

Short Communication

Driving Effective Global Leadership: A Theoretical Proposition on Breaching Cultural Communication Barriers

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Abstract

This study addresses the challenges of effective global leadership communications across cultures in our digital society. To address this global leadership challenge, the purpose of this study will be to explore tactics to reach and engage individuals across cultural borders. Globalization is a key progression for corporations to achieve new growth. Leaders and management professionals identify the benefits of managing resource costs when building teams and relationships across borders to maximize the return on innovative opportunities. Abilities to inspire and motivate individuals must also stretch across the digital ether and with that necessity brings in new cultural challenges. With our ability to provide instantaneous direction and receive prompt reactions across global time zones, leaders and managers have added a new dimension to drive effective communications with followers to bridge cross cultural practices. Two dimensions of cultures are identified in terms of high-context and low-context societies to present how appropriate tactics are implemented to harmonize communications. The focus of these societies varies within cultures and current digital technologies provide the foundation for a deep-dive analysis at an individual level to identify specific values and practices. The theoretical expansion of new studies to eradicate broad cross-cultural dimensions and focus on individual cultural tactics can be transformed utilizing technology and recognizing generational awareness for the evolution of globalization and cultural-individualism. Leaders implementing these tactics will be empowered to breach the culture barriers of globalization for effective communications and drive positive leadership outcomes.

Keywords: leadership, culture barriers, effective communication, Globalization, high-context, low-context, cross-cultural communications, digital technology

1 Introduction

Throughout history, people have connected with each other through communication. Irrespective of all the physical and language barriers, humans have been communicating with each other while existing in various groups, communities, and societies. Cultural influences, from several levels, lead to differences between the individuals' perceptions, creating barriers in communication and organizational communication (Nicoleta, 2012). The issue of communication between individuals and between groups becomes a problem of effective communication and mutual understanding between cultures (Miulescu, 2014). The purpose of this study is to explore methods to bridge the gap in effective communication across high-context and low-context cultures. Specifically, this study will view the social constructs of awareness, knowledge, and skill.

2 Culture and Communication

Hall's (1976) categorical distinctions between low-context and high-context cultures have been used to explicate dimensions of cultural variability that explains similarities and differences in communication between cultures (Gudykunst and Nishida, 1986, 1993; Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey, 1988; Gudykunst, Matsumoto, Ting-Toomey, Nishida, Kim, and Heyman, 1996). In Hall's view, cultures are differentiated by the communication that predominates (Allen, Long, O'Mara, and Judd, 2003). Context is the environment in which the communication takes place (Hall, 1976). "A high-context communication or message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit part of the language. A low-context communication is just the opposite; i.e., the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code" (Hall, 1976 pg. 79). It is generally assumed

that low-context communication predominates in individualist cultures and high-context communication predominates in collectivistic cultures (Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey, 1988).

Differences between individualistic, low-context cultures and collectivistic, high-context cultures are manifested in different predispositions toward specific dimensions of communication (Allen et al., 2003, p. 132). A construct that appears consistent with the theoretical aspects of such cultural diversity is “communication style” (Allen et al., 2003, p. 132). Norton (1978) provided an effective measure of communication style, or “the way one verbally and para-verbally interacts to signal how literal meaning should be taken, interpreted, and understood” (p. 99). From this perspective, those from high-context cultures would be expected to reflect more openness, while those from low-context cultures would be contentious, more impressionistic, and present a stronger overall communicator image that those from high-context cultures (Gudykunst and Nishida, 1993).

3 High-Context v. Low-Context Communications

Croucher, Bruno, McGrath, Adams, McGahan, Suits, and Huckins (2012) argue that “context is the environment in which communication takes place” (p. 65). Therefore, since context is significant to cross-cultural communications, it can be deduced that different cultures approach cross-cultural communications from a viewpoint that is rooted within their respective cultural context. In terms of those deeply rooted viewpoints which establish a cultural context, House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, and Gupta (2004) introduce the concept of shared-ness of cultural markers. Shared markers are common among a collective and they reflect the inherent cultural thoughts, feelings, reactions, historical context, religious beliefs, and identifies of the culture. Although the current conceptualization of the contextual or cultural markers for this paper are limited in scope and by no means comprehensive, it is important to observe the terms that are equal with or tantamount to shared markers as used in this work. Some examples include, psycholinguistic mechanisms, contextual cues, non-verbal communication cues, verbal codes, and intentions.

Croucher et al. (2012) explore the notion of how cultural variables can influence how people from dissimilar cultures approach conflict management. Moreover, it can be implied that divergence is inherent in the creation of barriers to cross-cultural communication. In the alternative, having awareness, knowledge and skill in relation to the cultural variables can serve to facilitate cross-cultural communication. In this regard, the authors provide perspective on the differences between communication styles in high- and low-context cultures. Accordingly, Croucher et al. (2012) provide that “individuals from high-context cultures use more ‘implicit communication codes, point-logic style, intuitive-affective rhetoric, and ambiguous, indirect strategies’ in conflict” (p. 65). Each of these conflict strategies are comprised of shared markers which must be apprehended and understood by persons seeking to effectively communicate cross-culturally. If a person lacks sufficient awareness, knowledge and skills to appreciate these non-verbal communication cues, the cross-cultural communication may suffer as a result of this deficiency.

In the alternative, “individuals from low-context cultures used solution-oriented conflict styles more than individuals from high-context cultures, and individuals from high-context cultures preferred non-confrontation” (Croucher, Bruno, McGrath, Adams, McGahan, Suits & Huckins, 2012, p. 65). These shared markers imply the need for the development of cross-cultural communication competencies. Although there exists a diversity of frameworks which serve to create certain hindrances to the conceptualization of dimensions of culture, Sue (2001) argues that the development

of multi-cultural communication is founded upon specific cultural competencies that are bound within three primary dimensions. Within these three dimensions, there exist three distinct components. According to Sue (2001), the first dimension consists of components that include shared markers or attributes that are specific to a particular race or cultural cluster, e.g. Anglo, Germanic European, African, Latin American. The second dimension of multi-cultural communication consists of the components of cross-cultural communications, e.g. “awareness of attitudes and beliefs, knowledge and skills” (Sue, 2001, pp. 791-792). The third dimension consists of foci, or components that relate to the environmental considerations of the person seeking to bridge cross-cultural communication barriers, e.g. “individual, professional, organizational or societal environments” (Sue, 2001, pp. 791-792).

Accordingly, Hynes, Kabakhidze and Suvirova (2018) argue that since consciousness and understanding are functions which aid the depiction and comprehension of the mechanisms of communication, cross-cultural dialogue requires an understanding of the ethnic and cultural dimensions of civilization to achieve effective cross-cultural communications. This infers the need for the apprehension of the three-dimensional model which considers the components of cross-cultural communications. Consequently, Hynes et al. (2018) propose that cross-cultural dialogue requires an understanding of “ethnosociocultural context and psycholinguistic mechanisms of speech perception and speech production” (p. 52). It can be argued that these contexts and mechanisms are embodied within the multidimensional model for developing cultural competence espoused by Sue (2001). Moreover, Hynes et al. (2018) propose that the underlying symbolic codes which are embedded within the cultural paradigm depict the “interconnection between symbol, code, act of communication, consciousness and national world view” (p. 52). This interconnection implies the need to possess cultural awareness, knowledge and skill regarding the multidimensional components of cross-cultural competencies necessary to bridge the differences that could serve to create barriers between high- and low-context cultures.

4 Awareness, Knowledge, and Skills

Banytė and Inčiūrienė (2012) provide that raising cultural awareness is essential to establishing effective and competent intercultural communication. The authors argue that although globalization is extant in our present day, cultural diversity and the importance of those divergences should never be undervalued when attempting to communicate cross-culturally or cross-nationally. Persons who seek to effectively communicate across cultures must be mindful of key cultural markers that are deeply ingrained within different collectives. House et al. (2004) argue that cross-cultural communicators must concentrate upon the *shared-ness* of the cultural markers within a *collective* if they seek to bridge cultural differences. Consequently, persons who seek to communicate across cultures must strive to acquire a level of awareness, knowledge, and skills that recognize and understand the cultural markers of the collective.

Banytė et al. (2012) contend that “language is the most visible expression” of a culture (p. 179). However, it is important to understand that although language is the most visible expression of a culture, the most important aspects of a culture are those distinctions that are not apparent. It is important to recognize that the most significant considerations of a culture are those that are below the surface of the visible expressions of language. Accordingly, the process of interacting with peoples of different cultures can be *disrupted* by an absence of awareness, knowledge, and skills which could contribute to the ability to perceive the “self – identity and systems

of thinking, acting, feeling, and communicating” of a person from a culture with a different communication context (Banytė and Inčiūrienė, 2012, p. 179). Herein lies the notion of how disregarding cultural markers or indicators can result in creating barriers to cross-cultural communication. More specifically, cross-cultural communications can ultimately be disrupted by failing to have enough awareness, knowledge and skills of what House et al. (2004) term as common *shared processes* that are embraced by members of a collective.

Accordingly, House et al. (2004) offer that these shared processes are embodied in the communal “thoughts, feelings and reactions” exemplified by members of the collective (p. 57). In other words, what do members of a collective think about political events, finances, or power? How do members of a collective feel about loyalty to friends or family? How do members of a collective feel about confrontation? Another question that arises is, does the person seeking to communicate across cultures have enough awareness, knowledge, and skills to know how members of a collective react to unexpected events, mistakes or gender issues?

Additionally, House et al. (2004) propose that culture is embodied within the collective identities and social constructs that give meaning to the events shared by the culture, e.g. the development of the language; the historical context, and the religious beliefs and identities (p. 57). In this regard, does the person seeking to communicate cross-culturally have enough awareness, knowledge, and skills to comprehend the meaning of historical events that are common to a certain culture? Does the person who intends to bridge the dissimilar cultures possess adequate awareness, knowledge, and skill to appreciate the language and religious differences that are manifest within a culture?

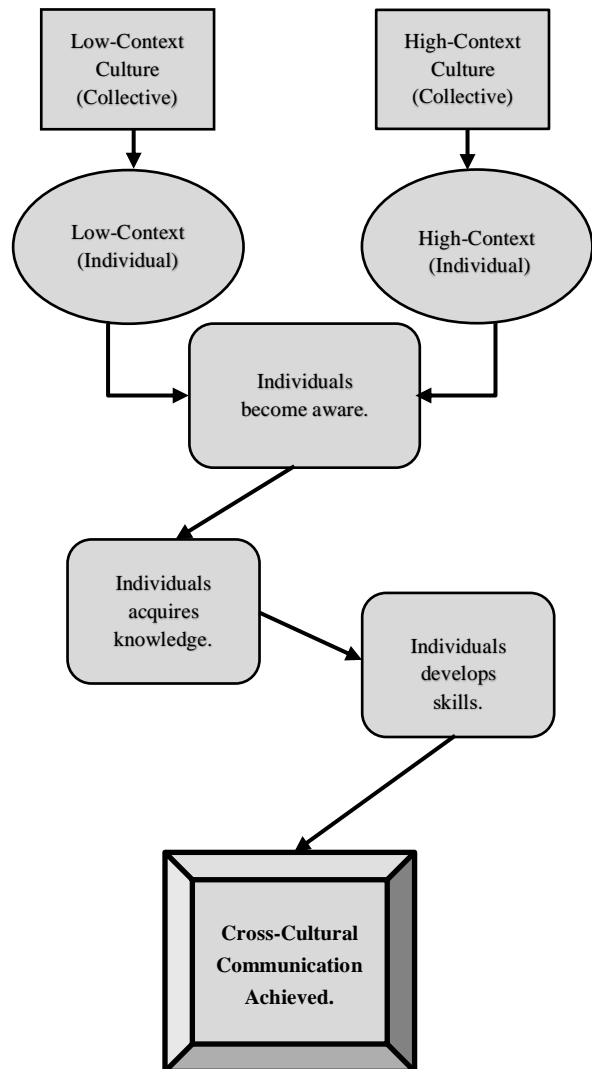
Collins, Villagran and Sparks (2008) argue that cultural and linguistic differences result in barriers to communication which inhibit the realization of effective cross-cultural communications within the healthcare industry. Consequently, these communication barriers ultimately serve to inhibit cross-cultural patient care. Collins et al. (2008) report that health care disparities among Latinos stem from a lack of knowledge regarding attitudes about cultural and social values. According to Collins et al. (2008) communication barriers stem from a “lack of culturally and linguistically appropriate messages” (p. 334). It can be deduced that the lack of awareness, knowledge, and skills necessary to bridge the gaps between high-context and low-context cultures contribute to impeding the delivery of “the actual content or words in a message” (Collins, Villagran & Sparks, 2008, p. 334).

Ribbens (2007) warns that differences in *language-specific behavior* between high-context and low-context cultures could result in misinterpretation of the intentions of the speaker and the resultant behavior being misinterpreted as offensive by the recipient, thereby seriously undermining worker productivity (p. 72). Accordingly, it can be inferred that cross-cultural misinterpretations have the potential to negatively impact the effectiveness of cross-cultural engagements. Moreover, Ribbens (2007) offers that, “it is not uncommon for people to be judged as evasive, irresponsible or even deceitful on account of differences in conversational styles or ignorance of politeness markers that go unnoticed” (p. 72). These considerations harden the need for the development of awareness, knowledge and skills for persons seeking to engage and communicate across cultures.

5 Plain Model of Cross-Cultural Communication

Although cultures are the environments wherein individuals learn about their respective symbols and heroes, either implicitly or explicitly, bridging cross-cultural communication barriers occurs at the individual level. Neither cultures nor countries have the ability to produce the initiative or

desire required for an individual to aspire to bridge cross-cultural communication barriers. Although cultures can have collective awareness, knowledge or skills, the cognitive exercises required to bridge cross-cultural communication barriers occur at the individual level.



6 Analysis

In order to address these questions, we will review the content cited to discover linkages between a variety of studies in a meta-analysis. This meta-analysis will allow us to determine if there are links that may or may not have been identified historically or if there are other opportunities for further studies. Our meta-analysis will begin by focusing on Social Awareness Factors, Social Knowledge factors, and Social Skills. By assessing the results other researchers have already analyzed regarding these factors, we can set the foundation for the next phase of our analysis. Leveraging the data from Croucher et al (2012), we identified the differences in 4 countries, India, Ireland, Thailand and the United States.

Overall the team found that when considering context as the “environment in which communications take place (Hall, 1976)”, utilizing the Conflict Style Instrument (Oetzel, 1998) and Rahim’s 1983 version of the Conflict Inventory (ROCI-II) it was discovered that with a statistical significance:

Welch's $F(3, 1,747)=66.14, p<.0001$ ($n_2=.10$) high-context nations prefer avoidance and compromise: Welch's $F(3, 1,760)=36.58, p<.0001$ ($n_2=.06$), with the main effect for national culture being the most significant preference: Welch's $F(3, 1,759)=30.01, p<.0001$ ($n_2=.05$) compared with low-context nations. Whereas the low-context nations preferred a dominating style: Welch's $F(3, 1,775)=62.14, p<.0001$ ($n_2=.10$) or integrating style: Welch's $F(3, 1,744)=76.79, p<.0001$ ($n_2=.12$)

Next, we identified countries that were low-context cultures using explicit statements, individualistic and conscientious attributes as identified above. We compare these with countries that are high-context: using internalized communication, collectivistic cultures and openness. We discovered through the research of Allen, Long, O'Mara and Judd (2014) that they had identified differences in communication between native English speakers and non-native English speakers that show statistically significant differences in native and non-native speaker communications and apprehension in communications. This provided a baseline that the information we are seeking is adding to previous research. However, we needed to find additional studies in order to conduct our meta-analysis. The results from this test also concluded that Americans tend to be more assertive [$t(414) = 3.42, p < .02$] and prefer dominance [$F(217) = 1.89, p < .05$] when dealing with high-context cultures. This affirms Croucher's findings.

Liu, Chua, and Stahl (2010) conducted research into the differences in communications between China and the US. Having identified the US as a high-context culture and China as a low-context culture (SITE), assessing their results will allow us to infer potential differences between high and low-context cultures. The differences identified when comparing these two cultures showed a significant impact between the high-versus-low context communications.

The key factor in their research was to understand the quality of the communication experience (QCE) and the impact on negotiation outcomes in business across cultures. As one would expect, it was discovered that intercultural negotiations scored higher on all three dimensions (Clarity, Responsiveness, and Comfort) with Chinese respondents scoring highest on Clarity and lower on Comfort than their American counterparts: ($M_{\text{Chinese}} = 4.27, SD = 1.52; M_{\text{American}} = 3.45, SD = 1.55$), $t(70) = 8.38, p < .05$) and ($M_{\text{Chinese}} = 3.21, SD = 1.33; M_{\text{American}} = 3.89, SD = 1.29$), $t(70) = -7.85, p < .05$) respectively, while there was no significant difference in Responsiveness.

Finally, we found a more recent study from Allen, O'Mara and Long (2014) that provided another level of detail on the communications, certainty, satisfaction and interpersonal differences in communications. It is clear from their work that communications competency and apprehension in Communication Certainty and Interpersonal Solidarity show a statistically significant difference from one culture to another. High-context cultures showed less apprehension in communications and resulted in feelings of competence, certainty and satisfaction along with a greater level of interpersonal solidarity. However, when dealing with intercultural communications, Americans were less certain, less satisfied and showed lower solidarity with their counterparts. Their findings show that the different level of emphasis placed on oral communications between high- and low-context cultures impacted communication effectiveness.

7 Future Research & the Individual Digital Persona

Several substantial studies have provided empirical research for cross-cultural engagements. House (2004) GLOBE phase 2 studies included 62 societies to expand upon efforts published by Hofstede (2013) from employees of a global corporation in the 1980's. Additional efforts by Hall

(1976) began the structure of high-context and low-context communications reaching from individualistic and collective societies. The collaboration of these extensive efforts provides a solid foundation for effective leadership. To expand to support effective communication, additional factors are suggested for appropriate deep dives into societies and individual specific alignments.

Expansion at the individual level with the constructs of awareness, knowledge, and skills are required for proper alignment. To fully dissect awareness, emotional intelligence (EI) levels at the individual level require at a minimum the analysis of self-awareness, to realize differences in cultures, and relationship management to manage change, influence, and teamwork (Goleman, 2011). To expand upon knowledge, future studies require further analysis with the individual personality traits. Expanding in the openness domain, to include facets of action to try new activities, and the agreeableness domain, to measure modesty, altruism, and empathy, provides new individual insights to reflect on knowledge discovery (Kraczla, 2017). To expand upon the practice to acquire the appropriate skills, Hofstede (2010) reflects the inclusion of awareness and knowledge. We advocate the individual personality domain of conscientiousness for identify the facets of self-discipline and deliberation to think before acting (Kraczla, 2017). Technology and individual identification of specific EI and personality facets empowers leaders to recognize cross-cultural structures for positive engagements. We recommend that a future study be conducted wherein the multiple dimensions we have identified be explicitly studied in order to add to the knowledge in this field of study. As with House (2004) Gestalt Fit constructs, he aligned cultural leadership theories with leadership behaviors. We post diving into dimensions of each individual construct of culture context as an Individual 'Fit' or Individual Digital Persona (IDP) to break the culture barriers.

8 Conclusion

Kim (2010) argues that because there exists an increased awareness of the need for more comprehensive research regarding intercultural communications, researchers must overcome the tendency to generalize when considering the dissimilarities and incongruities that present themselves among a diversity of "cultures, languages, religions, and traditions" (p. 166). Kim (2010) maintains that those who seek to bridge the differences between high- and low-context cultures must not rely solely upon contextual and non-verbal communication cues may serve to undermine the understanding that there is more to sheer verbal codes and "indirect/implicit communication" (p. 169). Kim (2010) warns against painting cultures with the "same broad brush" (p. 169). Effective communication barriers are broken when the discussion between two individuals is agreed upon. Ultimately, the individual follower provides the ultimate measure when this is satisfied. Hofstede (2013) advocates this analysis level as individuals may not always reflect the society dimension of the larger population. Leveraging digital technologies with Big Data platforms, we posit the time is now to begin focusing on the Individual Digital Persona (IDP) and move away from broad based cultural studies for better business outcomes.

Conflict of Interest: none declared.

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