Cultural Considerations

in Chinese and Western Business Workplace

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Cultural differences are often bigger than people realize and mere words of explanation do not always make an adequate bridge. Culture does have some influence on people's mind and judgment. Many foreigner business people grow to love China as they are working in this country although they often suffer from cultural differences. All they need to do is to recognize that cultural differences are neither good nor bad. And any struggle against the abuse of cultural values in business is a sentimental archaism. Underneath this lies the half-conscious belief that communicative strategies are a natural growth and not an instrument which people shape for their own purposes.

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Introduction

"Western" or "Foreign" is obviously a very generic term. There are many reasons Western cultures emphasize effectiveness which is evaluated in terms of success in the manipulation of others to achieve one's personal goal. Definitions of communication from many Asian countries stress harmony, which is most notable in cultures with a Confucian tradition. In this global world, people's need to connect with others is more than they know. It is very clear that doing business in any new country requires study and collaboration with those on the ground who can bring a sophisticated local knowledge into the equation. When China becomes a large trading market for foreign business people, business communication between Chinese and Westerners becomes more and more popular, and many foreigners at times struggle to work effectively and happily with their Chinese colleagues or clients. However, always showing respect is helpful. People let others know that they want to know them and stay friendly with a smile even when they are frustrated.

Strategies of Bridging Cultural Differences

To avoid misunderstandings, speakers should concentrate not only on content but also on context. Different communicative behaviors can have quite different meanings under different situations. The following strategies need to be paid special attention in Chinese and Western business workplace.

Checking What One Says Against What One Does

When interactants are talking with one another in the cross-cultural communication, they need to take into

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consideration not only the language but also the social and cultural background. This means that speakers ought to be sensitive with their words when facing different listeners in different places and time. A speaker should always check what one says against what one does. It is said that Chinese language is high contextual, which confuses the foreigners so much that even those learning Chinese will still have difficulty in understanding it completely. In contrast, English words have comparatively low context. English speakers are more frank than Chinese people, and they often mean what the words say. It will be especially puzzling for both peoples to associate with each other if they ignore the differences. For example, there are three main reasons which can explain the misunderstanding in a cross-cultural communication between Chinese and Western business people on time representation: (1) different habits in time metaphor model choosing of different cultures, (2) effects of ego-centered way of thinking, and (3) symmetry of time words in both English and Chinese.

Understanding Chinese People's Core Values

People behave in a certain way based on their beliefs and what they think is right and wrong. Chinese people are no different. In a recent training course in Shanghai, the trainees suggested these five points are Chinese peoples' main core values: (1) family first, (2) collectivism, (3) respect the hierarchy, (4) *guanxi*—relationships, and (5) harmony/balance.

As a result of these cultural norms and core values, what is "normal" for say an American may be weird for a Chinese person and vice versa.

Here is a very simple example. During the hot summer, Chinese people like to drink hot water but Westerners always prefer a cold drink. If you want to work more efficiently with your Chinese colleagues you need to understand what is important to them and what drives them.

Chinese People's "Yes" Does not Often Mean "Yes"

When Chinese people say the word "yes" in English, it is like the Chinese word "*shi*" which basically means "I'm listening to what you are saying, but do not entirely understand what you are saying". So when explaining something to your Chinese colleague or client, be very careful when you hear the words "yes, yes". If you want to be sure they understand then ask them to summarize what you just said to them.

Chinese People Do not Like to Give a Definite Answer to a Specific Question

Instead, they use other methods such as saying "maybe" or changing the subject entirely. According to some Americans observation, Chinese people do not like to give a 100% yes or no answer to anything in case it is wrong and they may feel embarrassed or lose face. Therefore, through practice and experience you should get a feel for it when your Chinese colleague means no without actually saying it.

Criticizing Colleagues or Staff in Public Is not Appropreiate

Pursuing face is a widespread social phenomenon around the world. However, the understanding of face varies according to different cultural backgrounds. Chinese "face" is not just dignity that is the understanding of Western people. Therefore, learning the different understandings of "face" between Chinese and Western people is crucial to the intercultural communication. Losing face is one of the worst things to Chinese people. They will do everything to avoid this. If you criticize your Chinese colleague in front of other co-workers, you may embarrass them so much that they will leave your company.

The notion of face is universal. Every social member wants to claim face for themselves in social interactions.

Cultural and language differences can hinder effective communication. In intercultural communication, people's views may clash with the different beliefs, norms, values, and traditions that exist in different countries, and they may have difficulty adjusting to a new culture and to those parts of the culture not familiar to them. For example, when Chinese communicate with others, they always evaluate others according to their feelings and the experience. Because their thinking mode is emotional, the face is emphasized in social communication.

To build strong relationships in China, you should always keep cool and give as much face as you can to your co-workers and clients through praise and compliments.

Compared with the Chinese thinking mode, Westerners' thinking mode is simple, direct, and logical. However, when people have completely adjusted to a new culture they can more fully enjoy it. They learn how to interact with other people, and they learn a considerable amount about life in a culture that is not their own. Learning about other cultures and how to adjust to the notion of face helps people learn more about themselves.

Chinese People Value the Result Best

The process is far less important. For example, a Chinese General Manger wouldn't want to know what the Sales Director had been doing to improve sales when the sales situation is low. He wouldn't want him to explain every step like a Western Sales Director would.

Remember one of DENG Xiao-ping's famous sayings "It doesn't matter if it's a black cat or a white cat as long as it catches mice", which basically means the process does not matter as long you get the result. Western supervisors should bear this in mind when managing their Chinese employees.

Promoting an Open Culture to Ensure Chinese Colleagues Speak up in Meetings

In the West, people often say, "The early bird catches the worm", but some Chinese joke, "The early bird catches the worm, but the early worm can be eaten by the bird!" Therefore, Chinese people will not express their own opinions in public.

A Western manager of an intercultural company will find the Chinese staff are not used to working in a Western way. It is important to coach them and emphasize the benefits of speaking up and sharing their ideas. When they share ideas, good or bad, encourage and reward them. This will facilitate clear and open communication in the company and help new ideas and innovations to flourish.

Accepting the Cultural Differences and Being Considerate

Knowing the differences is one thing; acting properly is another. It is easy for people to get culture information on other countries all over the world while it is not easy to achieve cross-cultural communication successfully even though people may be conscious of the differences. The key to success is to accept cultural differences whole heartedly so that people can associate with foreigners naturally and properly. Because of ethnocentrism, it is rather hard for people to completely accept others' cultures. In the form of the sense of superiority or patriotism, ethnocentrism always prevents people from making objective judgments. To overcome it, people have to either learn others' culture and custom or manage to appreciate them so as to love them. It is a long and difficult way but it is effective.

Conclusion

A multicultural workforce can offer benefits such as a broader range of perspectives and a greater ability to

compete in the global marketplace. A clarification is needed here. Attention to cultural diversity does not mean "anything goes". Honoring cultural diversity does not imply a lack of clear beliefs and strong values. Every employee benefits from an outstanding manager who engages in learning and experiencing their employees' cultural values. Everyone deserves to be treated with respect. The challenge is to identify what should be the same in their international company and what should be different. They just need appropriate uniform standards but not standardization of the company's multicultural environment.

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