Human Communication and Cross-Cultural Effectiveness

Brent D. Ruben

Little scholarly attention has been devoted to analysis of the problems and components of professional or vocational effectiveness in cross-cultural developmental settings. This paper approaches these transfer of skills issues from the perspective of communication. Research by the author indicating the role of particular interpersonal communication skills is summarized and some implications of this work are explored.

A great deal has been written about problems sojourners encounter as they strive to adapt to the demands and challenges of a new or different cultural environment. A topic of no less importance to many persons whose professional or technical roles take them to new cultures is the question of how one functions effectively with individuals from other cultures in work and work-related contexts. Especially for the many Western advisors, technical personnel, and sponsoring governmental and private agencies involved in projects in Third World countries, such concerns are of increasing importance. This paper addresses this issue in a very basic manner from the perspective of human communication. To indicate the relevance of communication to problems of skills and knowledge transfer, a prototypical case study is presented. The case highlights some barriers to effective transfer of skills, and provides the foundation for a discussion of the professional sojourner as a teacher. Next, a summary of some recent research on the role of particular communication behaviors in cross-cultural effectiveness is presented. Finally, some implications and possible applications of these findings are explored.

A CASE STUDY

Mr. S. has accepted a position as an advisor in a Third-world country. He will be working directly with Mr. Akagara, a national. Together they will have administrative responsibility for their project. Mr. S. is eager to arrive at his post. His work experience in the U.S. seems exceptionally well-suited to the task he must accomplish in his post in the developing country, and his high level of motivation and record of consistently superior achievement reassures him — and those who selected him — that he will encounter little he can't handle in his assignment.

After having been on the job for several weeks, Mr. S. is experiencing considerable frustration. To S., it appears that Akagara and most of the subordinates lack both training and motivation. On a number of occasions S. has endeavored to point out to Akagara, tactfully, that his practices are both inefficient and ineffective. Akagara’s responses seemed to S. to indicate total indifference. On one occasion, S. suggested that he and Akagara get together one evening for a few drinks, thinking that in an informal setting he might be more successful in making Akagara aware of some of these problems. The two went out together, but nearly every effort to bring up the work situation by S. was followed by Akagara changing the subject to unrelated chatter about family and friends.
The problem became increasingly severe in the weeks that followed. It seemed to S the only way he could get the job done was to do most of it by himself. Gradually, he assumed more and more of the responsibilities which had been previously performed by Akwagara. Though he feels some concern about this situation from time to time, these feelings are more than compensated for by the knowledge that he is getting the job done which he was sent to do.

Consider the question, is S succeeding or failing? The answer, of course, depends largely upon how one defines the role of the sojourner. If one takes the point of view that the task of the sojourner consists solely of getting the job done, we would probably conclude that S is functioning effectively. Viewed from another perspective, one cannot help but conclude that the advisor has failed sadly. The job is being done at the cost of successful transfer of skills. Probable consequences of his approach include the alienation of Akwagara, a loss of credibility for Akwagara among his subordinates he must supervise after he departs, and reinforcement of the view that Western advisors are insensitive, ego-centric, and not sincerely interested in the welfare of the host country or nationals.

For S, the sponsoring agency, and the country, the consequence is a failure to be able to share knowledge and skills meaningfully. The ultimate tragedy is that S, with the best of intentions and motives, may in fact spend two years of his life believing that he is functioning as the ideal advisor. All the while, he may actually contribute to forces which retard the process of growth, change, and development in his project and in the country as a whole. As this case, and a number of writings and research well indicate, the ability to satisfactorily understand and relate to others in a cross-cultural setting is probably the single most critical ingredient necessary to an advisor's success, and essential if one is to translate their own skills and knowledge into the idiom of the culture.

THE SOJOURNER AS TEACHER

In conceptualizing the role of the sojourner or technical advisor in terms of the effective transfer-of-skills, it seems useful to think broadly of the role as one of teacher. A teacher, after all, is a person who possesses particular knowledges and skills he or she wishes to impart to others. There are two distinct components of teaching—at least of effective teaching. First, the teacher must have an appropriate mastery of skills and knowledge in his or her field. Secondly, the teacher must be able to package and deliver those understandings to other persons in such a way that they will be able to accept, utilize, and integrate them. For the sojourner, these same components are crucial.

With regard to most technical advisors selected for overseas postings, the first component is well satisfied. Whether selected for an assignment to assist with the installation of a computer or electronic communication systems, the development of educational, governmental, agricultural, economic, or industrial policy, or any of a number of other less technical positions, job related competencies are seldom a problem. The second ingredient necessary for effectiveness of the sojourner is a set of skills and knowledge totally unrelated to the job. These skills and understandings have to do with communication, and research and reports from the field indicate that such capabilities are even more critical to the success of an advisor and a project than his or her job skills.

CROSS-CULTURAL EFFECTIVENESS

For convenience, one can refer to this needed set of skills as communication competence. If job or role competence is the ability to complete a task efficiently, communication competence is the ability to effectively relate to other persons in the process. Achieving an integration of the two is important in the short and long run, and from both idealistic and practical points of view.

The importance of communication to effective cross-cultural functioning is well illustrated by the case of Mr. S. As a member of a Western culture, it is likely that to Mr. S time and money are important criteria for success; he may well view wealth and power as essential to the solution of most problems. Consider democratic or majority role as the appropriate form of governance, revere technology, regard competition as good and winning an important goal. He likely values material possessions, the scientific method, efficiency, organization, specialization, and a clear separation between work and leisure. In his communication style, he is likely to be reasonably aggressive, direct, impatient, self-assured, and to regard business as the topic of major importance in most of his interactions, attaching a lesser value to discussion of family and personal matters.

Depending upon Akwagara's cultural background, he is likely to have a quite different communicational framework. For him speed and efficiency may be irrelevant or negative values. Material possessions, competition and winning may be regarded with far less concern, and he may view extended family relationships as the primary source of power and status. The democratic model, technology, progress, and western development may be viewed with cynicism and suspicion. Conditions of living may be regarded as inevitable consequences of manifest destiny, leaving little room for individual initiative. Work and leisure may well be blended, and he may be little concerned with systematic or efficient organization, or specialization. In discussions, Akwagara may well be relatively passive, indirect, patient, and will likely place a much higher priority on the topic of family and friends, than upon business. He may also be accustomed to standing or sitting close to persons he is talking to, and to numerous gestures involving frequent physical contact. In such an instance, the two individuals have a great many barriers to overcome if either is to understand with much accuracy the words and actions of the other.

RELEVANT RESEARCH

There has been considerable research effort directed toward identifying communication behaviors which contribute to effectiveness within one's own culture. Wiemann identified three main schools of thought about face-to-face interaction. The first he characterized as the human relations or I-group approach, typified by the work of Argyris, Ch. Bochner and Kelly, and Holland and Baird. The second orientation, the social skill approach, is reflected especially in the work of Argyle and Kendon, and the third is essentially a self-presentation approach suggested in the work of Goffman, Rodnick and Wood, and Weinstein. Though attempts to consider how these approaches generalize to cross-cultural interpersonal situations have been few, a number of researchers such as Arensberg and Niehoff, Bara, Brislin and Pedersen, Gudykunst, Hammer, and Wiseman.
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Bochner; Cleveland and Mangone; and others have suggested certain personal characteristics and/or skills thought to be crucial to effectiveness in such contexts. A synthesis of findings suggested in intra- and inter-cultural writings yields some consensus. For those concerned particularly with communication, a number of such behaviors seem important. Seven of these are: (1) capacity to communicate respect; (2) capacity to be nonjudgmental; (3) capacity to personalize one’s knowledge and perceptions; (4) capacity to display empathy; (5) capacity to be flexible; (6) capacity for turn-taking; and (7) tolerance for ambiguity.

Research was undertaken by Ruben and Kealey to determine the relative importance of these communication behaviors to cross-cultural effectiveness. The findings from in-the-field research suggest that an avoidance of extreme task, self-centered, and judgmental behavior—in that order—contribute most to effective transfer-of-skills. A tolerance for ambiguity, the ability to display respect, and a personal orientation to knowledge, are next in importance in cross-cultural effectiveness, followed by empathy and turn-taking. In the following sections, these communication dimensions will be discussed and their relationship to effective transfer-of-skills briefly explored.

**TASK AND RELATIONAL BEHAVIOR**

Roles, how they are enacted, and the impact they have, have been a concern to intra- and inter-cultural researchers alike. Individuals function in a variety of roles within interpersonal, group, and organizational settings. Behaviors that involve the initiation of ideas, requests for information, seeking of clarification, evaluation of ideas, etc., are directly related to the group’s task or problem-solving activities. Behaviors that involve harmonizing, mediation, gatekeeping, attempts to regulate the evenness of contribution of group members, compromising, etc., are related to the relationship-building activities of a group.

Some situations seem to call for an intense concern for “getting the job done.” Other situations call for building group cohesiveness, encouraging participation, and making certain no one feels excluded from involvement. Westerners seem to learn to focus mostly on the former, and are typically not much concerned about how involved people feel in the process, how much group or organizational solidarity develops, how people value the products of their effort, etc. But as indicated previously, the transfer-of-skills requires not only getting a job done, but also the competence to get it done in such a way that people feel a part of the completed project and have learned something from witnessing the process. Research suggests strongly that too much concern for getting the job done can lead to failure in terms of effectiveness at skills-transfer.

Here, the Akwagara case provides an excellent illustration. Mr. S has apparently mastered the skills often demanded for success in Western occupational roles. His style, appropriate to his own cultural background, is one of fast-paced problem-solving. Yet, in a developmental context, the very skills which were perhaps critical to his selection as a cross-cultural professional, may become a liability in a culture where rapid-fire problem-solving is less valued. From such a cultural perspective, S may well be viewed as impatient, over-zealous, insensitive, and lacking concern for people. The consequences of such a response may well be to foster feelings of resentment toward S, and thereby render his technical skills totally useless, and preclude effectiveness at transfer-of-skills.

**CROSS-CULTURAL EFFECTIVENESS**

**SELF-ORIENTED BEHAVIORS**

Other role behaviors sometimes displayed by individuals in an interpersonal context are individualistic or self-centered behaviors that function in negative ways from a group’s perspective. Behaviors such as being highly resistant to ideas of others, returning to issues and points of view previously acted upon and/or dismissed by the group, attempting to call attention to oneself, seeking to project a highly positive personal image by noting achievements and professional qualifications, and attempting to manipulate the group by asserting authority, are dysfunctional in intracultural as well as in intercultural contexts.

While the S case makes no reference to what might be thought of as self-centered communicative behavior, research conducted by Ruben and Kealey suggests that such behavior patterns toward persons in one’s own culture are a good predictor of potential problems at successful interaction with persons from differing cultures.

**NON-JUDGMENTALNESS**

People like to feel that what they say is not being judged by someone else without having been given an opportunity to fully explain themselves and be sincerely listened to. When persons find themselves being interrupted before having finished speaking, or notice that someone is nodding in disagreement even before they have finished presenting their thoughts, barriers to effective relating are set in place. The likelihood of teaching or transferring a skill in such a setting is greatly lessened. Ideally, one would strive to avoid passing judgments on what others have to say until one has enough information to be fairly certain that his or her evaluations will be based on a reasonably complete understanding of the other’s point of view. When a person believes they have been fully and attentively listened to, they are generally much more receptive to hearing reactions—whether positive or negative. In addition to being of use in improving the fidelity of information transmission, non-evaluative postures seem likely to increase the receiver’s regard for the source of non-evaluative messages, and thereby improves the quality of the relationship.

Again, with S and Akwagara, it isn’t clear from the information presented whether or not S was non-judgmental or not. One may infer, however, that had S invested a bit more effort in listening to and trying to understand Akwagara’s viewpoint, some of the problems might have been alleviated. Apart from the case, it is interesting to note that persons who are non-judgmental with others in their own culture will often be more effective in cross-cultural skills transfer than persons who are highly judgmental.

**TOLERANCE FOR AMBIGUITY**

The ability to react to new and ambiguous situations with little visible discomfort can be an important asset when adapting to a new environment. Although most people probably do react with some degree of personal discomfort to new environments, some seem more able to adjust quickly to those around them. Excessive discomfort resulting from being placed in a new or different environment—or from finding the familiar
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environment altered in some critical ways — can lead to confusion, frustration, or even hostility. This may well be dysfunctional to the development of effective interpersonal relations within and across cultural boundaries. Colleagues and others may easily become the unwitting and misplaced targets of verbal hostility during periods of adjustment; and while the frustrations are often short-lived, the feelings about the situation that they may have initiated, might not be. Learning to manage the feeling of frustration associated with ambiguity can thus be critical to effective adaptation in a new environment. It is likely that a bit greater tolerance for ambiguity and tolerance for the lack of control one feels in a new environment would have aided S substantially in his efforts to integrate himself successfully into his new situation.

DISPLAY OF RESPECT

The ability to express respect and positive regard for another person has been suggested as an important component in effective interpersonal relations within and between cultures. The expression of respect can be expected to confer status upon the recipient, contribute to self-esteem, and foster positive regard for the source of the communicated respect. People like to feel that others respect them, their accomplishments, their beliefs, and what they have to say. If one is able, through gestures, eye gaze, smiles, and words of encouragement, to indicate to others that he or she is sincerely interested in them, they are much more likely to respond positively to the person and what he or she has to say. In the case study, listening to Akwagara carefully, attentively, and encouragingly as he discussed family and friends, and reciprocating in kind, would have been an important means for S to have communicated his respect, and to begin to establish a strong foundation for an effective relationship — one which would be productive and satisfying on a day-to-day basis, and one which would facilitate the transfer of S’s skills and knowledge, as he has intended.

PERSONALIZING KNOWLEDGE AND PERCEPTIONS

Different people explain themselves and the world around them in different terms. Some people tend to view their knowledge and perceptions as valid only for them; others tend to assume that their beliefs, values, and perceptions are valid for everyone. Presumably, the more a person recognizes the extent to which knowledge is individual in nature, the more easily he or she will be able to adjust to other people in other cultures whose views of what is “true” or “right” are likely to be quite different.

People who recognize that their values, beliefs, attitudes, knowledge, and opinions are their own — and not necessarily shared by others — often find it easier to form productive relationships, than persons who believe they know The Truth, and strive to “sell” their own perceptions, knowledge, skills and values to others. If a person often begins sentences with phrases like “I think” or “I feel” or “In my own experience...”, chances are he or she is aware more of the personal nature of their knowledge and values than if they are using introductions like “Africans tend to be...” or “Americans are...” or “Canadians believe...” Among persons whose ideas of what is True and Right differ dramatically from that to which you’ve become accustomed, it is useful to keep in mind

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It is in this area where S was perhaps weakest. He unwittingly assumed his job description, his timetable, his mode of operating, his distinctions between work and family, his definitions of “idle chatter,” and so on, were in fact the understandings — ones which Akwagara must certainly share. The results are rather clear in the case study, as in so many other instances of relational problems with persons working within as well as across cultural boundaries.

DISPLAYING EMPATHY

The capacity to “put oneself in another’s shoes,” or to behave as if one could, has been often suggested as important to the development and maintenance of positive human relationships within and between cultures. Individuals differ in their ability to display empathy. Some people are able to project an interest in others clearly and seem able to obtain and reflect a reasonably complete and accurate sense of another’s thoughts, feelings, and/or experiences. Others may lack interest, or fail to display interest, and may be unable to project even superficial understanding of another’s situation.

Many people are attracted to individuals who seem to be able to understand things from “their point of view.” Certainly, since each individual has a unique set of past experiences, it is not possible to totally put oneself “in someone else’s shoes.” Through care in listening and observing, and with a sincere and diligent effort to understand the other person’s communicational framework, one can, however, achieve some degree of empathy, a critical ingredient for effective teaching. Had Mr. S devoted more effort to establishing this sort of understanding of Akwagara, and had he been successful in reflecting the resulting awareness in his words and actions, many of the difficulties he encountered could have been avoided.

TURN-TAKING

People vary in the manner in which they “manage” (or fail to manage) interactions of which they are a part. Some are skillful at governing their contribution to an interactive situation so that the needs and desires of others play a critical role in defining how the exchange will proceed. Effective management of interaction is displayed through taking turns in discussion and initiating and terminating interaction based on a reasonably accurate assessment of the needs and desires of others. Other individuals are less proficient at these dimensions and proceed in interactions with little or no regard for time sharing, and initiation and termination preferences of others. It is almost too obvious to note that people enjoy having an opportunity to take turns in discussion. This suggests strongly the need to avoid monopolizing conversations, and conversely, to resist the temptation to refuse to share responsibility for even participation. This simple factor is important to how one is perceived in one’s own culture, as well as in other cultures, where reciprocity in discussion can serve to indicate interest in, and concern for, the other person.
environment altered in some critical ways — can lead to confusion, frustration, or even hostility. This may well be dysfunctional to the development of effective interpersonal relations within and across cultural boundaries. Colleagues and would-be friends — as with Akwagara — may easily become the unwitting and misplaced targets of verbal hostility during periods of adjustment; and while the frustrations are often short-lived, the feelings about the sojourner that they may have initiated, might not be. Learning to manage the feeling of frustration associated with ambiguity can thus be critical to effective adaptation in a new environment.\(^4\) It is likely that a bit greater tolerance for ambiguity and tolerance for the lack of control one feels in a new environment would have aided S substantially in his efforts to integrate himself successfully into his new situation.

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It is in this area where S was perhaps weakest. He unwittingly assumed his job description, his timetable, his mode of operating, his distinctions between work and family, his definitions of "idle chatter," and so on, were in fact the understandings — ones which Akwagara must certainly share. The results are rather clear in the case study, as in so many other instances of relational problems with persons working within as well as across cultural boundaries.

DISPLAYING EMPATHY

The capacity to "put oneself in another's shoes," or to behave as if one could, has been often suggested as important to the development and maintenance of positive human relationships within and between cultures.\(^6\) Individuals differ in their ability to display empathy. Some people are able to project an interest in others clearly and seem able to obtain and reflect a reasonably complete and accurate sense of another's thoughts, feelings, and/or experiences. Others may lack interest, or fail to display interest, and may be unable to project even superficial understanding of another's situation.

Many people are attracted to individuals who seem to be able to understand things from "their point of view." Certainly, since each individual has a unique set of past experiences, it is not possible to totally put oneself "in someone else's shoes." Through care in listening and observing, and with a sincere and diligent effort to understand the other person's communicational framework, one can, however, achieve some degree of empathy, a critical ingredient for effective teaching. Had Mr. S devoted more effort to establishing this sort of understanding of Akwagara, and had he been successful in reflecting the resulting awareness in his words and actions, many of the difficulties he encountered could have been avoided.

TURN-TAKING

People vary in the manner in which they "manage" (or fail to manage) interactions of which they are part.\(^2\) Some are skillful at governing their contribution to an interactive situation so that the needs and desires of others play a critical role in defining how the exchange will proceed. Effective management of interaction is displayed through taking turns in discussion and initiating and terminating interaction based on a reasonably accurate assessment of the needs and desires of others. Other individuals are less proficient at these dimensions and proceed in interactions with little or no regard for time sharing, and initiation and termination preferences of others. It is almost too obvious to note that people enjoy having an opportunity to take turns in discussion. This suggests strongly the need to avoid monopolizing conversations, and conversely, to resist the temptation to refuse to share responsibility for even participation. This simple factor is important to how one is perceived in one's own culture, as well as in other cultures, where reciprocity in discussion can serve to indicate interest in, and concern for, the other person.
SUMMARY

It has been the intention of the foregoing to provide a basic framework for discussing the role of communication in cross-cultural effectiveness. In simplifying these processes for purposes of discussion, there is the risk of neglecting important questions. Perhaps the most crucial of these has to do with the difficulty of generalizing findings from studies of one or two cultures to other cultures. The studies summarized in the last section of this article, for example, were concerned with Canadian technical personnel who worked in various jobs in Kenya. On the basis of these and other studies noted, we can speculate that the findings are likely relevant for "Westerners" working with individuals from the so-called "developing" countries. Presumably, highly aggressive problem-solving behaviors would carry the same risks of ineffectiveness in many of the countries in Latin America, as in Kenya or other African countries, but further research is needed to verify these relationships.

There is another problem related to generalizing the research findings such as those discussed here. While one can argue that the importance of communication behaviors such as empathy, respect, nonjudgmentalness, etc., transcends cultural boundaries, the way these are expressed and interpreted may vary substantially from one culture (or one subculture) to another. Thus, while prolonged eye contact or head nodding may well be a sign of respect in one culture, it may be interpreted in quite another, perhaps even in an opposite — way in other cultures. A final caution has to do with the difference between knowing and doing. Even within one's own culture, knowing that one ought to be respectful or empathic or nonjudgmental does not guarantee that one will be able to perform the behavior, even with good intentions.

For persons who will work in cross-cultural situations, these three issues have a number of implications. The central theme that emerges from studies discussed in this paper is the need to be alert and sensitive to the needs, orientations, values, aspirations, and particularly communication styles of other persons with whom one interacts. One needs to know how respect, empathy, nonjudgmentalness, turn-taking, orientation to knowledge, and group and organizational roles are regarded and expressed in a given culture. Of equal or greater importance to effectiveness at transfer of skills is the willingness to be introspective, and committed to see, to examine, and to learn from one's failures and weaknesses as well as one's successes and strengths. Only in this way can one's behavior be brought into congruence with what one believes and intends.

For those persons involved in cross-cultural training and selection, aspects of the studies discussed in this paper have important implications. First, findings underscore the importance of interpersonal communication skills to cross-cultural effectiveness, suggesting a need to attend more closely to interpersonal communication skills in selection and training. Secondly, the research indicates the usefulness of a person's communication behavior in his or her own culture as a predictor of his or her communication behavior in another culture. This seems to suggest a need in effectiveness training and research for relatively more attention to the individual, and perhaps relatively less attention to inherent differences between cultures. Thirdly, the discussion focuses attention on the difference between knowing and doing, underscoring the importance of training which is directed relatively more toward behavioral effectiveness and relatively less toward theoretical and verbal mastery.

CROSS-CULTURAL EFFECTIVENESS

Each of these issues would seem to merit additional attention by researchers, as well. Perhaps most importantly, more study is needed to identify additional communication behaviors which may be significant for cross-cultural effectiveness. Further, research is needed to identify those communication behaviors which best generalize to a large number of cross-cultural situations. Such studies will serve to further strengthen the theoretical and pragmatic link between human communication and cross-cultural effectiveness suggested in this article.

NOTES

Brent D. Ruben is Associate Professor and Assistant Chairman of Department of Human Communication at Rutgers University. The author gratefully acknowledges the contributions of Daniel Kealey and Pri Notowidigo of the Canadian International Development Briefing Centre, and the support and encouragement of Pierre Lortie, Director of the Centre.


2 Systematic efforts to conceptualize "effective," "successful," or "competent" communication behavior have been relatively few in number. The notion of communication competence — used interchangeably with communication effectiveness — is discussed in this paper as a dyadic concept. For a particular interaction to be termed effective, or a person to be termed competent, the performance must meet the needs and goals of both the message initiator and the recipient. The term communication competence, as used in this paper, is based on the work of John Wiemann, who credits E. A. Weinstein as the originator of the term. See Brent D. Ruben, "The Machine Gun and the Marshmallow: Some Thoughts on the Concept of Effective Communication," Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Western Speech Communication Association, Honolulu, Hawaii, 1972; and John M. Wiemann, "An Exploration of Communication Competence in Initial Interactions: An Experimental Study," Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Purdue University (1975).

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