



[Academic Script]

Cultural Sensitiveness and Cultural Context

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Academic Script

1. Cultural Sensitiveness

The invention of wheel, fuel power, electricity, radio, telephone, cellular phone, internet, etc. has motivated the human race to be more powerful, more curious, more innovative, more exploring and this has led the human beings to travel extensively, communicate with each other and exchange knowledge with each other.

One more aspect, which is worth perceiving, is that this process of human interaction was augmented by the usage of one common language: English. As English is used worldwide as an international language, it brings with it the variance in the usage of this international language. We, that is, the humans, have become more intelligent and more informed about the cultures of the different societies of the world by communicating through English.

Moreover, even if English were not the instrument of communication, any language would be. And one must comprehend the ways and means of communication in cross-cultural scenario because in the absence of such understanding, the communication may become haywire or lead to confusion, or sometimes it may become offensive too.

Here we are trying to understand the aspect of cultural sensitiveness. I will try to explain the concept of cultural sensitiveness by giving one example.

Dr. P. C. Pandit, The Academic Director, of a well-known institute deploys, Dr. Shrikant Patel, one of the most senior professors, who has served in a government college, in the most remote part of Gujarat, to go to America and interact with Dr. John Paul, the Dean of The University of California. The interaction was arranged to discuss the terms and conditions of affiliation with the university. When Dr. Shrikant Patel reached America, he was welcomed by Dr. John Paul and his assistant Prof. Paul Roberts. The welcoming dialogue was....

Dr. John Paul: "Shrikant, welcome to California. I hope your travel was good. Meet Paul, he assists me in my class."

Dr. Shrikant Patel: "Hello! Thank you for receiving me Mr. Paul. I had an excellent time during my flight."

Dr. John Paul: "You Betcha! Great. But, I am not Paul, I am John. He is Paul."

(This made Dr. Shrikant a little confused, because he was habituated to address people formally by the surname or the last name of the person.)

However, the meeting started and Dr. John Paul started the discussion

Dr. John Paul: Yes Shrikant, tell me what would you like to know about the affiliation procedure.

(On listening to Dr. John Paul addressing him with the first name without using 'Mr.' or 'Sir' anywhere, Dr. Shrikant finds it very curt and insulting)

Dr. Shrikant Patel: Sir, we would like to know whether the degree conferred to the students will comprise your logo and signature of the authority?

(As soon as Dr. Shrikant Patel used 'Sir' to address Dr. John Paul, he felt it to be too formal and thought that Dr. Shrikant was trying to cover some aspect of agreement and had a feeling of suspicion)

This led to less effective communication and the cultural barrier in communication became evident.

We can define culture sensitiveness as Yolanda Williams states:

"Cultural Sensitivity refers to a set of skills that allows you to understand and learn about people whose cultural background is not the same as yours."

Cultural Sensitivity is one of the most important aspects that one must consider while doing international business. Especially in international business, one would find businesspersons at both ends working for common goals. However, their paths and ways of accomplishing these ends are different.

One of the aspects that characterize a culture is its language and communication pattern. One, either, must understand the intricacies of the foreign language or must make the person aware of the ignorance of the intricacies of communication. Otherwise, it will generate an impression of inefficiency or unreliability.

2. Cultural Context

Language, which is one of the tools of communication, can contribute to semantic barriers that can lead to cultural barriers. The usage of slang is one such root to cultural barrier. For example, in Britain, when a young spectator would talk about a

very good performance he would exclaim "It was Wicked". Here 'Wicked' in slang means superb. But a person from Indian origin would understand it as something bad or dangerous unless and until he knows the slang.

Also, as used in the dialogue between John and Dr. Shrikant the expression "You Betcha" means "You can be sure of it", literally it is a slang usage of "you bet you". Moreover, if the person do not know this common slang usage in the U. S. A., one would neither understand nor would be able to spell it too.

The second aspect, which is more instrumental in contributing to cultural sensitiveness, is ETIQUETTE. The simple understanding of etiquette is "the rules governing socially acceptable behavior". In the context of communication, especially in International trade, the cross-cultural sensitiveness plays an important role. Etiquette comprises your expressions, your body language, your gestures, and even your accent. The importance of body language comprises 90% of communication as compared to the words used.

In some cultures, the style of sitting next to someone depicts insult sometimes. A person in the USA is habituated to sit with one foot on the other and the sole of the foot is seen by the person sitting next to you. But the same gesture or body language in the UAE is considered to be insulting and humiliating. If the person from the USA does not have this cultural information, his business meeting or project may be affected. Sometimes the person may be offended and the communication

may lead to misunderstandings and conflicts. Sometimes it may further lead to tiffs as well.

Another example of cross-cultural confusion is that in South Asian countries and many other parts of the world the sign of 'OK' is done by rounding the thumb and the first finger of your hand. It is also marked as 'FINE'. But some other countries like the UAE or some portions of South America; the same sign is considered as obscene and it depicts the same meaning as showing the middle finger.

Now, I will put forward some ways and methods that a cross-cultural communicator should keep in mind before actually getting into some communication. However, the methods suggested are not theoretical. The communicator has to apply his or her wisdom to understand the situation, the person and the country in which or with whom the communication is conducted.

The cross-cultural communicator should update himself/herself about the basic cultural differences of the country. However, it is not possible for all to come across and study all the differences. The communicator should begin the communication by establishing a rapport with the counter communicator and make him understand that he is new to the social and cultural aspects of the country and ask for help as and when his language, gestures, body postures or any other modes of communication is offensive. The communicator should also make them feel comfortable that he will be ready to accept the cross cultural differences and follow them. Moreover, the communicator should distinctly keep the purpose of communication lucid and

comprehensible. This will make the person focus on the business and not only on the communication pattern.

3. Summary

Thus, we can understand that the cultural context in the communication leads to cultural sensitiveness and in the absence of the understanding of the cross-cultural communication patterns, the communication may end up in a major debacle. With the world, which has gotten into our hands, and with the accessibility of every part of the world, one should be completely aware of the cross-cultural condition of communication and proceed further for effective communication.