The Obama Beer Summit – A Case Study In Cross Cultural Communications

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The subject of communications between human beings has been a complex subject and is more complicated if cross cultural issues are involved. The paper draws on a recent event in the United States where a black professor was arrested while at his own home by a white police officer and the subsequent pronouncements by the President of the United States. An attempt is made to look at the cross cultural influences which led to crossed communication at different levels - individual and societal. The objective is to relate theories to practical business situations with specific references to the communication challenges while working for an Indian subsidiary of a German company. In the increasing globalized world, it is necessary to sensitize managers to the impact of cross cultural influences on communication. The paper attempts to link theory to practice to provide insights which could improve a manager's effectiveness in the work place.

On 16th July 2009, in the Boston area, Sgt Crowley, a white policeman arrested a black Harvard scholar Henry Gates after a confrontation at the Professor's home. A neighbour had called in the police after noticing two black men trying to enter Professor Gates house. Apparently the Professor, returning from a trip abroad, had misplaced his keys and asked the taxi driver, also a black person, to help him enter his own house.

President Obama, of Kenyan American origin, on hearing of the incident reacted by stating that he thought the police acted "stupidly".

This led to a national debate on racial profiling and, to diffuse the situation, the President invited Sgt Crowley and Professor Gates to the White House to share a beer.

President Barack Obama termed the occasion, what later on became known as the "Beer Summit", as "an opportunity to listen to each other"

The statement from the White House at the end of the "Summit" was "hopefully, instead of ginning up anger and hyperbole, everybody can spend a little bit of time with some self-reflection and recognizing that other people have a different point of view".

At the airport, Sgt Crowley told Boston TV "Right now I just want to get back to work, get back to doing what it is I do, get back to being dad to my three children"

Without getting into the larger issues of race, it was clear that the white policeman was not prepared to make a distinction even though he became aware that the black person was a professor. He received support across all races within the police force even though the President was critical of the action. This incident has a lot of parallels with what happens regarding cross cultural communication within multinational organizations.

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Till a few decades ago, the number of foreign companies operating with subsidiaries or project offices in India could be counted in tens. Now the Indo-German Chamber of Commerce itself lists hundreds of companies with operating offices in India. As the trend continues, as it surely will, there is need to study human behavior across cultures since it is a key to understanding competition. Communication between the members of an international team will be the key to success both for the individuals as well as for companies.

The study of cultures and sub-cultures and how they are relevant to the communication process within and outside of a multinational organization, is important to those entering into this increasing globalized business environment.

Looking at the Latin roots of the word "culture", it seems to originate from "cultura". "Cult" means to inhabit, till or worship and "ura" is defined as "the result of". Thus culture could be broadly described as "the result of human action" (Berthon / 1993).

(Hall 1959) suggests culture is often assumed to be a pattern of taken – for granted assumptions about the expected pattern of thinking, acting and feeling from an identified set of people. This may cover also common values, belief, attitudes, customs and a host of other visible and invisible aspects of a community or group.

India is a large enough melting pot of cultures which interacted for several centuries with Romans, Greeks, Persians, Afghans, British, French, Chinese, Portuguese and the Dutch among others. Given the multitude of languages, scripts and origins, the only common thread running from North to South and from East to West is the Hindu philosophy – not the religion but the way of life – one which is predominantly spiritual with a certain sense of fatality which commonly manifests itself at the work place.

Europe, like India, is a polyglot continent with as many, if not more, languages and dialects and like India, has a common thread in the acceptance of Christian philosophy. And as said about Hindu philosophy, one needs to distinguish between Christian philosophy and the Christian religion. Having said that, one would need to read the history of Europe to understand the deep divisions which sufficiently insulated the countries of Europe so that they each acquired their own special culture. The consequences of conquests could be seen in the several unique cultural manifestations. Switzerland has four national languages but is one of the smallest nations in Europe. The flamenco dance, seen so typically as Spanish, has its origins from the Middle East since the Moors ruled over much of Spain for centuries. The tendency of the British elite to speak French was a similar influence borne out of inter-marriages between the British and French royalty. The disciplined approach in northern Europe as compared to the warmer parts like Italy and Spain could be traced to climatic conditions. In the North, it became necessary for all members of a family to prepare and stock food and fire wood in the short summer for the long winter. The long winters also took its toll in making the inhabitants of the north more silent than their southern counterparts since the primary effort was to remain warm and survive the winter. Long periods indoors, without exposure to sunlight, has its own effect on the human mind. Likewise, closer home, one may observe the people from the North West, having borne the brunt of regular invasions have become relatively insensitive to violence. This is reflected in everyday life at the workplace with greater evidence of rage, violence, deception and lack of trust compared to the South.

Clearly there exist differences in human behavior usually termed loosely as cultural differences. How do these apparent differences impact the way we communicate with those from different cultural background. The subject is of importance to a practitioner of management and increasingly so because of the globalization of economic activity.

In human beings across cultures, the single most influential issue is to examine if individualism takes predominance over collectivism. Individualism – collectivism is a frame of mind which exists at the cultural level and, within a culture, it exists at the individual level.

In individualistic cultures "people are supposed to look after themselves and their immediate family only," and the collectivistic cultures, "people belong to inner groups or collectives which are supposed to look after them in exchange for loyalty" (Hofstede & Bond 1984 p. 419). Typically, in individualistic cultures such as the United States, members apply the same value standards to all, irrespective of position. This becomes clearly visible if we look at the way the white policeman reacted despite the position that the professor had in society. This attitude was emphasized later when he did not apologize despite the President's intervention. In India, we can see that the communication process is affected by the position of the person within a group. A policeman

in New Delhi, who recently stopped a member of parliament trying to cross a security cordon, had to apologize.

Within collectivistic cultures, we have in-groups which are ranked differently. In some, families are given in priority. In some, like most of North India, the caste to which a person belongs is most important and those belonging to a particular caste have set expectations of behavior from people from other castes. In some countries like Japan, it is often seen that the primary in-group is the company. In India, the family is generally the primary in-group though the sub-caste can dominate in cases. Likewise, in tribal groups, like Nagas it is seen that the community dominates. Since individualism dominates western cultures in general and collectivism dominates Eastern culture including Africa and the Middle East, this aspect of a culture has considerable influence in how people communicate between these cultures.

However, irrespective of the nature of the culture – individualistic or collectivistic, the fact remains that in both cases individual values and personality orientation play a major role in communication. Triandis, Leung, Vallareal and Clack (1985) suggested idiocentrism and allocentrism as personality orientations related to individualism and collectivism respectively. Idiocentric individuals are considered normal in individualistic cultures e.g. in the USA eccentric behavior is not generally frowned upon as in the East, and may even be seen positively as evidence of an innovative mind. In collectivistic societies, idiocentric behavior can invite rejection and so there is considerable pressure to conform to acceptable behavior within the group.

In Germany, odd behavior is frowned upon at the work place but is totally acceptable if you don't disturb anyone else. Thus Germans have no concern how people may eat or dress at informal situations but are very conforming when it comes to the work place.

Triandis (1989) along with others have also pointed to other variations in individualism – collectivism. In individualistic cultures each member sees himself as a person whose behavior is conditioned by his own thoughts, values and feelings more than the thoughts, values and feelings of others (Martin and Kitayama 1991).

This is evident when dealing with Germans who tend to communicate in unique ways at management level but conform to a common way at lower levels of interactions. This characteristic is responsible for their ability to spend a considerable time to accommodate all view points at the planning stage of a project which therefore takes more time. However once the planning is over, the communication between the those who implement a project exhibit little tolerance for variations.

Carrying these thought forward to companies, we now see how in our country we have what could be described as definitive company cultures. Infosys, Tata, Reliance, public sector companies of different hues, have all created cultures which bring to attention aspects which finally translate into brand value. As we step into an increasingly globalised economy a company may design in one country, produce in another and sell in several countries. In carrying out design it may use virtual teams located across continents working in different time zones uploading on common servers through VPN tunnels and communicating with each other over internet, VOIP telephone and teleconferencing. Oral and written communication in managerial and organizational settings are key aspects which are impacted by culture. There also exists a view that technology today provides tools for standardization and therefore the way of working can be the same in all countries irrespective of the cultural differences. Increasingly, however there is the view that companies must orient themselves to adopt local practices which can improve performance. The extent to which this can be done is dependent on a variety of factors such as size of the organization, the need to which it needs to interact with the environment, the views of the top managers and their global orientation.

At another level, culture impacts the attitude at the work place. Employees in Indian companies are more likely to be influenced by the hierarchy to which their supervisors belong both at the workplace and outside. The pecking order is more in evidence in informal settings in India than in the same company when it operates in Europe or USA. Even within India, differences in employee attitude may be seen between the north and the south and within the south in Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

Thus a manager while working or dealing with a company which has its origin in another country must try to put his finger on the differences in the way the communication processes could take place. Hofstede (1980 1983, 1991, 2001) has empirically identified three other dimensions of cultural variability apart from individualism - collectivism. These are uncertainty avoidance, power distance and masculinity – femininity.

It would be useful for managers to keep these dimensions in focus in the early stages of interactions to avoid crossed communication arising out of disregarding the influence of these dimensions on the communication processes. We now attempt to examine each of these dimensions to see how each influences behavior in the specific context of Indo-German communications.

Uncertainty Avoidance

Germans belongs to a high uncertainty avoidance culture and, as such, have a lower tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity than Indians. This, in turn, makes them prone to make rules and regulations which they will follow without exception. They also tend to take lower levels of risk and expect conformity. Indians on the other hand are more prone to risky behavior and will accept dissent. While this typically Indian behavior may be viewed negatively in a certain context, it has, on the other hand, a positive impact in terms of reduced stress levels and less ego. Hofstede sums up the differences between high and low uncertainty avoidance cultures as "what is different, is dangerous" and "what is different, is curious". On the other hand, individuals in high uncertainty cultures tend to be high in certainty orientation.

Power Distance

Members of high power distance cultures like India accept that power is a part of the way in which society is structured. Thus the hierarchical relationship between boss and subordinate has a much greater significance than in low power distance cultures like Germany where people consider themselves as much more equal. Thus in communications, the German counterpart will quickly connect and communicate with whatever level in the organization which is responsible. In India, on the other hand, there is a tendency to deal with "appropriate" level e.g. a Managing Director in India will except a communication only from the Managing Director on the other side. It sometimes comes as a culture shock to receive communications on important matters from a secretary or a subordinate who happens to deal with the subject.

Gender

The dominance of masculinity in a culture can lead to differences in which the employees in such cultures behave. In masculinity dominated cultures for example Japan, Germany, Switzerland etc., employees consider it an ingrained duty to work. Notice how Sgt Crowley said what he wants to do is to get back to work and look after his family. In countries like India, where masculinity is not so dominant, the tendency is to do just enough work to make a living. At the individual levels masculinity manifests in aggressive and dominant behavior as opposed to typical feminine traits such as being compassionate, sensitive and warm.

A manager needs to be sensitized to these dimensions before he steps into the cross-cultural minefield of verbal and written communication. Germans generally stick to the subject which is being discussed and even if they have other issues to discuss they will not start until they have your permission to do so. Indians often tend to use an occasion of verbal communication to move back and forth from the main subject under discussion to totally unrelated subjects. This is a usual point of conflict and Germans thus tend to view a lot of Indians to be unfocussed.

These tendencies extend to written communications and in reports. Germans in general tend to stick strictly to terms of reference of a study and if anything beyond is required, they tend to be rigid about not doing it unless it is agreed as an extra effort and, if necessary, paid for.

This is in contrast to the general Indian approach where a person carrying out a study may be expected to go well beyond the terms of reference as a matter of courtesy and no payments should be expected for this extra work. Thus contract conditions need to be carefully structured and made as explicit as possible to avoid cross cultural differences in interpretation which may lead to an enormous divergence of views and expectations. Another dimension of written contracts is that often Indians tend to make oral statements of commitments in order to arrive at a common understanding for the sake of signing a contract. During execution, it is often seen that Indians tend to get out of the oral commitments on the excuse that it is not written. This is another potential source of conflict and Germans who normally keep extensive notes of discussions, are well advised to convert all such oral transactions to 'minutes of meeting' duly signed by all parties.

This paper opens up for a discussion a vast array of topics which a student or practitioner of management could explore further in the specific context of his environment. Hopefully, as a result, it will possible, as President Obama said, to make it easier to "listen to each other" and recognize that "other people can have a different point of view"

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