THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CROSS-CULTURAL BARRIERS IN ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

In global, multinational or multicultural organizations, cross-cultural communication barriers can have a significant effect on the efficiency of organizational communication. Communication barriers can consequently lead to conflicts within organization, the creation of various power groups, misunderstandings with stakeholders and profit loss. The aim of this paper is to present how language differences, nonverbal misinterpretations, assumption of similarity, preconceptions and stereotypes, tendency to evaluate and high anxiety affect managers and employees in cross-cultural context. Developing intercultural competences is regarded as the solution to overcoming the abovementioned barriers, and the role of education, emotional intelligence and the development of reliable digital tools is emphasized.

Key words: *cross-cultural, communication barriers, organizational communication, intercultural competences*

1. INTRODUCTION

In a world of increasing globalization and internationalization, the importance of cross-cultural management skills has become more evident. Working in an organization that is global, multinational, or multicultural, one needs to acknowledge differences in culture affecting others and personal attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors (Miller, 2015). These culture-specific attitudes, beliefs

and behaviours directly affect organizational communication, and managers must put great effort into developing effective and efficient communication. In cross-cultural context, cross-cultural communication barriers may undermine the efficiency and quality of organizational communication. To explain those communication barriers, Barna (1994) uses the concept of six stumbling blocks: language differences, nonverbal misinterpretations, assumption of similarity, preconceptions and stereotypes, tendency to evaluate and high anxiety. Furthermore, she emphasizes the significance of developing intercultural communication competences in order to overcome the abovementioned communication barriers. Exactly this skill is of the utmost importance for managers in cross-cultural context. Due to non-efficient communication, organizations face tremendous business losses. Tran (2017) argues that language barriers, cultural nuances, and value divergence can lead to unintentional misapprehensions that can lead to conflicts and loss in organizational productivity. Referring to the somewhat wider context, Groves et al. (2015) emphasize that research strongly supports that international negotiations often fail due to a general lack of understanding and familiarity with different cultures involved in the process. Therefore, for successful cross-cultural management and communication it is crucial not only to overcome one of the barriers, but all of them. The knowledge of language should be complemented by the in-depth knowledge of culture and its nonverbal communication. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to present the effect of multiple cross-cultural communication barriers on management, specifically referring to the six stumbling blocks as emphasized by Barna (1994). By doing so, it will point to the most prominent problems in cross-cultural context and suggest possible solutions, mostly connected with the ways to raise intercultural competences of both managers and employees. Although theoretical in nature, the paper aims to provide deeper exploratory and critical analysis of main cross-cultural barriers in organizational communication.

Following the introduction, the problem of managing organizational communication is presented in more detail. Based on the relevant literature, it explores the very concept of organizational communication as well as the role of managers in establishing efficient organizational communication in cross-cultural context. To do so, six cross-cultural communication barriers are discussed in more detail to present the challenges they bring and their implications for management. Then, limitations and recommendations for future research and the main findings of this paper are addressed in the conclusion.

2.   ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

Communication is regarded as one of the most important managerial activities, affecting overall organizational performance (Yuliaty, 2021). Cornelissen (2014:50) defines organizational communication, i.e., corporate communication, as "a management function that offers a framework for the effective coordination of all internal and external communication with the overall purpose of establishing and maintaining favourable reputations with stakeholder groups upon which the organization is dependent". Both formal and informal communication need to be acknowledged by managers, as not only formal but also informal communication often plays a crucial role in forming interpersonal relations, which directly affect business processes. Furthermore, communication is conducted in various forms – verbal (written and

oral) and nonverbal (gestures, expressions, signs and symbols). Barriers that disable the effective transmission of a message from a sender to a receiver can obstruct each of these forms. Speaking of the transmission of a message, Tran (2017:64) distinguishes effective and efficient communication: "Effective communication is when the message of the sender has a successful decoding from the receiver and efficient communication is when the communication is done effectively at a low cost". In this regard, successful organizational communication would not only indicate that a message is transmitted, but also that it is transmitted in a fast and accurate manner. In cross-cultural context, exactly this transmission process presents a challenge for all stakeholders. In order to master it, the development of intercultural competences becomes one of the most important job-related skills.

Managers in cross-cultural context should demonstrate the awareness of both verbal and nonverbal communication barriers, as well as the effect of preconceived ideas and stereotypes on one's behaviour. In this regard, the education on cultural differences plays a role which is as important as the learning of a common corporate language. Arnulf et al. (2021:12) state that such education contributes to the understanding of severe and unexpected difficulties in cross-cultural management, "where knowledge and organization depends on communication among people who have widely different interpretations even if sharing the same working language such as English".

3. MANAGING ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION IN CROSS-CULTURAL CONTEXT

Barna (1994) uses the concept of six stumbling blocks to emphasize main cross-cultural barriers that can lead to problems and conflicts in organizational communication. Therefore, language differences, nonverbal misinterpretations, assumption of similarity, preconceptions and stereotypes, tendency to evaluate and high anxiety are further critically explored in details.

3. 1 Verbal communication barriers: the role of language

Without a doubt, today English is used as a lingua franca. On the one hand, the growing number of non-native speakers of the language widens communication possibilities in a globalized business world. On the other, the disparate levels of its usage represent a serious challenge to the efficient organizational communication. Piekkari et al. (2014) point that the impact that non-native speakers of English are having on the use of the English language is so strong that now, in the field of applied linguistics, there is a reputable stream of research called English as a Lingua Franca.

When it comes to the state of research on the role of language in business, Tenzer et al. (2017) state that numerous international business researchers increased their knowledge of the function and role of language within their subject area due to the emergent research drawing on ideas from a diversity of disciplines and using various methodologies. However, they also argue that there are severe knowledge gaps in theory, data, methodology, and content (Tenzer et al., 2017).

Among other issues, this research field deals with the usage of English in the business world. English language skills vary among organizations as well as among individuals in the same organization.

Hinds et al. (2014) stress the necessity for managers to understand challenges in communication within organizations that have a mix of native, bilingual, and professional competence in the lingua franca. Furthermore, they add that managers need to be aware of different coping strategies that can be used, including withdrawal, exclusion, and code switching for less confident English speakers, and leaving, asking for translations, or requesting that English be used for more fluent and confident English speakers (Hinds et al., 2014:559). All of the abovementioned coping strategies weaken the organizational communication by either slowing it down, transmitting incomplete and inaccurate messages or completely omitting them. To overcome these problems, managers should introduce appropriate solutions. Bellak (2010) suggests using multiple languages as corporate languages in addition to lingua franca, relying on translations services, recruiting personnel with language skills, offering language training to employees, in-/expatriating staff and establishing in-house languages departments. However, Piekkari et al. (2014:127) warn that managerial strategies related to the outsourcing of language services may result in the erosion of internal language capability, which can limit organizational capability to reply to varying situations that call for a stronger set of language resources. Therefore, more emphasis should be placed on strengthening the language competences within the organization. Knowing that their organizations provide support in overcoming language issues, employees might more openly address the communication problems and feel more motivated to enhance their language skills.

One of the difficulties, which is, in spite of its obviousness, often overlooked in the business world, is working in a second language. Even for individuals with near-native level of a second language, its continuous usage in both written and oral communication represents a demanding and tiring task. McCubbin et al. (2006) point to the fact that for individuals who perform in multiple languages, in addition to the typical cognitive work tasks performed in a single language, a series of additional cognitive-linguistic processes must be performed effectively. In other words, working in a second language requires not only dealing with the operational problems, which need to be take care of, but also to translate/transfer those tasks into a second language. McCubbin et al. (2006:6) describe the process in the following words: "Complex decision-making using input and/or output in different languages requires steps such as decoding and language switching in addition to the typical cognitive processing of tasks using single languages. In addition, there is considerable nuance required when verbatim translation is not feasible or when cultural idiosyncrasies require careful judgment of ambiguous meaning". The latter part of this statement is particularly indicative. For a great number of tasks and business concepts, there is no accurate translation from one language to another. The full meaning of certain concepts remains within the domain of one language, making the process of translating even more demanding. In these cases, as Ivanova (2018) claims, speakers may borrow a word to mean something that does not exist in their own. In general, to avoid the loss of meaning, individuals must put an extra cognitive effort into communicating such concepts. In working environments made of both native and non-native speakers, managers and colleagues ought to show more empathy for the tiring process of communicating in a second language.

One of the ways to deal with the problem of unequal proficiency levels is to introduce convergence into organizational communication. As Guirdham and Guirdham (2017:174) emphasize, in a communicational sense, convergence denotes "adjusting ways of speaking (such as style, dialect,

rules and primary language choice) to match those of a partner perceived as different or to show a wish for affiliation". By simplifying their vocabulary and grammar choices, employees and managers with higher language levels could significantly ease the communication for their less proficient colleagues. This practice may also increase the sense of bonding and closeness within an organization. The opposite process – divergence – is described as the "adherence to one's own way in spite of perceived differences or even increasing the difference. It is open to individuals in diverse work groups to diverge deliberately in order to increase social distance" (Guirdham, Guirdham, 2017:174). In cross-cultural context, the direct consequence of this practice is the formation of various subgroups, emanating different power relations within the company. Tran (2017:81) states that different speech communities based on language express different power relations. In his opinion, language can be used in the process of excluding and including individuals, and differences in use can create distinctions through which individuals and groups can avoid influence. The consequences of these practices may be more far-reaching than one would initially assume. The formation of such power relations does not only affect informal communication among employees, but also important job-related processes. Piekkari et al. (2014) argue that language fluency can deliver power to individuals which in some cases exceeds their formal status or what would their job description normally involve. In contrast, individuals who might be better skilled for a certain job, but struggle with language, may be overlooked due to this relation between language proficiency and power relations.

Another aspect of interpersonal relations directly affected by language is trust building. As Tenzer and Schuster (2017) notice, language barriers are frequently addressed as obstacles to trust building as well as factors that create distortions in organizational power relations. Therefore, it is upon managers to build awareness of the effects caused by language barriers, seek plausible solutions and implement them into organizations. However, as Piekkari et al. (2014) write, it is a nearly impossible to control all information flow and knowledge transfer within a company because critical exchanges often take place between people through informal interaction. For managers it "requires a fine balancing act to facilitate communication without introducing unintended impediments," and it can "only be achieved through a language strategy that permeates the whole organization, is championed by language-aware top management, and is supported by appropriate procedures, practices, budgets and incentives (Piekkari et al., 2014:127).

Digitalization might also play an important role in overcoming language barriers. Namely, in their research, Lifintsev and Wellbrock (2019) demonstrated that various digital tools simplify the cross-cultural communication process. Many of their respondents, when in communication with a representative of a different culture where language barriers are present, find it easier to avoid face-to-face communication. In that sense, tools such as online translators and autocorrecting can help an individual to feel more confident while communicating with people from different cultures, both during online and face-to-face encounters (Lifintsev, Wellbrock, 2019). It is reasonable to assume that with the further development of translation tools cross-cultural language barriers will become smaller. However, the greatest challenge in front of digital translation tools lies in the incorporation of culture-specific connotations into translations. Tran (2017:69) states the following: "Language possesses a unique cultural connotation. The differences between languages

is a marked characteristic of cross-cultural communication. These differences also present a pivotal obstacle". Nowadays, the improvement of digital translation tools is most evident in their growing ability to accurately translate culture-related concepts. For instance, the word *red* has different connotations in English and Russian. In English it has associations with "red politics, which might be relatively negative, and bureaucracy, which is almost always negative," and in Russian it mostly has "ancient associations with beauty and historical associations with the Soviet Union, most of which are either neutral or neutral / positive" (Ivanova, 2018:3). In this case, *red* does not only mean *red*. A literal translation, which does not convey the culture-related connotation, could create a communication barrier rather than convey a proper meaning. Therefore, it is of crucial importance to further enhance translation tools by "teaching" those culture-specific concepts such as this one. Only then, they could be completely reliable in overcoming language barriers.

3. 2 Non-verbal misinterpretations and assumptions of similarity

In addition to above mentioned language, the following two barriers in cross-cultural communication distinguished by Barna (1994) are non-verbal misinterpretations and assumptions of similarity. To overcome both barriers, one's awareness and knowledge of certain culture must go beyond knowing its language. For cross-cultural workplaces, this also means that all stakeholders should, besides mastering the organizational language, educate themselves on non-verbal communication of diverse cultures and abandon the assumptions of similarity. Fernández-Souto et al. (2015:237) state the following: "Nonverbal communication is a mirror reflecting different cultures. Managing the technical skills of a language, although it is unavoidable, is not enough to engage in the international context, as in most traditional societies, (. . .) non-verbal communication acquires special relevance. Furthermore, the findings of the research conducted by Arnulf et al. (2021) suggest that even mastery of a second language may not lead to metacognition that interprets and guides native speakers' speech acts. In business communication, the inability to accurately interpret non-verbal language may represent a serious disadvantage. As Peleckis et al. (2016) argue, ones' understanding of others body language and prediction of his behaviors is significant in business environment, specifically in negotiations and business meetings. To develop these skills in cross-cultural context, one must understand that non-verbal language is not always universal and learn how to recognize differences among diverse cultures. Groves et al. (2015) emphasize the importance of the education of future leaders and managers, especially in the development and assessment of cultural quotient. They consider cross-cultural competences as the integral part of management education, emphasizing that specially in negotiations in multicultural context one needs to have understanding and competence to work with individual from diverse cultural backgrounds, thus with variety in their values, communication style and behavioral cues (Groves et al., 2015).

A certain part of body language is innate and genetically determined as well as universal among different cultures. However, as Peleckis et al. (2016) write, non-verbal communication signs are not universal and they are determined by nationality and culture. The same gestures may have different meanings in different nations, while cultural aspects such as ethics, etiquette and educational level determine body language signs (Peleckis et al., 2016). The important factor determining the

amount in which non-verbal communication is used is the difference between high-context and low-context cultures. Namely, communication in high-context cultures relies more on contextual elements. Gestures, facial expressions and eye contact are used in addition to words to strengthen, assist and hint the message that is being transferred (Tiechuan, 2016). Individuals in high-context cultures communicate using non-verbal embedded information and use gestures, reasoning and even silence rather than words to suggest meaning Merkin (2017). The examples of high-context collectivistic cultures would be China and Chile, where people rely more on contextual cues in communication than in the U.S.A., which is classified as low-context culture (Merkin, 2017).

Another important aspect, which varies in diverse cultures, is interpersonal distance. In order to avoid uncomfortable situations, one should be aware of it while communicating with members of different cultures. For instance, Guirdham and Guirdham (2017:167) present a hypothetical situation in which Arabs and Latin-Americans communicate with a member of Anglo culture: "Arabs and Latin- Americans feel comfortable with a smaller space bubble than Anglos. This leads them to stand closer, creating discomfort for an interacting Anglo, who may move backwards, thus giving an impression of unfriendliness to the Arab". In this situation, if Arab and Latin-American assumed that there is a similarity between their and Anglo culture, they might find themselves offended. The similar problem might occur with interpreting eye contact. Unlike in Europe and America, in the countries such as China, Japan, Philippine and Indonesia people evade prolonged eye contact as possible because they consider it as impolite and implying offense (Tiechuan, 2016).

The assumption of similarity might also be detrimental when interpreting emotions and gestures. Matsumoto (2006) points that individualistic low context cultures, as opposed to collectivistic high context cultures are more open to expressing their emotions and making judgment based on it. On the other hand, LaFrance and Mayo (1978:77) state, "emotional expression involves both cultural similarities and differences. It is not simply the case that some emotions are universal and others culturally specific". For example, smiling can be qualified as a universal expression of joy. However, in Japan, it often expresses annoyance and it is used to command others and indicate person's inner strength and control (LaFrance, Mayo, 1978).

When it comes to gestures, Fernández-Souto et al. (2015:236) provide interesting examples of inaccurate interpretation because of the assumption of similarity. The gesture of giving a rose from a boss to his secretary would be interpreted completely different in various parts of the world. In the U.S.A., it is a sign of gratitude for a well-done task. In Latin countries, it would indicate that the boss is attracted to his secretary and therefore be considered inappropriate. In addition, making noises during a meal is considered rude in most of Europe, while in Japan it is simply good manners and stating that the food is delicious. Another example of a gesture, which can be completely differently interpreted in cross-cultural business context, is the OK hand gesture in which the thumb and index finger touch. While in the U.S.A. and Canada it indicates that everything is going fine, in Australia, Belgium and France it means *zero* or *nothing,* indicating that business related tasks or negotiations are not going well (Tiechuan, 2016).

3. 3 Stereotypes, tendency to evaluate and high anxiety

One of the most harmful phenomena for cross-cultural businesses and surroundings are stereotypes. Zhu (2020:1652) defines stereotype as "the product of lazy and limited perceptions of some people, who are always prone to fit people into the fixed patterns according to their previous experience". Stereotypes directly affect the quality of communication, both in the way it is conducted and perceived afterwards. Regardless of whether they are positive or negative, in business negotiations they can be seriously damaging. Because of preconceived ideas, in cross-cultural communication people may behave differently towards the members of various groups. Moreover, oftentimes people are not even aware of the fact that their verbal and non-verbal language towards the members of other cultures is affected by certain stereotypes. Consequently, stereotypes can effect the information processing as often people remember more about individuals of whom the stereotype is positive, while less about those of whom it is negative (Guirdham, Guirdham, 2017). For example, if a person regards Roma people as uneducated, he/she is more likely not to notice a high education level of an individual member of that culture. The most problematic aspect of stereotypes is their persistence. In spite of changed social and cultural circumstances, stereotypes seem to survive. As Tran (2017:65) notices, through repeating and emphasizing, stereotypes as fixed prejudices "are likely to become "the eternal verities", which take root in people's minds and further hinder future communication".

Tendency to evaluate from one's own point of view also represent a stumbling block in cross-cultural communication. Ethnocentrism, which assumes that one's own culture holds the only correct and morally right set of values, disables an individual to view the world from various standpoints. Barna (1994:8) explains it in the following words: "Each person's culture or way of life always seems right, proper, and natural. This bias prevents the open-minded attention needed to look at the attitudes and behavior patterns from the other's point of view". In order to illustrate this phenomenon, she describes the stance towards the mid-day siesta. The members of northern cultures might see it as an act of laziness and sluggishness. However, if they understand that this custom in the Mediterranean is regarded as a necessity and a way to deal with extremely high mid-day temperatures, their concept of siesta changes from a "lazy habit" to a "pretty good idea" (Barna, 1994:8). Guirdham and Guirdham (2017) bring another interesting example of evaluation from one's own point of view. Namely, they discuss how people from high power-distance cultures can cause difficulties when they work in low power-distance societies. In this regard, university lecturers from Central Europe teaching in British and American universities may consider the growing egalitarianism between students and staff as undermining their authority (Guirdham, Guirdham, 2017). From their viewpoint, practices, which are common there, such as addressing lecturers by first name, may be seen as extremely rude and inappropriate.

Finally, high anxiety as the last stumbling block in cross-cultural communication recognized by Barna (1994) is distinct from all other barriers. It can be regarded as an emotional response and a defense mechanism from the stress caused by recognizing and adjusting to cultural differences. Barna (1994) sees it as the block that triggers and composites the other stumbling blocks. All of them – language differences, nonverbal misinterpretations, assumption of similarity, stereotypes and tendency to evaluate – are affected by high anxiety, which makes people even more vulnerable

to communication barriers. In this regard, Guirdham and Guirdham (2017:170) address the notion of intercultural communication apprehension (ICA), defining it as "the fear of communicating with people from different cultures or with 'different others' in general". Furthermore, they discuss that in some cases, suffering from ICA is an individual trait, which can be predicted from a person's emotionality, sociability and self-control. Developing emotional intelligence can help reduce and successfully manage ICA. In cross-cultural business surroundings, all stakeholders should take responsibility for developing their intercultural competences. However, the crucial role should be played by managers, who by recognizing communication barriers and leading by example, drive the desired change.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The effect of cross-cultural communication barriers on management in global, multinational or multicultural work surrounding cannot be neglected. Barriers such as language differences, nonverbal misinterpretations, assumption of similarity, preconceptions and stereotypes, tendency to evaluate and high anxiety can have a detrimental effect on organizational communication. They can lead to conflicts among employees, misunderstanding with various stakeholders and profit loss. In addition, they can result in the creation of various power groups, increased tiredness of employees, underperformance, trust problems and inaccurate assumptions and conclusions. Therefore, developing effective and efficient organizational communication is one of the most important managerial tasks in cross-cultural surroundings. In order to achieve it, managers should develop intercultural competences and be able to recognize and overcome various communication barriers. Language and culture education, the development of emotional intelligence and perfectioning reliable digital tools can all contribute to the enhancement of intercultural competences. Finally, managers in cross-cultural surrounding should lead the change by example, but it is upon all stakeholders to contribute to the overcoming of communication barriers.

The aim of this paper was to provide exploratory analysis of main cross-cultural stumbling blocks in organizational communication. Acknowledging them and emphasizing their importance the paper tried to recognize the most prominent problems in cross-cultural context and suggest possible solutions that can help managers and employees in multicultural settings to develop and advance their competences for work in cross cultural context.

When it comes to the effect of cross-cultural communication barriers on management, some research limitations need to be considered. Namely, this is a highly multidisciplinary field, which encompasses research from the domains of management, business economics, linguistics, sociology and ethnology. Further incorporation of these research fields could create a better picture of the actual state of affairs and result in creating applicable guidelines for managers. In addition, cultural intelligence assessment together with the language assessment of managers could help organizations determine potential shortcomings and create useful educational programmes. Both in the process of assessment and education, digital tools can be of a great help. Future research also

needs to explore empirically relations among different barriers and their effects in organizational communication.

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VAŽNOST MEĐUKULTUROLOŠKIH BARIJERA U ORGANIZACIJSKOJ KOMUNIKACIJI

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SAŽETAK

U globalnim, multinacionalnim ili multikulturalnim organizacijama, međukulturalne komunikacijske barijere mogu imati značajan učinak na učinkovitost organizacijske komunikacije. Komunikacijske barijere posljedično mogu dovesti do sukoba unutar organizacije, stvaranja različitih grupa moći, nesporazuma s dionicima i gubitka dobiti. Cilj ovog rada je prikazati kako razlike u jeziku odnosno verbalnoj komunikaciji, pogrešne interpretacije neverbalne komunikacije, pretpostavke sličnosti, predrasude i stereotipi, sklonost procjeni i visoka anksioznost utječu na menadžere i zaposlenike u međukulturalnom kontekstu. Razvijanje interkulturalnih kompetencija smatra se rješenjem za prevladavanje navedenih prepreka, a ističe se uloga obrazovanja, emocionalne inteligencije i razvoja pouzdanih digitalnih alata.

Ključne riječi: *međukulturalno, komunikacijske barijere, organizacijska komunikacija, kros-kulturološke kompetencije*