

THE CONCEPT OF FRAMING IN CROSS-CULTURAL BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT: *Starting from the concept of cultural frames and their role in signifying human experience, the paper aims at pointing out that business communication, like any social interaction, is underrun by a process of framing, according to which individuals perceive, comprehend and appropriate otherness. Expanded to cross - cultural business communication, framing provides a clearer perspective on cultural divergence and ensures the acquiring of cultural sensitivity, which, in a global business environment, is of crucial importance for effective interactions.*

KEY WORDS: *frames; framing; globalization; cultural divergence; business communication; cross - cultural communication; cultural sensitivity*

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1. INTRODUCTION. FRAMES AND THEIR ROLE IN SIGNIFYING EXPERIENCE

The concept of 'frame' was introduced by sociologist Erving Goffman in his 1974 book *Frame Analysis. An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. The author's attempt to explain how conceptual frames structure the individual's perception of the society exploits the literal sense of the term, namely 'border [...] in which a picture [...] is enclosed' and gradually expands it towards the more abstract meaning of 'general order or system that forms the background to something' (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, 1989, p.489).

In other words, just like the picture frame defines an artistic representation of reality as a distinct, unique world, individuals rely on frames, which are culturally inherited forms of organization of experience, to structure the events and interactions they are involved in and invest them with significance.

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Under the circumstances, our perception of everyday reality is a matter of intersecting frames that enclose otherwise meaningless experiences and turn them into meaningful interactions. As experience - based, structuring perception, framing is a process that sets the individuals on a position of maximum awareness of their own behaviour and the others' reactions, confronting them with such concept as standards, rules, and etiquette, all of crucial importance for social integration and assertion. Therefore, communication relies on continuous negotiation between individuals who interact in different social contexts, constantly shaped by their cultural background.

2. FRAMING IN CROSS - CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

The field of business communication is a specific section of social intercourse, where the constant pressure of framing is further enhanced by such stakes as professional prestige, position in company hierarchy, and, last but not least, financial incentive. Here, the role acting is even stricter than in regular social interaction, since the rules are proportionately more rigid and the people involved more aware and hunting for weak spots to exploit to their (and their company's) benefit. Transferred to the level of multinational communication, this issue gains new dimensions not only in terms of extension, but also as a result of the wide range of systems of values involved.

In the age of globalization, where geographic borders have gradually lost their traditional separating rigidity, gaining an integrative rather than a separating meaning, cross - cultural communication abilities have become crucial for the survival and development of any company.

Therefore, communicating across cultures involves good command of a complex network of cultural frames that yields a heterogeneous business environment, where people bring along their individual culturally and ethnically determined values, beliefs, and perceptions. Under these circumstances, awareness of different framing systems endows the business person with flexibility of thinking and behaviour, as well as with the ability to adjust and react efficiently when in contact with other cultural backgrounds.

The concept of framing is implicit in Carol Kinsey Goman's studies of cultural differences and their impact on business communication, as the author constructs her research in the field around the idea that the awareness, comprehension, and appropriation of differences are essential for efficient human intercourse, whether in everyday life or in business. As a specialist in business communication, Kinsey Goman notices that cultural differences go as deep as to the medium of communication, whose variations delineate three basic oppositions:

- a. high - context/ low - context;
- b. sequential/synchronic;
- c. affective/neutral cultures. (Kinsey Goman, 1995, p.60)

2.1. High - context vs. Low - context Cultures

In *high-context cultures* (Mediterranean, Slavic, Central European, Latin American, African, Arab, Asian, American - Indian) communication relies more on the context, extracting meaning from such non - verbal cues as body language, silence, and pauses, rather than from the spoken or written message. In such cultures, personal relations and informal agreements are more binding than any formal contract.

By contrast, *low - context cultures* (most of the Germanic and English - speaking countries) value explicit and specific messages the precision of the spoken or written words underlying interpersonal relations being considered of utmost importance.

Starting from this premise, “the major business challenge for people in a low - context culture is to realize the importance of building and maintaining personal relationships when dealing with high - context cultures” (Kinsey Goman, 1995, p.63).

2.2. Sequential vs. Synchronic Cultures

These culture types display different ways of perceiving time and the associate concepts of timing, dealing with deadlines and scheduling. As their name shows, sequential cultures (North American, English, German, Swedish, and Dutch) appropriate temporality as a sequence, according to which time becomes a linear commodity to “spend” “save”, or “waste”, whereas synchronic cultures (South America, southern Europe and Asia) perceive temporality as a constant, circular flow that can be experienced only fragmentarily.

This divergent perception has a determining impact on building business relations, as it establishes the meaning of being “on time” and, implicitly, the approach to such concepts as deadlines, strategic thinking, investments, and long - term planning. These elements can cause misunderstandings between people from a sequential culture, who view being late as a sign of bad planning or disrespect, and people from a synchronic culture, who consider the insistence on timeliness as a sign of immature impatience. In sequential cultures, business people give full attention to one agenda item after another, whereas professionals in other parts of the world do several things at the same time on a regular basis.

The American so - called “commoditization” of time, which is the basis for the “time is money” mentality, cultivates an obsession of timelines that translates into a major disadvantage when doing business in other cultures. In order to make a point in this sense, Dr. Carol Kinsey Goman quotes a Japanese executive, who confessed his amazement and amusement at the Americans’ rush to return home after a business deal abroad. He explains that arriving in a foreign country with a return ticket booked and a very strictly delimited stay enables the hosts to put pressure on a deal by making a very late offer, totally to their advantage. This is a relevant example of how the obsession to stay on schedule blunts the negotiation instincts and works to the detriment of the business as a whole.

Another culturally determined aspect related to time perception is orientation to the past, present, and future. Thus, American culture promotes the belief that the individual can influence the future by personal effort, and favours the idea of short-term planning. By excluding time variables and hazard, this purely pragmatic view leads to a perceptible “dehumanization” of human relations, not only in business, but also in everyday interactions.

By contrast, from the perspective of synchronic cultures, the past becomes a context that ensures the understanding of the present and the future. The emphasizing of the past and of related concepts such as the individual’s roots, memories and bonds undermines the pragmatic perspective in favour of a more sentimental attitude, according to which favouring friends and relatives, whether in daily life or in business dealings, is a natural sign of loyalty.

2.3. Affective vs. Neutral Cultures

This distinction is established according to the proportion of reason and emotion involved in business interactions and delineates two categories of cultural framing: the *affective* type, in which people show their feelings plainly, and the *neutral* type, characterized by carefully controlled and subdued emotions.

Research conducted in different national business environments found that emotional reactions are least acceptable in Japan, Indonesia, the U.K., Norway and the Netherlands, and most accepted in Italy, France, the U.S. and Singapore (Kinsey Goman, 1995, pp.110-111).

Cultural framing is a matter of actively using our individual cultural background, determining our way of thinking and acting and, more importantly, providing us with the set of criteria by which we perceive and appreciate others. That is why experts in intercultural communication recommend that productive business relations should be built on the awareness that cultures are not *right* or *wrong*, *better* or *worse*; they are just different. Therefore, in the contemporary global business community, what is proper in one culture may be ineffective, or even offensive in another, and therefore, the key to cross-cultural success is the understanding of and respect for diversity, known as *cultural sensitivity*.

3. CULTURAL SENSITIVITY IN BUSINESS

Culture is a comprehensive concept that includes the history, politics, faith, mentality, behaviour and lifestyle of a community. Consequently, lack of cultural sensitivity, i.e. ignorance of cultural differences and poor understanding of foreign languages, leads to failure in international business. David A. Ricks, in his book *Blunders in International Business*, writes: “Cultural differences are the most significant and troublesome variables [...].The failure of managers to fully comprehend these disparities has led to most international business blunders.” (Ricks, 2006, p. 8)

In the global context, in which the recent development in transports and communications has brought together people from different nations, cultures, languages and backgrounds, communication is conditioned by the understanding of *the*

other. Paradoxically, this has not led to a levelling of cultural differences, but to an enhanced sense of nationality and diversity, as, in order to survive and develop, companies need to transcend national borders and connect with foreign partners, clients or customers.

Under the circumstances, doing business across national borders requires cultural sensitivity, which involves a sense of empathy, flexibility and creativity supported by the awareness of and reverence for cultural differences.

In a global environment, organizations have come to understand that cultural sensitivity has a decisive impact upon business performance, which justifies investments in providing their staff with training in this sense. Thus, even the major economies of the world, which still foster a sense of cultural superiority, have been forced to admit that survival on the international market entails good knowledge of foreign customs, etiquette, protocol, communication styles and negotiation approaches. In other words, recognizing cultural divergence can make the difference between success and failure in marketing and negotiation.

Therefore, in order to recognize differences and adapt to the acceptable behaviour framework specific to every cultural environment, we need to display flexibility in thinking and cautiousness in gestures and verbal manifestations. Since apparently harmless remarks can turn into heavy blunders by offending others, it is safer to listen to the interlocutors and pay attention to their behaviour than to launch such remarks as “those people” or “they are all alike except for you”, or to make any statements regarding “us and them” (Ricks, 2006, pp.40-41).

Experts in cross - cultural communication point out that, in order to bridge cultural differences, people need to know their own culture and keep an open mind, which entails sensitivity to both verbal communication, and such non - verbal as behaviour, manners and thinking in a particular culture.

Thus, experts in cross - cultural communication have detected the following basic distinctions in the use of verbal language in different cultures:

- the English use understatement and modesty; they are extremely polite and deliberately vague to avoid any confrontation;
- Spaniards and Italians like prefer flowery language, eloquence and expressiveness over exactness;
- Germans are very logical in manner and words;
- Asians consider harmony an important virtue and will avoid confrontation at all costs. For that reason, they will often say "yes" to many things with the understanding of “Yes, I hear you” or “Yes, I understand”, and not necessarily “Yes, I agree.” (Ricks, 2006, p. 102)

On the other hand, we should remember that, except a smile, there are no universal gestures and so, what might be considered a gentle gesture in one culture could be a gross offense in another. For example, in the West, to beckon someone to come over, we hold out our hand with the palm up and then move our fingers, gesturing the person to come. In Asian cultures this is considered vulgar and, therefore, replaced with a gesture made with the palm facing down and the fingers rolling.

This is just one of the numerous examples that reinforce the idea that communicating across cultures requires awareness of and sensitivity towards other cultures, which ensure an insightful approach to otherness and enhanced adaptability to communication environments.

As intercultural communication expert Neil Craig Storti shows, cultural and linguistic sensitivity plays a particularly significant role when negotiating across national borders, as ignorance of culturally and/or ethnically established standards, etiquette and taboos will become the source of blunders very likely to undermine business success.

4. CROSS CULTURAL NEGOTIATION

Cross cultural negotiation is “a specialized area within the field of cross - cultural communication that provides a theoretical framework for the training of negotiators and sales personnel, so that they should have solid knowledge of the culture, values, beliefs, etiquette and approaches to business, meetings and negotiations in the target countries in order to maximize the potential of a positive outcome” (Storti, 1998, p.94).

Training in cross - cultural negotiation involves a series of factors that can influence the proceedings of a business interaction, by covering the following verbal and non - verbal cues:

- **Eye contact.** In the US, UK, Europe and South America, strong, direct eye contact conveys confidence and sincerity and trustworthiness, whereas in Eastern cultures, prolonged eye contact is considered rude and is generally avoided;
- **Personal space and touch.** In Europe, North America, Japan and China, business people usually leave a certain amount of distance between themselves when interacting, as touching is permitted only between friends and family members. On the contrary, in South America or the Middle East, business people are tactile and, therefore, personal space shrinks significantly. These non - verbal cues require special attention, since “they are known to have a much greater impact and higher reliability than the spoken word, due to people’s capacity to interpret symbols and cues recognizable on the level of collective memory” (Dumbravă, 2009, p.254);
- **Time.** While Western societies are very clock conscious and punctuality is crucial, in countries such as Japan or China being late is taken as an insult, whereas in South America, southern Europe and the Middle East, being on time for a meeting does not carry the same sense of urgency;
- **Meeting and greeting.** Although most international business people meet with a handshake, in some countries, this is not appropriate between genders. At the same time, some cultures view a weak handshake as sign of weakness, whereas others

perceive a firm handshake as aggressive. Other useful details are related with addressing people by first name, surname or title, and the suitability of small talk;

- **Gift giving.** While in Japan and China gift - giving is an integral part of business protocol, in the US or UK it has negative connotations. The major details to be considered are related with where gifts should be exchanged, colours that should be avoided, and whether they should be lavish, wrapped or reciprocated (Storti, 1998, pp.101-102).

Cross - cultural negotiation training starts from the premise that cultural blunders can have disastrous consequences in business and relies on the understanding of etiquettes and approaches to business abroad before focusing on cross - cultural negotiation styles and techniques. Therefore, specialists in this field have detected three interconnected aspects that need to be considered before entering into cross cultural negotiation:

The basis of the relationship has to do with the affective - neutral divergence in terms of cultural framing. For instance, in Europe and North America, where personal relationships are seen as unhealthy and dangerous to objectivity, business is mostly contractual in nature. On the contrary, in South America and Asia, business is personal, and partnerships will be made only between people who know, trust and feel comfortable with one another. Therefore, in this type of cultures, it is necessary to invest in relationship building before conducting business.

Information. Western business cultures emphasize clearly presented and rationally argued business proposals using statistics and facts, while others, such as the South Americans, are more visual and oral, preferring information presented through speech or using maps, graphs and charts.

Negotiation styles also differ significantly across cultures. For example, in the Middle East, topics are approached simultaneously rather than sequentially, the Japanese will negotiate and make decisions as a team, whereas in Asia decisions are usually made by the senior figure; in Germany, decisions can take a long time due to the need for detailed analysis; in the UK, deals are closed under the pressure of deadlines, which is inconceivable in Greece, for instance. (Storti, 2006, p. 79)

These are the main factors that need to be considered when approaching cross cultural negotiation, in order to be able to prepare effective presentations and adjust our behaviour in accordance with a particular foreign business environment.

To sum up, successful cross - cultural communication is based on the following:

- The awareness that patterns of perception and behaviour are culturally based, and they cannot be judged in terms of correctness;
- Sensitivity to verbal and nonverbal behaviour;
- An open mind to other views and customs;
- Avoidance of judgmental attitude and labelling according to our own cultural standards;
- Acceptance of the fact that there are no universally valid gestures.

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