

## **Managing Conflict In A Multicultural World Through Communication Strategies**

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### **Abstract**

World wide competitive realities, international politics, high technology, and global economies have brought people with different cultural backgrounds and nations with different economic development stages together in an instant. Proximity, however, does not necessarily result in mutual understanding, especially when individuals of different cultures are required to work and negotiate with one another. This paper discusses a Five-Step Conflict Management Model - assessment, acknowledgment, attitude, action, analysis - to provide a theoretical framework for managing conflict across cultures effectively. A hypothetical case of a global corporation is presented to relate the applicability of the framework.

### **Introduction**

Our interdependent global economy and marketplace, and the increased emergence of multicultural workforces in organizations require that we develop communication and conflict management skills to work and live effectively in our ever-shrinking global village. In order to think globally, we need to make a concerted effort to understand and to get along with people who do not share our backgrounds, values, beliefs, customs and norms. Communication between people of different cultures is essential to the survival of any organization. However, we have not yet learned to understand, respect, and value those whose backgrounds, beliefs, worldviews, customs and ways of doing things are different from our own. This creates cultural anxiety, which leads to conflict, or pseudo

conflict. With growing interactions with people from different nations and cultures, intercultural conflict is unavoidable in the global workplace. Therefore, managing conflict across cultures is of utmost importance as we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The purpose of this paper is to discuss a Five-Step Conflict Management Model - assessment, acknowledgment, attitude, action, analysis - to provide a theoretical framework for managing conflict across cultures effectively.

Our culture frames conflict interaction. We have expectations and preferences in relation to how conflict should be managed. When our conscious or unconscious expectations are not met, conflict occurs. Communication is at the root of both generating and managing conflict. Before discussing the dimensions of intercultural conflict, the following key terms are defined:

When individuals from different parts of the globe, or different cultural backgrounds within the same country, are brought together, conflict, misunderstandings, anxiety, and / or dissonance are bound to occur. Intercultural conflict differs from conflict between members of the same culture in the following way: While conflict is defined as an expressed struggle, intercultural conflict may not actually exist. It may be perceived as existing and thus cause barriers and misunderstandings. This does not mean that all intercultural communications are perceived to have intercultural conflict.

### Case Study

Company XYZ is a global company with offices in India, the United States, Japan, Malaysia, Germany, and Norway. Company XYZ is involved in chemical and pharmaceutical products for industrial and commercial clients. It operates in a dynamic, globally competitive environment and faces a variety of national governmental regulations and interventions. The products manufactured by XYZ are used in health care, personal care, and building materials.

An executive meeting is scheduled with executives of each of the above countries and the following issues will be discussed:

1. Reducing the chances of serious injuries in the company's manufacturing

plants.

2. Implementing automation and work simplification methods to increase efficiency.
3. Investing in research and development projects toward a long-term advantage.
4. Investing in plant equipment to reduce pollution in all XYZ plants.

What cultural perspectives need to be considered before this meeting?

One of the most popular theories addressing the impact of culture on the management process is that developed by Geert Hofstede (5). He developed a typology consisting of four national cultural dimensions by which a society can be classified: power distance, individualism, masculinity and uncertainty avoidance. Figure 1 depicts these dimensions in each of the countries in which XYZ has headquarters.

Figure 1 Cultural Dimensions

Country	Power Distance	Individualism	Masculinity	Uncertainty Avoidance
India	High	High	High	Low
U.S.A.	Low-Medium	High	Medium-High	Low
Japan	High	Low	Highest	Very High
Malaysia	Highest	Low	High	Low
Germany	Medium-Low	High	High	High
Norway	Low	High	Low	Low

Given the above cultural dimensions, let us look at each of the four topics to be discussed.

## Safety

We would expect that in the United States, Japan, Germany and Norway safety would be of primary concern, while in the developing countries of India and Malaysia safety concern would be relatively low. In developed countries, the cost of injuries at the workplace is very high, and the employers cannot afford to

neglect potential safety hazards. In developing countries injuries costs, however are relatively low, and other concerns may be primary.

### **Automation**

Automation would be an important concern for developing countries. The issues would be more on the line of government, which wants high employment and low technology. The developing countries (Malaysia and India) want more union power to protect jobs. There is a likelihood of strikes in India and Malaysia partly because of social benefits.

### **Research and Development**

Most likely there is no conflict in regard to research and development except for the question of where to locate the facilities. The decision on location is made on the basis of governmental issues, such as government approval, protection of patterns, and skills and technology available for research. For example, how quickly does the government approve research and development? Is there control over pricing, and the life of a patent? Governmental regulations and concerns vary from country to country. Perhaps the needed skills are not readily available.

### **Pollution**

Conflict occurs in terms of how and where to expand or modernize manufacturing facilities. On one hand, the developing countries are more willing to bend in order to employ people. Also, law enforcement in relation to pollution is very lax as compared to developed countries.

In order to prepare for an effective and productive meeting with a minimum of conflict, the executives need to be pro-active. A five-step-conflict management model could be adopted in the above situation where executives from different countries meet and work together. Conflict is bound to occur. How is the

meeting best approached? How can the executives use a pro-active approach toward managing actual and potential intercultural conflict?

## **A Five-Step-Conflict-Management Model**

This model involves a step by step analysis of the following factors: Assessment-acknowledgement – attitude – action – analysis (4). Let us apply each step in managing the above intercultural meeting most productively and avoiding any possible intercultural conflicts.

### **1. Assessment**

Assessment, the first step in managing conflict, includes five stages to determine the true nature of the conflict. These are:

- 1.1 The nature of the relationship and the characteristics of each participant in the conflict.
- 1.2 The cause of the conflict and the nature of the conflict.
- 1.3 The clarification of the goals of each party.
- 1.4 The examination of the communication climate or environment.
- 1.5 The consideration of the most appropriate style or behavior to manage the conflict.

#### **1.1 The Nature of the Relationship and the Characteristics of each Participant.**

In the above case, let us assume that there are five executives from each of the five countries. They have equal authorities and responsibilities for their own country operations and for the overall performance of the corporation as a whole. However, they are born, educated and raised in their respected countries. We will assume that they hold their national cultural characteristics, as described in Figure 1.

#### **The Cause and the Nature of the Conflict.**

There are several potential sources of conflict in any intercultural group communication context are discussed below:

### **Ethnocentrism**

One of our biggest conflicts causing factors in intercultural communication is our tendency to evaluate others from our own cultural perspective. One may assume that the executives from the United States, Japan, and Germany believe that they have superiority over the other executives in relation to technological development. The executives from India and Malaysia may hold the view that they have a superior historical and cultural heritage with deeper understanding of nature and spirituality. These ethnocentric views may create perceptual or real intercultural conflict when these executives discuss resolutions of the four issues discussed in the case.

### **Assumptions of Similarities**

Another common cause for intercultural conflict is our tendency to assume similarities by simply being human and thus having common biological and social needs. Unfortunately, when we assume similarity we overlook the fact that the forms of adaptation to these common biological and social needs and the values, beliefs and attitudes surrounding them differ vastly from culture to culture (2). In our case, some of the executives, say from the United States and Germany, may assume that there is a lot more similarity than there are differences in running a business and that managerial decisions would override any cultural differences. This type of assumption is likely to create an intercultural conflict since it will disregard the values held by the other executives.

### **Preconceptions and Stereotypes**

Another serious conflict causing agent when communicating across cultures is stereotyping. Barna (2) refers to stereotypes as “stumbling blocks” in intercultural communication. Stereotyping is a lazy way of categorizing people by assigning attributes to an individual on the basis of that person belonging to a group of people.

The executives from other countries may view the Americans as hasty and aggressive because of their low uncertainty avoidance and high individualism. The Japanese executives may be stereotyped as being quiet and deliberate. The Indian executives may be viewed as docile and submissive. The Malaysian executives may be viewed as following orders without ever questioning authority because of their very high power distance.

### **Contexting**

An important dimension of potential intercultural conflict is contexting. Ed Hall discusses

The knowledge of high and low context cultures to be an important factor when communicating and working with culturally diverse people. Context refers to the space, positioning, location, meeting arrangement, setting, etc. that communicates without the use of words. In a high context culture, these contextual references are used to communicate a lot of meaning. Thus, a person from a high context culture does not need many words while a person from a low context culture needs to articulate and spell out precisely what he or she means.

In our case above, the Japanese, Malaysian, and Indian executives come from high context cultures relative to the American, German, and Norwegian executives. Much of what the Japanese, for example, chooses not to articulate is essential to understanding his or her message. The problem arises when the Japanese expects others to understand that which is not said. The German, American or Norwegian, on the other hand, relies more heavily on what is actually said or written. To them, the high context Japanese may seem alarmingly vague and non-committal. This may make them uncomfortable or even suspicious in relation to trust.

### **Nonverbal Differences**

The primary level of culture is communicated implicitly, without awareness, chiefly by nonverbal means (1, 7). Each culture has many subtle codes of nonverbal communication. Even when we don't utter a single

word, people attach meaning to our behavior.

In our case, a nod from the Japanese executive may be interpreted as an agreement, while a circular head motion from the Indian executive may be interpreted to mean disagreement. A handshake from the American executive may be viewed as a contractual agreement. These nonverbal cues may turn out to be misperceptions and misunderstandings leading to intercultural conflict or intercultural anxiety among the executives.

### **1.2 The Clarification of the Goals of each Party**

Assessing one's goals and accepting the inevitability of difference are critical dimensions of the assessment phase. Before the executives in our case can engage in productive intercultural interactions in their meeting, they need to identify their goals and overcome their assumption that differences are inherently negative. To the extent that every executive ascribes to a set of goals and priorities for the whole corporation, an intercultural conflict arising from objectives at the national level of operations would be resolvable. However, if there were major disagreements on the goal priorities for the overall corporation, intercultural conflict resolution would be a major challenge. The resolution of this conflict would be affected by the expected outcomes of the discussions in terms of whether the executives will be pursuing collaboration, compromise, or accommodation on specific issues.

#### **Collaboration**

Collaboration is aimed at reaching one's own goals with a high concern for the other. It shows high assertiveness, not aggressiveness. The parties work creatively together to find new solutions that will maximize goals for all. Both parties replace the "you" and "I" perspectives with a "we" perspective.

#### **Compromise**

Compromise is an intermediate style between assertiveness and cooperation. In compromise, one looks for an intermediate position that partially satisfies both parties.

### **Accommodation**

Accommodation occurs when one is non-assertive and cooperative. It is the opposite of competing. When adopting the accommodating style, the individual puts aside his or her own concerns in order to satisfy the concerns of the other person. The individual often succumbs to group pressure by not pushing their own point of view.

Depending on the cultural background of each of the executives, he or she would be amenable to collaboration, compromise, or accommodation. Of course, there may be other compelling reasons as well to choose a particular approach in resolving conflict.

### **1.3 Examination of the Communication Climate or Environment.**

In this step of assessment one needs to assess the communication environment in terms of encouraging open communication, procedures for resolving problems, empowerment of people, and appropriate channels of communication. In the case of our five executives, their discussion of various issues and resolution of conflicts may be facilitated or obstructed by the extent of information sharing, open discussions, and open communication channels to one another.

### **1.5 Consideration of the Most Appropriate Approach to Managing Conflict.**

#### **Avoidance**

Avoidance is often characterized by non-assertive, passive behavior. The individual does not openly pursue his or her own concerns, or those of the other person, but refuses to engage openly in the conflict by avoiding it. The avoider may sidestep the issue by changing the topic or simply withdrawing from dealing with the issue.

#### **Assertiveness**

When managing a conflict assertively, the individual clearly states his or her point of view, feelings or needs without being aggressive (I am O.K. you are O.K.).

### **Indirect Aggressiveness**

The indirectly aggressive conflict management style essentially says, “I am o.k., you are not o.k., but I let you think you are o.k.” The individual does not openly discuss the conflict but uses indirect, often unrelated verbal or nonverbal attack toward the person in conflict without letting the other person know what is really wrong.

### **Direct Aggressiveness**

The competitive style of managing conflict is characterized by aggressive and uncooperative behavior. The individual pursues his or her own concerns at the expense of others. The conflict is seen as a “battleground, where winning is the goal and concern for the other is of little or no importance (I am o.k. You are not o.k.).

None of the above approaches are automatically superior to the others. Each approach has advantages and disadvantages depending on the circumstances of its use. However, we often use, consciously or unconsciously, a particular approach in managing our conflicts. We are often “frozen” into a particular approach and need to “unfreeze” into a variety of approaches to manage conflicts effectively in different contexts. Our preferred approach is often a result of our cultural norms and values. If we come from a highly individualistic culture like the United States, we most likely use more the assertive or aggressive mode of managing our conflicts. We may be consciously or unconsciously conditioned to think that winning is everything. We may also be more concerned about the immediate issue rather than the relationship. On the other hand, a person from a collective culture (Japan, for instance) may use avoidance more often to save the relationship and not lose face or to save the other person’s face.

## **2. Acknowledgment**

A thorough assessment of the situation, as described above, provides a sound foundation for preventing as well as resolving intercultural conflicts. The assessment provides for an excellent awareness and understanding about the

complexity of making decisions in an intercultural setting. The next step in proactively managing intercultural conflict is to listen very carefully to the other party's concerns and perspectives, and then articulate your understanding of the other party's viewpoint. In other words, you address your perception of the other party's viewpoint.

### **3. Attitude**

Our attitude toward the other party and his or her culture plays an important role in managing any intercultural conflict. Each executive needs to address his or her attitude toward the other executives and their cultures, as well as his or her willingness to engage in productive and open-minded interactions. In our case, if the Malaysian, Japanese, or Indian executives were to accept the dictates of corporate management, they may be viewed by the American or Norwegian executives as being too submissive or docile, and hence, as pushovers. With that attitude, the Norwegian and American executives may use an aggressive approach to getting their way. This would lead to conflicts with the other executives who may avoid any further participation in decision making. Each executive needs to ask him or herself the following questions: Is my attitude open or closed toward the cultural differences at hand? Do I understand the various cultural perspectives in question? Do I stick to the issue and separate the issue from the individual?

### **4. Action**

Use the conflict style appropriate for the particular intercultural situation, and be able to revise your actions according to how the interaction progresses. Listen, repeat, and clarify the other party's perspective. Monitor your own verbal and nonverbal communication and be conscious of your own actions and how they affect the other party. Seek continual feedback and demonstrate willingness to modify your communication behavior. Generate as many options or solutions as possible, and review and summarize the expectations and decisions of the other party. Above all, try to be open minded and flexible toward

modifying your behavior according to how the interaction progresses.

## **5. Analysis**

Even though analysis is part of every step throughout the conflict management process, it is very useful to also designate analysis as a separate culminating step (4). In the final analysis of the intercultural conflict, the question needs to be asked, "have the other party's concerns been articulated and considered? The decisions need to be summarized and clarified. Procedures for implementing any changes need to be reviewed.

In our case, the executives need to re-examine what has occurred in the interaction and analyze all points of view. They need to examine the expectations which were or were not met and why a certain behavior may have taken place. Have certain actions and communication behaviors changed their views? By analyzing carefully each intercultural interaction, each executive may learn to adjust his or her behavior and reduce intercultural conflict in the future.

## **Concluding Comments**

This paper presented a five-step framework for managing intercultural conflicts. It identified the complexity that executives face in an interdependent global economy requiring effective intercultural communication to work together in harmony. No universal prescriptions are suggested since respecting the cultures of all persons would preclude such normative suggestions. Rather, this paper describes a framework that can encompass and accommodate a variety of perspectives and variables toward inclusion and appreciation of different cultural challenges in managing conflict.

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