Intercultural Management and Communication:
The Embodiment of Murphy's Law

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Genesis Chapter 11: "And the Lord said, 'Look, they are one people, and they all have one language... nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them.'"¹

Abstract

Communication in all its ramifications effects and affects managing and management. Intercultural communication compounds the already complex management environment because perspectives are shaped by culture and as cultures differ so does communication. These complexities often lead to misunderstanding and organizational in efficiencies.

"Intercultural Management and Communication" is an attempt to high-light the communication-management link and to reintroduce or reinforce what managers already know: we are constantly communicating -- silence can be deafening -- and we must expect that we will often be misunderstood while accepting the fact that we will misunderstand others.

Introduction

Assumption University (ABAC) has one of the most, if not the most,

¹ Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 49502, p 8
culturally diverse work forces in Thailand. Its faculty and staff is composed of professionals from more than thirty nations. Students arrive from more than 40 nations and attend its classes. Effective communication and management in this multicultural environment is not easily attained, but they are needed if the University is to: maintain its focus, build on its competitive advantages, insure its student body a universal education, and continue to grow in the field of international education.

In any organization almost every aspect of management is influenced by its communication environment. At ABAC, English is the glue that holds its heterogeneous groups together and the only medium that can attain the coordination and cooperative effort needed to stay focused on University objectives.

The University's growth has been accompanied with increased misunderstandings and misconceptions that lead to problems in almost every aspect of its operation. It appears that a "we" versus "they" nonproductive attitude is becoming more prevalent. This article will, hopefully, help those who are employed in multicultural environments understand the need for intercultural communications awareness, empathy and tailoring their management style to the particular situation.

The University's heterogeneous mix of cultures leads to problems that are often rooted in poor communications. These problems can often be traced to some type of an intercultural communication failure. Most staff and student problems are basically cases of déjà vu and easily explained, but often hard to accept. Even after twenty years in the Thai environment, ethnocentrism can still get in the way of effective communications and management, and the Thai system of communicating can still, on occasion, lead to frustration of those who do not share the same perspective.

What is somewhat surprising is the fact that many educators who have persistent problems with the University's management system and managers are teaching courses that should make them more understanding of the root causes of their problems: cross-cultural variances in communication and management processes. In the business sector, many managers have probably taken courses in sensitivity training, cross-cultural management and the like. Yet, often unbeknownst to them, they still suffer from problems related to communication failures. These failures lead to management mishaps and produce expatriot managers who fail in their foreign assignments.

Murphy's Law is an old management saw that says 'if anything can go wrong, it will'. That 'law' applied to communications simply means that if there is any way something said, written or conveyed by nonverbal means can be misinterpreted -- it will be. Murphy's Law itself is often misunderstood. Most Thai and other
non-Western and even Western students think that management folk sayings such as Murphy's Law, O'Reily's Law, Parkinson's Law, the Peter Principle et al. are, in truth, accepted Laws and Principles of the scientific and business world.

Culture: Foundation of Communications

What makes a good communicator? Communication texts usually say empathy, receptivity and responsiveness are major factors. However, in a diverse multicultural organization, knowledge of cultural differences and perspectives is vital to an effective communication process. Without this knowledge, it may not be possible to empathize or receive messages in proper context. To be effective communicators in the international arena, managers must be capable of coping with ethnocentrism.

Working within their own particular frame of reference, people believe that what they communicate is received as it was intended. They are often in error because differences in the receiver's values, beliefs, attitudes and experiences can lead to different perceptions. Different perceptions lead to unexpected behavior. Thus failure in transmitting the intended message in a context that can be interpreted as it was meant to be by the receiver is a major cause for concern. If mutual understanding is to be transmitted effectively across cultures then attention must be paid to the entire communication process.

When addressing problems associated with miscommunications, it pays to point out a simple managerial communication imperative that is related to Murphy's Law: One should expect to be misunderstood. The converse is equally important; one should expect that he will be guilty of misunderstanding others. If the frustrated communicators are asked: how many times have they been misunderstood? they invariably answer--"innumerably". However, when asked: how many times have they misunderstood others? they have difficulty in answering. Even worse they sometimes think that they have been understood and the ensuing behavior was a direct calculated affront. We know that miscommunication occurs between people from the same culture, so we should expect that more miscommunications will take place between people with different cultural backgrounds--even if they are using the same language. Actually, using the same language as the common tongue may exacerbate misinterpretation.

What may be more difficult to accept is that misunderstandings may be aggravated when both parties use a common language. In these cases, both parties believe they are communicating, but cultural noise and nuances can distort and twist the true meaning of what is thought to be said and what is actually heard.
English is ABAC's medium of instruction and organizational communication. Westerners, especially English-only speakers, seem to encounter more communication problems than others. The Westerner assumes that everyone understands what is being said because they are using a common language — English. And, he thinks that he can't be guilty of miscommunication because he is the owner of the language. In addition, Thai and other foreign speakers of English often give the impression that they think like Westerners by speaking about business and managerial matters much as Westerners and Americans do. This leads the Westerner to assume that both parties are communicating on the same wavelength.

If we accept the fact that we can misunderstand people, just as they can misunderstand us within our own culture, we should be able to agree that communicating with others coming from other cultures with different sets and rank orderings of values compounds the problem. Even values that are held in common between cultures can lead to misunderstandings because the emphasis or priority paid to them may vary across cultures.

For example, frankness is a primary value of the West. Thais, however, see frankness in a negative light. Peace is a primary value of Thailand but is only a secondary value of the West. How do these different values and rank orderings affect communication? They prevent open, direct communication and lead to the often heard remark by Westerners: "Why don't they level with me?"

Thais, in general, believe that one should interact with others politely no matter how much anger or annoyance one might feel, or as the Thai saying goes: "Keep muddy waters inside while you put clear water outside." Americans valuing frankness tend to handle anger in the opposite manner, believing that it is better not to 'bottle up' one's anger but rather to 'let it all hang out.' Thais think that this direct, explosive approach is reckless at best.

Thais seem to have good relations and avoid outright open conflict, but they are not saints; they have and make enemies. When angered, they find subtle ways to get back at one another. They certainly don't deal with the problem immediately in a frank and open discussion.

Thus different rank orderings of values cause problems. Hence, ABAC's multicultural staff is ripe for conflict due to its diverse cultural population and value systems and, all too often, a lack of communication ability within this culturally diverse and complex environment.

It is these impressions of commonalty that creates many problems for the Westerner. The simple fact is most non-native speakers of English, regardless of their educational backgrounds, are still strongly influenced by their traditional cultures.
They live and act by it. For example, many Asians place considerable faith in astrology and various other mystical forces in arriving at their decisions. The Bangkok Post on 12 September 1996 referenced a Thai Farmer’s Bank Research Center paper that reported 80,000 to 100,000 mediums operating in Thailand doing close to a billion dollars in business. During the parliamentary censure debate in September 1996, the Prime Minister was accused by the opposition of changing his birth month from the astrological sign of Cancer to Leo because Leo was the sign of Leadership. A number of well-known politicians have been quoted in the press as saying that they have been told by their fortune teller that they were destined to be Prime Minister.

Symbolic Systems Differ

Differences in the signs that are used to encode meaning add to communication problems. The receivers may not share with the transmitters the codes and symbols necessary to interpret the message as it was intended. Those involved in the communication process may have shared similar experiences, but the signs and symbols they use to encode and decode these experiences may differ. As a result, a receiver may misinterpret a familiar set of signs from that intended. During the World Bank meeting held in Bangkok some years ago, a Thai reporter collapsed in an epileptic fit. A western dignitary immediately responded to his condition. The foreigner became incensed and berated the other Thai reporters because they were standing around their fallen colleague smiling and laughing. Had they no compassion? Was the incident funny? No and no, the Thai reporters found themselves in an awkward situation and responded in a Thai manner.

We generally accept the fact that language differences are a major barrier to communication (hence the need for translation), but there is less understanding that nonverbal communication may also create communication problems. Smiling and (nervous) laughter by the Thai reporters in that situation was not appropriate within the Westerners mindset.

Kinetics or body language differences can create problems as can object language (use of bells, drums, etc.) and proxemics (use of personal and social space). It has often been said that the non-verbal component of a conversation makes up 70% or more of the message communicated -- even between those sharing the same culture and language. Normally we are not aware of the nonverbal messages transmitted and are certainly unaware of how these messages will be interpreted by others. Thus, the potential for serious culturally induced non-verbal communication problems is increased. The use of the author’s foot to point to something (both hands busy) has over the years gotten him into trouble a
number of times in Thailand.

The Nonuniversality of Kinetics

In general, kinetic systems are culturally specific and learned. Research has established that some facial expressions such as fear, sadness, disgust and others are, by and large, biologically determined and have some commonality in meaning across cultures. Nevertheless, even these expressions are not totally reliable and can lead to misinterpretation. Universal physical expressions may vary greatly in their emotional loadings. Some harmless expression of slight annoyance in one culture may be interpreted as one of murderous intent in another.

Moreover, situational factors often play a major role, as they may modify these universal and other expressions. For example, when watching a film alone, Americans and Japanese shared similar facial expressions. With an audience present, the Japanese were physically less expressive than the Americans.

Simply put, most facial and body expressions cannot be generalized across cultures. Eye contact, for example, can lead to many misunderstandings. American, "How can you trust what he had to say. He won't even look you in the eye." South American, "What an upset, he looked me right in the eyes all the time he was talking to me." In Chinese literature:

sticking out the tongue is used to express surprise, widening of the eyes for anger and scratching the ears and cheek to show happiness. What do you do when you burn your fingers? Japanese grab their ear(s). The giggling, hunched shoulders of a Thai in conversation with his superior will almost certainly be misinterpreted by those unfamiliar with Thai culture. Thailand is the Land of Smiles but these smiles often conceal much more than they reveal.

Since verbal and nonverbal messages are learned, those working in intercultural environments, if they want to be effective, must learn the key new nonverbal cues. They also need to learn to temper their personal experiences with empathy and sensitivity toward others' feelings and circumstances. In unfamiliar situations, stereotypes and ethnocentrism may influence those images.

Being frank and open American professionals depend more on verbal communication to convey their messages than do Thais. A Thai, wanting to be considerate, may not ask about something that is unclear or bring up a problem with an American colleague. He expects that the American will deduce that something is the matter. Since the American hears no specific verbal complaint, he has no reason to believe that something is wrong. The Thai may go away upset by the American's insensitivity. Since the American wasn't told, how was he to know? There is but one answer: by understanding the culture he is working
in and keeping his ears and mind open.

When a Thai has a problem, he or she might describe 20% of it to others, leaving the other 80% to be guessed at or assumed. An American is more likely to relate the problem in its entirety. From the Thai perspective, he may think that the American's disclosure is only 20% of the problem and become dismayed by the size of what he imagines the real problem to be. To the extent that we have empathy and an open mind, however, we can override stereotypes and negative expectations. Better armed, we can make informed judgments and predictions about each other's values and attitudes.

Honesty to the Thai is not always the best policy. If Thais are forced to choose between politeness and honesty, they will usually choose politeness. Being honest may require frankness and frankness may result, in confrontation. Thai politeness has been called a "social cosmetic." Some say that it is the most important factor involved in social relationships. The psychological comfort and welfare of those involved in a particular situation outweigh the objective truth or validity of the matter being discussed, regardless of its potentially harmful effects. Some Thais, aware of the American concern for hypocrisy, recognize that there is an inherent element of hypocrisy embodied in the Thai approach and they tend to view it somewhat negatively; however, most Thais do not.

Professor Edward Hall in his book, "The Silent Language" (1959) pointed out, "almost everyone has difficulty believing that behavior they have always associated with human nature is not human nature at all but learned behavior of a particularly complex variety. Possibly one of the many reasons why the culture concept has been resisted is that it throws doubt on many established beliefs." Hall also noted that when people from different cultures do not understand one another, they blame it on the other's "stupidity, deceit, or craziness."

Therefore, a major determinant to understanding international management, intercultural communications and institutional growth is an understanding of the sociological and cultural forces at work in the local environment. It is cultural differences that brings about many of the major misunderstandings and communication problems.

Recognizing the need for understanding, explicit attention and considerable effort must be expended in sensitizing both foreign and indigenous members of the organization to the value systems, customs, and philosophies of each other --not so that they will be adopted or accepted as sacrosanct and thus immutable, but so they will be taken into account in the decision-making process. When feasible and desirable, a synthesizing, adaptive and modified organizational culture and managerial system can be planned and may evolve over time.
Changing an organizational culture through an evolutionary process is no easy task. Experts say that it takes from five to fifteen years. The critical change agents are the top management team, especially the top manager. Through effective leadership, communication, and training, a "we-they" attitude can eventually give way to one of "us" and an effective organizational culture.

An organization such as ABAC must consist of professionals -- not Thai professionals, U.S. professionals, Indian professionals, Burmese professionals et al.

The author once read that General Eisenhower fired a successful American general because he called a British general an s.o.b. When questioned why he fired a successful general for calling someone an s.o.b., General Eisenhower answered that he didn't fire the general for calling the other general an s.o.b.; the general was fired because he called him a "British" s.o.b. If the story is true, General Eisenhower took the revolutionary approach to organizational change. He had to; he was fighting a world war that required a team (we) effort.

Change

American executives feel comfortable with change; they thrive on it, and almost feel that it is their duty to bring change about. This attitude implies a certain dissatisfaction with the status quo. Americans speak highly of "change agents" and those that can bring about meaningful change. They believe the individual should take an active role in modifying the status quo.

Thais also believe in change, but they do not believe that they need to initiate or bring it about. Their concept of change and a person's role in it differs from the American way. To the Buddhist, change is a given; constant cycles of rebirth is what existence is all about. Change is pervasive and it would be ridiculous and useless for mortals to actively involve themselves in the process.

Thais believe that things are going to change without outside interference - universities, governments, companies, and worldly problems are going to come and go. Thais would agree with Milton: "They also serve who only stand and wait." As a result of this precept, Thais are not apt to initiate changes in the work place. Their culture and educational system emphasizes deference to seniors, rote learning and maintenance of the status quo. These are strong inhibiting factors.

ABAC's Top Management team is Thai and in evaluating their current and future development plans, it is they who will decide the University's direction. Are they capable of putting aside their ethnocentrism and strike out on a more globally oriented educational path? A path that would require some organizational-cultural accommodation.
The President knows the problems and difficulty of changing an organization's culture, but thus far he has not articulated the need for change. He would certainly get the support of his western staff, but would meet with resistance from many who would think that he has forgotten his heritage by subscribing to western organizational theory and development. Evolutionary changes cannot be done willy-nilly nor all at once. Changes must be planned. Is the University capable of learning to speak one language? If so, that would make almost all things possible.

**Note**

Due to space and other constraints, the remainder of this article will appear in the next edition of the ABAC Journal. Part II will deal with some specific aspects and differences that are at the root of many communication and management problems and misunderstandings at ABAC and here in Thailand.

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**References**


