CROSS CULTURAL COMMUNICATIONS

IMPACT GLOBAL BUSINESS

"So let us not be blind to our differences but let us direct our attention to our common interests and to the means by which those differences can be resolved." -- John F. Kennedy

**CULTURAL DIFFERENCES ARE REAL**

Leading how to communicate within the context of a different culture is a trying task, but the results lead to successful job search efforts and careers.

**Consider the following conversations:**

**Situation One:**

American: "Hi, how are you?"

Foreign Student: "I am well. I'm glad you asked about me."

American: "Well, I've got to go now, see you later."

The foreign national had not yet learned that, "How are you?" is probably just an extension of "Hi," and "See you later," is another way of saying good-bye.

**Situation Two:**

"My worst experience in graduate school in the United States was working on team projects with Americans," said a graduate student from Japan. "I learned a lot in working with my American friends in graduate school," said a graduate student from Germany.

What happened in these situations?

**THE ADJUSTMENT PROCESS**

When foreign students come to the United States to continue their education, they experience the phenomenon of "culture shock," as do all people who go abroad to varying degrees. Culture shock describes the initial stress and strain all people experience when they move from the familiar to the unfamiliar. Living in a different culture influences your mental, emotional and physical sense of well being. The impact can be obvious such as stomach upsets from new and unusual food, to the less obvious such as gestures and body language. Consciously or subconsciously, we perceive that we do not completely understand the customs, thought patterns and ways of behaving in another culture.

Foreign students studying in the United States are faced with transitional experiences, and must choose how to handle these experiences. When they choose to modify their behavior and adapt to the foreign culture, each event serves as a lesson, an opportunity to learn new behaviors.

When they choose not to adapt, those same interactions are experienced negatively, and are causes for frustrations, anger and often helplessness. Therefore, it is worthwhile to be clear on our choices and intentions. Peter Adler, a researcher and trainer from the East-West Center in Hawaii, suggests a number of ways that culture shock can contribute to the growth and learning of foreign students in the United States. He believes:

All learning involves change, and living and educational experiences in the United States provide opportunities for new learning.

The feelings resulting from change can be thought provoking, and persons experiencing cultural shock can benefit from the analysis.

A person experiencing culture shock most often receives feedback from individuals and from the environment. They can learn from this feedback.

**RETURNING HOME FROM ABROAD**

When foreign students return home from the United States, they generally encounter reverse culture shock and feel confused. They sometimes feel ill at ease with friends, family and once familiar circumstances.

The political climate may also have changed or friends have married, moved, or simply seem different than remembered. Returning foreign students experience subtle forms of rejection. They go through many of the same mental, emotional and physical adjustments they did when they first went overseas. Again, however, it is a process, and after awhile they relax and feel at home.

Some, during this period, may begin to come to terms with the profound effect living in another culture has had on them. It is at this time that concepts studied abroad are questioned for relevancy and application to one's culture. Modes of functioning in a graduate school environment or practical training experience sometimes do not appear to be related to one's "real" environment. The challenge of being able to "integrate" these learning experiences becomes a real, rather than a philosophical, topic discussed during a seminar.

**CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION**

There is the need to understand the realities of communicating in a culture other than one's own. Because all nations are becoming more globally interdependent, it is imperative that as students we understand the complexities of living in a foreign culture. Communication across cultural boundaries is difficult. Differences in customs, behavior and values result in problems that can be managed only through effective cross-cultural communication and interaction. Persons of dissimilar backgrounds usually require more time than those of the same culture to become familiar with each other, to speak openly, to share in common ideas and to understand one another.

Most communication is manifested through symbols that differ in their meanings according to time, place, culture or person. Human interaction is characterized by a continuous updating of the meaning of these symbols. In the past 25 years, we have expanded our capacities for symbolic communication beyond what was accomplished in the previous 2,500 years. Our communication capabilities are extending beyond print to that of electronic technology; in the process, our whole thought patterns are being transformed.

Despite all the technological wonders that are occurring, we need to work with one another on a person-to-person basis. To be effective, we have to overcome stereotypes and language barriers. When individuals have misunderstandings or commit "errors" when interacting with persons from different cultures, they are often unaware of any problem. Cross-cultural faux pas such as the examples previously mentioned, result when we fail to recognize that persons of other cultural backgrounds have different goals, customs, thought patterns and values from our own. It has been assumed that cultural differences are barriers and impede communication and interaction. To overcome these barriers one needs to understand the differences between one's own culture and another's.

For example, in the United States promptness is valued and schedules are adhered to. In other cultures, arriving late is the norm and a different meaning can be construed depending on how late one arrives or the circumstances.

All cross-Cultural communicators have a wide range of methods to use that go beyond words to include gestures, signs, shapes, colors, sounds, smells, pictures and many other communication symbols. The diversity of human culture in this regard may be demonstrated by the artist who may communicate both thought and feeling in paintings, sculptures, music and dance.

Every person operates within his or her own private world or perceptual field. This is what is referred to as life space, and it applies to individuals as well as to organizations and nations. Every individual communicates a unique perspective of the world and reality. Every culture reflects that group's view of the world. Every person also projects himself or herself into communication. We communicate our image of self-including our needs, values, standards, expectations, ideals and perceptions of people, things and situations.

**U.S. COMMUNICATION STYLES**

The following are some things to consider when trying to understand and enhance one's cross-cultural communication skills.

**Preferred topics.** Americans, when talking casually with friends, engage in "small talk." Small talk subjects can include the weather, sports, the latest movies, jobs and people one knows. Politics and religion are considered controversial topics that Americans are taught to avoid unless discussing them with people one knows very well.

**Verbal interaction**. Americans generally speak for short periods of time during a conversation, encouraging others to participate in the conversation. It is considered impolite to dominate conversations. Also, Americans do not like confrontation, but if it is unavoidable, will do so in a restrained and controlled manner, using a conversational tone of voice.

**Depth of involvement.** Americans will discuss personal topics with very close friends, and perhaps someone they may never see again, like a seat mate on an airplane. Conversations, generally, are kept on the superficial level; small talk.

**Channels preferred.** The ideal for Americans is to be verbally adept, speaking in a moderate tone and avoiding the use of hand and arm gestures. Physical touching during a conversation may include a touch on the arm or shoulder, although not everyone is comfortable with this. Women touch more often, while men generally do not touch each other after they have shaken hands. A comfortable space between individuals is an arm's length, unless one is a close friend.

**Nonverbal communication**. When speaking to an individual, Americans look into the listener's eyes and then slightly look away. When one is the listener, one will almost constantly make direct eye contact with the speaker. Generally, Americans distrust persons who do not look them in the eyes while talking to them.

**SKILLS OF EFFECTIVE CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATORS**

All cross-cultural communication skills can be learned.

**Respect**. The ability to express respect for others is an important part of effective cross-cultural communication. All people like to believe and feel that others respect them, their ideas and accomplishments. However, it is difficult to know how to communicate respect to persons from another culture. These questions may help. What is the importance of age in communicating respect? What is the significance of manner of speaking? Do you only speak when spoken to? What gestures express respect? What kind of eye contact expresses respect? What constitutes personal questions that may invade privacy?

**Tolerating ambiguity.** This refers to the ability to react to new, different and, at times, unpredictable situations with little visible discomfort or irritation. Excessive discomfort often leads to frustration and hostility and this is not conducive to effective communication.

**Relating to people.** Many Westerners are concerned with the job at hand. In transferring knowledge or skills to persons in another culture, the requirement to get the job done is not as important sometimes as making the individual feel as if they are part of the completed project and have benefited from being involved.

**Being non-judgmental**. Most people like to feel that what they say and do is not being judged without having the opportunity to fully explain. The ability to withhold judgment and remain objective until one has enough information requires an understanding of the other's point of view.

**Personalizing one's observations.** Different people explain the world around them in different terms. As one author wrote, "This is my way, what is your way? There is not 'the' way, it is all relative." One should be able to personalize observations, be more tentative in conclusions and demonstrate a communication competence that what is "right" or "true" in one culture is not "right" or "true" in another.

**Empathy**. This is the ability to put yourself in another's shoes. Most individuals enjoy communicating with those who attempt to understand things from their point of view.

**Persistence**. This is an important skill for the cross-cultural communicator. Often one's first attempts at bridging the communication barriers may not meet with much success. But having patience and perseverance and the courage to keep on trying will be rewarded.

**CONCLUSION**

A recognition and a few minor personal adjustments can greatly influence professional business relationships. Professional business managers should be aware of these differences and be prepared to make appropriate communication adjustments if these careers take them into different cultures.