LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

- To understand the intercultural nature of business communication
- To appreciate intercultural communication as communication shaped not only by national cultures, but also by other cultural dimensions such as ethnicity, gender and social class
- To heighten your awareness of differences in communication styles across cultures
- To develop positive attitudes towards people from different cultural groups

THE ROSETO STORY

Roseto is a small community in Pennsylvania in the United States known for its closely-knit Italian immigrant families. Idyllic and pretty like many other small towns in the United States, Roseto nevertheless is distinguished for the well-documented lifestyle of its people. Around three decades ago (mid 1960’s), medical and anthropological researchers were drawn to Roseto because it seemed to have been resistant to one of the most common causes of death in the United States: heart attacks. This was the period between 1955-1965. If textbooks were to be believed, people from Roseto would have died early: many drank and smoked, and worked under laborious conditions. Roseto became a mystery: the people defied medical logic by living longer than the rest of the United States.

What researchers found intrigued and caught them by surprise. Roseto, it was known, had households of three generations of family that ate together and engaged in social activities together. Families formed strong emotional bonds, thus establishing trust not only within them but, more importantly, within the Roseto community itself. This could explain why crime rate was zero and there was no case of individuals seeking welfare support from the government because they helped each other out. In other words, the “overall atmosphere of the town was one of mutual support and understanding, and unfailing sustenance in time of trouble” (Wolf, Grace, Bruhn, & Stout, p. 101).

Unfortunately, Roseto experienced dramatic changes in lifestyle from the late 1960’s onwards as it started to be a “less cohesive, materialistic, more ‘Americanized’ community” (Egolf, Lasker, Wolf & Potvin, 1992, p. 1090). The community’s deeply social lifestyle was breaking apart, and as a consequence Roseto started to see more people dying of heart-related diseases. For example, the number of men under 65 who died due to heart attack increased rapidly after 1965 (p. 1092).

According to Malcolm Gladwell, author of the bestselling book, Outliers: The story of success (2009), Roseto taught us to appreciate the idea that “the values of the world we inhabit and the people we surround ourselves with have a profound effect on who we are” (p. 12).
THE ROLE OF CULTURE IN COMMUNICATION

You are probably asking now what the relevance of the Roseto story is to our lesson in intercultural communication. Indeed, what does the story teach us about intercultural communication?

“...one of the world’s most significant problems: intercultural relations...”

Edward T. Hall

Communication is a deeply cultural phenomenon

Before the work on Roseto, much of medical research centered around health as a largely individual phenomenon. On the contrary, Roseto teaches us that health should be viewed from the point of view of the community and culture. If such is the case, then we cannot go terribly wrong with the belief that communication is a deeply cultural phenomenon. If health can be understood as being shaped by culture, how much more communication which involves interaction between people?

Culture in communication is not a simplistic concept

Nevertheless, the role of culture in communication is usually misunderstood or sometimes underappreciated. For example, when we talk about intercultural communication, we only think in terms of ‘national’ cultures. Even if, for example, being German, American, Singaporean or Filipino influences the way we talk, we simply do not communicate as a German, American, Singaporean or Filipino alone. It is difficult (in fact, impossible) to say that we bring along with us only our ‘national’ culture when we talk or write to people. A ‘Singaporean’ is also a mother or a father, a student, a priest, a Malay teacher, a female corporate CEO, a college drop-out who put up his own clothing business and who is now a much sought-after inspirational speaker, and so on.

So there is still much room for learning more about the role of culture in communication, and especially about the intercultural nature of communication. To borrow the words of Gladwell above, the values of the world we inhabit and the people we surround ourselves with have a profound effect on how we communicate. This could not be more true and relevant in intercultural communication in business contexts.
THE NEED FOR INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS IN TODAY’S WORLD

In essence, intercultural communication is communication between people from different cultures. This formal field of study dates back to the 1950’s when Edward T. Hall, an anthropologist, published his landmark book, *The silent language* (1959), where the term ‘intercultural communication’ was introduced. Hall’s foray into intercultural communication was first influenced by his early years growing up in multicultural New Mexico in the United States and in his deployment in Europe and the Philippines during the World War II (1942-1945) as commander of an African-American regiment (Rogers, Hart, & Miike, 2002). He would later work with the Hopi and Navajo during which he crystallized further his belief in intercultural relations as “one of the world’s most significant problems” (Hall, 1992, p. 76).

The point of contact in communication between people is the *intercultural* moment. It is during this time when communication either becomes successful or unsuccessful. Breakdown in communication could thus be due to lack of understanding of what is going on at the point of intercultural contact. We may find other people’s communication practices or strategies weird, crazy, insulting, arrogant, bossy, weak, and so on. If we lack the intercultural competence to understand and navigate potentially difficult intercultural moments, completion of tasks or gathering of important information may not be achieved. Worse, we may start judging or shunning others because we simply do not understand them or cannot make sense of what they are doing. We start blaming others for the breakdown of communication, instead of looking at our inadequate understanding of the intercultural nature of our communication as a possible cause for the failure.

Communication breakdown cannot probably be more costly than in business and professional contexts because this may mean loss of revenue for companies. This is why listening is an important skill in business because “no two stories are alike” (see Prudential ad above). This may even mean loss or risk of lives, such as the many airplane disasters in history many of which were caused by communication breakdown due to lack of comprehension of local terms and cultural differences, among other communication-based causes (Jones, 2003).

**Culture shapes communication in the workplace**

Therefore, it is important to gain awareness of the cultural dimensions of communication which influence the shape of communication in the workplace. What do people create their cultures through the way they speak, write, listen and read? How can you contribute, instead of being a hindrance, to effective business communication in multicultural workplaces and contexts? How can you deliver your message clearly and effectively through a keen understanding of your audience’s cultural norms and values? Intercultural communication, after all, is not something
Intercultural communication is not something we do independently as a business activity; rather, it is embedded in the real business activities that we engage in such us product presentation, price negotiation, networking, conflict resolution, and rejection letter writing. To carry out these activities persuasively and effectively, intercultural awareness or sensitivity is important.

**DEFINITION OF CULTURE**

Culture is “the coherent, learned, shared view a group of people has about life’s concerns that ranks what is important, instills attitudes about what things are appropriate, and prescribes behavior, given that some things have more significance than others” (Varner & Beamer, 1995, p. 2).

It is useful to take note of a few points about the above definition:

**Culture is created and learned**

Culture is not something that we are born with, but rather it is created and learned, imparted to us through our upbringing and exposure to the practices and rules of conduct of the culture of which we are a part.

So when you remark, “That’s commonsense. Why doesn’t he know that?”, or “It is not appropriate for her to say that”, you probably think that you have said something that is true or unarguable. But what you probably do not realize is that ‘commonsense’ and ‘appropriateness’ are part of the value system which you have learned as part of a community or society.
Culture is shared by people in a society or group

Culture is shared by a society and members of a society agree about the meanings of things and why. The question though is: do all members of a society agree about the meanings of things and why? If you say a particular society favors direct (not indirect) communication, would you expect all members to communicate in a direct manner?

This is where a narrow view of intercultural awareness may lead to stereotyping of people. Yes, culture is shared by people in a society or group, but each individual is still unique in terms of her values and practices because her life experiences are also unique. You may share with someone from your group or society a deep belief in respect for family and family tradition, but you may not share with her the same religious beliefs.

Culture shapes attitudes

Culture teaches values and priorities, which in turn shape attitudes. This must be clarified though: culture per se cannot teach values and priorities; rather, certain people in society or the community do this. So when attitudes are shaped, it is people who do this too. We are largely unconscious of our own attitudes towards others and the world because we are also largely unconscious of the people around us who shape our attitudes. Because we create our own cultures, we are also shapers of other people’s attitudes. This is where power is deeply intertwined with culture.

Culture prescribes behavior

Culture prescribes behavior and members of a society or a community usually behave in ways that they think are appropriate or acceptable in their culture. This is where power and culture are also interconnected. There are people, by virtue of their privileged positions, who are able to prescribe their own values and practices upon the rest of their society or community and call them everyone’s culture.

What happened?

In the movie Seven Years in Tibet, Heinrich Harrer, an Austrian living in Tibet, was asked by the Dalai Lama to build some sort of a movie theatre in Lhasa. In one scene, while he and a group of Tibetans were digging the piece of land on which the theatre was going to be built, their shovels and spades uncovered earthworms in the ground. The Tibetans complained about this and work on building the theatre had to be stopped temporarily, much to Heinrich Harrer’s amazement and frustration. Work only resumed after all the earthworms were safely collected in containers and transferred to another location.

What do you think happened? Why did the Tibetans make such a big fuss about the earthworms? Why was Heinrich Harrer amazed and frustrated by what happened?
Culture is dynamic

Another important element of the nature of culture is its dynamism. If it is shared values and practices, what happens if society changes? No culture is completely static (unless of course no one practices it anymore) because people continuously change it. The phenomenon of globalization is such that all corners of the world are affected by it, though not equally. Even the most isolated tribal communities are not spared by the influence of globalization. Although contact with outsiders may still be minimal, what other people do to their environment (illegal logging, water pollution, etc.) still impact the lifestyle of these communities. Culture, thus, no matter how we define it, is dynamic and continuously changing. This is important to know because much intercultural talk does not seem to assume this. People still talk of culture as if it does not change at all.

Culture is plural

At any one time, each of us belongs to more than one culture, the most obvious perhaps being the culture of the country in which we live. Other cultural entities include an ethnic group, a religious group, or even a profession that has its own specialized ways of doing things. When we ‘enter’ a conversation, therefore, our culture is always plural. It has many voices because we come from and associate with different groups of people and communities. This is why some people would rather use the word ‘cultures’, instead of ‘culture’. But we will not quibble with this matter: culture or cultures, we will assume that whatever values and practices we bring into a communication situation, these values and practices come from not one but many sources, e.g., nationality, education, ethnicity, gender, workplace experience.

DOMINANT CULTURAL ORIENTATIONS

In order to make ‘sense’ of culture in communication, we now need to be familiar with some dominant cultural orientations or tendencies. You will find that in business, different contexts and people may show tendencies towards certain cultural orientations.

How contexting affects communication

All communication occurs in a context. What this implies is that messages and meanings are not always communicated through words. In fact, some important messages come out from what is not said, rather than from what is said.
Let us say you write an email to ask a colleague if she wants to be nominated as the new director of your department, and you receive no response: your specific cultural context can either tell you that your colleague actually says ‘yes’ (but does not say it directly) or, simply, has forgotten to write a response. Perhaps another colleague would have said “Yes, I am willing to be nominated for the position”. In this example, silence can mean many things, including ‘yes, my colleague wants to be nominated as director’, ‘my colleague forgot to answer my email’, ‘my colleague is still thinking about it’, and so on. Contexting is working in this example. The context gives you clues about what certain things mean. In other situations, however, messages are directly communicated through words and not indirectly through context.

In a high-context corporation, for example, people convey meaning by relying less on verbal communication and more on nonverbal cues, environmental settings, and implicit information, shared by the parties in the communication. As a result, for an outsider, they can appear as rather indirect and vague in their verbal communication. If you propose a new business concept to a prospective partner, you might receive a ‘yes’ answer, but yes here may not mean ‘yes, I agree’ or ‘yes, I’m interested’ (which is rather direct), but ‘yes, I understand the concept but I still have to think about it’ or ‘yes, I understand the concept, but I am not interested’ (which is rather indirect because you do not know how to proceed). Here, you need contexting to know what ‘yes’ means (e.g., where you are making a pitch for your concept, who you are talking to).

Many layers of meaning are embedded in some groups or societies’ cultures so high-context communication requires that you really need to ‘experience’ the culture before you start understanding how and why people communicate their messages in particular ways.

In contrast, in a low-context corporation, people rely more on verbal communication and less on circumstances and non-verbal cues to convey meaning so they are essentially direct, precise and explicit in their communication. Even if they criticize, they say everything they say or feel. So, for a cultural outsider, they may be brutally frank or unfeeling.

How face-saving affects communication

Face-saving is the act of preserving one’s outward dignity. Though all of us are concerned with face-saving, the value attached to the maintenance of status and respect varies significantly from culture to culture. Usually, the more high-context a culture is, the more importance its
members attach to face saving. So if an individual is essentially high-context (she delivers her message in an indirect way, usually through non-verbal cues), then face-saving is likely very important to her.

To say it in another way, the indirectness that characterizes high-context communication is to a large extent a strategy to avoid causing another person to lose face. So instead of disagreeing with you in a meeting, a person may just keep quiet and avoid arguing. In this sense, it can be viewed as consideration for another person’s sense of dignity. It can also mean ‘truth’ is less important than ‘relationship’. However, to people who prefer low-context communication, this indirectness may be seen as dishonesty, suggesting that the speaker is hiding something.

Business communication arguably values low-context communication because it wants the delivery of the message to be done in a clear and fast (although still considerably respectful) manner. However, because business communication does not happen in a vacuum (people make it happen), it has to contend with people’s different, usually even clashing, cultural values. You may not like figuring out implicit messages in other people’s communication practices, but it is almost certain that you will encounter people (if you have not done so yet) who deliver such indirect messages.

How the individual is viewed in relation to the group

Cultures, societies, groups or communities can be characterized as either more individualist or collectivist in orientation (Hofstede, 1991). An individual who exhibits individualist tendencies may have loose ties with the people around her. She is comfortable looking after herself, and also expects others to look after themselves with high expectations of support from her family or cultural group in general. On the other hand, an individual who exhibits collectivist tendencies one who from birth onwards is integrated into strong, cohesive groups, which throughout her lifetime continue to protect her in exchange for unquestioning loyalty. A collectivist individual in this sense is someone who thinks and does things with her family or community in mind.

Thus, in an individualist corporate culture, independence is highly valued; in a collectivist corporate culture, the individual is regarded as part of the group and a high degree of interdependence prevails in the same group.

We must bear in mind, however, that individualism and collectivism are cultural tendencies and not biological traits of people. They are also not mutually exclusive. Thus, every individual is individualist and collectivist at the same time, except that there are different ways of dealing with specific situations and people. You may be individualist in your view of academic achievement and career development, but highly collectivist in your view of family responsibility.
Varner and Beamer (1995) point out that in an individualist culture, a single person can earn credit or blame for the success or failure of a company project while in a collectivist culture, credit or blame goes to the group. Collectivist individuals do not usually seek individual recognition and are uncomfortable if it is given. As members of a team, they “are more concerned with fulfilling their obligations to a group than being self-fulfilled in terms of personal achievements” (Abdullah, 1996, p. 26).

Those with individualist inclinations, on the other hand, have the ‘self’ as the center of action and achievement. If they go up the corporate ladder, it is because they believe they have worked hard for it themselves. Recognition is easily accepted; if congratulated, you expect them to say ‘thank you’, instead of ‘uh, not sure about that’ or ‘not really’.

How time is perceived

Hall (1983) makes a distinction between cultures that tend to be monochronic and those that tend to be polychronic. In monochronic business cultures, time is seen as a way to organize the business day efficiently. People place a high emphasis on schedules, a precise reckoning of time and promptness and schedules usually take precedence over interpersonal relations. People in such business cultures try to get to the point quickly when communicating and they also tend to focus on only one task during each scheduled period.

If, in a corporation, time is seen as more fluid and people do not observe strict schedules, then you are probably working with people with polychronic orientations. Preset schedules are subordinate to interpersonal relations and people take whatever time is needed to get to know each other and build a foundation for the business relationship. It is not unusual for business meetings with largely polychronic tendencies to be interrupted by other things completely unrelated the discussion. If meetings do not follow the agreed schedule, people tend to think of these as ‘natural’ and are essentially not bothered by it as much as those with monochronic inclinations.
How power is distributed

Cultures also differ according to how power is (or should be) distributed in society. This relates to how status is accorded. For example, in some communication contexts, status is accorded to people based more on their individual achievements while in others status is ascribed to people by virtue of their age, family background, profession, and so on (you see here how this intersects with individualist/collectivist orientations). In the latter, organizations are usually more hierarchical and extensive use of titles especially for high ranking executives and officials is the norm. Power is clearly at the hands of those who occupy the topmost positions of the hierarchy. In the former, organizations are less hierarchical and titles are usually only used when they are relevant to the competence one brings to the task, for example, as a medical doctor. In these contexts, power distribution is more flat; that is, more people are accorded the opportunity to speak and make decisions.

Within a highly hierarchical organisation, you will observe that people show proper respect for individuals depending on their rank and position. When addressing people who are older or of higher status, people may speak formally. It is also considered inappropriate to interrupt authority figures when they are speaking and their opinions carry a lot of weight. This leads to the practice of not questioning what they say, especially in front of other people, as this will be viewed as a sign of disrespect and can also lead to a loss of face.

However, this behavior may be interpreted as a lack of assertiveness on the part of the employee in contexts that are less hierarchical and where employees are relatively free to interrupt their superiors and voice their own opinions.

How decisions are made

Decisions may be top-down or bottom-up. Usually, unilateral decisions are made because the style of leadership is authoritarian and typical relations are hierarchical in nature. Bottom-up decisions usually assume a much more democratic, consultative style of leadership is employed and relations are typically more flat or egalitarian.

We must be mindful though of the dangers of these distinctions. The process of decision-making may have the semblance of consultation and consensus, but a closer look at the process may reveal that it masks a top-down process.

Gender is crucial in decision-making processes. It is still a fact that male executives generally make important decisions in their companies.

Gender is also crucial in decision-making processes. In recent years, more and more women have occupied top-level corporations and therefore have provided strong voices in decision-
making. The inroads made in diversifying corporate cultures cannot be ignored because many women have broken the barriers of power in their work. However, it is still a reality that women are less represented in executive-level positions. Male executives are generally still the ones who make important decisions in their companies.

All this tells us that we also need to be very careful about understanding the nature of corporate culture – it varies from one corporation to another.

VERBAL COMMUNICATION

In discussing verbal communication, the choice of words and expressions, organization of messages, and clarity of pronunciation will be examined. All points made and examples given are for communication in the English language.

Choice of words and expressions

When you are communicating with people with different cultural orientations, you need to pay careful attention to your choice of words and expressions. Avoid ambiguous words, unfamiliar words, acronyms, idiomatic expressions and slang.

➤ Ambiguous words

The same word may have very different interpretations in different cultures and this could give rise to miscommunication when interacting with people across cultures, for example, “table”.

When one suggests *tabling* something for discussion, it means putting it on the meeting agenda in England but it means taking it off the agenda in the US.

➤ Unfamiliar words

The use of unfamiliar words can also cause a breakdown in communication. For example:

*In Singapore, these are common:*  
Please queue up.  
Could I have the bill, please?  
Take away, please.

*In the United States, these are common:*  
Please get in line.  
Could I have the cheque, please?  
To go, please.
Acronyms

Acronyms that are easily understood by members of one culture may be totally incomprehensible to members of another culture, for example, FYI, ASAP, EDB, IPO.

Idioms

These expressions can also create a breakdown in communication. For example,

To break a leg (To do well at some performance)
To hold one’s tongue (To refrain from saying something unpleasant or nasty)
To rain cats and dogs (To rain very heavily)
More money down the drain (More money to spend)

This does not mean that you should avoid using them altogether. It means that you should know when it is appropriate to use them and when it is not.

Slang

Cultures may develop their own slang that may be foreign to other cultures using the same language. For example:

An advertisement by Electrolux worked very well in Europe but was unusable in the United States. The advertisement carries the slogan, “Nothing sucks like the Electrolux”. The slogan will not go down well with an American audience because the slang expression “it sucks” has negative connotations in the US. In Europe, the word “sucks” has a literal meaning so the slogan is perfectly all right.

Again, the point here is not to say slang is bad, but simply you should know how and when it should be used. In fact, if you happen to enter a new company or profession, you should try to find out its own slang because knowing it may help you speed up your entry into the new group. Not knowing it may be dangerous too.

Organization of messages

It is also important to organize your messages in a way that is suitable for your target audience whose culture is different from yours. Some people prefer a direct approach to most messages with the main idea presented first and the details given later. However, some other groups may not like the direct approach because in practice it can result in being tactless and rude.
This preference for an indirect approach may be traced back to the nature of the culture with respect to contexting and face-saving. More about the role of culture in organizing messages will be discussed later.

ONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

Nonverbal communication adds to the message and a failure to interpret nonverbal signals correctly can lead to unwanted misunderstandings and a breakdown in the communication process. In intercultural communication, it is important to recognize that people from different cultures attach different meanings to nonverbal signals. This is crucial in contexting as discussed above.

Body language

➢ **Posture.** The way we sit, stand and walk sends a nonverbal message. While in some contexts, sitting upright in a chair may be viewed as being alert and showing respect for the other party in the communication process, in some other contexts, the same posture may be viewed as a sign of the other person being uptight or even aggressive.

➢ **Head movements.** In many parts of the world, including Singapore and China, the head nod means ‘yes’. However, in Bulgaria, parts of Greece, Yugoslavia, Turkey, Iran and Bengal, people nod their heads up and down to signal ‘no’. In these countries, shaking their heads back and forth means ‘yes’.

*The body says what words cannot.*

Martha Graham
Eye contact

Direct eye contact may show openness, trustworthiness and integrity. Indirect eye contact, on the other hand, especially the lowering of the eyes, may indicate respect and humility for the other party. An intercultural tension can occur when two people talking to each other ‘read’ different meanings from eye contact. Avoiding eye contact can be perceived by one as being insincere or deceitful, while a direct eye contact can be deemed as intimidating, or disrespectful especially if the person being talked to is of a higher status.

Laughter

Laughter, especially in the form of giggling, may not be a reaction to anything humorous but rather an expression of embarrassment when people do not understand something, for example, a joke related by another colleague.

On the other hand, laughter as a strategy to keep people warm and comfortable at the start of a meeting may work with some, but may be a disaster if tried on others. People come to meetings with different expectations. If you are presenting, some expect you to be formal and serious, perhaps because the topic is deemed serious (e.g., a multimillion-dollar business deal). Cracking a joke to make people laugh may be harmful to your presentation. So how do you prepare? Research on who will attend your presentation. Ask people who know them. Know what their cultural predispositions are concerning matters like formality of meetings.

Touch

The handshake has become an accepted touch between business people when they meet but the type of handshake varies widely across cultures. A firm handshake may be a sign of strength and character and indicates sincerity. However, the handshake can also be very soft, almost limp which can indicate humility (Foster, 2000).

Touch also involves awareness about what kind and how much of touch is tolerable within an intercultural moment. Can you tap someone’s shoulder, hair or back? Does touch reveal gender-based meanings or levels of power and intimacy? Can you hold hands together or put your arms around each other’s shoulders while you walk, or is it taboo for you to do either of these? In this age of political correctness, a gentle touch can be considered a form of sexual
harassment or a genuine show of concern. Such intercultural knowledge is very important because touch is, indeed, a touchy matter.

**Physical space**

Goodman (1995) highlights that in interpersonal communication, the physical space between speakers adds to the message. Culture determines whether the distance is too close or too far away. Distance can be thought of as showing degrees of intimacy, as shown in his diagram below.

The intimate space is reserved for people one is closest to and this space is generally extremely inappropriate at the workplace. The casual-personal range denotes the space where friends and relatives are usually comfortable in. The socio-consultative distance is generally appropriate for the workplace while the public space at work is limited to formal presentations. The actual distance for each of these categories again differs from culture to culture so failing to understand differences in the appropriate physical distance between speakers can lead to some discomfort and serious miscommunication.

Space and touch intersect when you deal with issues concerning private space. How much space (literally, physical space) do people give each other in the workplace? Each individual creates an imaginary line that separates her from others. Interestingly, those with individualist inclinations may draw the line further from them than the one drawn by those with collectivist orientations. In other words, an individualist co-worker may be more protective of her private space than her collectivist co-worker who may be more willing to let her already blurry lines to be crossed for the sake of friendship and bonding.

**Tone, volume and speed**

Tone, volume and speed of speaking also vary widely in different cultures. What in one culture may sound like a heated argument may in another culture be considered the norm for a
reasonable discussion. Some groups of people speak in soft, hushed tones; emotions are also
generally restrained and losing one’s control may be considered very bad form; being cool and
self-possessed is what is admired. In other contexts, the pace of speaking is generally fast and
volume loud, with more ups and downs in intonation. This way of speaking shows that one has
one’s heart in the matter.

Turn-taking and silence

Turn-taking in conversation and the role of silence also offer much for intercultural awareness.
In some contexts, it is acceptable and even desirable to interrupt while someone else is
speaking as it indicates enthusiasm and interest in the conversation. However, in some other
contexts, interrupting is considered rude; people in these cultures usually wait for the other
party to finish speaking before making their point. Similarly, a period of silence between
contributions is accepted as the norm. Taking time to process the information before one
starts speaking is in fact a sign of respect for the other person but other people may feel
uncomfortable with these periods of silence and tend to fill them up with ‘unnecessary’ talk.

More importantly, however, turn-taking and silence reveal different levels of power relations
among interlocutors. In meetings, for example, the chair can determine who can speak or who
cannot. Gender is certainly critical here as well. Although much has been said about inroads in
gender equality in the corporate world, the reality is that there is still a disproportionate
number of men who wield power in their workplaces. This has implications for patterns of
communication in the workplace. Is one’s silence a choice or a non-choice? Do you choose to
be silent or have you been silenced? Is this because you are female, a subordinate, or belong to
an ethnic minority?

CULTURE'S INFLUENCE ON WRITTEN BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

Organisation of messages

Essentially, in business communication, the writing style of messages that is preferred is direct,
clear and concise. Writers are expected to ensure that every part of the message is directly
relevant to the subject under discussion. This direct rhetorical pattern of writing can be
represented by a straight line from the opening sentence to the last sentence. This writing style
is characteristic of low-context cultures. However, it also happens that people, especially those
with high-context orientation, write in a way that is indirect. In this manner of writing,
paragraph development may be said to be turning and spiraling in a circular fashion.

Mechanics and format

The mechanics and format of letter writing also differ across cultures. In Singapore, because of
the British influence, most of the time dates are written the European way (day.month.year),
and addresses are written the ‘Western’ way, beginning with the name, and working down to the street, city and country plus postal code. In some companies, business letters are usually very formal and respectful of rank and hierarchy. Last names are usually written in uppercase and dates are given in the year.month.day format. The address is usually written beginning with the country and postal code, followed by the city (and prefecture), street address and finally company and/or personal name.

Mechanics and format, though, are not rigid and unchanging. In fact, the best way to make sure that you are doing the right thing is to observe how people in your workplace write. There is no point memorizing in-house style conventions and format since they vary from one company to another. In fact, referencing for the materials you are currently reading is done through Microsoft’s in-house referencing tool. The important point to remember is consistency. After you have figured out the preferred style of the company, make sure you consistently follow it.

**TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION**

Thus, in order for you to become an effective communicator in the global workplace, the following is a list of things that you should try to work towards.

**Develop a sense of cultural awareness**

Always remind yourself that culture shapes communication. If you read an email that you think is too formal or too informal, take time to relax and find out why it is so. In a conversation, if someone’s way of speaking makes you uncomfortable or confused, postpone judgment of the person and, instead, focus on the message being communicated. If you can transcend initial irritation or confusion brought about possibly by different cultural expectations, mutual understanding may be achieved, tasks accomplished and objectives achieved.

**Do not be ethnocentric**

Ethnocentrism is the tendency to judge all other groups according to your own group’s standards, behaviors and customs and to see other groups as inferior by comparison. Be aware of your own ethnocentric bias by accepting the fact that people do things in different ways.

**Listen genuinely when others speak**

Amazingly, not too many people are good listeners. Usually this happens because we think we are right and that the other person is wrong. Our biases and assumptions distract us from listening to the messages of other people. Make sure you always try to understand the point-of-view of others. If not, as implied by the Prudential print advertisement above, you may end up losing clients who have unique stories to tell.
Do not lapse into your own language while in the presence of others who do not speak it

Use a language which is understood by all. Using a language that is only understood by the few people from your own group or culture may be seen as your way of excluding all others in the group or may suggest that you have something negative to say. This happens in group work and team-building exercises. Those who cannot understand what others are saying may feel excluded or unwanted.

Take responsibility for the communication

Communication is essentially a matter of trust and mutual respect. Do not expect the other party to do all the figuring out or making sense of the meaning and messages being produced. Similarly, do not expect the other party to always adjust to your way of talking, writing or thinking. You must do your part in making adjustments as well. Success in business communication – or any communication for that matter – depends on whether you and your listener or reader mutually deliver your messages in ways that are appropriate and respectful of differences.

Conclusion: AVOID OVERGENERALIZATIONS

As a final note, while learning all you can about the values and practices of a group of people is a good way to figure out how to send and receive intercultural messages effectively, do not overgeneralize and stereotype people. As in all our interpersonal communication, we need to communicate with individuals as individuals who are by their very nature unique despite being part of cultural groups. To be effective in intercultural business communication, it is important to be aware and open to variations and individual differences even among those we think come from a similar culture. Intercultural sensitivity will not only enable you to deliver your message clearly, but you will also earn the respect of others who think you respect them too.
ACTIVITY 1: How does culture influence communication?

CULTURAL MOMENTS

Look at the picture on the left which appeared in Today (18 November 2009, p. 35, by Associated Press), a newspaper in Singapore. It was taken during US President Barack Obama’s visit to Japan in November 2009. Here he was meeting Japan’s Emperor Akihito in Tokyo. Groups of people both in the US and Japan gave conflicting views on this cultural moment. What could some of these views be? Can you derive cultural meanings from the picture?

Look at the picture on the left which appeared in The Straits Times (2 March 2010, p. A14, by Associated Press), a newspaper in Singapore. It shows Toyota president Akio Toyoda apologizing to his Chinese audience in Beijing after global safety recalls due to defects in their car products, deemed to have resulted in at least 34 deaths. How is Toyoda’s bow different from that of Obama? What is the prime motivation behind Toyoda’s bow? What does this say about the role of intercultural communication in global business?
The picture on the left appeared on the first page (lead story) of The Straits Times (14 July 2010, p. A1, BT File Photo). It shows DBS CEO Piyush Gupta apologizing for a recent massive service interruption which prevented DBS customers from accessing their accounts or using the ATM. Compared with Toyoda’s apology, in this picture Gupta is not shown bowing to his audience (or customers in general) in order to apologize. Is this a less sincere form of apology? What contrasting cultures of apology are shown by the two pictures? Which apology is better than the other?

**ACTIVITY 2: Why does cultural misunderstanding happen?**

The following is a critical incident which shows how communication across cultures can cause problems. What do you think happened in the two incidents to give rise to the misunderstandings? Use the questions that follow the incident to guide you in your analysis.

The following exchange takes place between a client and a supplier:

**Supplier:** Hello. Good to see you again.
**Client:** Thank you.
**Supplier:** How are things?
**Client:** Fine. I came to tell you that our new vice president for distribution is coming next week.
**Supplier:** Good. Was he expected?
**Client:** We just heard yesterday. We’re setting up appointments for him with all our suppliers and he’d like to see you, if you have any free time, of course. We’d like you to come on Wednesday at 9.00.
**Supplier:** Let me check my calendar. *(The client just stood in front of her table, surprised.)* We have our regular staff meeting on Wednesday mornings, but I suppose I can change that. It shouldn’t be a problem. Let me confirm that and get back to you later this morning.
**Client:** *(Looking very uneasy and sounding rather apologetic)* I’m sorry for the trouble.
**Supplier:** Not at all. *(Feeling a little puzzled by his uneasy demeanor)*
Questions

1. Why do you think the client was surprised when the supplier checked her calendar?
2. Why did the supplier’s response make the client feel rather uneasy and apologetic?
3. Why do you think the supplier was puzzled?
4. What fundamental cultural orientations are at play in the dialogue?

ACTIVITY 3: How do power and culture shape corporate communication?

Revenue growth vs. corporate image management

In today’s business, revenue growth continues to be one of the most critical issues faced by most companies. Finance Asia™ is very much aware of this and has put this on top of its agenda for the next five years. Finance Asia™ is a regional investment think-tank based in Singapore whose main products are financial strategic “ideas” sold to clients who invest or intend to invest in Asia. These clients are mainly from the banking and capital investment sector.

In an excerpt of a meeting below, three top executives of Finance Asia™ discuss how best to proceed with revenue growth strategies. Konrad Paracuelles, who has studied and worked in the Philippines, Singapore and Germany, is the Assistant Director for research. Faiza, trained as a marketing strategist in multinational companies based in Malaysia and the United States, is the Head of the company’s corporate image management division. Laura Smith is the Managing Director of the entire company and is the most senior of the three. She has almost two decades of banking experience in several Asian countries.

Konrad insists that it is possible to zero in on revenue growth alone. The company can release favorable data without necessarily becoming unethical.

Faiza believes that revenue growth is useless without the right management of corporate image. Clients, especially prospective clients, would need an image check before they engage consultants and their companies.

Laura believes that corporate image management is important, but does not see how it contributes to the company’s aggressive drive towards revenue growth.
Meeting excerpt

(1) Konrad: It has been done, and can be done.

(2) Faiza: Look at Enron and a few others in recent years. What went wrong? Corporate culture. Dishonesty, etc. The impact on business and investor confidence around the world is unimaginable.

(3) Konrad: What...what’s being dishonest about using positive data [to prove your case]¹?

(4) Faiza: [Like skewing] data?

(5) Konrad: My point is there is nothing unethical about what we’ve been doing and what we intend to do. Revenue growth is the most critical issue.

(6) Laura: We all believe that, don’t we? Competition in the market is [fierce].

(7) Konrad: [fierce] yeah.

(8) Laura: and we must vigorously strategize how to maintain our niche, in fact how to expand it. But...

(9) Faiza: Precisely.

(10) Laura: But how does image cut directly into revenue growth, Faiza?

(11) Faiza: Simple. Bad image, no growth. I am not saying...

(12) Laura: that we have bad image?

(13) Faiza: I just want to say that corporate culture, trust, character cannot be compromised in any way. Times have changed. Image-making is not about superficial transformation.

(14) Laura: Uh-huh.

(15) Faiza: It is about maintaining a company culture that is true to the ideals of fairness, openness and integrity.

(16) Konrad: You’re re-inventing the wheel.

(17) Faiza: [Huh?]

(18) Laura: [Huh?]

(19) Konrad: Integrity is integrity is integrity.

(20) Laura: Oh, you mean, there is really nothing new in the way Faiza defines integrity? [That]...

(21) Konrad: [You can] say it that way, yeah [yeah]

(22) Faiza: [I am] just making sure that we focus on it more. I mean, ok, look. Is it right to promote a product even if it has not gone beyond the conceptualization [stage]?

(23) Konrad: [It depends] on how you promote it. If it is...

(24) Faiza: Depends? Sure, we will look formidable. But what does it teach everyone in Finance Asia™?

Meeting continues.

Power and culture

How do power relations and culture manifest themselves in the patterns of communication in the excerpt above? How do you explain such power relations and culture?

¹ Brackets [ ] mean words spoken at the same time.
ACTIVITY 4: How is seating arrangement cultural?

Look at the various ways the chairs are arranged below. How do you think do the different arrangements reflect different meeting cultures, especially in the following areas:

- Flow or exchange of ideas between meeting participants?
- The value of every participant’s contribution to decision-making?
- The role of the meeting leader?

A

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Bibliography


