NAVIGATING CULTURAL DIFFERENCES:
THE ROLE OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Alias: Vladimir CALDWELL

ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the key role of intercultural communication in detecting and embracing cultural differences among leaders to encourage productive cross-cultural relations. It explores three key components: insights from multicultural consciousness, understanding and adaptability, as highlighted in Erasmus programs and international conferences. Emphasizing intercultural competence, the article underlines its importance in effective communication and relationship-building across cultural barriers. By applying Hofstede's Cultural Dimension Theory to my experiences in Poland, on the NS Mircea, and at the 2023 USNA Leadership Conference, the analysis reveals how cultural values and attitudes impact communication, socialization, and leadership styles. It also discusses the advantages and challenges of multiculturalism, presenting multi-channel communication, cross-cultural leadership, and broad perspective-seeking as best examples of multicultural awareness in business. Through continuous learning, self-reflection, and a growth mindset, students develop intercultural competence. This article contributes to the literature on intercultural communication and leadership, providing practical guidelines for leaders in different contexts.

Keywords: intercultural communication, leadership, cultural self-awareness, adaptability, Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory.

Introduction

The process of globalization spreading has accelerated, and this is the reason why there are increasing encounters between people with different cultural elements. Consequently, because of the current emphasis on intercultural relationships, regardless of whether in personal or professional contexts, the competence to communicate and forge relationships across cultural barriers has become a vital ability. Intercultural communication can be achieved by developing communication skills. It plays a very important role in breaking cultural barriers, and it enables successful cross-cultural relations. During my last four years of academic studies, I have come to recognize the great importance of intercultural communication in navigating cultural differences by being part of many intercultural environments. Hence, this paper explores three main components of intercultural communication: cultural self-awareness, empathy, and adaptability, supported by my analysis based on my experience from Erasmus+ and international conferences.

Cultural Self-Awareness

Cultural self-awareness is considered to be a reflective cognizance about one's own cultural background, values, beliefs, and prejudices, as well as the ways they form one's perceptions, behaviors, and interactions with others. Awareness of this is achievable by self-realization that the cultural lens dictates and plays a role in the way a person views and understands the world around him. Cultural self-awareness plays a key role in the development of intercultural competences and is required for successful business communication and separate teamwork in a multicultural environment (WUL, n.d.).

How does one become aware of one's cultural preconceptions? A first step would be to move yourself outside your cultural frame. See yourself from a third-person perspective and think outside the box. Culturally speaking, there are some main aspects that differentiate cultures most of the time, such as food, language, and religion.

Examine the variety of meals you ate during the past week and wonder if any of them may seem bizarre or disgusting to others who belong to different cultural settings - or even from other regions within your country. Coordinate a meeting with a classmate who is native to a different neighborhood within the city, state, or country than you. Your conversation aims to show these products as something unusual and share your opinion on them.

Other students will also exchange their ideas. Consider how such an exercise may deepen your awareness of the subtle and unconscious implications embedded in the civilizing process. Besides that, consider how our culture's food rituals interfere with linguistic behavior. Exhibiting this language diversity, you will never say in French that you are "still working on your dinner" ("Are you still working on your plate?"); otherwise, instead of concentrating on relaxation and enjoyment, mealtimes become unbearably dreary. This lifestyle translates into the French office, where typically the employees almost always consume their lunch for one hour simply to enjoy the meal and the company (WUL, n.d.).

Think about the expressions through life you have come across, behaving among your family and friends and your culture group. This is an area where, in investigation, you may find that some idioms present difficulty in correctly translating both literally and figuratively into the different languages and cultural contexts. To provide more context on this topic, set a time for a get-together with someone from a different village, city, county, or country (one who may not speak your mother tongue). Within this conversation, you should tell the folks the children's sayings you were hearing when you were growing up and their meaning as well. Ponder over the wonders of these trivial phrases that manage to unravel the beauty of a culture and the details of its relationship with language (WUL, n.d.).

While the relationship between religion and culture can be more complex to investigate because of the different levels of people's belief in their own gods, it is an enriching and fascinating area of study. If everyone in our group is tolerant enough to confront the idea with an open-minded dialogue without offense, this topic can perfectly be considered one more method of cultural conditioning. There is no wonder that a person with the same religious background but a different regional or country affiliation would usually have contradictory opinions with other believers. On the other hand, a great number of people who are profoundly attached to their own specific religions have been instructed to disbelieve that theirs is the correct religion. The contemplation of the effect of such a state of things may furnish us with additional knowledge on indoctrination and its influence.

Empathy

The term *empathy* is the English equivalent to feeling grief or sadness through others. Translated literally from the Greek *empathia*, is the ability to relate so correspondingly to other people by entering their world or, to put it in a metaphor, to stand in their shoes. In the world of foreign language teaching and communication, it becomes intercultural empathy. This is about the person in particular who should be able to internalize a native-speaker's way of thinking based on which the person would communicate with the world. Intercultural empathy demands of language learners to be more than being able to actually use language skills, even as they communicate with the culture which is a companion to the language they are learning. By taking this step they can build a more informed and appreciative attitude towards the target culture. In result, it empowers people to communicate effectively with representatives of a different cultural milieu and establish a relationship based on understanding.

Empathy to those from different cultures is serving as a significant factor in effective communication as well as reducing cultural gaps. It enables a person to step in other than their own culture's shoes, while also remaining themselves, and as a consequence experience the broader scope of understanding of engaging. Cultural empathy is not about conforming with the culture or pitying it or even defending it but rather to be aware of and to accept what makes it truly a culture. That is not only to look at the world through the lens of others, and to feel what the inner world is, but also to stick to their own identity of culture. Cultural empathy is a component of a powerful relationship that is also about communication with others, which helps in a way as a person gets to move past their personal differences and get to learn more about the experiences of others around them. Through volunteering or other experiences to gain knowledge about society or culture an individual can develop his or her empathy and perspective-taking, thus, the psychological barriers occurring by cultural difference is a case in point. Therefore, cultural empathy can be basically described as the ability of a person to associate the feelings of another person from the target culture with one's own feelings and to talk with them easily (Zhu, 2011).

Adaptability

The last, but not least, criterion of intercultural communication is being able to adapt. Leaders, among other things, have to be flexible and able to apply different communication styles, behaviors, and approaches to navigate cultural differences. This might be accomplished by a change in your speech, the use of nonverbal methods, or a change in how you make decisions to fit into the set social norms and regulations. Adaptability itself needs an open mind, readiness to learn, and preparedness to do the unexpected.

By doing so, they can react positively to cultural diversity and achieve creative spaces as well as collaboration (Cromarty, n.d.).

Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory

The Cultural Dimensions Theory, developed by the Dutch social psychologist Geert Hofstede (1928-2020), is a conceptual construct meant to make intercultural understanding and comparison of nations viable. The theory proposes six key dimensions that influence how people from various cultures perceive, think, and behave: power distance index (PDI); individualism vs. collectivism (IDV); motivation towards achievement and success (MAS), which distinguishes collective from individual goals; uncertainty avoidance index (UAI); long-term and short-term orientation (LOW); and indulgence (IND) (Culture Factor Group, 2024). In terms of MAS, different cultural strains might be expected. Also, short-term orientation (LOO) vs. long-term orientation (LTO) and indulgence vs. restraints (IVR) are the two different approaches to intercultural differences. In developed cultures such as those of the United States, saving (SAV) (this pattern prevails in developed economies such as those of the US) is very high (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010; Hofstede, 2011). Cultivating cultural dimensions allows leaders to be rewarded with great benefits during intercultural communication.

Erasmus+ in Gdynia, Poland (October 2021 – February 2022)

The period of my Erasmus+ mobility in Gdynia, Poland, offered me a perfect chance to communicate with people from various cultural backgrounds, such as Poles, Italians, Bulgarians, and Kuwaitis. Taking Hofstede's dimensions as a basis, a phenomenon of different communication styles as well as cultural values among these four cultures stands before me.

Cultural Differentiation Index Poland, which shows a high rate on the PDI (68), indicates social acceptance of and expectation of an unequal distribution of power (Culture Factor Group, 2024). These cultural inclinations appeared in the communication flow I had with older people or those who were in supervisory roles, particularly in its more formal and hierarchical mode. Cultural conflicts showed me how I should change my

communication style in order to demonstrate respect and modesty. When I did so, I quickly started to deal with the cultural challenges in a better way. In addition, Poland approximates the middle point (60 for the individualism scale and 64 for the masculinity scale) (Culture Factor Group, 2024) on the polarity between personal aims and collective goals and a relatively high score on performance and success orientations.

As opposed to that, Italians have a slightly lower score on the PDI (50) and take the lead on the individualism dimension as compared to other countries (Culture Factor Group, 2024), which emphasizes a more equalitarian and autonomous cultural belief. During my interaction with Italian students, I figured out that the way of talking was more focused on the direct expressions of people involving opinions and personal aims. Unlike Poland (Culture Factor Group, 2024), Italy is the country with a higher degree of indulgence (30 out of 100). Hence, enjoyment and leisure are given higher priorities in Italian society. The ability to acknowledge and savor such a cultural difference made it possible to create stronger bonds and to put in place collaborative relationships between myself and the Italian participants. Bulgarian people score high on the axis of the PDI (70) and low on the individualism dimension (30) (Culture Factor Group, 2024). Thus, they represent a hierarchical society where collective attitude and group loyalty are a must. The case with the Bulgarian students was that they practiced less law-direct communication and had a priority on the maintenance of harmony and the avoidance of tension. Among others, Bulgaria has a high score of 85 on the Uncertainty Avoidance Index (Culture Factor Group, 2024), which signifies great demand for orderly life, safety, as well as certain rules and expectations. A contextualized and sensitized approach to the Bulgarian participants' group dynamics allowed me to not only build their trust and rapport but also to gain my own acceptance and appreciation.

On the basis of the PDI (90) and more towards the lower position on the individual index (25), I can safely conclude that the social setup in Kuwait is highly power-oriented and has a stronger collectivism character (Culture Factor Group, 2024). When communicating with Kuwaiti students, I saw that there is reverence for authority, collective harmony, and non-direct communication. The culture of the Kuwaiti students caught my attention when I noticed that they have great respect for authorities, collectiveness, harmony, and an indirect way of communicating. In the same context, Kuwait gives a lower score on the indulgence dimension (Culture Factor Group, 2024), which is an indicator of a high degree of adaptability and people's tendency to use the social norms and expectations of other individuals to regulate their actions.

Sailing Practice on Board NS Mircea

As a student responsible for international cadets, I had the chance to communicate with midshipmen from the United States, the United Kingdom, Bulgaria, and Poland during a practice on board the training ship from June to July 2022. Through seeing myself in the bigger picture of leadership on the training ship, I realized that being culturally self-aware and adaptable is what great leaders are made of.

The Americans and the British reduce highly on the individualism dimension (91 and 89, respectively) (Culture Factor Group, 2024), which is related to autonomy, self-reliance, self-achievement, and independence. Aboard the ship, they may be more willing to take up the initiative, talk freely, and expect one's own praise and recognition of their achievements. As a leader, I found out how I could provide individual support, feedback, and opportunities for self-directed learning, as previously mentioned, to account for these cultural preferences while welcoming and acknowledging diversity. But on the other hand, it was vital to infuse a feeling of having a shared goal and working as a team since the performance on a ship is highly dependent not only on an individual but rather on the crew effort, too. Through achieving the balance between individual self-discovery and group harmony, it was possible for me to set up a platform that has as its objective both personal development and collective team success.

The United States and the United Kingdom represent countries that get relatively low marks on the PDI, scoring 40 and 35, respectively (Culture Factor Group, 2024). That means they are the ones who like to promote more egalitarian and participative leadership styles. Thus, an individual from the aforementioned group may tend to have a conflict with authority, ask questions and be involved in the decision-making process. I, being their immediate link to the system, had to make the communication style more open with keeping the transparency needed as well as ensure the inclusion of their input and reactions. I became able to collaborate with the students more effectively, create a participative learning setting, and show that I was competent in engendering trust, involvement, and a sense of togetherness in the class.

Unlike the West, Bulgaria has strong hierarchical and collectivist culture in its community and this may constantly lead to the limitation of its individualism (30), while on the other hand, it could increase its power distance (70) (Culture Factor Group, 2024). Another opportunity is to give the youngsters a chance to meet each other on the training ship, who will already know what is most important, which is being united, being a part of the same group, being loyal, and respecting the chain of command. In order to exercise leadership, I helped to create group identity by forming a common culture and goal and stating the respect of the ship's command hierarchy. This happened by trying to make my guidance as clear and direct as possible, giving directions, and chalking out the agenda while also keeping myself connected to the inner team sentiment of my students. By studying my communication style and bringing on some elements of a directive, supportive, and holistic approach, I was able to provide Bulgarian cultural values through the group and elicit a sense of acceptance and belonging from the students.

Poland gets an average result at individualism (60) and the top one at the power distance indicator, according to Culture Factor Group (former, Hofstede Insights). This represents the notion of a civilization that works together, respects hierarchy, and acknowledges the equality between individual interests and those of society at large. In this case, we conclude that Polish students get a quality of educational balance between the grade and the classmates' collaborations and that they are used to flexible and hierarchical learning and teaching. Being a leader among these campus groups meant that I had to master walking the cultural line. One of the ways in which I was able to ensure this was by constructing a lot of opportunities for the workers to grow as individuals while making teamwork, discipline, and respect for authority the most important values. This was my way of working to have a win-win situation between participants who would operate by common rules, receive regular feedback and support, and be jointly responsible and held accountable for learners' performance.

United States Naval Academy (USNA) Leadership Conference 2023

The participants of the 2023 USNA Leadership Conference came from different cultural brackets in countries such as the USA, Bulgaria, Japan, Germany, Peru, Canada, Taiwan, Brazil, the Philippines, and Mexico. The title of the conference, *Returning with Honor: Trials to Triumph*, meant celebrating the return of the prisoners from the Vietnam War, and guest speakers such as LT Brad Snyder, CDR Everett Alvarez, CAPT Charlie Plumb, RADM Robert Shumaker, and MajGen Charles Bolden Jr. provided a perception of cultural differences and the importance of intercultural communication in leadership.

Despite the variety of cultures, Japan stood out because of its unique cultural values and style of communication. Japan is known as one of the countries with the highest rank of uncertainty avoidance (92) and long-term orientation (88), which means there is a kind of preference for stability, plans, and perseverance (Culture Factor Group, 2024). A careful structure, meticulous details, and planning for a long-run approach were familiar to Japanese societies in social situations. This implied that I would have to provide supplementary clarifications, pay extra attention to communication, and show respect to authority and power.

The United States and Canada register a score of 46 and 48 in terms of uncertainty avoidance index, and a score of 91 and 80 score equivalent to the individualism dimension (Culture Factor Group, 2024). This is more characteristic of a high-context culture, which displays the capacity to accept low clarity and the personal aims of individual achievements. In interacting with members of the ethnic groups we came across, I found it necessary to acknowledge the importance of individual manifestation and make it possible for that interaction to instill growth into new ideas.

Germany and Bulgaria, based on the Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI), a measure of the extent to which a culture is comfortable with ambiguity and complexity, scored 65 and 85, respectively (Culture Factor Group, 2024), and this well explains their love for structure and clear expectations. On the contrary, Germany is more preferred, not only on the individualism dimension (67), but also compared to Bulgaria, which is rarely thought of as (30). This shows that there is a balance between individual and collective interests in German culture, while Bulgarian culture is more collectivist (Culture Factor Group, 2024). Recognizing the different contexts guided the adjustment of messages and roles in the proper handling of participants from those countries.

Latin American countries, like Peru, Brazil, and Mexico, foster societies that may be hierarchical (64, 69, and 81 on the Behavior Cultural Dimension) and collectivist in nature (16, 38, and 30 on these dimensions) (Culture Factor Group, 2024). It implies that there is surely the presence of a centralized social structure

grounded in the principles of group solidarity and mutual benefits. And when engaging with community members from such cultures, it was indispensable to demonstrate laid-down rules of authority, personal care for people based on friendship, and the cohesion of a group.

The theme of our conference, *Returning with Honor: Trials to Triumph*, allowed us to have discussions on intercultural communication and leadership with stronger backing. The former prisoner of war guests CDR Everett Alavarez, CAPT Charlie Plumb, and RADM Robert Shumaker narrated their experiences of being resilient, adaptive, and remaining unified under challenging death and bone-chilling conditions. Their stories, however, have drawn attention to developing strong and trusting relationships and building up a sense of shared goals, even though cultural backgrounds vary. Through the creation of similarities between the classic conference proceedings and the process of intercultural communication, the conference confirmed the role and importance of personality traits such as empathy, tolerance, and adaptability in leadership.

Reflections on Intercultural Experiences: Developing Leadership and Communication Skills

My multicultural experiences have fine-tuned the efficacy with which I apply different strategies to confront the sophisticated impediments as well as the deeper understanding regarding the crucial subtleties in cultural diversity. Those encounters from the different aspects of my life and the newly gained skills of collaboration or interaction with people of a different background did not only offer me possibilities in cross-cultural communication but also brought some positive influence on me as a person and as a leader as well.

The cross-cultural interaction through my Erasmus+ experience in Poland, the sailing training practice aboard NS Mircea, and the USNA Leadership Conference in 2023 have imprinted on me the unspoken reality of cultural self-awareness, adaptability, and empathy. With the help of Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory, I got to understand how the values of a culture and the expectations of the people in it affect the manner in which communication takes place, social interactions, and leadership.

Moreover, I will point out that such experiences have enabled me to become more inclined to recognize and perceive the existing differences among various cultures. Through learning about the various, culturally particular grounds and choices of people from countries like Poland, Italy, Bulgaria, Kuwait, the USA, Britain, Japan, Germany, Peru, Brazil, and Mexico, I have learned to tailor the way I communicate and lead towards a more inclusive, collective, and effective guideline for collaboration. Personally, this has shifted my communication style, some cultural norms and values have been demonstrated, and diverse perspectives are actively being sought and accommodated.

Although this is the case, there are certain cultural differences with which I am confronted that are not without troubles either. On the other hand, the isomorphism of cultures confronting each other is the most common issue that results in misunderstanding or conflict. More specifically, the components of power distance, individualism vs. collectivism, and uncertainty avoidance are the basis of such different views on organizational operations, such as roles, operations procedures, and communication standards. The cultures of two regions could be very distinct in the expressions of life values or the understanding of job and life balance. Unquestionably, an extremely high level of cultural sensitivity, patience, and open dialogue had to be achieved to close the gap that existed as a result of the cultural barrier.

Moreover, such practices made me aware that not only knowledge and development are essential factors for cultural competence, but adaptation and individual personality are also the same. Being determined to interact with other cultures on a regular basis, in addition to being open and flexible, I was able to deepen my cultural knowledge, improve my adaptability, and strengthen my leadership skills in a multicultural context.

Conclusion

To sum up, this paper deals with the search for the meaning of intercultural communication for leaders and is focused on the necessity to move beyond the appreciation of diversity and into successful cultural navigation. What I have done is combine academic knowledge with personal experiences in this article as a means of showing the importance of intercultural competence as one of the factors for building understanding, collaboration, and success between people of different cultures.

The experience as an Erasmus+ exchange student in Poland, the NS Mircea training ship practice, and the USNA Leadership Conference 2023 are analyzed from the cultural perspective of Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory. Surprisingly deep insights on how different cultures can be perceived and on how to communicate and lead across cultures have come to light during those three international experiences. The variety of multicultural communications that I have been involved in has led me to understand that transforming my cultural self-awareness, empathy, and openness are the main points in the process of the formation of links that touch upon all people, including people of different cultures.

Besides that, I think the paper has illustrated intercultural connections both in advantages and disadvantages in that it has aligned itself to the process of continuous learning, the maintenance of self-awareness, and the development of a growth mindset. Like a person born in a border town, a leader with the philosophy that intercultural communication is a vital determinant of organizational success is the one whose values are deeply rooted in cultural contexts and whose mind and soul are adapted to diversity.

REFERENCES:

Cromarty, C. (n.d.). How to adapt communication for cultural differences, and why is it so important? In ewgroup. Retrieved on April 14, 2024, from https://theewgroup.com/blog/adapt-communication-cultural-differences/

Culture Factor Group. (2024). Country Comparison Tool. In hofstede-insights.com Retrieved on April 14, 2024, from https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison-tool

Hofstede, G., Hofstede, G.J., & Minkov, M. (2010). Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind. Intercultural Cooperation and Its Importance for Survival. McGrawHill.

Hofstede, G. (2011). Dimensionalizing Cultures: The Hofstede Model in Context. In *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture*, 2(1). Retrieved on April 14, 2024, from Grand Valley State University: https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/orpc/vol2/iss1/8/

Mazur, B. (2010). Cultural diversity in organisational theory and practice. In *Journal of Intercultural Management,* 2(2), 5-15.

Williams, R. (2023). The importance of Adaptive Communication. In Leading Energy Profile (LEP). Retrieved on April 15, 2024, from https://leadingenergyprofile.com/blog/the-importance-of-adaptive-communication

WUL. (n.d.). Intercultural Competence - Global Citizenship Program. In Webster University Library. Retrieved on April 15, 2024, from https://library.webster.edu/c.php?g=98100&p=634461#s-lg-box-1881190

Zhu, H. (2011). From Intercultural Awareness to Intercultural Empathy. In *English Language Teaching*, 4(1), 116-119. Retrieved on April 15, 2024, from https://www.ccsenet.org/journal/index.php/elt/article/view/9671