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Karin Lackner

Cross Culture Pace
The Interplay of Cultural Dimensions in Global Organizations

Abstract

On-going globalization is challenging organizations and management in multiple ways. Employees of companies with locations all over the world are a conglomeration of inpats, repats, expats and glopats. The situation cannot be compared any longer to those experienced some years ago; working environments are increasingly outgrowing intercultural differences. Instead, there are interplays of cultural determinants with mutually reciprocal effects. Organization culture, itself the result of contradictory unit cultures, is imprinted by the surrounding home country's culture. Demographic diversities such as gender, age, ethnicity and collectivism/individualism are determined by the culture of origin and will – in addition to the organization's code of conduct – affect communication and collaboration in organizations. Language disadvantages are an obstacle to communication as well as to the self-esteem of the people involved. Power distance, also influenced by the home country's culture, influences the communication patterns of the organization. The interplay of cultures and the resulting conflicts are aggravated by the culture gap between the countries involved.

Key words: intercultural communication, global management, organization dynamics

1. Introduction

The advancing globalization of our economic system and society represents a permanent challenge for organizations and management. Rather than being something new, globalization now goes without saying. We have become used to globalized markets, globalized enterprises and globalized lifestyles.

Accepting a foreign assignment is nothing unusual; for some people it is no longer even a special challenge. Regional, national and continental borders have become permeable and fragmentary. It is not surprising to find various cultures of origin within a team in an organization; it is equally common for business English to blend with regional language use without contradiction. Globalization affects not only people's professional or educational lives. Due to unbounded possibilities, everything changes, from processes of socialization, individual ways of living and work-life balances to the development of global identities.

Employees of internationally constructed enterprises are a conglomeration of various cultures of origins, consisting of inpats (in the past they were probably called "locals"), repats (those who have returned from foreign assignments), expats (those who are currently on foreign assignments) and glopats (cultural and organizational nomads, e.g. a person who studied in the USA, has already completed several foreign assignments, now heads a branch office of a German enterprise in China and has a French passport).

Within the multiple varieties of cultural imprints the original cultural identity vanishes, boundaries open up. This reaction might lead to individualism, the person being reverberated to his or her own self. The other reflex is reinforcing the affiliation to the community of culture where socialization took place, which means setting boundaries. This kind of ambiguity is a companion in multicultural environments. The impulse of regression to social affiliation when confronted with a high dose of estrangement and strangeness is a schismogenetic phenomenon as described impressively by Krusche (2010).

This article is meant to be a summary of observations. Over the last decade I conducted a series of smaller research projects on intercultural issues (Lackner, 2008, Mantos de Freitas, 2011). Some of the insights out of these studies are outlined in the following descriptions. Another source for examples of intercultural occurrences is collected experiences from consulting performances in multicultural environments. The given examples have been analyzed in professional intervision settings and are documented as unpublished manuscripts.

This article calls attention to a few problems relating to intercultural collaboration, emphasizing language issues. To mention the conclusion in advance, my assumption is that differences relevant to organizations and those relevant to culture are interwoven and mutually reinforce or inhibit each other.

2. Different aspects of culture within one organization

Every organization has its own tonality. Influenced by the organization's history and tradition that imprints the present situation the organization has a specific picture of its future, concealed in visions and mission statements (although here it seems likely that basic principles set down in writing are rather meant to accentuate the glossy side of the organization). It's about who we are and who we would like to be.

The characteristic of organizations is also the product of different mostly contradicting interests within the organization and how the particular relevant representatives deal with the contradictions due to these divergences. If we assume that different divisions develop different cultures due to their task we can also reason a culture clash potential in decision making management teams. Conflicts are unavoidable when different patterns of thinking and operating (e.g. production, sales, marketing, controlling, etc.) meet. The divisions' cultures sometimes can even be recognized by the peoples' behavior and habitus or the public appearance of the unit.

Organization divides along the premises of the inevitable division of labor in subareas. The structural expandability of organizations, in principle unlimited, leads to a series of small systems and subsystems linked vertically and horizontally to one another. Each department consists of a number of groups. Each group develops its own characteristics, its own habitus and its own habits, even a language of its own understood only by "insiders". In this case we can also speak of ingroup cultures, some familial, others levelheadedly businesslike, which differentiate themselves from the organizational culture.

To get an impression of an organization's culture it can be worthwhile to look at the way the organization handles demographic diversity such as basic anthropological differences. How does the organization deal with gender differences or with the relationship of generations? Usually here as well there are both an official glossy policy, e.g. a commitment to gender equality, and a policy in practice. Organizations treat this subject in different ways, from lip service to technical execution in which the filling of jobs is carried out according to a strict codex. The studies concerning the influence of culture on gender issues are numerous (compiled by Zhou & Shi 2011) but will not be outlined in this paper.

The relationship of generations is treated similarly. Which significance do older or younger employees have? Is the organization aware of the demographic changes and shifts during the next 30 years? Heitzlhofer (2008) surveyed human relation departments of global companies concerning their being prepared for the so called "graying society". In his sample only one of the companies had a strategic draft for the future generation issue.

Many research projects deal with the difference between collectivistic and individualistic cultural imprints (compiled by Zhou & Shi 2011) and how this difference influences team work. According to a study by Gomez et al. (2000) collectivists for example value maintenance higher than individualists, who favor task contributions.

The effects of demographic influences on culture respectively the influence of culture on demographic differences and their various interactions have been thoroughly surveyed (compiled by Jonsen et al. 2011). The overall impression is that these variables are determined by the culture of origin and thus influence the handling of diversity within organizations. The organizational code of conduct is a commitment where organization culture and culture of origins meet. The culture of origin is not just one more difference among others with which the organization and management have to struggle. It gives the organization and its contradictions a specific “color” and tonality.

Organizational culture and culture of origin do not run in parallel. In consultancy we often encounter conflict constellations which find their origins in the organization, intertwined with conflicts which arise when various cultures of origin intermix. A structurally necessary organization conflict between project organization and line organization for example is usually unpleasant for the people involved. Sometimes it seems easier to blame the difficulties on the cultures of origin than to deal with the organizational adversities.

2.1 Strategies of denial and postponement

Within the framework of consultancy and training as well as in research projects with multicultural teams (Matos de Freitas, 2011) I have noticed that interculturalism as an influence on collaboration is denied at first. My impression is that they, the people involved, do not want interculturalism to be a topic for discussion. The global daily routine has become a matter of course. Without mentioning the latent intercultural difficulties, subjects relate to operative contents or organizational questions. A common and popular evasive maneuver is the argument that it’s all about people and people are simply different from each other. Intercultural differences are reduced to differences among the personalities of individuals. The possibility that the cultural background might determine an individual’s behavior, especially in difficult situations, is suppressed.

However, the argument works exactly the same the other way around. In consulting and training situations, experience and “ has taught me that if someone cannot get along with another person – for whatever reason – the cultural background is used as an excuse. This, too, sounds like a tactic for not having to deal with either the problem or the cultural differences.

3. Teams in global organization environments

In this paper I would like to refer to two different forms of intercultural teams in global organizations. One is a globally scattered team, where the departmental leader works in the parent company, while the teams and their team leaders are scattered around the globe. The other is an on-site team in which people with various cultural backgrounds and various statuses, that is, inpats, repats, expats and glopats, work directly together in a branch office of the company.

In addition to e-mail communication, either distributed to all or to a selected number of persons, the typical communication pattern of scattered teams is the one on one communication mode via telephone.

One of the main problems of such a team-communication, which we discovered during an internal research project (Matos de Freitas 2011)[1], is the distance in space and time. Communication is limited to virtual options, depending on the technical facilities provided by the enterprise. Thus a simplified pattern of communication, mainly conducted by telephone, established itself. What a team member discusses with the boss remains unknown to the others. In addition to telephone calls, written reports on their content are to be delivered in order to avoid any misunderstanding or loss of overview. On closer inspection this style of communication causes a number of difficulties. One of these is permanent uncertainty on the part of the communication partners as to whether they have received all, and especially all important information. Without seeing the conversational partner's facial expression one cannot recognize how they are reacting to the conversation. This leaves room for imaginative interpretation. In the research analysis cited above the members of the scattered team wanted to get together at least once a year, driven by the need to be able to put faces and voices together.

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[1] For reasons of discretion and confidentiality no further details about the company or the research project will be given.

The managers in the parent company have the unsettling feeling that the supra-regional units are drifting away in an emancipatory manner. The managers feel too far away to be able to exert any influence on this process. So they slacken the reigns and hope that everything goes well on-site. At this point a problem straddles the existing conflict brought about by distance; this new problem is determined both by culture and by global economic and societal developments. Inpats do not feel obligated to the parent company and change jobs and companies based on the principle of supply and demand. For the company that is 'deserted' this means not only more time and effort for the Human Resources Department due to hiring, firing and orientation, but also a migration of know-how to the competition. Employees in the parent company on the other hand fear losing their job when foreign labor turns out cost saving for the company.

3.2 Communication and language difficulties in multicultural on-site teams

There are multiple constellations for getting people from various cultural backgrounds together. The multiculturalism of teams is varied. The well-known model consists of one responsible manager from the parent company, a classical expat and a series of colleagues. On the management floors there are expats, conversing in business English; on the operative floors there are inpats mostly speaking the local language. Today multicultural teams are increasingly different. Management is no longer necessarily provided by the parent company. Organizations draw their managers from the global market. Because mobility and internationalism are no longer an anomaly, there are often sufficient well-educated candidates rich in intercultural experience. Management teams are composed of a mixture of expats, repats, inpats and glopats. The language is universally business English.

As mentioned before, there has been a lot of research analyzing intercultural teams concerning all kinds of issues and varieties (Jonsen et al., 2011, Zhou & Shi, 2011). In this paper I would like to point out one aspect of intercultural communication: the language issue. In consulting and training situations language skills are always a topic even though it is often pushed aside. This observation can be supported by research data. Interview partners of the Matos de Freitas study (2011) neglected language difficulties at first. Only after a while they admitted that language disadvantage is a major communication inconvenience.

The following example shows how sensitive the perception of language advantages could turn out:

> *Participants from six different language regions take part in a group dynamics seminar. The training language is English. It turns out that at least three-quarters of the participants can speak German well enough to be able to take part in a seminar conducted in German. In answer to my question as to why they registered for a course held in English the curt answer was "Language disadvantage." Among the German speakers they would have been the ones who could not have fallen back on their native language and its nuances. It was better to have a feeling of equality with others who also could not communicate in their native language. This was not precisely correct, for it was these participants who had the best command of English as lingua franca; they thus turned a language disadvantage into a language advantage for themselves.*

In this group one of the issues was the command of another language. The extent or degree of language mastery inevitably becomes an indicator of competition, even if this is not recognized. At least one considers oneself to have an advantage if one can communicate more fluently than the others. The lack of command of the language becomes an obstacle. One stutters, feels awkward, and no longer tries to speak. Silence is better than feeling embarrassed.

According to the research project of Matos de Freitas (2011) this emotional situation of linguistic deficiency is intensified when one must communicate with a native speaker. The feeling of not understanding everything correctly is a permanent accompaniment in such encounters, just like the suspicion that the native speaker may have pulled a fast one linguistically, for example where important negotiations are concerned. It would also not be wise to verbalize this uncertainty, as it would only increase the other's head-start. Unfortunately, although many hours of English instruction may well have significantly improved both speaking ability and listening comprehension, they still have not reduced this feeling.

As demonstrated in the practice example below, knowledge of a language is not enough for intercultural communication. Meanings are hidden behind terms and definitions. Often it is these meanings that make the difference.

> *In an intercultural group an increasingly fierce discussion developed between a spirited German and the US American. As far as I can remember it was about a technical detail for a machine. The German raised his voice a bit and called out toward the US American: "I do not agree." What he meant was that he was of a different opinion; for the US American this direct address was an offense that had been expressed. I remembered the rebukes of my English teacher, who had hammered into me that one might never directly say no, not agree, or similar things unless one wished to deliberately offend the conversational partner. So I tried to defuse the situation and translated for the US American that the German had meant "he would like to discuss the issue". That calmed down the native speaker sufficiently that he could concentrate again on the technical detail which the discussion was about. The delighted German then said: "Yes, the issue! I do not agree!" The abruptly increased tension in the group had now gripped the Frenchman, a gentle, elegant man who apparently wanted to make peace and said, "I think we need an animator." This in turn was misunderstood by everyone else.*

Among non-native speakers such misunderstandings will always occur. Unfortunately the feeling of being linguistically insufficient all too often prevents their being cleared up. The people involved decide to withdraw and that it is better to leave things be. A colleague and repat with experience abroad explained to me that what was needed was to develop a type of meta-communication and reflection with the counterpart so that mutual uncertainties could be discussed.

Withdrawal is one way to escape from linguistic disability, but not the only one. Although I have experienced many denial strategies in the course of my professional activity, I can remember very clearly one scene in the course of a consultancy implementing a German branch in Poland, where linguistic limitation was expressed aggressively.

> *There are about forty people present. There is no common language. Some can speak Polish and English, others Polish and French, others Polish and German. The consultants can speak German and English, in a pinch some French, but no Polish. The solution which developed spontaneously was one of whispered translations. This slowed the communication process considerably, which particularly annoyed my colleague because he had to leave out the jokes he loved to sprinkle the process with, since jokes delayed through whispered translations were no longer funny. While only a side issue, it mirrored the irritation level of the entire group. This irritation found a vent in a completely different place. I had just begun to collect feedback about the previous day on the flipchart. When it was the turn of the third group, their leader dictated his answers to me in Polish.*

When I think back on native speaker and non-native speaker groups I have consulted or trained it occurs to me that my memories of intercultural groups who do not communicate in their native language are less vivid and duller that those of German groups. I have also observed this strange “sterility” with participants who spoke outstanding German but were not native speakers.

Problems relating to languages are intertwined with problems relating to generations. One of the tasks of a major change project in an organization was the switch from German to English for all business issues. While older members of the organization drudged away at language lessons in order to cope with the globalization tempo of the organization, younger members took knowledge of English for granted. Today a well-grounded education in languages is a competitive advantage when applying to global organizations.

Besides the language issue the relationship between the older and the younger members of an organization is shaped by the culture of origin. In my consultancy work in Asia I have often experienced circuitous detours which make possible both the avoidance of loss of face by the top boss and the negotiability of a solution. The mode through which decision making in organizations functions under these conditions was worked out by the people involved, not always reflected upon, quasi as the result of an analysis of reality. Some things develop without reflection in the course of time and then establish themselves as sufficient.

I first understood how strongly the principle of seniority is linked with interculturalism when I worked with project leaders in the former Balkan countries after the Balkan war in the late 1990s. When the participants had been asked to portray a typical intercultural conflict situation a particular seniority problem presented itself in every presentation.

4. Cultural interplay

One of the conclusions of two decades of intercultural consultancy and corresponding research projects is that the organizational problems are of a similar kind everywhere. The necessary organizational conflicts take place, and – if influenced by interculturalism at all – then most likely they will show up at trouble spots where age, gender and corporate feelings are involved.

In some cultures organizational life is strictly separated from private life. In Singapore I met Asian women in business suits like those I had met in the USA or Europe. When they leave the company at the end of the working day, the business suit and the organizational culture are shed; women plunge into their culture of origin as they change into their sarong. Nonetheless the cultures of origin imprint their characteristics on the organization culture and 'colors' the organization's tonality.

Globalization and interculturalism are quickly growing processes. Maybe it is the uniqueness of a multicultural management situation that the stakeholders concentrate on. Then, however, they need the ability to professionalize this uniqueness by working actively on their situation, thus developing awareness and skills to cope with the unknown and the unique or just leave it be and accommodate. Confrontation with something unfamiliar, with something different, something foreign sparks feelings of ambivalence in people. On the one hand the unknown makes us curious and provokes a desire to discover this foreignness, to accumulate information until the unknown no longer feels strange to us. On the other hand, the foreign makes us afraid, threatens our own existence and must therefore be repelled. That which we do not know is replaced by assumptions, imaginings and prejudices.

One could, however, actively shape, reflect on and form that which is. On the level of reflection a ‘third world’ is being created which is neither entirely the one culture nor the other. An ‘artificial’ culture becomes a new reality which is shaped and cultivated by the people involved and their cultures of origin. This requires meta-communication abilities. At this point I will venture the hypothesis that the more an organization develops skills of self-steering and self-reflection, the less intrusive the problem of culture will prove to be. Only under these conditions is it possible for an organization or an organizational unit to clear away the entanglement of organizational problems, cultural influence factors and basic demographic conflicts. That organizational units become independent in the process cannot be hindered. The above-mentioned concerns about increasing emancipation of branch offices in a global organization are intensified by self-steering on-site management.

If this scenario - the creation of a ‘meta-culture’ - succeeds, are we then growing out of the intercultural? Or will the blurring boundaries of culture trigger schismogenetic reflexes that emphasize the cultural affiliation? My guess is that we will have to deal with both dynamics when we want to manage multiple cultures.

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