

# THE ROLE OF CULTURAL DIMENSIONS OF COMMUNICATION AND DEVELOPING CULTURAL AWARENESS IN INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS

Gordana Mušura<sup>1</sup> 

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31410/ERAZ.2020.203>

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**Abstract:** *The purpose of this paper<sup>2</sup> is to consider the importance of understanding cultural dimensions of communication and what role they play in developing cultural awareness among managers working in international companies with a whole variety of employees from different countries and with different cultural backgrounds. That is why international managers need to be trained to become aware of cultural and social differences and to be able to act in an appropriate way and cope with problems if it is necessary, especially in these disruptive and risk-averse times, caused by Covid-19 virus and a pandemic crisis. They also need to understand some specific non-verbal ways of communication that might cause misunderstandings or create unpleasant situations. Therefore, non-verbal communication as a special aspect of cultural dimensions of communication is analyzed and the most common problems that occur among people who come into contact at the international business level are pointed out with the aim of avoiding or minimizing them.*

**Keywords:** *Intercultural communication, Non-verbal communication, Human resource Global managers, Cultural misunderstanding and shock.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The cultural dimensions of communication are an integral part of intercultural communication which arises from mutual contacts among people of different cultures in the modern globalized world. Hence the studies of this kind are relatively recent. The understanding of this concept is especially of a great importance nowadays when specific kinds of crisis, including that caused by Covid-19 virus, arise and threaten to jeopardize every aspect of people's lives. A lot of things can also go wrong in business very quickly and have a negative impact on economies and societies of many states. That is why effective human resource global managers require soft skills, such as the ability to communicate with overseas employees and to understand their different points of view and diverse attitude to work performance. They also need to be culturally sensitive and interculturally competent.

## 2. CULTURAL DIMENSIONS OF COMMUNICATION

The cultural dimensions of communication explain the relationships between people and their expectations and needs in the workplace. Hofstede (1991) formulated this theory after completing an extensive study of cultural differences that he conducted for the company IBM in the 1970s. Namely, there was need to determine the reasons for the great differences in the business of this company in many countries in the world, although the same procedures and standards for

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<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Business and Tourism, Akademija znanja, Budva, Montenegro

<sup>2</sup> Some segments of the paper were taken, adapted and translated into English from the doctoral dissertation "Sticanje interkulturalne komunikativne kompetencije u nastavi italijanskog jezika kao stranog u osnovnoj školi" (Mušura, 2019). ("Acquiring intercultural communicative competence in teaching and learning Italian as a foreign language at elementary school")

work and qualifications of employees existed everywhere. The author found that the causes were in the great cultural differences, both of the employees and, in a broader sense, of the culture of the country in which the plants operated. This practical experience helped him to formulate his basic settings, i.e. four basic cultural dimensions (Andrijević, 2016, p. 38-39 in Musura, 2019).

Hofstede's theory of cultural dimensions represents the backbone and theoretical framework on which other anthropologists and social psychologists, as well as the author himself, have upgraded their views and theoretical assumptions regarding the dimensions of cultural variability. This theory, based on empirical research, builds its principles on the premise whose value can be viewed through different dimensions.

In his original version, Hofstede (ibid., in Mor Barak, 2005 & Musura, 2019) presents four dimensions through which cultural values can be analyzed. Those are:

- distance of power, which refers to the strength of the social hierarchy, i.e. the relationship between government and social inequality;
- individualism towards collectivism, i.e. the relationship between the individual and the group;
- avoidance of uncertainty, i.e. controlling aggression and expressing emotions;
- masculinity towards femininity, i.e. a tendency towards self-confidence versus modesty.

Hofstede later added the fifth dimension, which is „long-term versus short-term orientation.” The author then in 2010 complemented his theory with the sixth dimension, which is „indulgence versus limitation.” Other anthropologists have also researched this concept. Thus, we mention Hall (Hall, 1976) who researched „cultures of low and high context” and different concepts of time. What these dimensions have in common is that they affect how people communicate.

### 3. NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

The domain of cultural dimensions of communication also includes non-verbal communication as a specific process of communication by sending messages without words that can be transmitted by various instruments. Among the most common ones are gestures and facial expressions, distance between bodies as a form of communication, manner of dressing as a linguistic expression and status symbols. All these kinds of non-verbal language can cause misunderstandings in everyday communication.

Balboni (2012, p. 150) points out communication problems that are caused by cultural values, such as communication problems related to time, the concept of public and private, hierarchy, respect, status, the concept of family, honesty, loyalty, fair play and the metaphorical world. The same author (ibid, 2007, p. 58 in Musura, 2019) notes that “in intercultural contexts there is a higher risk of problems when using non-verbal language than verbal”, since “neurolinguistic factors and not only pragmalinguistic ones are also present”. People are not even aware of their own communicative use of the body and mostly think that gestures and interpersonal distances of the body are natural, not realizing that they „belong to the cultural grammar of language”. A person sees something first, i.e. he or she notices it and after that listens to it. People also see more than they hear. Thus, 80% of the information that reaches the cerebral cortex comes from the eyes, while only 10% of the information comes from the ear although „linguistic information is much more sophisticated than visual and allows communication of abstract concepts (ibid.)”.

Furthermore, when it comes to a conflict, the author emphasizes (ibid.) that “nonverbal signs prevail over verbal ones and have more weight than the spoken word”. If the word is accompanied by a gesture, e.g. with the blink of an eye or the movement of the hand, it can be understood quite the opposite of what has been said. When observing body language, some delicate points can be emphasized, such as smile, eyes, facial expressions, hands and fists, legs and feet, body odors, sounds and moods, which can also create certain problems in mutual communication, especially if we are not aware of the communicative use of our body and consider gestures and interpersonal distances to be natural, without realizing that they also send a certain message.

Balboni (ibid.) also points out that “speaking means using language, while communication includes other non-verbal components that vary from culture to culture and often have different meanings in different cultures”. These signs are decoded in our mind according to our own „mental software”.

Only people who are able to understand different kinds of non-verbal languages and communication can avoid cultural misunderstandings and shock when meeting people from different cultural backgrounds.

#### **4. PROBLEMS IN CONDUCTING BUSINESS ACROSS CULTURES**

As one of the biggest trends in the 21<sup>st</sup> century business landscapes is the need for more global business approach, the cultural components in conducting business are increasingly emphasized. It is very important to learn about other cultures and gain a certain degree of adaptation to a new culture because most difficulties that arise in mutual business contacts are due to intangible, cross-cultural misunderstandings. That is why business people should learn some typical practices and behavior of one’s business culture before working in that culture. For example, it is essentially important to know if the following aspects are usual in your future business client’s culture: using people’s first names, shaking hands, giving presents to clients, getting straight to the point in business meetings, having long business lunches, working very long hours, using face to face or online communication, dressing formally, asking personal questions and talking about free-time activities. Once people acquire the cultural knowledge, they will be able to understand things from different points of view and perspectives and do business successfully in international settings.

#### **5. THE ROLE OF HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGERS IN INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS AND MODERN MANAGEMENT**

Managers who work in international business teams should think globally and have good cultural awareness. It means that they should develop the ability to understand the culture of the people with whom they work and behave appropriately. They also need to be aware of the fact that cultural diversity provides a greater variety of perspectives and ideas, which may lead to more creative solutions and better work performance. They are expected to create diverse teams in order to empower individuals to perform at a higher-level and to increase productivity. Furthermore, leveraging workplace diversity should be increasingly seen as a vital strategic resource for competitive advantage and modern management has to enable positive business competition that differs in language, culture and distinctive system values.

Apart from the afore mentioned, successful international human resource managers need to learn some new strategies as to be able to cope with problems or difficulties of any kind and

solve them in a positive way. These strategies include their ability to respect all employees and to adapt to them, to learn some essential elements of their cultures and languages and develop good relations with all the members of the team. They should also gain more knowledge of different business policies and experiences. By adopting and applying this, modern human resource global managers will create an intercultural atmosphere at work and acquire “critical cultural awareness”, which is understood as “the ability to critically evaluate based on explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in their own and other cultures” (Byram, 1997, p. 53 in Musura, 2019, p. 57)

## 6. CONCLUSION

The paper considers the importance of knowing cultural dimensions of communication, as well as non-verbal communication in order to establish successful intercultural communication and conduct business on a global level. It means that people who enter into intercultural contacts can „engage with complexity and multiple identities and avoid stereotypes.” (Byram et al., 2002, p.10) They also need to possess “the ability to deal with cultural differences in a positive way” and “to interpret gestures, codes and other non-verbal ways of communication, as well as negotiation and conflict resolution skills” (Jokikokko, 2005, p.70 in Musura, 2019). These requisites are especially of a great importance both for human resource managers and their employees. They should become interculturally competent by learning how to navigate business environment in an interculturally sensitive way. This is considered to be an essential global career skill.

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