

HOW TO ACQUIRE SKILLS OF EFFECTIVE BUSINESS COMMUNICATION: METHODOLOGICAL HINTS

Nowadays International Business spreads more and more all over the world. Many transnational corporations have their representatives in different countries. They all work with partners and very often they speak different languages. But in this situation business must also remain profitable. One of the ways to be on the top is to communicate effectively, to understand partners and to be understandable by them. So we can see that today we have to pay great attention to the international business language, which is English.

If a man wants to be successful in business, he must know how to communicate, giving presentations, having meeting, negotiations and or being involved in some other communicative situations. Effective communicators have many tools at their disposal when they want to get across a message. Whether they write or speak, they must know how to put together the words that will convey their message. They reinforce their words with gestures and actions. They establish eye contact with an interlocutor, listen to what he says and think about his feelings and needs. At the same time they study his reactions, picking up the nuances of his response by watching his face and body, listening to his tone and voice, and evaluating his words. They absorb information just as efficiently as they transmit it, relying on both non-verbal and verbal cues. To become effective communicators learners need to be taught the main hints of successful and productive communication.

Basics of intercultural business communication

The first step in learning to communicate with people from other cultures is to become aware of what culture means. Our awareness of intercultural differences is both useful and necessary in today's world of business.

a) Understanding cultures

A person may not realize it, but he belongs to several cultures. The most obvious is the culture he shares with all other people who live in the same country. But this person also belongs to the other cultural groups, such as ethnic group, a religious group, a fraternity or sorority, or perhaps a profession that has its own special language and formalities.

So what exactly is culture? It is useful to define *culture* as a system of shared symbols, beliefs, attitudes, values, expectations, and norms of behavior. Thus all members of a culture have, and tend to act on, similar assumptions about how people should think, behave and communicate. Distinct groups that exist within a major culture are more properly referred to as *subcultures*.

Cultures and subcultures vary in several ways that affect intercultural communication:

- *Stability*. Conditions in the culture may be stable or may be changing slowly or rapidly.

- *Complexity*. Cultures vary in the accessibility of information. In North America information is contained in explicit codes, including words, whereas in Japan a great deal of information is conveyed implicitly, through body language, physical context, and the likes.

- *Composition*. Some cultures are made up of many diverse and disparate subcultures; others tend to be more homogeneous.

- *Acceptance*. Cultures vary in their attitude towards outsiders. Some are openly hostile or maintain a detached aloofness. Others are friendly and cooperative towards strangers.

As it is seen, cultures vary widely. There is no wonder that most of us need special training before we can become comfortable with a culture other than our own.

b) Difficulties of intercultural business communication: language barriers.

The more differences there are between the people, who are communicating, the more difficult it is to communicate effectively. The major problems in inter-cultural business communication are language barriers and cultural differences. In this work the attention is paid only to the language barriers and to the main procedures that can make everyday-life of businessmen easier, such as meetings, presentations and negotiations.

If business is doing by an American in London, he will not obviously have much of a language problem. He may encounter a few unusual terms or accents in the 29 countries in which English is an official language, but his problems will be relatively minor. Language barriers will also be relatively minor when he deals with people who use English as a second language (and some 650 million people fall into this category). Some of these millions are extremely fluent: others have only an elementary command of English [7]. Although he may miss a few subtleties in dealing with those who are less fluent in English, he will still be able to communicate.

The real problem with language arises when he deals with people who speak virtually no English. In situations like this, he has very few options: he can learn their language, he can use an intermediary or a translator, or he can teach them his own language. Becoming fluent in a new language (which everyone must do to conduct business in that language) is time-consuming. The U.S. State Department, for example, gives its Foreign Service officers a six-month language training program and expects them to continue their language education at their foreign posts. Even the Berlitz method, which is famous for the speed of its results, requires a month of intensive effort - 13 hours a day, 5 days a week. It is estimated that minimum proficiency in another language requires at least 240 hours of study over 8 weeks; more complex

languages, such as Arabic and Chinese, require more than 480 hours [5]. Language courses can be quite expensive, Unless someone is planning to spend several years abroad or to make frequent trips over an extended period, learning another language may take more time, effort, and money than he is able to spend.

The option of teaching other people to speak a foreign language does not appear to be very practical at first glance. However, many multinational companies do, in fact, have language-training programs for their foreign employees. Tenneco, for example, instituted an English-language training program for its Spanish-speaking employees in a New Jersey plant. The classes concentrated on practical English for use at work. According to the company, these classes were a success: accidents and grievances declined, and productivity improved [5].

In general, the magnitude of the language barrier depends on whether you are writing or speaking. Written communication has its own rules and conventions. In this work a verbal conversation is the focus of attention. Therefore it is necessary to be aware of the problems, which arise in connection with this type of communication.

c) Barriers to oral communication

There exists a common viewpoint among specialists in teaching methodology that oral communication usually offers more problems than written communication. The ones who have ever studied a foreign language know from personal experience that it's easier to write in a foreign language than to conduct a conversation. You're likely to have a hard time of understanding the pronunciation if the person is not proficient in English. For example, many foreigners notice no difference between the English sounds *v* and *w*, they say *wary* for *very*. At the same time, many people from North America cannot pronounce some of the sounds that are frequently used in other parts of the world.

In addition to pronouncing sounds differently, people use their voices in different ways, a fact that often leads to misunderstanding. The Russians, for example, speak in flat level tones in their native tongue. When they speak English, they maintain this pattern, and Westerners may assume that they are bored or rude. Middle Easterners tend to speak more loudly than Westerners and may therefore mistakenly be considered more emotional. On the other hand, the Japanese are soft-spoken, a characteristic that implies politeness or humility to Westerners [2].

Idiomatic expressions are another source of confusion. If an English native speaker tells a foreigner that a certain product "doesn't cut the mustard," chances are that the latter will fail to communicate. Even when the words make sense, their meanings may differ according to the situation. When speaking a foreign language one needs to follow these simple guidelines:

- *Try to eliminate "noise"*. Pronounce words clearly, and stop at distinct punctuation points. Make one point at a time.

- *Look for feedback*. Be alert to glazed eyes or signs of confusion in your listener. Realize that nods and smiles do not necessarily mean understanding. Don't be afraid to ask, "Is that clear?" and be sure to check the listener's comprehension through specific questions. Encourage the listener to ask questions.

- *Rephrase your sentence when necessary*. If someone doesn't seem to understand what you have said, choose simpler words; don't just repeat the sentence in a louder voice.

- *Don't talk down to the other person*. Do not over enunciate and "blame" the listener for lack of comprehension. It is preferable to use phrases such as "Am I going too fast?" rather than "Is this too difficult for you?"

- *Use objective, accurate language*. Do not follow the tendency of throwing around adjectives such as "fantastic" and "fabulous", which foreigners consider unreal and overly dramatic. Calling something a "disaster" will give rise to images of war and death; calling someone a "prince" may be taken literally.

- *Let other people finish what they have to say*. If you interrupt, you may miss something important. It may also show a lack of respect.

These are the most common and worth mentioning points of inter-cultural communication. Actually they are the basis of a businessman's behaviour in his everyday life. The necessity of being effective remains actual in all its communicative aspects and situations.

Presentation

The first and one of the most important parts of business communication is presentation. This is the opportunity to introduce one's company, project, plans and so on. Therefore the speaker must be well prepared to make good impressions on the audience.

The first we need to lay emphasis on is the rule for speakers - 'You're lost if you lose your audience'. The speaker should do everything to avoid such a situation. The secrets of presentation success are the following: clear objectives, definite plan and apparent signals.

Any presentation requires a distinct strategy or plan to help the presenter reach his objectives. The aim is not to pass away twenty minutes talking nonstop and showing a lot of nice pictures. It is to convey a message that is worth hearing by the audience who want to comprehend it. However, how many speakers really hold the audience's attention! What is the secret for those who do! First, find out about the audience and what they need to know. Plan what you're going to say and say it clearly and concisely.

A good presentation has to have accurate structure. The parts of it are introduction, main body and conclusion or summary.

a) Introduction

In any presentation the beginning is crucial. Certainly there are some things, which are essential in an introduction:

- subject/title of talk;
- the scope of your talk: what is and is not included;
- an outline of the structure of your talk.

b) Main part

The introduction is followed by the main body of the presentation. It contains the details of the subject or themes described in the introduction.

A good speaker uses various signals to hold the audience's attention and make the information comprehensible. One type of signaling is to produce a list with a phrase like *There are three things we have to consider*. The speaker then says what the three things are and talks about each one at the required level of detail. For example: *There are three types of price that we have to think about: economic price, market price and psychological price. Let's look at each of these in more detail. First, economic price. This is based on production costs and the need to make a profit...* and the speaker goes to describe this type of price. After that, he goes on talking about the market price and so on.

Another signaling technique is to give a link between parts of the presentation. Say where one part of the talk finishes and another starts. For example, a well-organized presentation usually contains different parts and progression from one part to the next must be clear, with phrases like *That's all I want to say about the development of the product. Now let's turn to the actual marketing plan*. This technique is very helpful to the audience, including those who are mainly interested in one part only.

One more type of signaling is sequencing of information. This usually follows a logical order often based on time reference. So a project may be described in terms of the background, the present situation and the future. Key words in sequencing information are *first, then, next, after that, later, at the end, finally*, etc.

Still another technique, which helps to emphasize key points, is careful repetition. The idea may be exemplified by the following sample: *I've already said, there is no alternative but to increase production by 100 per cent or I'd like to emphasize the main benefit of the new design -it achieves twice as much power with half as much fuel*.

The final point concerns timing and quantity of information. Psychologists have suggested that concentration is reduced after about twenty minutes without a break or a change of activity. Furthermore, audiences should not be overburdened with technical details or given too many facts to remember. It is claimed that to ask people to remember more than three things in a five-minute talk is too much. Some say that seven is the maximum number of any length of presentation [4]. The data may be

disputed. Anyway every speaker needs to think about exactly how much information of a particular type a specific audience is likely to absorb and to plan accordingly.

All the above-mentioned techniques are especially useful in making the main body easily understood. They help the audience to follow the information and to remember it. They are also useful for the speaker to keep to the planned structure and to know exactly what stage has been reached at all times during the presentation. Clear structure doesn't just contribute to the presenter but the audience as well. In many presentations the main body can be helpfully divided into different parts. The main parts, each with a main heading, refer to the Introduction. Clearly there are many ways of arranging the main body of a presentation. Quite often different sections may be split up themselves into smaller segments of information.

One more point to make presentation interesting and easy to understand is to use visual aids, e.g. graphs, charts, tables, diagrams, pictures and so on. But we must remember that "The great danger (in using visual aids) is that presenters place the major emphasis on visual aids and relegate themselves to the major role of narrator or technician. On the contrary he is central to the presentation. The visual aid needs him, his interpretation, his explanation, his conviction and his justification" [1]. Visual aids can make information more memorable and they help the speaker. However, they must literally support what the speaker says and not simply replace the spoken information. It is also not enough just to read the text from a visual aid.

There are many advantages of correct use of visual aids. They can show information, which is not easily expressed in words, or they can highlight information. They provoke the audience to employ other means of receiving information; they bring in variety and therefore increase the audience's attention. They save time and they clarify complex information.

c) Ending

The last part of the presentation is the ending. It can be represented by either summary or conclusion. The differences are the following:

- In the summary we say nothing new. We only pay attention to the most important points of our presentation.
- In the conclusion we have to infer and to show how important the topic of the presentation is.

It is also necessary to mention one more part, which follows the whole presentation and is open for questions. A nightmare scenario is as follows: the speaker finishes his talk with the words "Any questions?" This is met by total silence. Not a word. Then an embarrassed shuffling, a cough... How can this be avoided? A possible answer is that if the presentation is good enough and the audience is clearly interested in it, someone will have some thing to say or enquire.

Another way to avoid the nightmare of utter silence is to end with an instruction to the audience. This should ensure immediate audience's response. Giving an instruction is often useful in sales presentations and where the audience has special requirements.

Here are two examples:

1) a sales presentation

After talking about his or her products or services, the speaker wants the audience to explain their needs and says: *'Okay-I told you about the ways Snappo can help companies like yours. Now for us to do that, we need to know more about the way you work. For example, tell me about your particular situation, tell me what in particular may interest you.'*

This places the responsibility for the audience to respond - unless of course they have a completely negative view of both the presenter and the message! Assuming they are well disposed towards the potential supplier, it is probably in their interests to offer some information and begin the discussion

2) a training manager

Speaking to the audience of Department managers, vice-presidents, or potential trainees, the Training Manager has outlined recommendations and explained what is available. He/she can end with: 'Right! I've told you what we can offer. Now tell me what are your impressions, what are your priorities and what else do you need to know now?'

Another option is for the speaker to have a question prepared. Ask something, which you know the audience will have to answer. This often breaks the ice and starts the discussion. It may be possible to single out an individual who is most likely to have a question to ask you or a comment to make, or it may be apparent from earlier contact perhaps during the reception or a coffee break, that a particular individual has something to say or to ask.

The above described rules of conveying information and delivering a presentation may help to avoid disadvantageous situations described in the article "When incompetence is tantamount to fraud" of John Kirkman (The Financial Times, May 23 1986):

... The conference offered 20 papers. Of the 20 speakers, 12 overran their allotted time, so the programme on both days fell behind schedule.

Speaker 1 got slides out of sequence with talk, distractingly putting them up before she reached the relevant point in her script. Read inexorably through the script, stumbling over written word-clusters she could not articulate.

Speaker 2 put up transparencies on overhead projector with comment 'You won't be able to read these.' Correct! Had an electronic watch that beeped at 15 minutes; commented that the beep meant time was up; went on speaking. Overran by 10 per cent.

Speaker 3 used first five of allocated 15 minutes to tell an anecdote relevant to talk. Overran to 27 per cent.

One speaker's monotonic mumble defeated even the halter microphone he was asked to wear because we could not hear him. He understood the chair's warning about time, and stopped three minutes early. Blessed relief!

Another speaker did not know whether or not he had a slide to illustrate his point: 'I think we have a slide for this, it is slide six. Oh no, sorry. Well, we will go on'. How were we supposed to follow, if he himself was lost?"[3]

Meeting

The reason for having a meeting is to make a decision. Information may be given in the presentation followed by questions or discussion, but it is to get a consensus that the meeting has been arranged in the first place. Achieving this in the most time- and cost- effective manner possible is a goal that everyone attending the meeting must share.

As a rule decision-making meetings need to follow a specific structure. The rational decision process includes the following steps:

- study/ discuss/ analyze the situation
- define the problem
- set an objective
- state imperatives and desirables
- generate alternatives
- establish evaluation criteria
- evaluate alternatives
- choose among alternatives.

One other aspect of decision-making is the necessity for participants in the meeting to be aware of one another's needs and perceptions. If these are not effectively communicated, if there is an insufficient degree of understanding of one another's requirements, then an acceptable conclusion is unlikely to be reached. There are four essential elements in decision-making:

- awareness;
- understanding;
- empathy;
- perception.

It is only when we accept that communication is a two-way process that any form of communication, including decision making, will become genuinely successful and effective.

Decision-making is not always an identifiable activity. Frequently the discussion may be evolved into a consensus, which can be recognized and verbalized by the leader without the need to 'put things to the vote'.

Regardless of the type of a meeting (information or decision making), it is important to close with a restatement of objective, a summary of what was accomplished, and a list of agreed action that needs to be taken.

After a meeting, it is essential to follow up with action. A brief memorandum of conclusions should be written and distributed. Appropriate people who did not attend the meeting should be informed about essential decisions made.

Finally, each meeting should be viewed as a learning experience. Future meetings should be improved by soliciting evaluations and deciding what action is required to conduct better meetings.

Negotiation

Negotiation is an essential part of every-day business life. It can take place at any time and in any place. Negotiation is a kind of meeting, but contrary to the latter it may be held in some unexpected and uncomfortable place such as a street or the stairs.

There are several definitions of negotiation. It is said to be "the process for resolving conflict between two or more parties whereby both or all modify their demands to achieve a mutually acceptable compromise". Thus, it is "the process of changing both parties' views of their ideal outcome into an attainable outcome" [6].

The need of negotiation arises when we are not fully in control of events. Negotiation is the place to handle mutual differences or conflict of:

- interests (wages, hours, work conditions, prices: seller VS buyer)
- rights (different interpretations of an agreement).

The aim of a negotiation is to come to an agreement, which is acceptable to both sides, and to preserve the overall relationships. While specific issues are to be negotiated, common interests are still to be maintained. Negotiations do not mean "war". Negotiators can still be friends and partners.

There are four main stages of negotiation:

- Preparing objectives, information, strategy
- Discussing (argue) and signaling willingness to move
- Propose and bargain
- Close and agree.

While preparing for the negotiation it is important not only to prepare supporting arguments but also to define objectives. Objectives should be realistic and attainable and have certain priorities. It is also necessary to investigate the opponent's plans and priorities, which can be rather difficult.

The objectives should be classified basically as follows:

- Like Ideal but least important
- Intend Achievable, a range of possibilities
- Must The real limit

The general strategy for negotiation is to have a negotiating team of three people who will also be involved in the preparation.

- Leader The person who will do the talking and conduct the negotiations
- Summarizer The person who will ask questions and summaries for control.
- Observer The person not involved in the actual negotiations whose role is to watch, listen and record.

80 % of the negotiating time is spent arguing. If it equals 100% the negotiation will break down [6]. There are two kinds of arguing:

- Reasonable and constructive Debates, discussions
- Unreasonable and destructive Emotional quarrels

The opponent may try to divert you by escaping into destructive behaviour. In this case your behaviour should not be to interrupt, but listen and control your feelings. Even if the battle is won, the war can be lost.

A negotiator should be constructive in arguments and try to get information by asking open questions or even leading questions. One thing should be tackled at a time and the opponent should be made justify his case item by item.

It is important to be non-committal and to state only ideals at first. Later the information about the negotiator's position can be given, and further alternative proposals can be made. Sometimes it is necessary to challenge the opponent, so that he demonstrates his strengths.

Negotiation means movement. It may be that both parties move on one issue. It may be that each moves on different issue. The motive forces are twofold:

- Sanctions The penalty of not agreeing
- Incentives The benefits of agreeing

In both cases, the parties seek for protecting their self-interests. They will show willingness to move by sending signals.

To signal is not to show weakness. But if both parties wait for the other to signal, the result will be deadlock.

The opponent's signals will show his willingness to move. So one should listen, recognize his signals and interpret them, looking for the qualified words which are evidence of willingness to move.

Another very important point of negotiations is proposing and bargaining. Proposals should be realistic in order not to cause argument and deadlock. The language of the proposal signals one's firmness. Weak language such as "we hope..., we like..., we prefer..." should be avoided. Instead, a phrase "we propose..." is appropriate.

The final step in a negotiation is closing and agreeing. There are two aspects to it:

- When to close
- How to close

The first is the most difficult moment to recognize. There is a balance between:

- Closing too early More concessions from the opponent could have been squeezed
- Closing too late The opponents squeezed excessive concessions.

The aim of closing is to get the opposition to stop bargaining and to make an agreement. The final thing to do is to write down the agreement and agree what is written down. It is necessary to do this before leaving the negotiating table.

What characteristics should one have to be an effective negotiator? The first and the most important characteristics, from the standpoint of many executives and managers of large corporations, is *preparation and planning skills*.

The other very important characteristics are:

- Knowledge of subject matter being negotiated
- Ability to think clearly and rapidly under pressure and uncertainty
- Ability to express thoughts verbally
- Listening skills
- Judgment and general intelligence
- Integrity
- Ability to persuade others
- Patience
- Decisiveness

In spite of the existence of negotiation theories, it is frequently difficult to apply theoretical and conceptual knowledge in a practical situation. In order to be a good negotiator, one should have negotiation skills as well as a theoretical knowledge. But without a practical experience it is hard to negotiate effectively.

Interpersonal skills are very important in negotiating, but what can help a negotiating party while thinking what to do is not an elaborated theory, but a simple analysis and intuition.

Being trained to use the observed professional communicative skills in-service students become more aware, confident and efficient making their initial advancement in the upcoming career.

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