

Enhancing Intercultural Communication Skills

Lianlian Lin

California State Polytechnic University Pomona

China's integration into the global economy is rapidly deepening as it is phasing in WTO rules to fulfill its obligations as a WTO member. Chinese firms are increasingly exposed to global competition and negotiation and Chinese people in general are having more and more intercultural communication and interactions. Understanding the role of communication in cross-border business and learning how to effectively enhance communication skills can lead to sustainable sources of competitive advantage. Therefore, effective communication skills are imperative to success in the continuous process of globalization and achievements in today's workplace. There are many differences in verbal and nonverbal communications cross cultures. When interacting with people from other cultures, nonverbal communication cues play an important role and often cause misunderstanding. Based on a survey of a hundred of Chinese and American professionals and managers, this research examines differences in communication practices in China and in the US and addresses several aspects of nonverbal cues - haptics, proxemics, oculosics, chronemics, and silence (Waldman and Stowe 1998).

Haptics refers to communicating through the use of bodily contact such as touch and gestures. According to Axcell, who classifies some cultures as "don't touch," "touch" and "middle ground," Chinese culture lies in the middle ground while the US is a "don't touch" oriented culture. Touching may be misunderstood as a form of sexual harassment in the US (Chaney and Martin 2000). Touching may also be an indication of social hierarchy, as people of higher rank usually touch people of lower rank.

Another nonverbal cue that affects communication is proxemics – the use of space. Psychologists identified four zones to describe the interaction among American people: the intimate zone (less than 19 inches), the personal zone (18 inches to 4 feet), the social zone (4 to 12 feet), and the public distance (over 12 feet). Chinese people often fall into the intimate zone when speaking to each other while Americans usually fall into the personal zone standing at least an arm's length away, usually over 18 inches to 2 feet (Hodgetts and Luthans 2003).

Oculosics, eye contact, is also very important because it can convey subtle thoughts. It is believed that eyes are windows of minds. Proper eye contact can reduce distance between people and make people feel close to each other, which can facilitate verbal communication. However, the manner of eye contact may vary between the two cultures. Americans prefer more direct eye contact as the old saying goes, "Look into my eyes and tell me truth." Chinese tend to use moderate eye contact. The intense level of eye contact could also lead to different effects. For example, when a man talks to a woman, intense eye contact may cause misunderstanding because it can be considered frivolous, offensive, or a

sign of disrespect or dishonorable intentions. In any case, prolonged and steady eye contact should be avoided in both countries because it makes people uncomfortable.

Chronemics, the perception of time, is part of nonverbal communication. The US is a time-conscious culture and punctuality is considered a positive attribute not only for business meetings but also for social engagements. Since China is moving toward a market-based economy, the Western concept of “time is money” is becoming more and more popular, especially among business people who believe that punctuality for business appointments is related to efficiency. In both cultures, a person’s status also makes a difference in punctuality. The person of lower rank or with less bargaining power in a business deal usually should arrive earlier than the other party or than the appointment time to show their respect, enthusiasm, or sincerity.

Silence is a conversation technique used in both countries and can serve many purposes in communication. As the old Chinese saying indicates, “Silence is as precious as gold.” For example, silence can help settle an argument. In a situation in which it is difficult to answer questions appropriately, silence can be used as a break in the conversation. When conversation resumes, perhaps new ideas will be introduced. Sometimes silence is just part of a negotiation technique to get additional information. Since silence could represent various meanings, facial expressions can be used as hints to figure out what silence really means in a particular circumstance. For instance, a glum face may signal disagreement while a relaxed countenance may represent satisfaction. Silence should not be used too often because it can be considered unfriendly and brand an individual as difficult to communicate with, reluctant to negotiate, unpleasant to deal with, or slow to make decisions. Since Chinese traditionally don’t like to say “no” directly, silence could mean disapproval.

Those nonverbal cues are especially important under high context culture because in such culture, identical words can have different meanings if they are expressed in different ways such as a different tone and pitch in voice, different facial expressions in eyes and faces, or being said under different circumstances. Chinese culture is a relatively high context culture, comparing with the low context American culture. Without knowing cultural differences, communication cross cultures cannot be effective and may even lead to business failures. Competitive advantages in firms or countries in the global competition can be traced to their cultural roots and even built upon their cultural heritage. According to Hofstede, fast adaptation would be a competitive advantage for a short-term oriented culture while development of new market would be a strength for a long-term oriented culture (Hofstede 2001). China is undergoing rapid changes including its business communication style and practice. The increasing use of information technology in business communication in China definitely helps reduce the cultural barriers among peoples of different cultures, but it doesn’t diminish the necessity of cross-cultural understanding and its importance to business success in the global marketplace.

Reference

Chaney, Lillian H. and Jeanette Martin (2000), Intercultural Business Communication, 2e, Prentice Hall.

Hodgetts, R.M. and Luthans, F. (2003), *International Management – Culture, Strategy, and Behavior*, McGraw-Hill Irwin.

Hofstede, Geert. Culture's Consequences, 2nd Edition, Sage Publications, 2001.

Waldman, L. & Stowe, J. (1998). Business Communication in Argentina. *The Delta Pi Epsilon Journal*, (XXXX).

3.