

LEADERSHIP BRIEFING

Mindful Communication in Cross-Cultural Organizations

by Valerie Barker

"Categorizing is a fundamental and natural human activity. It is the way we come to know the world. Any attempt to eliminate bias by attempting to eliminate the perception of differences is doomed to failure" Ellen Langer, 1989, p. 154).

Culture and Communication

Anyone who has traveled outside of their own country knows that differences in national and ethnic culture and cultural values affect the way people communicate. Geert Hofstede (1991), a veteran in the study of effects of national culture in organizations, has described cultural values as the mental programming or software of the mind, a set of meanings and beliefs shared by people from specific national backgrounds. All cultural groups whether national, ethnic, or socio-economic develop sets of rules to determine what is good and what should be. With regard to the workplace and within organizations, cultural values provide the foundation for rules about the distribution of power and rewards, procedures and practices, and types and level of communication.

Our culture and ethnic background influence the explanations we make for others' behavior. Generally, we *assume* that people we know have meanings that are similar to our own. But in the workplace, particularly, small differences in meanings attached to words or gestures due to culture may lead to large misunderstandings. Craig Storti (1999) describes how *understatement* may be interpreted differently depending on cultural background.

For example, a group of medical professionals of diverse disciplinary and cultural backgrounds are discussing strategies for a new prevention program for heart disease and stroke. During the course of the

discussion, a group member of Asian origin, states "I have one small suggestion." The US members of the group understand this to mean that the speaker does not have a strong opinion on this matter. In fact, the speaker is signaling a very real concern -- even objection. In the words of the movie "what we have here is a failure to communicate." At least, there is a break down in communication because of misinterpretation.

In this case, misinterpretation is connected to the concepts of high and low context in communication processes. Asian communities are described as high context because communication is governed by unwritten rules based on politeness and respect for others' face. Often communication tends to be indirect -- but the presence of certain cues signal agreement, disagreement, concern, or indifference. For instance, individuals from high context nations such as Japan tend not to answer "no" even when they mean "no." Giving such a direct answer would appear rude and disrespectful. Instead, the topic of conversation may be changed, or the individual may "talk around" the subject.

To another Japanese person, this communication strategy signals "no." However, a US negotiator, in this situation, may well be mystified -- even annoyed. The United States is a low context society where protocol in communication is much less concerned with rules of deference, politeness and face, and where people tend to "speak their minds." Clearly, this can affect outcomes, especially in accomplishing something as apparently straight-forward as giving or receiving instructions.

That said, we must be aware that not *all* people from the same culture behave in the *same* way all the time. Often there are more similarities between cultures than differences (Gallois & Callan, 1997). This means that we must be *mindful* of the kinds of interpretations we are making of others' behavior and speech.

What is Mindfulness?

1. Creating new categories
2. Showing openness to new information
3. Awareness of more than one perspective

(Ellen Langer, 1989)

Misunderstandings occur as a result of our *interpretations* of others' behavior not their *actual* behavior (Gudykunst, 1994).

Mindfulness vs. Mindlessness

One way of understanding the meaning of mindfulness is to think about its opposite -- *mindlessness*. Ellen Langer, a social psychologist who has researched this concept over many years, describes mindlessness as a condition in which individuals consider information and alternatives incompletely, rigidly and thoughtlessly (Burgoon & Langer, 1994). Mindlessness holds the social world still and unchanging -- communication processes are rule governed rather than rule guided. Below is a situation where both parties in the exchange are functioning mindlessly on the basis of cultural norms. The American boss believes that subordinates should be empowered in decision making -- power distance between bosses and subordinates is low. The Greek believes in a hierarchical form of management where power distance is high.

Behavior	Interpretation
American: How long will it take you to finish this report?	American: I asked him to participate. Greek: His behavior makes no sense. He's the boss. Why doesn't he tell me?

(Adapted from William B. Gudykunst , 1994)

Organizations have the potential to increase mindlessness because of routine task performance and role-based interactions. Rules and procedures encourage automatic culture-bound behaviors instead of culturally mindful ones. Organizations can encourage mindfulness by holding behavioral audits, and by training organizational members to self monitor their behavior, show sensitivity to interpersonal cues, and develop adaptability in novel situations (Ashforth & Fried, 1988).

Certain personal world views encourage mindlessness. Those of us who express absolute certainty about the world, see things in terms of black and white, assume that what happened once will always happen again, and, as a result, behave in habitual, unthinking ways are responding mindlessly. By

contrast, those who learn to make more not fewer distinctions, remain open to new information, and develop the power to understand situations from more than one point of view can communicate in a mindful contextually-considered fashion.

Openness to new information and awareness of more than one alternative are characteristics of a focus on the *process* of communication rather than the outcome (Gudykunst, 1994). That is, when we communicate mindlessly, we are more interested in what is *going to happen* than what *is* happening.

For example, because a western-European, hospital administrator, in the discussion mentioned earlier, is acutely aware of the cost of treating heart disease, she is concerned to get the prevention program in place. In focusing on the outcome, she fails to understand that a senior heart surgeon (who happens to be Asian) has an important (and helpful) suggestion to make. That is because it is only when we are mindful of the process (how we and others are communicating) that we can understand how our interpretation may differ from others.

In situations where we know that there is a high probability that misunderstandings may occur, it is important to communicate in a culturally mindful fashion. This is particularly relevant in cross-national organizations where western-based bureaucracies are operating in culturally dissimilar contexts and in domestic organizations characterized by cultural diversity. Summarized below are some important behaviors to encourage in such contexts.

Mindful Behavior in the Workplace

- **Develop cultural flexibility** -- learn culturally valued activities and accommodate them
- **Learn to communicate** -- use others' rules for verbal and nonverbal communication
- **Manage conflict** -- learn a collaborative style not an aggressive one
- **Learn to suspend judgement** -- take time to understand
- **Show cultural sensitivity** -- search for cultural explanations for behavior
- **Develop tolerance** for differences among people

(Adapted from Harry C. Triandis (1994))

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