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INTERCULTURAL NONVERBAL COMMUNICATIONS AN EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISE

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an experiential exercise that is used in Business courses to teach and emphasize the importance of intercultural nonverbal communication cues in today's international business environment.

With the dramatic growth in international business activity during the last ten years, it is important for educators to explore some of the areas that would give us a better understanding of some of these intercultural issues. It is obvious that our lack of knowledge about other cultures is losing us business abroad. [3] And this trend is to continue until educators raise students' sensitivity to intercultural issues and give them proper training in the areas of language, nonverbal behavior, values, and decision making process.

It is obvious that some of the issues mentioned above, such as teaching a new language, will require a considerable amount of time and effort on the learner's part. Some of the other concerns may not require as much time, but they definitely require extensive sensitivity training.

INTRODUCTION

Clearly, a significant feature of intercultural communication relates to the "silent" language of nonverbal communication. The effects of gestures, postures, body movement, eye contact highlight the intriguing role of kinesics. [1]

Dimensions of space are especially important, as cultural members structure their interpersonal body space according to cultural norms.

In reality, nonverbal communication operates under incredibly complex rules. So all this exercise can hope to accomplish is to introduce and sensitize participants to different communication cues.

Purpose of the Exercise

This exercise was designed to a) sensitize participants to different communication cues, used in intercultural encounters, b) examine one's reactions to various communication cues, c) explore the implications of different communication cues in the business setting.

Administration

Introduce the exercise by letting the participants know that they will be participating in a role play. It is very important that participants feel very comfortable with their assigned roles, so spend as much time as is necessary to create the right environment. Divide the class into three groups. This can be done randomly (A,B,C,A). Then all the participants who have been assigned letter "A" act as the seller. Letter "Bs" are the buyers and "Cs" act as observers.

To start the exercise you need one of each letter, or a buyer, a seller, and an observer. It is important that the role players do not reveal their roles to the other group members.

Distribute the participants' guides. Give the participants enough time to learn and practice their roles. The task in this exercise is to negotiate for a better price and make a deal. However, one of the role players (the buyer) will have the responsibility of displaying or acting out one of four major communication cues. These are:

- Haptics - which is defined as where, how, and how often people touch each other while conversing.
- Proxemics - which is defined as the use of interpersonal space.
- Oculistics - which is defined as eye-to-eye contact or avoidance.
- Chronemics - which is defined as the timing of verbal exchanges during conversation.

It is obvious that the above mentioned cues can be used in many different ways and combinations. For the purpose of this exercise I have found it less confusing to use only one cue per role player.

Research has shown that compared to most other cultures Americans need more interpersonal space, like to make eye contact, like to get to the point, and are very quick in responding to questions. [2] So it is very natural to use the opposing view to make the point. (E.g., have the role player avoid eye contact, or touch the other person or move closer to the other party as they continue on).

The role of the observer is very critical. He/she is the only source of feedback if video tape recording is not used. The observer must be briefed on techniques of observing without being judgmental. This can be done while the role players are preparing for the role play. The actual role play can take anywhere from 20 minutes to 40 minutes. When the triads are finished, give them 15-20 minutes to discuss the process that just took place with the observer. This will prepare them for the general discussion.

During the general discussion you as a facilitator are trying to make participants focus on certain nonverbal behaviors. Here are some questions that could be used as a guideline.

- Did you feel uncomfortable at any point during the course of the exercise?
- What were the nonverbal cues used in this exercise?
- How/what did you feel when you were touched?
- Did the nonverbal cues used by your partner affect your ability to listen, understand, and comprehend the content?
- Were there any cues that helped/hindered your communication process?
- What nonverbal cues were most/least threatening? Why?

Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 11, 1984

-What other nonverbal cues from other cultures do you know of or have you experienced?

-In what countries/cultures would you find the nonverbal cues used in this exercise?

-What are the implications of the various nonverbal cultural cues in relation to business transactions?

I have found it useful to video tape the role play and play it back during the discussion. Lowering the volume will help the participants to focus on the nonverbal behaviors and reduces the distraction of verbal exchange.

Variation of Activity

-Other nonverbal cues can be examined.

-Use only one nonverbal cue to measure individual rather than cultural reaction to the same communication cue.

Conclusion

If we are to succeed in today's international business world, we must make an investment in the education and training of our potential business leaders. The very first step in this process is to sensitize them to cultural differences to get them in touch with their feelings, and reactions. This exercise is only a tool to make participants aware of some of the basic nonverbal communication cues. There is a lot to be said about other major intercultural issues such as problem solving, decision making and other forms of communicating.

SELLER'S ROLE

For the purpose of the exercise, assume that you are the sales representative of the Alpha corporation. Your company specializes in making micro computers. Recently, your computers have gained world-wide recognition and popularity. This is due to their low price and simplicity. Your company has started to negotiate with buyers from other countries. You are one of the representatives who is assigned to the international division. Your company has furnished you with the following information:

(All costs/price figures are per unit)

<u>Production Cost</u>	<u>Selling Price</u>	<u>Profit</u>	<u>Your Commission</u>
\$3,000	\$3,500	\$500	\$50
\$3,000	\$3,750	\$750	\$75
\$3,000	\$4,000	\$1,000	\$100
\$3,000	\$4,250	\$1,250	\$150
\$3,000	\$4,500	\$1,500	\$250
\$3,000	\$4,750	\$1,750	\$400

Your company intends to keep the selling price below \$5,000/U even though sales have increased 50% over last year. This is your first client since you have been transferred and you are eager to make a deal.

BUYER'S ROLE

For the purpose of the exercise, assume that you are the representative of the Beta corporation. You have been sent abroad to negotiate a deal with the Alpha corporation. Alpha corporation specializes in making microcomputers, and the demand for their

product has increased considerably over the past few months. Your company would like to take advantage of this situation and initially purchase 90 units of their new computers if the price is right. You purchase the computers and resell them in your country. Based on your cost and the sale price, it is possible for you to make a big profit. Here is the information your company has furnished you with:

(All per unit figures)

<u>Target Purchase Price</u>	<u>Selling Price</u>	<u>Profit</u>	<u>Your Commission</u>
\$3,500	\$5,000	\$1,500	\$150
\$3,750	\$5,000	\$1,250	\$125
\$4,000	\$5,000	\$1,000	\$100
\$4,250	\$5,000	\$750	\$75
\$4,500	\$5,000	\$500	\$50
\$4,750	\$5,000	\$250	\$25

According to your company's forecast, in less than 6 months, the demand for this type of computer will go down. (This is due to increased supply). In order to maximize your profit you need to make a deal now.

OBSERVER'S ROLE

You are to observe the interaction process between person "A" and person "B". Then you are to record person "A"'s reaction to person "B", using the chart below. You will be working with one nonverbal cue. The nonverbal cue is Oculistics, which is eye-to-eye contact or avoidance. Person "B" will try to avoid direct eye contact as he/she converses with person "A". You are to closely watch person "A"'s reactions.

<u>Feelings</u>	<u>Oculistics</u>		
Excitement	1	2	3
Pressure	1	2	3
Embarrassed	1	2	3
Overwhelmed	1	2	3
Irritated	1	2	3
Frustrated	1	2	3
Angry	1	2	3
Hostile	1	2	3
Close	1	2	3
Relieved	1	2	3
Bored	1	2	3
Defensive	1	2	3

The numbers indicate the degree of feelings which person "A" is experiencing. (1-low & 3=high). More than one number in each category may be marked (e.g., using circle for the first reaction and cross for the later ones).

Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 11, 1984

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- [4] Hall, E. T. "The Silent Language."