while the business discussions are proceeding. They tend to regard extended small talk and preliminaries as a waste of precious time.

d) Orientation on Time. Americans are as obsessed with time as many other cultures are with relationship-building. Famously monochronic, they treat time as a tangible asset that can be saved, spent, lost, found, invested and wasted.

If US business people have an appointment in someone's office at 9:00, they expect their counterpart to see them right on the dot. They regard a person who keeps them waiting for longer than 10 minutes as either hopelessly undisciplined, intolerably rude or both.

e) Informality. A key American value is egalitarianism. They tend to feel uncomfortable in the face of overt status distinctions. Women and young men face relatively few obstacles to doing business in the US, where individual achievement is generally regarded as more important than one's social class, family background or gender.

f) Communication Style. Depending on their ethnic background as well as their individual personality, US negotiators show great variations in the way they communicate. Also, compared with northern Europeans and East Asians, Americans may appear more expressive, more extroverted. But when compared with southern Europeans and Latin Americans, they usually seem bland and introverted.

g) Direct Verbal Communication. The low-context Americans tend to 'say it like it is'. They value frank, straightforward exchange of information, and are usually unaware that

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East and Southeast Asians might be offended by their directness. They may even be suspicious of negotiators who prefer indirect, oblique, ambiguous communication.

h) Making a Presentation. Americans respond best to brisk, factual presentations delivered by a competent speaker of English and enlivened by visual aids where appropriate. They may interrupt with questions rather than hold their questions until the end.

7. The Japanese Negotiator

a) The Language of Business. Today more and more Japanese negotiators speak foreign languages, especially English. Nevertheless, because so many Japanese executives read English better than they speak or understand it, it would be better considering employing an interpreter.

b) Make Initial Contact Indirectly. Japanese do not like to do business with strangers. A good way to make initial contact is at a trade show or on an official trade mission. Or one could arrange for an introduction by a respected third party of high status, ideally someone known to both companies involved in the deal.

c) Build a Relationship Before Talking Business. The Japanese concept of *'wa'* necessitates that members of a group, be it a work team, a company, or a nation cooperate with and trust each other. Thus, the Japanese usually prefer, or even demand that business dealings occur among friends, and do not like to deal with strangers. Therefore, proper introductions are crucial when business relationships are launched. Before business transactions can begin, the Japanese must first place the foreigner within some group context (*a 'wa' relationship must be established).* That is why developing rapport is the most important and often, the most time-consuming component of the overall negotiating process. It is essential to get to know the counterpart before starting to discuss business.

d) Orientationon Time. Japanese value punctuality and strict adherence to schedules. They also expect the same of their foreign counterparts, especially potential suppliers. However rude it may be considered being late for a business meeting, it is quite acceptable to be late for a social occasion.

e) Hierarchy, Status and Gender in Japan. Younger, subordinate individuals are expected to defer to older, higher-ranking persons. Since few women have reached positions of authority in Japanese companies, most Japanese men are not used to dealing with females on the basis of equality in a business context. In Japan, buyers automatically enjoy higher status than sellers and expect to be treated with great respect. Hence young foreigners-especially if they are women – tend to face significant cultural obstacles when trying to sell to Japanese customers.

f) Concern with Face. 'Face' has to do with self-respect, dignity, and reputation. One can 'lose face' by appearing childish or lacking in self-control – for example by losing one's temper. One can cause the counterparts to lose face by expressing sharp disagreement, embarrassing them, criticizing them in public or by showing disrespect. Causing serious loss of face can completely disrupt a promising business negotiation. One can give the counterpart face by using polite form of address and observing local customs and traditions. Giving face is an effective way to build a solid relationship. If one makes a mistake, he/ she may be able to save face with a humble apology. And one can save the other party's face, for example, by allowing him a graceful exit from a difficult negotiating position.

g) Communication Style. It is reticent and formal. There is less reliance on written and telephone communication; more emphasis on meeting face-to-face.

h) Verbal Communication. The Japanese frequently employ indirect, vague, oblique language wherein the meaning is deliberately ambiguous and implicit rather than clear and explicit. They may use circumlocutions and evasive language to avoid offending the other party. For example, many Japanese consider it offending to reply to a request with a blunt

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'no'. So a negotiator might answer, 'That will require further study' or 'That will be difficult' instead. The result is that politeness is sometimes confusing for the foreigners. Surface harmony has been maintained at the cost of clarity.

Japanese distrust glibness. They use fewer words than many Westerners and tend to rely more on paraverbal and non-verbal communication.

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