Importance of Standardization in Minimizing Cross-cultural Miscommunication

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Most of the conflicts at both personal and professional life arise due to miscommunication. Cultural differences are one among many such reasons. This article aims to understand and emphasis on the importance of standardization as a method to minimize, if not overcome, cross-cultural miscommunications, especially in business. **Methodology:** This research looks into the existing literature on standardization, communication, and cross-cultural communications to establish a relation among these aspects, no primary data collection was done for this research. **Findings:** The finds of the article suggest that standardization and adaptation are the two main keys, among others, to minimize cross-cultural miscommunication. **Implication:** When people know what is expected of them, they are less likely to do otherwise, unless they desire to create conflict. Setting of standards also tells people what to expect and what to not expect from the other party. **Originality:** Many researches have been conducted in the field of communication and cross-cultural communication, where various challenges have been identified and ways to overcome have also been proposed. However, that is said about communication in general. Communication happens through products, services, and even organizational cultures when businesses interact globally. This paper identifies that aspect in organizational cross-cultural communication and proposes possible solution to it.

Key words: Adaptation, cross-cultural communication, globalization, organizational culture, standardization

INTRODUCTION

Culture (organizational) refers to "the way things are done here" (Daimler, 2018). This, then, will vary from organization to organization since every organization is unique in their own ways because of the people and the environment they exist in. According to (Hofsted et al. 2010), there are six cultural dimensions on which the world can be classified. Each of these cultures affects the way people behave in the workplace and is different from country to country and region to region. Following this idea, it would mean, the way of executing a task or a behavior in an organization in one part of the world might not be the same as another organization in another part of the world. This will result in confusion and reduce the productivity of the organization. The objective of this article is to investigate into this matter and propose a possible solution to reduce workplace miscommunication while engaging in cross-cultural communication.

UNDERSTANDING CULTURE

Spencer-Oatey (2012) said, "culture is a notoriously difficult term to define." However, he compiled some definitions given by many experts and one of them is given by T.

Schwartz, who stated, "Culture consists of the derivatives of experience, more or less organized, learned, or created by the individuals of a population, including those images or encodements and their interpretations (meanings) transmitted from past generations, from contemporaries, or formed by individuals themselves." Singh (2015) defines culture "as the acquired knowledge that people use to interpret experience and generate social behaviors." Sociology understands culture as the languages, customs, beliefs, rules, arts, knowledge, and collective identities and memories developed by members of all social groups that make their social environments meaningful. With these ideas in mind, culture can be understood to be the beliefs and values which form the core of a community that influences the way people interact with each other, within the society, and also their worldview. People develop culture overtime and they collectively adhere to those practices as acceptable by the society. Cultures are said to be evolving, as is the society. A practice, which might be considered a social norm today, may not be considered a norm overtime.

These practices affect the way people communicate with each other within their community and with the rest of the world in both personal and professional life. Things that are accepted in one culture might be offensive in another culture. Every culture is unique in their own ways. According to (Hofsted et al. 2010), the entire world can be divided into six major cultural dimensions, namely, power distance index (PDI), individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, uncertainty avoidance index, long-term orientation versus short-term normative orientation, and indulgence versus restraint. These are two major extremes that exist in any culture. No society is fully inclined toward any one of these extremes but is more inclined to one than the other. However, various other researchers have criticized these dimensions. Palovaara (2017) cited few of those criticisms in his work. He cites Tung and Verbeke who state that the cultural dimensions given by Hofsted are an aspect of culture, which can only be measured relative to other cultures and would not make any sense on their own if there was no other culture around.

We need to understand one important difference while understanding culture which is the difference between cultural practice and religious practice. Religious practices are those norms and principles that are found in a particular religious book or practiced by members of a religious group, while cultural practices are those norms that are practices by the members of a community, locality, or race. For example, the cultural practice of one locality might be to welcome their guests with alcoholic beverages. Now, a Christian family would refrain from that practice as that

is against the teachings and principles of Holy Bible. Hence, we see that culture is a flexible concept that can be influenced and modified with the belief system of people.

COMMUNICATION, MISCOMMUNICATION, AND CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Communication has been defined as involves interchange of thoughts and ideas (Patience, 2016). According to Cambridge dictionary, "communication is also the exchange of information and exchange of feelings that can result in understanding." It is any possible means by which the message in ones minds can be transmitted to another. To communicate is to engage. Communication creates understanding and reduces confusion. Communication can be done through language, sound, action, or even silence can communicate a message. Most, if not all, of the living organisms are known to communicate in some or the other form.

Miscommunication, as defined by the Cambridge Dictionary, is "failure to communicate ideas or intentions successfully." Miscommunication can happen in any kind of communication regardless of their cultural background. However, there are higher chances of miscommunication in cross-cultural communication due to the cultural differences. For example, if a person who comes from a culture that scores high in PDI, meaning they hold that there should exist a high distance between the leader and subordinate in the treatment they receive, the same will like to be treated with more respect if the same is a leader and will treat a leader with much respect if the same is a subordinate. Now that may appear to be "buttering" in some culture while it is the accepted norm in other. Situations such as this create misunderstanding among people when engaged in cross-cultural communications. Either the sender or receiver or both can do it. Miscommunication can be done through words, actions, gestures, or even an inappropriate silence.

Cross-cultural communication refers to the interaction of people from different cultural groups to create understanding. This does not only mean the simple exchange of words and gestures. It includes all implied and expressed values, norms, belief system, actions, gestures, and other cultural aspects associated within the cultural system of the parties associated in the communication. It is not an easy process as there are many challenges to cross-cultural communication. Jenifer and Raman (2015) listed down five major barriers to cross-cultural communication, namely, beliefs and values, norms and roles, misunderstanding, stereotyping

and ethnocentrism. There might be other barriers that hamper effective cross-cultural communication in this era of globalization. Cross-cultural communication can also happen within a company, as people from different cultural groups are present within the company. India, for example, is a country of diverse culture. The cultures of south are different from north, so is east from west. When all these people come and work in the same company, they engage in cross-cultural communication. These same things become bigger when companies from different countries engage in trade and business with each other at a global scale.

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

People carry their value, belief, and culture with them when they join an organization (Singh, 2015). This differs from person to person and place to place. However, in the organization, everyone has to work as one team for the betterment of the organization. People will have to lay aside their cultural differences and adapt to what is known as organizational culture. Daimler (2018) states that organizational culture is referred to as "the way things are done around here." She also goes on to say that there are three elements to a culture (organizational), namely, behavior, system, and practice. An organization can have a great culture when all these three elements are aligned with each other. In the words of (Stefanovska and Tanushevski 2016), who said that the organizational culture is a complex set of norms of behavior, ideologies, opinions, attitudes, symbols, and core values shared all over the organization, influencing the methods used by the organization to meet its objectives, and helps in regulating and controlling the conduct of the employees. (Morgan 2017) pointed out that employees might be unaware of the corporate culture but it is like the air which is all around us. For this reason, it is very important that these cultures are strategically developed and not allowed to develop themselves. Therefore, management needs to take it seriously to lay down the corporate culture and also practice them. The organizational performance can be hampered if these are not taken care (Mihai et al., 2017).

So, what can be some cultural practices that can be practiced in the organizations? Many authors and experts in organizational culture have listed many ways of building an effective organizational culture that benefits the company. Montanez (2018) pointed out that corporate culture is not the company's culture. She adds, corporate culture is like the character of a person, which are not the things that appears on the surface but are deep-seated traits which show up during challenging and difficult circumstances. According to the (Forbes Coaches Council 2018), a company can build

a good corporate culture by implementing the following tips, such as, (a) Enlist, Empower, and Encourage, (b) Create a respectful workplace, (c) Care about each other, (d) Live it, (e) Be inclusive, (f) Be the example, (g) Communicate properly, (h) Repeat your message, (i) Never forget your purpose, (j) Establish trust, (k) Make it about humanity, (l) Create a core value system, (m) Focus on what's going right, (n) Share the same vision, and (o) Have a common story. The point to consider and understand here is that, instead of listing down each and every activity that should comprise of the organizational culture, the management should concentrate on putting down the principles which should validate any practice along the way.

THE PROBLEM QUESTION

Having understood culture, communication, miscommunication, cross-cultural communication, and organizational culture now let us understand the problem. Imagine, two companies, foreign to each other, with different organizational and national (ethnic) culture are engaging in trade. As discussed earlier, when people from different cultural background communicate, they tend to miscommunicate. The question is how can we minimize the instances of miscommunication while engaging in cross-cultural communication, in this case through trade and commerce? Is there any one cultural practice that can be looked up to and considered as the "best cultural" practice in cross-cultural communication?

GLOBALIZATION TO PROMOTE STANDARDIZATION

The 21st century is seldom referred to as the era of globalization (Singh, 2015). According to Oxford dictionary, globalization has been defined as "the process by which businesses or other organizations develop international influence or start operating on an international scale." However, according to (Karadagli, 2012), there is no unified definition of globalization as the definition of the term depends on the context it is used. Mezulanik (2002) understood globalization as qualitative new level of the development of the human society, with three basic dimensions – political, social, and economic.

According to Oamn, as cited by (Mahmutovic et al., 2017), economists see globalization through the prism of easing challenges to international trade and economic activities. They also cite Stiglitz who states globalization to be the

increased interconnectedness of the countries and nations of the world that has resulted in a great reduction in communication and transportation costs and withdrawal of artificial barriers to the flow of goods and services, capital, knowledge, and (to a lesser extent) people across borders. Again, in the words of (Stros et al., 2014), globalization is a process of industrialization and modernization, which is expanding worldwide and has an integrating function. Summing up these ideas and other ideas, it can be said that globalization is a process that started with the view to expand trade and business with rest of the world but has now become a phenomenon in which the whole world is influenced by each other economically, socially, politically, and culturally, where they adapt to the best possible practices that they come across and identify themselves as one.

Through globalization, companies are reaching out to the nook and corners of the world. This means that they are communicating with the world at large through their products and services (as stated earlier, communication refers to any kind of engagement to create understanding). This gives rise to cross-cultural communication, as the cultural background of the host country will be mostly different from that of the operating country. The company is communicating through their mission, vision, and operation. Companies that have their plants in foreign country and those that are in some kind of partnership with a foreign firm are forerunners in cross-cultural communication in business and commerce. The way they present themselves in the market, both national and international, will play a major role in determining their future in a foreign country.

One major drawback of globalization is that culture influences the way certain products are produced and presented to the customers of a particular country. Can a company customize its products or service to meet the cultural demands of a particular country? As we have identified previously that certain norms, which are accepted in some culture, may not be acceptable in another culture.

This drawback can be overcome by adapting and standardizing to the cultural and ethnical norms of the host country. Wach (2003) referred to this as global product. According to Wach, these global products are marketed in the same form/condition almost all across the globe. He goes on to say that there are three steps in product strategy on international market, namely, adaptation, standardization, and diversification. Going global (entering of new markets) with the virtually unchanged products is referred a standardization. He adds that it helps the company to keep its image and/or product consistent. It is clear from the

above statements that when companies go global they also need to maintain their identity. Wach (2003) also mentioned the words of T. Levitt that the whole world is becoming a common market. In which, irrespective of the place they live in, customers desire the same products all over. Increased lifestyle uniformity of consumers' needs all over the world is the main stimulus for product standardization. This proves that people are not limited by their cultures but are coming to a global standard. This helps in overcoming cross-cultural communication barriers too. His model is presented in Figure 1.

Therefore, to answer the above question, it can be stated that a company operating in foreign market will need to both adapt and customize their product to meet the preference of the local customers, which may be influenced by their cultural background, while they ought to maintain a certain standard to maintain their identity of both the product and company.

The need for global standards can be understood from the practice of many international standard accreditation bodies. Some of these are International Accreditation Forum, GLOBAL GAP, International Accreditation Board, and International Organization for Standardization, among others. These apex bodies exist to make sure that a certain standard is maintained while engaging in global trade. These standards are set based on the type of the product, need of the global customers, and the product itself. These standards are not based on any cultural basis and can be termed as bias free. Purcell (2011) said, "standardization is one of the most critical elements at work in the field of globalization." According to him, there are about 500,000 standards that exist in the world today as the foundation for the global economy. He also states that high quality of performance throughout the world is a demand for globalization. Without these global standards, which serve as guidelines and rules, it would have created much confusion in communication through products that are sold in foreign market. These are set to promote one standard for the whole world and are accepted worldwide. This helps in overcoming cultural barriers to communication.

Standardization is even more possible as people are moving toward a global culture. This is made more possible due to the widespread of modern education. Kelly (2018) mentioned that globalization is promoted through the international agreement Education for All, which was launched by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization. She mentioned that one of the main attempts of standardization is to concurrently promoting a dominant ideology while remove individuality
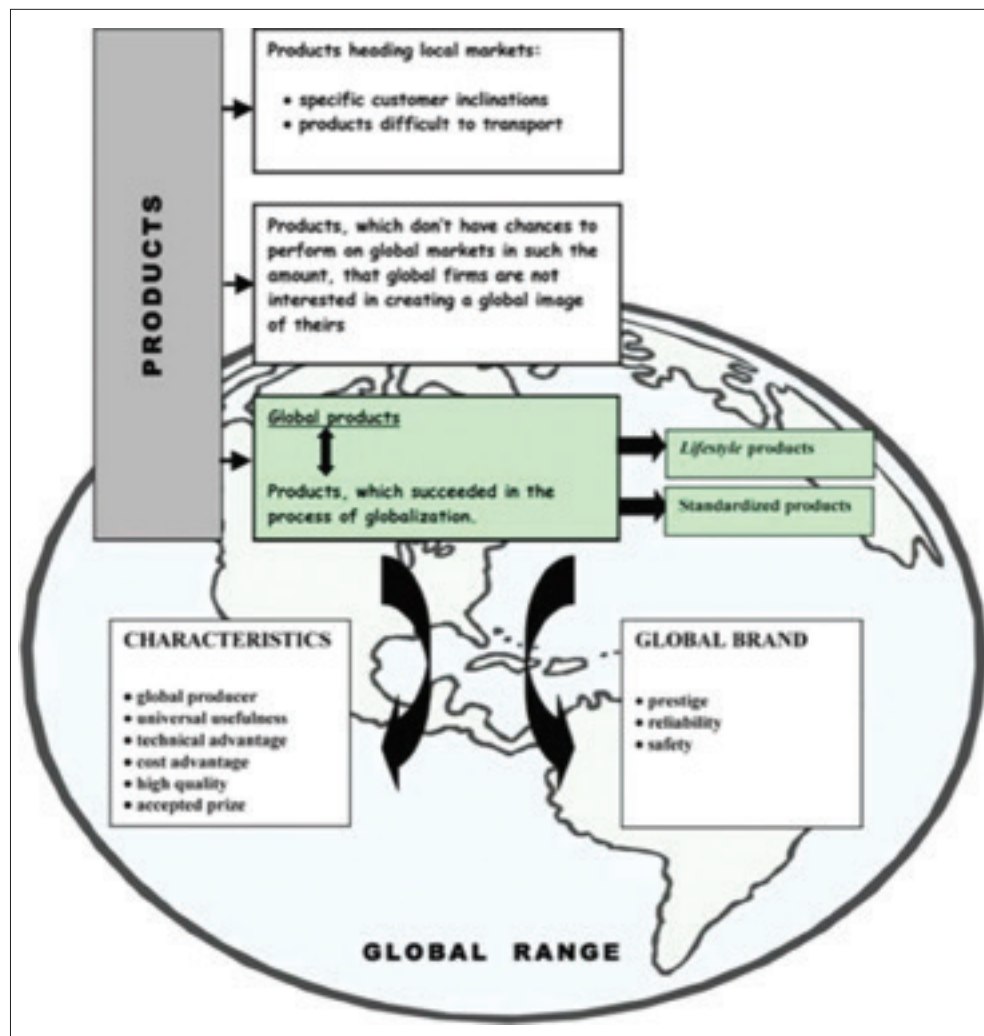
Figure 1: Wach's model of global product

and diversity while. This "dominant" ideology is what is making the world come together. People have started to look beyond the traditional and cultural views and are coming to more common and globally accepted norms and practices. Cross-cultural communication barriers are being overcome through these standardized educational practice and exercise of enlightened social norms. Women empowerment is one such example of this century. Hundred years ago women in India, and many other countries, were considered for only household work and that were the cultural norm. However, the reality is something else altogether now.

Standardization in terms of human resource management is also becoming a common practice in many companies that operate globally. According to (Mihai et al., 2017), organizations that operate globally are focusing at the procurement, allocation, and efficient use of human resource within their corporations. They believe that if foreign branches all throughout the globe do not achieve adequate results, it may result in failure and could harm the organization. For this, they try and adopt an orientation that suits the needs of the organization but that which is approved by the head office. It can either follow ethnocentric, polycentric, or geocentric orientated HR policies. In many cases, a combination of these orientations can be noticed. They also go on to add in their paper that since the quality of the product is an important factor for the company success, it is important to maintain a standard in the state of technology used and also the people working in the organization.

Stefanovska and Tanushevski (2016) stated that even though globally, there exist many differences and even opposing value systems, globalization brings about

significant changes in "the communication process and certain transformations, especially in countries in transition, in order to facilitate communication between organizations of the same or similar activities, needing more frequent cooperation. In this regard, the process of homogenization of value systems in different fields is increasingly happening and is more noticeable, which is certainly reflected in the organizational performance." This is another clear indication that the world is coming to some common standards of operation as people are interacting with each other more than ever before. Their research was conducted on over 30 organizations from the region of Pelagonia that fall within the frames of MSMEs based on their structure and numbers. They were asked if they thought that globalization influenced cultural change on their organization, which were different from their own culture. To this, 63% of the organizations responded positively. These facts show that globalization is playing a dominant role in shaping the workplace culture to a more global and standardized fashion. People are adopting to other cultures and becoming more understanding and considerate of each other's cultural and ethnic views.

STANDARDIZATION IN INDIA

India is a global player when it comes to trade and commerce. According to a press release by the Ministry of Commerce and Industry of Government of India, the overall export (Merchandise and Services combined) for the period April–July 2020–2021 is estimated to be USD 141.82 billion and the trade surplus was estimated to be 14.06 billion (Ministry of Commerce and Industry, 2020). It is very crucial to adhere and maintain the national and international standards when it comes to production, if companies want to remain in the competition and continue to make profit. The establishment of Bureau of Indian Standards is another indication as to why standardization needs to be given much importance when operating both national and international market. For example, in the textile industry, if the size "medium" is not measured same worldwide, both the producers and consumers will get confused while producing and making a purchase, respectively. Standardization is not restricted or applicable to one or any one type of industry but is applicable for all kinds of industry (product and services).

CONCLUSION

It can be said that the problems of cross-cultural communication (organizational) can be as simple as the language itself, which can be resolved by setting an "official language" (Mezulanik, 2002), to as complex as the product or service or the mission and vision of a company. When engaging in a cross-cultural communication (engagement), the parties involved need to be considerate about the cultural background of the other party. Erixon (2018) points that globalization has brought about great improvement in business practices, living standards of common people, and the performance of an entire economy. People are adapting to more post-modernized cultures and common practices are accepted across cultures. Standardization and adaptation are two main keys for effective cross-cultural communication in this era of globalization.

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