BRIDGING CULTURAL DIVIDES FOR EFFECTIVE INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS MEETINGS

Virginia Mihaela DUMITRESCU[1]

Abstract

The present article sets out to examine the main cultural divides that may threaten the success of international business meetings, while at the same time seeking to identify theoretical tools and practical strategies that can be used to surmount differences and ensure a climate of effective cooperation. After a brief definition of two key concepts of intercultural studies that are particularly relevant to our topic (i.e., cultural "awareness" and "competence"), it analyzes, one by one, the most likely areas of "noise" that should be carefully considered by both organizers and attendants of international meetings: communication style, status and protocol, the attitude towards authority/hierarchy/power, the treatment of time and space, the orientation towards deals/tasks or relationships, the assumptions about the purpose and outcomes of a meeting, etc. Our final recommendation to organizers and foreign participants alike is to use their theoretical information and practical skills in a joint effort to prevent or at least minimize the negative effects of culture gaps – and ideally, to turn their differences into assets for the success of the meeting and for the benefit of their business activity.

***Keywords*:** cultural awareness, cultural competence, "noise", cultural divide

Working towards a Common Ground

Staging an international or cross-cultural business meeting is not an easy task, given the welter of administrative, planning, and cultural aspects involved. Of course, a meeting will be all the more difficult to organize if it is not just a one-to-one or small-group meeting, but involves a large number of attendants from various cultures, and if it is highly participative (problem-solving, brain-storming) rather than predominantly informative or motivational (the so-called "presented" type of meeting). To an even greater extent than cross-cultural business meetings that take place in the participants' country of residence (as in the case of corporate meetings organized within MNC subsidiaries, for instance), international business meetings with participants coming from across the borders are, next to negotiations, one of the areas of business communication where cultural differences may manifest themselves most clearly. If they are ignored or not properly dealt with, such differences may result in communication breakdowns and damaged business relations that could sometimes take years to mend.

[1] Virginia Mihaela Dumitrescu, The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, mihaela.dumitrescu@rei.ase.ro

The major mistake business people often make in situations of cross-cultural interaction is that of assuming similarity rather than difference among individuals with a similar professional status, background and goals, imagining that their own way of behaving and looking at things are universally valid. To prevent the dire consequences that might arise from that misconception and avoid blunders that might compromise the success of a meeting, organizers in particular should be both culturally aware and culturally competent, both knowledgeable and properly trained to apply that knowledge. “Cultural awareness” is here understood as the ability to step outside of one’s cultural boundaries and at the same time realize that deeply seated cultural differences do exist and people’s behaviour is determined by their culture – a culture that may have little, if anything, in common with one’s own in terms of values, beliefs, perceptions, behaviour code, etc. Compared to it, cultural competence requires not only general information about cultures along with a more in-depth understanding of specific cultures, but also behavioural and attitudinal changes grounded in that understanding. Both organizers and attendants of cross-cultural meetings should thus fully understand, on the one hand, their own culture, and the way their mentality and behaviour have been shaped by their own cultural experiences, and on the other hand, the culture(s) of the people they come into contact with; finally, and most importantly, they need to view cultural differences not as weaknesses or as potential causes of conflict, but as strengths that they should use to their advantage (for solving problems in a more creative manner, for example). Gaining cultural awareness and competence could sometimes involve the strenuous effort of going through different attitudinal stages, from “parochial” - summarized by the phrase “my way is the only way”, in which case the impact of cultural differences is ignored), to “ethnocentric” (based on the conviction that “my way is the better/best way”, which means that one acknowledges cultural differences but chooses to underestimate them), to “synergistic”, which is a big step forward, since people become aware of both their culture and others’ culture(s), both “my way and their way”, and are willing to use cultural diversity to find the best way of addressing a situation), and finally to the “participatory” stance, which consists in focusing on “our way”, i.e., interacting with people with different cultural backgrounds and trying to create a shared culture, a common ground of meanings, norms and attitudes in order to effectively deal with a particular situation that demands cross-cultural co-operation, such as an international business meeting.

Therefore, in addition to the precautions usually taken in the case of domestic meetings (such as making sure that the meeting is really necessary, planning carefully down to the smallest administrative detail, ensuring the meeting’s focus and clarity by determining its intended outcome, and communicating it to participants before the meeting actually takes place), organizers should pay attention to a multitude of cultural factors in an attempt to minimize any potentially disruptive cultural differences related to communication styles, status and protocol, the attitude towards authority/hierarchy/power, the treatment of time and space, the orientation towards deals/tasks or relationships, the assumptions about the purpose and outcomes of a meeting, etc. Let us consider, one by one, these cultural areas where differences are most likely to emerge in the course of an international business meeting.

Verbal, Non-Verbal and Para-Verbal Communication

An international business meeting is, first and foremost, a cross-cultural communication process. According to the American anthropologist Edward T. Hall, the author of an intercultural analysis model based on communication style, effective cross-cultural communication means giving the right responses (i.e. reacting adequately) in actual intercultural communication situations (such as the one we are analyzing) rather than sending the "right" messages. In other words, reacting in a culturally competent way is paramount, in such situations, compared to merely making correct statements. Most miscommunication problems are due to the fact that people communicate differently in different cultures, a point emphasized by Hall's distinction between "low context" vs. "high context" communication styles (Hall and Hall, 1990: 102). The low-context communication style characteristic of racially or ethnically diverse countries (the US, Australia, Scandinavian countries, Germany, Switzerland, etc.) is defined by an almost exclusive reliance on direct, complete, explicit verbal messages, with no information left to be inferred from the context. By contrast, high-context communication, specific to countries or regions with less racial or ethnic diversity, and a strong sense of tradition and history (e.g., Latin America, the Middle East, Japan, Korea, China, Mediterranean countries), is indirect, incomplete, sparse, with meaning depending largely on the context, and verbal messages supplemented or sometimes even replaced by non-verbal clues (facial expressions, gestures and body movements); much of the missing information is usually inferred from the group's or community's similar experiences (which make up the cultural "context" in which communication takes place). Asians, who generally belong to high-context cultures, are far more sensitive to nonverbal communication than their Western counterparts, and are particularly good at "reading" body-language, even when this is contradicted by a speaker's explicit verbal messages. At the same time, they value oral face-to-face communication more than written communication. Hall remarks that messages themselves can be placed along a continuum, from low-context (direct statements, logical, causal explanations) to high-context (greetings, winks, etc.). Communicative interactions (conversations) can, therefore, be classified as low, high or intermediate, depending on the quantity of high-context or low-context statements they include. Needless to say, no culture can be clearly placed at one or the other end of the high-context/low-context continuum: even in low-context cultures, where clear direct messages are preferred, people still use high-context allusive messages (such as winking); and it is obvious that people will always need to formulate clear logical, causal, explanations in certain situations, regardless of the culture they represent.

Hall notes that in predominantly High Context cultures (e.g. Japan) people are inclined to use a formal form of address, but do not feel the need for detailed background information when asked to fulfill a task or to make a decision. As for predominantly Low-Context cultures such as the US, addressing people by their first names (perceived by most foreigners as too informal) appears as a somewhat failed attempt at high-contexting; unlike high-context people, Americans need a lot of detailed background information before embarking on a task or making a decision. – a characteristic which is explained by Hall by the fact that Americans tend to view life as segmented in a multitude of separate areas, and are used to focusing on compartmentalized bits of information. Finally, Hall adds that people in Japanese companies are immersed in “a sea of information”, meaning that there is a continuous exchange of information among both ordinary employees and company executives; exactly because gathering, processing and disseminating information are dominant activities in a Japanese company, people are sometimes irritated when foreign low-context business partners bombard them with unnecessary information. Paradoxically, although the Japanese do not need much background information in ordinary, routine circumstances (because they are already well informed), they do require such information when faced with a new situation to which they have not been previously exposed and contexted. In sharp contrast to them, business people in German and American companies (where everything is low-context and strictly compartmentalized) are, according to Hall, less generally involved in exchanging and disseminating information, hence their constant need of information, and their feeling that their high-context partners do not provide enough information. According to Hall, offices in German and American companies are just “islands of information”, since information is shared with few (Hall and Hall, 1987).

Christine Bennett (1999) adds a few more characteristics to the two culture types formerly identified by Hall. According to her, high context cultures are group-oriented, bureaucratic, and tend to have a rigid code of behaviour, unlike low-context ones, characterized by individualism, weaker group identity, greater personal freedom of manifestation, more individual choice, and people’s tendency to gain their identity through individual effort.

The relevance of such differences in communication style are obvious in the case of international meetings, where all participants must find the appropriate level of contexting to bridge culture gaps. If such adjustments are easily and automatically done in one’s own cultural setting, they take a certain amount of training and effort when one is abroad. In an international meeting, people-oriented attendants from a high-context culture, who value personal relations and always try to establish social trust first, might feel neglected by the more pragmatic, schedule and task oriented co-participants or hosts from a low-context culture, for whom personal relations are not equally important. High-context participants may also be less inclined to give feedback or take part in debates involving an element of polemics, since they value harmony and consensus above everything else, and are, by nature, less argumentative and contentious than their low-context counterparts. Unlike Westerners (and especially Americans), Asians tend to show great emotional sensitivity, and a remarkable ability to hide their emotions; apart from that, their special concern with face-saving determines their verbal interaction with other co-participants, which is mostly motivated by their willingness to save themselves as well as other people from embarrassment (and loss of face). To Japanese attendants, a potential source of "noise" (a word defined in the area of intercultural studies as any annoying manifestation of cultural differences) could be the direct, overconfident or overbearing communication style specific to Americans, for instance. Moreover, the Japanese are known to use silence or long pauses before answering a question addressed to them, which may paradoxically appear as the most irritating "noise" to American co-participants during meetings. Even the well-known Asian politeness may look artificial and excessive to some Westerners. Consequently, organizers need to take into account and try to level these cultural differences in communication and interaction styles in order to ensure the necessary spirit of effective cooperation and goodwill that can be appreciated by participants from all cultures.

The Great Cultural Divide: Deals vs. Relationships

We have already mentioned, in passing, that some cultures are more oriented towards personal relationships in the professional environment, whereas others are more concerned with completing tasks and observing schedules. Interculturalists such as Richard Gesteland reformulate this distinction as Deal-Focused vs. Relationship-Focused, and identify it as "the 'Great Divide' between business cultures", which is likely to cause the most dramatic and costly culture clashes in the business arena. More relationship-focused attendants at an international meeting will tend to view the more deal-focused co-participants as too blunt, pushy, and aggressive. Their need for smooth interpersonal relations will often prompt them to use an indirect, subtle communication style (often supported by the use of body language), making them reluctant to contradict or refuse the people they interact with. Arabs, for instance, will prefer to lift their eyebrows rather than say "no", in much the same way the Japanese and Thais will avoid negative words and will replace them by facial expression (smiling) or even changing the subject. The Far Eastern habit of hiding emotions – especially negative ones, such as irritation, frustration, anger, impatience – behind an expressionless or smiling face is one way of maintaining harmony, preserving one's "face" (i.e. people's respect), and preventing one's interlocutor or listener/audience from losing face. The use of body language, considered by some to be a superficial aspect of culture, actually turns out to be an essential component of human interaction, and consequently deserves special attention on the part of attendants and organizers alike, as it may get in the way of effective communication during an international or cross-cultural meeting.

The deal-focused/relationship-focused distinction is closely connected with people's divergent assumptions about the purpose and outcomes of a meeting. Participants from deal-focused cultures are more likely to look at a meeting as an opportunity to gain valuable business-related information, solve a problem or contribute to making a decision, depending on the type of meeting they are attending. Relationship-oriented people will, on the contrary, view the meeting as one of a long series of opportunities to get to know people (colleagues, potential or actual business partners etc.) better and solidify their personal relationship with them. They will expect a meeting to bring about an increased level of trust among participants, in view of successful or continued future cooperation.

The Attitude towards Time

International meetings take time to prepare, their actual proceedings may sometimes take place over a period of a few days, and for each scheduled activity there is a strict timeline that needs to be observed by all participants. This brings to the fore another relevant cultural divide, which is related to the different, culture-specific, attitudes towards time and punctuality in different cultural environments. There are a lot of clichés describing the behaviour of business people from various cultures. Latins, for instance, are said to be more relaxed and in less of a hurry than most other nations in the West (especially Northerners). The Japanese are considered to be even more careful and precise in keeping appointments than the most punctual negotiators in the West. Compared to both Latin and Asian business people, Americans seem to be in a rush, always under pressure for results or closure, eternally obsessed with completing tasks "on time" and moving on to the next business assignment. The two main time-orientations may also have other implications, as explained by Edward T. Hall, who identifies two culture types: "monochronic" and "polychronic". Monochronic approaches to time (characterized as linear, sequential and focusing on one thing at a time) are said to be most common in the European-influenced cultures of the United States, Germany, Switzerland, Scandinavia, and, to a certain extent, Japan, which also tends towards the monochronic end of the time continuum. Polychronic orientations to time (predominant in Mediterranean and Latin cultures including France, Italy, Greece, and Mexico, as well as some Eastern and African cultures) are defined by multi-tasking, a high involvement with people, a perception of time as elastic, and more importance attached to human interaction than schedules and deadlines. In other words, meeting participants from polychronic cultures may be less careful about punctuality, and more used to taking frequent breaks, being interrupted or engaging in several activities at a time than participants from monochronic cultures, who regard tardiness as lack of respect and prefer prompt beginnings and endings, dealing with one agenda item at a time, talking in sequence, avoiding conversational overlaps, and completing tasks in a more orderly, focused or expeditious manner.

In his turn, Richard Gesteland re-defines the opposition **"**monochronic vs. polychronic" as "Rigid-Time vs. Fluid-Time" (Gesteland, 1997), understood as punctuality, tight schedules, low tolerance of interruptions during business meetings and fixed agendas on the one hand, and aversion to rigid deadlines, loose scheduling, and meetings with flexible agendas (or meetings-within-meetings) on the other hand. He nevertheless draws attention to the fact that there may be regional variations in people's attitude towards time even within the same country, as illustrated by the example of Brazil (where the Sao Paulo area appears as mainly monochronic, whereas Rio seems to be more polychromic), or by the so-called "North/South Divide" in some European countries (e.g. in Germany: monochronic Hamburg vs. polychronic Munich). Such differences can however be easily surmounted if all participants put in an effort to ensure the optimum conditions for an effective meeting.

Hierarchy and Etiquette

Status and protocol are also viewed differently across cultures, and ignorance of cultural norms in these areas may cause embarrassment to participants in international meetings. The American culture, for instance, exalts egalitarianism and encourages informality. The opposite attitude is to be found in status oriented, hierarchical societies: the Japanese, Koreans or Russians regard others as junior or senior to them, inferior or superior (rather than equal), and appreciate formality (as shown by their dress code, the use of honorifics or titles attached to people's names, and the attention paid to the rules of correct behaviour in all circumstances – for instance, when greeting people, presenting a business card, drinking tea and sake, or offering a gift). According to Edward T. Hall, differences exist even among Westerners: German business people are generally perceived as having a more formal style than Americans (Hall and Hall, 1990: 48). Richard Gesteland lays special emphasis on this distinction between Formal and Informal cultures, and its relevance to communication practices (especially the form of address)**.** Considering how deeply ingrained these cultural biases are in the national psyche, it is obvious that any breach of status and etiquette norms may have negative effects on the relations between participants in a meeting, which may compromise the future or potential business relations between the companies they represent.

Moreover, organizers of international meetings in particular should pay special attention to Geert Hofstede's notion of "power distance" (Hofstede, 1980; Hofstede, 1997), understood as the psychological distance between superiors and subordinates, and used with reference to the degree of deference and acceptance of unequal power among people in a professional environment. In national cultures with a high power distance index (e. g. Arab countries, Guatemala, Malaysia, the Philippines, Mexico, Indonesia, India), "superiority" is often derived from social status, gender, race, age, education, birth, family background or other factors, whereas cultures characterized by low power distance (e.g. Austria, Denmark, Israel, New Zealand, Ireland, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Switzerland, the US, Britain, Germany) value equality among people, and earned rather than ascribed status – a difference that should be kept in mind during international meetings, so that cultural sensitivities may be adequately dealt with, and all participants may be given the proper consideration and respect, in accordance with their own culturally-determined expectations.

Proxemics

Finally, culture-specific attitudes to space may also sometimes generate awkward situations among meeting attendants from different parts of the world. In Europe and North America, business people usually feel comfortable leaving a certain amount of distance between themselves and the people they interact with, and view touching as only acceptable between friends (which is also the norm in certain Asian countries, such as Japan or China), in contrast to other nations (South Americans, Middle Easterners), where people are, on the contrary, more tactile and more inclined to get physically close to their interlocutors. These are matters that should be carefully considered by culturally competent meeting organizers and attendants alike.

By Way of Conclusion: Turning Differences into Assets

The above description of the most likely areas of cultural conflict was not meant to exhaust the subject: in complex situations of intercultural business communication such as international meetings, there may be numberless other "noise"-generating factors that organizers and attendants should be prepared to deal with. On the other hand, the validity of various intercultural analysis models, like the ones mentioned above, is inevitably limited. Such theoretical models can be useful tools in the hands of business people willing to avoid serious culture clashes that might reflect negatively on their professional activity, but they are not to be taken literally, as individual differences are as important and worthy of attention as national ones. The best advice that could be given to organizers and foreign participants is to use their theoretical information and practical skills in a joint effort to prevent or at least minimize the negative effects of culture gaps– and ideally, to turn their differences into assets for the success of meetings and implicitly for the benefit of their business activity.

References and bibliography

Bennett, Christine I., *1999*. Comprehensive Multicultural Education: Theory and Practice (4th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

Gesteland, Richard R., 1997. *Cross-Cultural Business Bahaviour*. Copenhagen: Handelshojskolens Forlag.

Hall, Edward T. & M. R. Hall, 1987. *Hidden Differences: Doing Business with the Japanese*. New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday.

Hall, Edward T & Mildred Reed Hall, 1990. *Understanding Cultural Differences*. Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press.

Edward T. Hall, 1989. *Beyond Culture*. New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday.

Hall, Edward T., 1990. *The Silent Language*. Garden City, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday.

Hofstede, Geert, 1980.*Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values*. Beverly Hills CA: Sage.

Hofstede, G., 1997. *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind* (1991). New York: McGraw-Hill.

The author

Dr. Virginia Mihaela Dumitrescu is a Lecturer in English for Business Communication at The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, a translator, and a former book editor. She holds a Ph.D. in Literary Theory from Bucharest University. She is co-author of the textbook *Mind Your Steps to Success. English for Students of Cybernetics*, author of articles on literature, criticism, translation theory and intercultural business communication. She has taken part in international professional exchange programmes ("Publishing in the USA", Washington D.C.), ESP teacher-training courses (The British Council, Bucharest; Lackland Defense Language Institute, USA), and conferences on ESP teaching, cross-cultural communication, literary theory, semiotics, translation and cultural studies.