

An Introduction to Cross- Cultural Communication

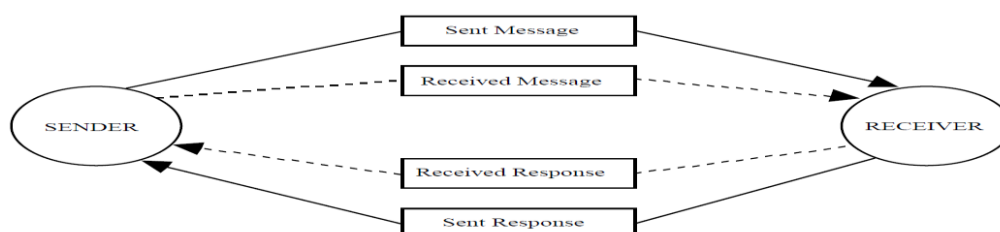
This section sheds the light on the definition of Cross- Cultural Communication, Its importance in workplace as well as the major barriers that may occur in business. Also, this part tackles some Tips that might be useful to ease communication between people from different backgrounds

1. Definition of Cross- Cultural Communication

Communication is the sending of message from a source to a receiver with the least possible loss of meaning .The speaker sends a message that is in some kind of code. The listener decodes the messages and responds thereby giving the speaker feedback. Hence, Intercultural Communication is the process of sending and receiving messages between people whose cultural background could lead them to interpret verbal and non-verbal signs differently.

The purpose of communication is to transfer ideas and knowledge from one entity to the other. The first step in communication is input; someone must say something that is received by someone else. The communication loop is successful when the receiver demonstrates that he or she understands what was being communicated.

Figure 01: Communication Model.



Source: Adler, Nancy J. "Communicating across Cultural Barriers" (p.02) *Research Gate*.Jan. 2003.
Web. 20 Spet. 2016.

Cross-cultural communication is a field of study that looks at how people from differing cultural backgrounds communicate, in similar and different ways among themselves, and how they endeavor to communicate across cultures. In other words, Cross- cultural communication is about the way

people from different cultures communicate when they deal with each other either at a distance or face to face.

Communication can involve spoken and written language, body language and the language of etiquette and protocol. Thus, Cross- Cultural Communication is a multifaceted subject which has elements from a number of disciplines such as: anthropology, linguistics, philosophy, and psychology.

If we seek to understand a people, we have to try to put ourselves, as far as we can, in that particular historical and cultural background. ... It is not easy for a person of one country to enter into the background of another country. So there is great irritation, because one fact that seems obvious to us is not immediately accepted by the other party or does not seem obvious to him at all. ... But that extreme irritation will go when we think ... that he is just differently conditioned and simply can't get out of that condition. One has to recognize that whatever the future may hold, countries and people differ ... in their approach to life and their ways of living and thinking. In order to understand them, we have to understand their way of life and approach. If we wish to convince them, we have to use their language as far as we can, not language in the narrow sense of the word, but the language of the mind... (An extract by Jawaharlal Nehru, Visit to America, and taken from Communicating across Cultural Barriers by Nancy J. Adler)

It is worthy important to take in consideration that No two national groups see the world in exactly the same way. Perception is the process by which each individual selects, organizes, and evaluates stimuli from the external environment to provide meaningful experiences for himself or herself.

In brief, Cross-cultural communication is the process of exchanging information and ideas between individuals from different cultural backgrounds. This field of study investigates how cultural differences influence communication styles, behaviors, and perceptions. As globalization continues to connect people from diverse cultures, understanding cross-cultural communication has become increasingly important in both personal and professional contexts.

2. The Scope of Cross-Cultural Communication

2.1. Verbal and Non-Verbal Communication

Verbal communication includes both spoken and written forms of language utilized during interactions. Various cultures may possess unique languages, dialects, or even specific variations in vocabulary and grammar that affect the manner in which messages are expressed and understood. For instance, certain cultures prioritize directness, whereas others may prefer indirect communication to preserve harmony and politeness. Recognizing these distinctions is essential to prevent misunderstandings.

Non-Verbal Communication includes all forms of communication that do not involve words, such as gestures, body language, eye contact, facial expressions, and even the use of silence. Non-verbal cues can have different meanings in different cultures. For instance, maintaining eye contact is seen as a sign of confidence and honesty in some cultures, while in others, it may be viewed as disrespectful. Similarly, gestures like a thumbs-up may be positive in some cultures but offensive in others. Thus, awareness of non-verbal communication is vital in cross-cultural interactions.

2.2. Cultural Differences

Numerous factors shape how people communicate within their cultural contexts, including nationality, ethnicity, gender, age, and social norms. For instance, cultural expectations around gender may dictate different communication styles; some cultures may expect men to be more assertive while women may be encouraged to be more accommodating. Age can also play a role, as older individuals may command more respect in certain cultures, influencing how younger individuals communicate with them.

Additionally, each culture has its own unique set of norms, values, and beliefs that influence how messages are constructed and understood. For example, in high-context cultures (like Japan or many Middle Eastern countries), much of the communication is implicit, relying on context and shared experiences. In contrast, low-context cultures (like the United States or Germany) often prioritize explicit, clear, and direct communication. These differences can lead to misunderstandings if communicators are not aware of each other's cultural frameworks.

2.3. Interdisciplinary Nature

Cross-cultural communication is not confined to one discipline but draws from multiple fields, each contributing valuable insights to understand the complexities of communication across cultures:

Anthropology: Provides an understanding of cultural practices, beliefs, and the historical context that shapes communication behaviors.

Psychology: Explores how individual perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors are influenced by cultural backgrounds, and how these factors affect interpersonal interactions.

Sociology: Examines the societal structures and social norms that govern behavior and communication patterns within specific cultural groups.

Linguistics: Analyzes language structure, meaning, and usage, highlighting how language reflects cultural identity and influences communication styles.

3. The Importance of Cross- Cultural Communication

The importance of cross-cultural communication creates a network and helps establish a strong chain both internally and externally. As business is expanding globally, culture is a concern that affects communication all time. The importance of cross-cultural communication is there for the following reasons:

3.1. Avoiding miscommunication: When people from different cultures interact then there is a chance of miscommunication due to a difference in language and attitude. A proper understanding of different cultures where the business has an interest can cause effective communication.

3.2. Creating a work environment of equal opportunity: In a multinational organization, the success of a business depends on the collective effort of people from different cultures. Each employee needs to get equal treatment here and therefore understanding of various cultures is a pre-requisite for the employer.

3.3. Enriching human resources: If cultural barriers are removed, a business enterprise can hire skilled people from different parts of the world. This will enrich the human resources of the business. Here, the business will grow and develop rapidly.

3.4. Better Progress: Every industry is dependent on its employees for better progress and more profit-earning sources. It is quite understood that Cross-Cultural Communication directly influences the relationship between the managers and the employees. Moreover, the employees are more comfortable while communicating with each other during the project. Hence, a hike in the progress chart of business can be observed in a short while, as it lets employees communicate effectively across cultures despite their cultural differences.

3.5. Cultural Influence: There is no doubt that cultures play a vital role in determining how we talk with one another. In case there is an absence of harmony and a sense of equality due to cultural backgrounds, it can lead to a chaotic situation.

3.6. Management: Cross-Cultural Communication can be quite beneficial in situations where the business is spread across various parts of the globe. Surely, all the employees working there will belong to different cultures and religions. The company executives will develop some benchmarks for all of the team. Each member would have to act the same and treat everyone with equality. Any discrimination based on culture should be prohibited.

4. Cross-Cultural Communications in the Workplace

It's no secret that effective communication is central to the success of any organization, regardless of industry. But in order to truly understand what it takes to communicate effectively, one must first understand the different cultural factors that influence the way people interact with one another.

Workplaces are more diverse, remote teams are scattered across the country or around the world, and businesses that once sold products to a single demographic might now sell to a global market. All of these factors have converged to make cross-cultural communication a vital part of organizational success. Every typical person has a style of communication that signifies the culture he or she belongs to. There is no doubt that we all come across a cross-culture situation where we need to establish a meaningful conversation. Most people often find a need for communication across cultures during their working hours.

It is commonly observed that the workplace usually consists of people having different cultures and backgrounds. This significantly increases the need to prevent a predictable clash between their thoughts and the way of approach. Cross Culture Communication is expected to reduce these conflicts to promote harmony among the employees. The main goal is to transfer the correct message, followed by an accurate response. Any misleading situation should be prevented, and the communication level should be preferable by both sender and receiver.

In fact, different cultural ways give people different ways of thinking, analyzing, hearing, accepting, and interpreting different things. – This means the same words or gestures in the United States will mean different things to people associated with other cultures. At the time of globalization, communication across cultures falls within the larger field of communication studies around the world. From businesses to universities to schools, the application of cross-cultural communication along with foreign language education is gaining prevalence amongst people from different societal, cultural, or national setups.

5. Factors affecting Cross- Cultural Communication in Work Place

In today's changing business scenario increasing number of firms extends their business abroad. Effective communication with people of different cultures is especially challenging. Cultural awareness shapes how business firms behave in cross-culturally reflected international markets. It is broadly recognized that cultural factors act as invisible barriers in international business communications. Understanding cultural differences is one of the most significant skills for firms to develop in order to have a competitive advantage in international business. Organizations should focus on eliminating the cross cultural communication barriers

Many problems arise in our workplace today as a result of the barriers cultural diversity imposes on cross cultural communication. Cross-cultural communication barriers such as anxiety, uncertainty, stereotyping, ethnocentrism, and others are caused by inadequate cultural knowledge and the lack of intercultural communicative skills.

5.1. Language

Language is regarded as one of the common causes of cross-cultural barriers to the communication processes. When the individuals are not well-equipped with languages and make an attempt to

communicate on their own, then others may not understand the messages and there can be occurrence of number of misunderstandings. The individuals, belonging to rural communities migrate to urban communities to pursue educational programs, acquire employment opportunities and enhance their career prospects. But they are usually not fluent with English language.

In order to acquire better livelihoods opportunities, they need to learn to communicate in English. For this purpose, they get enrolled in training centers to augment their English language skills. On the other hand, there are individuals, who are employed in organizations or higher educational institutions and need to travel to foreign countries for work-related purposes. In such cases as well, they get enrolled in training centers to pursue foreign language courses. Long-term as well as short-term foreign language courses are organized in colleges and universities as well. When the individuals generate awareness in terms of languages and make use of them in communicating, the individuals are able to achieve personal as well as professional goals and overcome cross-cultural barriers to communication. Therefore, it can be stated, language is one of the common causes of cross-cultural barriers to effective communication.

5.2. Misunderstanding

Misunderstanding is the foremost barrier to communication in a multicultural environment. This is common among people of different cultural backgrounds whose values and beliefs vary. The variation in the different cultures results in high level of anxiety and uncertainty and end up into the misunderstanding. The misunderstanding which has been raised due to anxiety and uncertainty continues in their entire tenure.

5.3. Norms and Roles

Norms are the culturally defined rules for determining the acceptable and appropriate behavior. Individuals they themselves frame rules for themselves and also expect others to do so. Each and every culture has it's owns norms and they have their own acceptable and appropriate behavior. People working in multicultural environment often fail to understand the norms of the other culture and act accordingly. Roles are a set off norms applicable to specific groups .In particular culture different roles are assigned to men and women, children and parents/guardians, husbands and wives.

These roles vary from and culture to culture and in a multicultural team one can find several violations of the roles. This further leads to anxiety and the communication process is interrupted.

5.4. Behaviors and Beliefs

It is apparent that there are differences in the behavior and beliefs of the individuals. It is also comprehensively understood that in order to promote communication and overcome various types of barriers, the behavior and beliefs of the individuals should be decent, refined and sophisticated. Differences in the behavior and beliefs are not regarded as negative, but the individuals need to ensure that their behavior and beliefs should not prove to be disadvantageous on others.

When the individuals are pursuing educational programs or are engaged in employment opportunities, they need to ensure, they form their behavior appropriately, deal with others well and form positive beliefs. On the other hand, within homes, neighborhood, public places and community as well, the individuals, belonging to various age groups, categories and backgrounds need to put into operation appropriate behavioral traits and form positive viewpoints. Even when the individuals form negative viewpoints, they need to ensure, they do not prove to be barriers within the course of the communication processes as well as in dealing with others. Therefore, it can be stated, behavior and beliefs are one of the major causes of cross-cultural barriers to effective communication.

5.5. Stereotypes and Prejudices

Stereotyping is the process of forming the picture of the whole culture. The individuals belonging to the same culture have similar characteristics and are categorized accordingly. It is a belief in terms of various groups and in most cases is negative. Stereotyping can be done on the basis of number of factors, these include, caste, creed, race, religion, ethnicity, gender, age, cultures, educational qualifications, occupations and socio-economic background. In some cases, the stereotypes can be positive as well. For example, the individuals, pursuing higher education are well-equipped with usage of technologies. On the other hand, the individuals, who possess ill feelings in terms of other cultures, are a negative stereotype. Within various types of organizations and educational institutions at all levels, it is vital for the individuals to promote positive stereotypes.

The prejudices of the individuals in terms of some individuals and not others, is another cause of cross-cultural barriers to effective communication. When individuals feel that they are being

discriminated against and are not provided with same opportunities as others, it is likely that cross-cultural barriers will take place within the course of the communication processes. Therefore, it can be stated, stereotypes and prejudices are one of the major causes of cross-cultural barriers to effective communication.

5.6. Ethnocentrism

Thinking about our own culture, our group behavior as the standard against all the other groups. One's own cultural experience unintentionally makes us to feel that our culture is distinctive. This ethnocentrism increases the level of the anxiety. In work places the ethnocentrism is directly proportional to anxiety level. Multicultural team members face a lot of issues due to ethnocentrism. Actually, Ethnocentrism is the process of dividing cultures. The individuals, belonging to one's own culture is categorized as in-group and those belonging to other cultures are categorized as out-group. Preference is given to in-group and the individuals form the feelings of antipathy and antagonism in terms of the individuals of the out-group. When they form negative feelings, it is apparent that they will not communicate with them in an appropriate manner.

Hence, this gives rise to cross-cultural barriers within the course of putting into operation the communication processes. When the cultural traits are in-group, they are regarded as good. On the other hand, when they are out-group, they are regarded as negative and one does not feel interested in communicating with them. Ethnocentrism renders an important contribution in encouraging aggression and hostility and leading to an increase in cross-cultural barriers to communication.

Due to ethnocentrism, the individuals experience problems in acquiring an efficient understanding of the messages. When the messages are not understood well, it gives rise to cross-cultural barriers within the course of implementation of communication processes. Therefore, it can be stated, ethnocentrism is one of the primary causes of cross-cultural barriers to effective communication.

6. How to Improve Cross-Cultural Communication in the Workplace?

All businesses want to have a productive workforce. However, building and maintaining a productive workforce requires an environment that supports diversity while balancing time, cost, and management. When diversity is the feature that characterizes a team, the chances of

miscommunication happening are higher. Hence, the measures to overcome cross-cultural barriers to effective communication are stated as follows:

6.1. Do your homework

When we say do your homework, what we mean is do your research before meeting new staff members. Many cultures expect a degree of formality at the beginning of the interaction. However, this level of formality isn't expressed in the same way across cultures. You, as an individual, should be aware of this and be ready to respect this.

6.2. Avoid Slang

This tip mostly applies to the cases when the staff happens to be non-native English speakers. While they certainly are proficient in English, when it comes to understanding and using idioms, slang words, or even sayings, they may not understand the context in which they are used. That's why you should always be careful with the words you choose to use when communicating with them. Otherwise, you can end up confusing them, or in the worst-case scenario, offend them.

6.3. Become aware of the Preconceptions and Stereotypes

In one way or another, we all have absorbed some sort of stereotype and have a preconceived idea of something. These overgeneralized beliefs about a particular group of people don't always align with the actual reality. That's why we should stop seeing things in black and white or dividing things into good or bad without knowing the intent behind a behavior or an action. This will only benefit you and your staff by being seen as open-minded and facilitating a deeper relationship.

6.4. Speak Comprehensively

Speaking in a comprehensive manner doesn't necessarily mean that you need to talk at a snail's pace, which by the way, can be another way to offend your peers. However, talking at the average conversational speed you have isn't a good idea too. It would be best for you to modulate your pace of speaking. In that way, you will communicate clearly and pronounce your words more appropriately, and your audience won't have problems with understanding what you're trying to say.

6.5. Be careful with the humor you use

For many cultures, business is business. They believe in behaving professionally and following protocol at all times. So, if you want to be funny and decide to make jokes make sure that they'll be

understood and appreciated and not be offensive to people of other cultures. In this way, the cultural conflicts in the workplace will be reduced.

6.6. Practice active listening

When talking to someone, always try to listen to them actively. You can do so by summarizing what the other person has said and ask questions frequently. In this way, important information won't get misunderstood or missed, and it will help build rapport with your colleagues.

6.7. Don't make closed questions

It isn't acceptable to answer negatively in many cultures, so people of those cultures will always try to respond positively. However, you, as an individual, should avoid making closed questions. It's way better to phrase your questions like open-ended questions so that you get some sort of information as a response. In that way, you won't force people to answer in a way they wouldn't normally.

6.8. Keep it simple

While at times, using big words might seem like the right thing to do, in certain circumstances, it's not. In cross-cultural communication, that would only make it harder for people to understand you. Anytime you might think of using those kinds of words, choose a more straightforward way of expressing them. Put understanding and simplicity over complexity.

6.9. Remember that communication isn't only verbal

We always tend to forget that the type of communication we use daily isn't just verbal. We often say too much about ourselves, without having the need to open our mouths. All this is done through nonverbal communication, i.e., gestures and facial expressions. In a way, we should also be aware of the way we communicate without using words. We can send and receive non-verbal messages through eye contact, body language, and facial expressions we make. Culturally learned behavioral differences can significantly affect workplace communication. However, following a list of the dos and don'ts can always get you on the right track.