**Telephoning across cultures**

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**DOING BUSINESS INTERNATIONALLY**

Doing business internationally means that you will come into increasing contact with individuals who speak different languages and live in different cultures. Even the simplest form of communication will become a challenge. Knowing that cultural differences exist is only step one of the process. Learning to deal with these differences and perhaps turn them to your advantage can make the difference between a successful and unsuccessful international business deal. There are more than 6,200 different languages in the world today. Merely knowing the language, though, is still not enough to be able to effectively communicate. You must have some understanding of thought patterns, values, societal norms and of how individuals from different cultures process information to be an effective communicator.

Different cultures have different ways of using language. Some speak in a very literal way so it is always quite clear what they mean. Others are more indirect, using hints, suggestions and understatement to put over their message. North America, Scandinavia, Germany and France are ‘explicit’ countries, while the British have a reputation for not making clear exactly what they mean. One reason for this seems to be that the British use language in a more abstract way than most Americans and continental Europeans. In Britain there are also conventions of politeness and a tendency to avoid showing one’s true feelings. Meanwhile, for similar reasons Japanese, Russians and Arabs – ‘subtle’ countries – sometimes seem vague and devious to the British. Plain speakers can seem rude and dominating to subtle speakers, as Americans can sound to the British – or the British to the Japanese. Being aware of these differences can help in understanding people with different cultural traditions [3, p.26].

In some countries, like Italy and Britain, conversation is a form of entertainment. There is an endless flow of talk and if you break the flow for a second someone else will pick it up. In other countries there is a higher value placed on listening – it is not only impolite to break in but listeners will consider what has been said in silence before responding. Finland and Japan are examples.

If you are talking to people who are also speaking English as a foreign language, they are likely to leave gaps and silences while they search for words or try to make sense of what you have just said. So be patient and try not to interrupt, as you would hope they would be patient with you. Every country has its own codes of etiquette.

**TELEPHONE ETIQUETTE**

Your voice is all you have got to make the telephone conversation lively and effective. When you talk to someone face-to-face, how much of your message is conveyed just by what you say? Studies have shown that only 7 percent is conveyed by the words you use. Another 38 percent is conveyed by the tone of voice. The remaining 55 percent is conveyed by body language. And that is missing in a telephone call. You have to make up the missing 55percent by using your voice. How is that to be done? Clarity of speech is of great importance. Clear articulation and correct pronunciation are necessary. English is spoken all over the world, in varying accents; it is sufficient to pronounce correctly and clearly. Speed of speaking can affect clarity to some extent. A high-pitched voice is un-pleasant and may appear uncultured; an extremely low pitch can sound mechanical. People who have a loud voice appear to be brash and overbearing; very soft speakers cannot be heard clearly, and may seem shy. You need to find the right speed, pitch and volume that makes you sound clear and easy to follow. Tone is the expressiveness of the voice. A great deal of tone depends on the speaker’s attitude and state of mind. Cheerful/sad, respectful/impertinent, interested/bored, energetic/tired, sincere/false; these are some of the worlds we use to describe tone of voice. The person who hears the voice is affected by its tone, and so is his/her attitude to the speaker. Hence it is necessary to learn to use the voice affectively [2].

In today’s world most of our initial contact with someone is through the telephone. The way the telephone is answered makes the first impression about the person and the company. Telephone etiquette is necessary for everyone. You want to be courteous and pleasant, and you want the caller to feel important. You want to avoid wasting his/her time and your own company’s time. You want to help the caller to get the work done.

**BASIC RULES OF INTERNATIONAL TELEPHONE COMMUNICATION**

Regardless of the cultures that the speaker and the listener originate from, both have to ensure a maximum of understanding speaking over the telephone. The communicator should convey information accurately and concisely in descriptive language and should ask for feedback from the listener to verify that the message was received properly, give the listener time and opportunity to ask questions.

The person receiving the communication should be an active listener who concentrates on the message being communicated. The individual should answer and respond at the appropriate tune and ask for clarification or further explanation if there is any doubt about the tone or content of the message. It is better to ask questions and ask for the message to be repeated than to walk away not fully understanding it or making wrong assumptions.

Here are some guidelines for making a positive impact by telephone.

1. Even before you pick up the phone, know the time of the locale you are calling. Nothing worse than taking a colleague out of bed for a non-urgent matter just because you are ignorant of international time differences.
2. Prepare in advance; before making a call, plan all questions and comments. Collect all required information, files, papers that may be needed. Have paper and pen at hand. Greet; as soon as the call is answered, return the greeting and identify yourself, and ask for the person to whom you want to speak.
3. Visualize the speaker; it is easier to be interested in words that relate to a face.
4. Listen between the lines; tone of voice conveys a good deal. Summarize; the main points should be repeated at the end to check the understanding of both parties.
5. Use uncomplicated, simple language. Unfamiliar words and long sentences are very difficult over the phone. You cannot see facial expressions or read body language over the phone, it is hard to judge how well your message is being understood. The simpler the language the less chance of misunderstanding.
6. Don't hurry the pace of your speech. Talk slowly and distinctly.
7. Concentrate when you listen and never interrupt someone on the other line. Often people will allow themselves to be distracted while on the phone. When dealing in a cross-cultural situation, eliminate all distractions and pay attention only to the person you have called, be sure that the slightest distraction can cause you to misunderstand the message.
8. When dealing with secretaries or message takers it is important in some cultures to remind them to get a pencil and paper and to write the message down. Be sure to ask them to repeat the message and the contact numbers you have given
9. Should a phone conversation start to turn sour, it is important to remain diplomatic and not risk ending a relationship on the telephone. Show an eagerness to resolve the problem or conflict.
10. Try and return calls in the same business day. If international time differences make that impossible then return the call the next day at the latest. Failure to return a call is rude.
11. End the call politely; say “thank you” for giving you time (or information or help), indicate the next step, if required. Wish the time of the day pleasantly and replace the receiver gently. The person who made the call should put down the receiver first; within the organization, the senior should end the call; in case of a call to or from a customer, the customer should end the call. [1, p.73-74; 2, p.109]

**CONCLUSION**

The telephone has been around for decades and is a key tool in international business, yet few people ever think about how they use it and what the reaction to one's telephone manner may be on the other end of the line. There is a cultural disconnecting when communicating by telephone and to ignore the basic communication differences that exist between cultures just because you are talking on the phone is a mistake.

Two important rules when attempting to communicate on the telephone cross-culturally are:

 1) Don't be overconfident. You should always assume there are differences in the way information is received and processed. Do not take thought processes for granted, even if someone speaks the same language as yourself; it is dangerous to assume that they think the same way or hold the same values.

 2) Use uncomplicated descriptive language to explain your position. Being clear and concise can play an important role in ensuring better understanding.

Resources

1. *Charles Mitchell.* The short course inInternational Business Culture, 3rd Edition. California, 2009.
2. *Navi Mumbai*. English Language Communication Skills; Himalaya Publishing House. 2010.
3. *Simon Sweeney*. English for Business Communication Student's Book; Cambridge university press. Un.K., 1997.