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## **Intercultural Communication at Workplaces: Difficulties as Voiced by Local and Expatriate Managers**

### **Background**

Industrialization and liberalization of economy, along with several workforce trends including the rise of organizations with global markets, and increasing occurrences of cross-national joint ventures and collaboration in technology transfer, bring about an increase in frequency and intensity of local-expatriate interfaces at various organizational levels. Local-expatriate interfaces are characterized by the likelihood of high uncertainty. Locals and expatriates are faced with cultural and language barriers. The more the participants differ in their cultural and subcultural attributes, the more intercultural the communication. The "cultural baggage" and upbringing of locals as well as expatriates will affect the way they manage the cross-national differences. Even if the language barrier is overcome, local-expatriate can still fail to understand and be understood; they can still fail to relate with each other effectively. The differences in cultures have a constraining influence on cross-cultural communication and collaboration.

Local-expatriate communication will be effective, if there is a desire to communicate, a willingness to reduce intergroup posturing, an understanding of cultural differences and similarities, an ability to reduce uncertainty, and willingness to develop mutual trust. Local personnel as well as expatriates must be able to deal and bridge their differences and communicate in a manner that "works." Understanding the differences and similarities in work orientations and

communicative styles would enable local-expatriate to maintain constructive work and interpersonal relationships. There is a substantial literature that describes Malaysian culture and how it differs from other cultures particularly the Western culture. The value orientation of individualism/collectivism (Trandis, 1988), the perceptual orientation of high-context and low-context culture (Hall, 1981), and time orientation (Hall, 1984) have been employed to explain differences in work habits, communication patterns and interpersonal relational orientations across cultures. Hofstede's (1984) four work-related cultural value dimensions of individualism-collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity-femininity have been widely used also to delineate how cultures differ and their implications on managerial practices. These theories have provided useful insight into the cultural differences and its implication on managing the workforce. Abdullah & Gallagher (1993), drawing on these theories, have discussed the influences of cultural difference on the local workforce.

In the field of intercultural communication, cultural differences in work orientation and specific verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors have been an issue in many intercultural communication researches, and many have underscored the inherent difficulties and implications presented by the language and cultural differences. Today few would question that cultural differences must be recognized in the study and in understanding of organizational behavior. It should be treated up front and on the center stage. The more diverse the cultural elements, the greater impact culture has on managerial effectiveness. The increasing local-expatriate interfaces have placed a premium on the ability to deal with cultural differences and difficulties associated with the differences.

Although cultural differences have been identified, along with personality differences, as the major reason for a local-expatriate intercultural difficulties and communication breakdown, not all cultural differences would be equally pertinent and consequential to communication and work performance. Differences do not necessarily cause difficulties. However, there are cultural differences that truly make a difference from the view of locals and expatriates. Given this premise, thus there is a need to identify and understand what

cultural differences do locals-expatriates experience as sources of difficulties between them. Equally important is to identify the various ways that locals and expatriates have tried to deal with the problematic cultural differences in their own actual dealing with each other.

An insight into these issues has been sought in the present study. Specifically, this paper reports the findings of the following research questions: (1) What cultural differences do locals and expatriates experience as sources of difficulties between them, and (2) What strategies do locals and expatriates employ to cope with their own experience of intercultural difficulties.

### **The Study and Respondents**

The data of the present study was obtained from in-depth interviews with 11 locals and 11 expatriates of multinational organizations, national organizations and cross-national joint ventures. A convenient, purposive sampling was used in the study. The local personnel interviewed were those that have direct and frequent contacts with expatriates. This is necessary as the study was to gain insights into the problems as experienced by those engage in intercultural communication. The study purposively selected European expatriates because they are culturally different, and furthermore more and many of them are present in the country as a result of industrialization, liberalization and deregulation policies. To have a good entry point to the interview, the local or expatriate interviewed in this study were those known by the interviewers. This strategy was useful as it facilitates the data gathering process and the respondents were more open and critical of the issues addressed in the interviews.

The interviews were conducted by graduate students using a structured questionnaire prepared by the researcher. These interviewers were trained on how to conduct the interview, particularly on how to probe for more information. The interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed in their entirety. The interviews with expatriates lasted for about one to one and a half hour, but the interviews with locals were slightly shorter, about half an hour to one hour. The transcribed data were content analyzed for themes in cultural differences, intercultural communication difficulties, and coping strategies.



All of the interviewees had been working at their respective organizations (in Malaysia) for a period ranging from about a year to eight years. All the 22 interviewees were males; their age ranged from early thirties to middle fifties. Most of the expatriate interviewees held managerial position (some were senior managers), the others were technical advisers or marketing executives. They come from the United Kingdom, Italy, Sweden, France and German. Most of these expatriates had experienced working in other foreign countries, and had an education background consisting of a bachelor or a masters degree. On the other hand, most of the locals were either engineers or project managers, and one of the local interviewees had no international working experience, but all had some overseas training or education. Most of the local interviewees had an educational background consisting of a bachelor degree or a masters degree, and all were married. In terms of interaction, all the locals reported that they had daily direct contact with expatriates who are their coworkers or superior, and likewise all the expatriates interviewed reported that had daily interaction with the local employees at various level. In sum, the interviewees were those who are immersed in intercultural activity, and most of them had substantive intercultural exposure.

This paper is obviously based on a very limited sample. For this reason, it must be viewed as a preliminary foray into a subject which is complicated. Further research in this subject is needed.

### **Results and Discussion**

All of the interviewees involved in this study are keenly aware that differences between Malaysians and expatriates do exist, and they readily voiced several significant differences in communication patterns and work orientations that they experience as sources of difficulties. Interestingly, it is found that the locals' views of local-expatriate interfaces and the difficulties associated were some what matched with the expatriates' views. Although all the expatriates mentioned that they enjoy and are happily working in this country, most of them voiced out some levels of frustrations, tensions and difficulties when working and interacting with local personnel. The locals reported some frustrations and complaints when

working with expatriates, likewise. Most of the locals and expatriates attributed these difficulties to differences in language, verbal and nonverbal behavior, and work orientation. In addition, in spite of the cultural awareness, intergroup attitude and posturing were observed among some of the local interviewees. The findings on sources of communication difficulties and coping strategies employed by the interviewees are discussed under two sections: (1) language and communication behavior, and (2) work orientation.

**Language and communication behavior.** Although language is not a major problem, some of the misunderstandings, according to the locals, are due to the language barrier. Many of the local interviewees complained that expatriates speak fast and with a strong accent; hence, they had difficulty in following and understanding what the expatriate are saying. One local aptly described the problem in his remark: "They speak with a strong accent, sometimes it is difficult to get their message." As a consequence of this difficulty, some confessed that they communicate when they have to, and most of their communication is limited to work-related matters. This findings concur with Cargile's (2000) assertion that different accents, vocabularies and different rates of speech (seemingly minor language differences) present one of the biggest challenges to successful intercultural communication.

The finding on language problem might explain for the limited socialization outside the workplace. Most of the locals cited family commitment as the reason for limited socialization with the expatriates. The expatriates, acknowledging the importance of socialization with local employees, mentioned that they socialize with their Malaysian counterparts when they have the time. This finding implies that either the locals or expatriates (or both) is keeping an intercultural distance, and an insider-outsider attitude prevail.

A small problem associated with language barriers as voiced by the locals concur with the expatriates' remark on the efforts that they have to put when communicating with local employees. One expatriate said, "I have to use shorter sentences, speak slower, and avoid flowery language." Another mentioned, "I have to repeat, talk slower, and use simple language." Poor pronunciation, inadequate English



grammar makes communication with the locals not only difficult but also time consuming and sometime frustrating, according to some of the expatriate interviewees.

Indirect and ambiguous communication of the local employees seem to be a problem to the expatriates who prefer and practice direct, open and explicit communication. All the interviewees readily mentioned this as a major difference between locals and expatriates communication patterns. Most of the expatriates find it difficult to work with Malaysians because they communicate indirectly, and they are under communicating; and this may create communication problem and misunderstanding. Many of the expatriates feel that the Malaysian employees tend to be ambiguous more than necessary, they are reluctant to say no, particularly to their superior. One expatriate explained his frustration as follows: "Malaysian employees have difficulty in saying no ... They say I will try when in fact they disagree with my proposal. Hence, I have to be more sensitive to their nonverbal cues..... I have to get feedback." Another expatriate commented, "Malaysian are more respectful and they are less bold. If you are too direct with (some) Malaysians, they will withdraw and you will not get any communication, any feedback, any echoing and any response to questions ... You have to be politically correct and not too direct" Another expatriate complained that "Malaysian employees are reluctant to sit down and talk out the difficulties. They use a third party to tell their disagreement or to work out the problem rather than telling the person directly." This finding concurs with the general perception and belief that Malaysians prefer indirectness in their communication, as pointed out by Abdullah (1996).

One expatriate recounted an incident that best illustrate the problem attributed to proclivity to emphasize indirect communication and face saving: "There was a particular project that we were late in and the problem of late delivery was brought up during a meeting. When queried if there was going to be a problem in delivery, there was a denial that the problem existed and that there would be no problem in delivery. Of course much later, the problem of late delivery did surface and there were a lot of problem with our customers. Eventually the solution was found, but what strike me was the lack of intellectual honesty and people's reluctant to admit at the early stage and right from the beginning that

there was a possible problem or that there could be a problem." It appears that from the expatriates' point of view, indirect style of the Malaysians and counterproductive face-saving behavior is a source of conflict and tension. Paradoxically, Malaysians use indirect communication to avoid conflict and save face.

Several of the local interviewees perceived that candid and direct style of communication of the expatriates in a way is a reflection of lack of sensitivity. But to the expatriates, to overcome or avoid miscommunication, they have to be aggressive and direct in their communication. They seek verbal and nonverbal feedback. Clarity, directness, frankness, and completeness are highly valued. As one local reported, "If there is not enough data, or if the point made is not apparent, they will ask questions as they feel uncomfortable with the vagueness and ambiguity. I perceived this as aggressive, persistent and hard headed."

Another marked difference in verbal behavior between locals and expatriates is Malaysians do not ask a lot of questions; they seem reticence as opposed to the expressiveness and aggressiveness of the expatriates. The expatriate interviewees want Malaysians to be involved in decision making and problem solving. But they have not been very successful at this as local employees are still hesitate to provide decision making input. The prevalent feeling among the expatriates is that Malaysian employees tend to be reserved, do not like to criticize or challenge the authority, and lack of analytical ability and confidence. One expatriate interviewee expressed his frustration with a comment that "Malaysian do not ask a lot of questions. You make a statement, they accept it. In some cases they do not even seek clarification. What you say, they believe as you are a manager. If you are their manager or superior what you are telling is correct. They would not (cannot) question." The Malaysian employees, on the other hand, expect expatriate managers to instruct and brief them rather than soliciting ideas from them. Another expatriate succinctly recounted a problem associated with Malaysians' tendency for under communication: "A typical answer was -what to do?- in return to my question for ideas from them on problems. It was much later, through the grapevine that I learn that this had created the impression and the situation that the boss doesn't know what to do. From my



perspective, I was doing this to develop the skills of the staff. By questioning, I wanted the staff to think and evaluate, and that is a coaching role." Along this point, one expatriate mentioned, "Malaysian look up to the leader and want to be given directions. Another observed that "It is difficult to get Malaysian employees to open up to you. They prefer to keep the issue to themselves rather than discuss it openly ... they seem to have a problem and keep it to themselves. They do not want to rock the boat, save the face ... ." These findings suggest that locals and expatriates have different conceptualization of a leader.

A number of the expatriate interviewees demand more complete information than what Malaysians deem necessary. One expatriate lamented that "Here you are not told and thought everything as much as you wanted to know. I always have to dig ... and dig, and learn by self, continuously questioning ... Here I have to push and keep on pushing for more information." According to him, his experience on this matter is similar as those other European friends working elsewhere in Malaysia. Many of the local interviewees do acknowledge the aggressiveness of expatriate for information, and one confessed that Europeans verbal behavior make him become irritated and impatient. The differences in communication needs and expectations could create relational and work problems. The frustrations and discomforts mentioned here underscore the challenges in local-expatriate interfaces. All the comments made by the interviewees clearly indicate that differences in expectations and attribution of each other verbal behaviors are the sources of intercultural difficulties. Attributing intercultural communication difficulties to cultural differences (real or otherwise) is also observed in a study conducted by Salk (1997).

**Work orientation.** Along with the above marked differences in verbal behavior, expatriates identify troubling differences in work orientation. A sense of frustration emerged from many of the expatriate interviewees' comments that Malaysian employees have a relax attitude toward time and do not have a sense of urgency. The expatriates feel that locals have to be more professional in their time management. One expatriate noted, "It's is difficult to get things done through Malaysians. It's not that they don't have commitment ... perhaps they lack discipline in terms of work prioritization.



They face difficulty in knowing which jobs need to be done first." This tension is acknowledged by one of the local interviewees with an assertion: "Europeans will not allow us to sit on a task for too long; they stick to schedule...sometimes it is difficult to stick to schedule."

Another expatriate categorically mentioned time behavior as the first difference between working with fellow expatriates and Malaysians. He felt that the locals are not committed to deadlines. He mentioned, "They do not put much emphasis on schedule. They are less hurried, perhaps less stressful and more accommodating to time change. In executing projects, they have project milestones but throughout my experience working in project team led by Malaysians the schedule keeps on changing. They do not pay much emphasis on the schedule unless they are being put to close scrutiny by their boss." Several of the expatriates mentioned that they try to adapt to Malaysian time concept, and not to have high expectations. Some of the expatriates construe the relax attitude toward time as a weakness in planning. These findings are consistent with the assertion that monochronic people frequently experienced difficulty in their business dealing with polychronic people as the polychronic people tend to ignore datelines and are imprecise in appointments, as reported by Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997).

Another difficulty stems from differences in emphasis on groups and preference for face-to-face communication (written message must be follow-up with face-to-face communication). One expatriate related a problem attributed to these values as follow: "Recently the management instructed me to go to Miri to discuss issue on operation philosophy. Management has instructed me to convey their opinion on the issue. Before I went down, I email to them all the relevant information including the views of the management. But when I went down to Miri and convey them the management opinion, they could not accept it and they told me that it is Mr. E's (his) idea not the management. I asked them for alternative proposal they don't have any. I believe they don't read my email." This incident illustrates the point that Malaysians are more apt to ideas or opinions based on a team decision and they are less time-conscious.

The finding of the present study also suggests that Malaysians have a different conception of a problem (what a

problem is?) than that of the expatriates. This is another source of difficulty. One of the expatriates suggested that Malaysian employees be trained in planning and strategy-problem analysis. The professional way of solving a problem is to admit it from the start. One expatriate respondent recounted an incident to illustrate this point: "I write operational instructions and managers are to implement those instructions. The problem is that these instructions were put on the shelf and forgotten. Operational instructions are critical in the way the work is undertaken from a health and safety point of view as well as costing point of view. When I go out to a particular unit and ask to see certain things, I get the blank look." From this expatriate point of views, the locals have no sense of urgency. Several of the expatriates interviewed complained that Malaysians tend to wait for a problem to clog up, then they try to solve. These findings underscore the difference in thinking style between Malaysian managers and European managers.

Another topic of concern mentioned by several expatriates is that Malaysian employees have difficulty accepting expatriates' opinions. One expatriate illustrated this theme with an incident: "Four years ago, I tried to introduce total quality business management. It required everyone in the company to actively look at their job function and come up with suggestions for improvement. However some middle management personnel took the suggestion as a personal complain against them." In this incident the staff reaction may be a typical of a collective culture where group decision making is valued. The incident also signifies that any organizational change needs to be strategically introduced.

Several salient issues surface from the present analysis. Firstly, problems occur in many areas of organizational communication such as innovative, production and maintenance communication. Nevertheless, problems are more likely to occur in upward communication and in innovative communication as Malaysian subordinates are rather passive in providing decision making inputs. This seemingly passivity outlook will result in restricted information flow and certainly has implications in several areas of job performance, such as, performance evaluation and feedback, group decision making, conflict resolution, and delegation or empowerment. Secondly, decision making



groups are more likely to suffer groupthink problem as Malaysian employees are reluctant to openly and directly voice their disagreement, criticism or discontent. Thirdly, while the Malaysian employees welcome the values of timeliness, speed, accuracy of information and feedback, it seems that they do not view a lack of sense of urgency, indirectness and ambiguousness as dysfunctional values. As timeliness, accuracy, speed, adequacy and efficiency of information flow and feedback are considered some of the global workplace values, Malaysian employees, managers as well, need to accommodate and practice these competitive workplace values.

Intercultural difficulties stem not only from cultural differences but also from attitudinal barriers. An ingroup-outgroup attitude is implied in some of the local interviewees' comments. For instance, one commented, "They must have their holiday..... they must have all their entertainment....but the rest of us ... we work... and work. The amount that we pay ... we could pay local people who has the same kind of ability if not better." Another said, "I find they are arrogant even though in terms of technical knowledge (in some aspects) they are not that strong compared to us. They are difficult to convince and stick to their decisions." This would certainly hinder effective local-expatriate interactions. The finding perhaps implies that some Malaysians employees need to be trained not to be too ethnocentric in their communication as such a tendency creates a mental blockage toward communicating at interpersonal level. Local-expatriate interfaces would be more effective as the participants move from intercultural to interpersonal communication.

**Coping strategies.** Affective strategy emerges as the primary method of dealing with and managing intercultural difficulties. Many of the interviewees mentioned several attitudinal and motivational qualities that help them to deal with outgroup members. Most are in agreement that qualities such as patience, open-mindedness, cultural empathy, sensitivity, compromising, diplomatic, flexibility and adaptability are necessary in order to manage intercultural differences and difficulties. The other strategy commonly used is to learn, understand and accept cultural differences. Both groups note that the ability to dilute one's cultural outlook and view the counterpart's ways as not bad but something that is

different as salient for effective collaboration. Awareness and knowledge of the counterpart's culture help them to be prepared when dealing with employees of other culture and in anticipating and overcoming probable intercultural breakdowns.

In terms of behavioral strategy, most of the interviewees use accommodating rather than divergent strategy in dealing with cultural differences and the intercultural difficulties. Listening closely to each other, making adjustment in their communication pattern and work habit to make them more compatible with the organizational or local cultural practices emerge as primary behavioral coping strategies. These includes changing speech pattern (i.e., speak slower, use simple language, repetition, not to be too direct and aggressive, asking and probing), and accommodating differences in work habit (i.e., not too rigid to scheduling, try to get use to the different in time management, discuss problem together; not to have high expectation).

### Conclusion

The present study yields evidence and bring to surface the cultural differences which are consequential to communication effectiveness and work processes. Additionally, the study also provides insight on how the intercultural difficulties traceable to cultural differences are work out. Cultural as well as language are the factors contributing to the intercultural communication difficulties and the frustrations of the expatriates and the locals. The intercultural difficulties are attributed more to differences in verbal behavior (indirect, implicit, under communicating v.s. direct, explicit, expressiveness) and time orientation.

Difficulties occur in innovative, maintenance and production communication. However, there are more communication difficulties in the innovative communication including in problem solving and decision making situations. The expatriates face difficulties in soliciting ideas and opinion from the locals as well as getting locals to listen to innovative ideas. This is particularly true if the ideas are seen as individual or out-group initiative. The expatriates expect locals to be participative, task-driven, and time conscious. The locals, on the contrary, expect complete instructions from their



expatriate managers. Information is seldom volunteered but must be requested. The locals feel that adherence to schedule is not critical. While the expatriates prefer direct, explicit and detailed communication; the locals practice indirect, implicit communication. The communication difficulties traceable to the cultural differences, however, are manageable through affective, cognitive and behavioral strategies.

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