Intercultural Communication Between International Military Organizations; How Do You Turn a 'No' Into a 'Yes'?

By

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Government, private business, and academia have been placing increasing emphasis on collaboration in multi-stakeholder, multicultural environments. Globalization and developing mutual relationships with other global partners make intercultural communication an essential consideration, due to the visions and goals of the organizations.

The researcher's experience in the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) Theater Security Cooperation (TSC) provided motivation to further investigate the influence of intercultural communication factors on collaboration in the multi-stakeholder, multi-cultural organizational environment. TSC is the framework the U.S. DOD uses to assist foreign partner nations in developing security capabilities and capacities that are consistent with U.S. national interests and national security interests (Reynolds et al., 2015). In most cases, these partner nations have cultures and values that are significantly different from those we observe and practice in America.

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Persons working within the Department of Defense Theater Security Cooperation environment must regularly interact with others coming from cultures that are dissimilar to their own. They must adapt to cultural environments and norms that are different from what they were accustomed to (Froese & Peltokorpi, 2013). To address these conditions, the following subjects were determined to be relevant contributors from the body of literature:

1. Expatriate adaptation to foreign cultures (Haslberger, Brewster, & Hippler, 2013)
2. Power Distance (Hofstede, 1983)
3. Sensemaking Theory (Weick, 1995)
4. Intercultural communication

From this, the following research question emerged:

'How do US Department of Defense employees perceive their intercultural communications effectiveness and shortcomings during their State-to-State interactions?'

This research focuses on both the discovery and analysis of individual elements that define the interaction during communication for the purpose of gaining a greater understanding as to how (and how much) intercultural communication factors help or hinder collaboration between differing governments and their military officials.

As a result, this greater understanding may provide insight that would provide collaborators the opportunity to improve their negotiating performance based on both increased effectiveness and efficiency.

To illustrate these points, imagine a group of people that is about to play a game of football. While this seems simple, the question might be posed, "Which type of football?" While many Americans would relate to the sport sponsored by their National Football League, others from France, the United Arab Emirates or Thailand would relate to another sport, which is referred to soccer in the USA. At the same time, Australians and New Zealanders would be thinking of another full contact form of football referred to as rugby. Imagine the confusion that might occur if players from the United States attempted to play European Football on Middle Eastern football pitches using accepted NFL procedures. The results would be a huge number of fouls and penalties for carrying the ball and appearance of the lack of sportsmanlike conduct by the visiting American players. Conversely, those methods would be fully acceptable on the American football field.

Similarly, while communicating in the intercultural environment, it is important that those who are visiting with and interacting with a hosting partner nation (or culture) are aware of the rules of their "football pitch" and adapt to them accordingly.

Findings

This research indicated that self-monitoring, leading to behavior changes during expatriate adaptation was particularly prominent. Self-monitoring is described as individuals when adapting to foreign cultures being aware of how their interactions and behaviors affect (and are affected by) external, situational factors (Snyder, 1974). If compared with building a house, this appears to be similar to the foundation. If the foundation materials selected and construction methods used were not to acceptable standards, this would affect the quality and longevity of the house. This metaphor is useful because some of the differences between Western and Middle Eastern cultures are measurable in nature. Individuals on both sides of this dyad must recognize cultural differences and be willing to change. This would establish essential preconditions (the foundation) from which other positive changes (the building of the house on the foundation) could occur. A summary of those areas is noted below (it may be useful to refer to the provided conceptual model):

> ## Methodology
> Phenomenonology (Creswell, Creswell, & research, 2007) was the research methodology used, with data collected from ten participants with representation from both Middle Eastern and American origins. (The Middle Eastern region was selected due to the researcher's focus in that region, which provided access to the participants.) From twenty hours of interviews, over 300 pages of transcripts provided rich narratives to analyze.

1. <u>Openness and trust, within the Operating Environment.</u> When self-monitoring and behavior positively take other cultures into account, this indicates their ability to self-monitor and modify their behaviors to meet with the host culture's approval. In many cases, they observed the host culture reciprocating. Openness and trust often results in improved intercultural communication.

2. <u>Power Distance.</u> Westerners working with high-power distance cultures should first be aware of the power distance differences between the two cultures. When self-monitoring has occurred, participants will have modified their behaviors, resulting in improved intercultural communication effectiveness. Failure by participants to adapt their behaviors would diminish their intercultural communication effectiveness.

3. <u>Identification within Sensemaking Theory.</u> Individuals must identify others and themselves within the context of the situation. When they successfully modify their behavior to account for others' viewpoints, they increase their intercultural communication effectiveness. Self-monitoring during personal adaptation is essential for them to recognize their need to change their behavior.

4. <u>Problem Setting.</u> When identification is not properly done due to the lack of self-monitoring, the problem may not be 'properly set.' This research indicated limited or blocked intercultural communication as the typical result when self-monitoring was neglected.

Conclusions

As human beings, we possess two eyes, two ears and one mouth. Our brains have more mass and size than all of those combined. When considering this perspective, it appears that even the way our bodies are constructed supports self-monitoring and behavioral change. We have more communications receivers than transmitters, and our relatively large brain size aids us in analyzing the information and making decisions to change in order to accommodate foreign cultures.
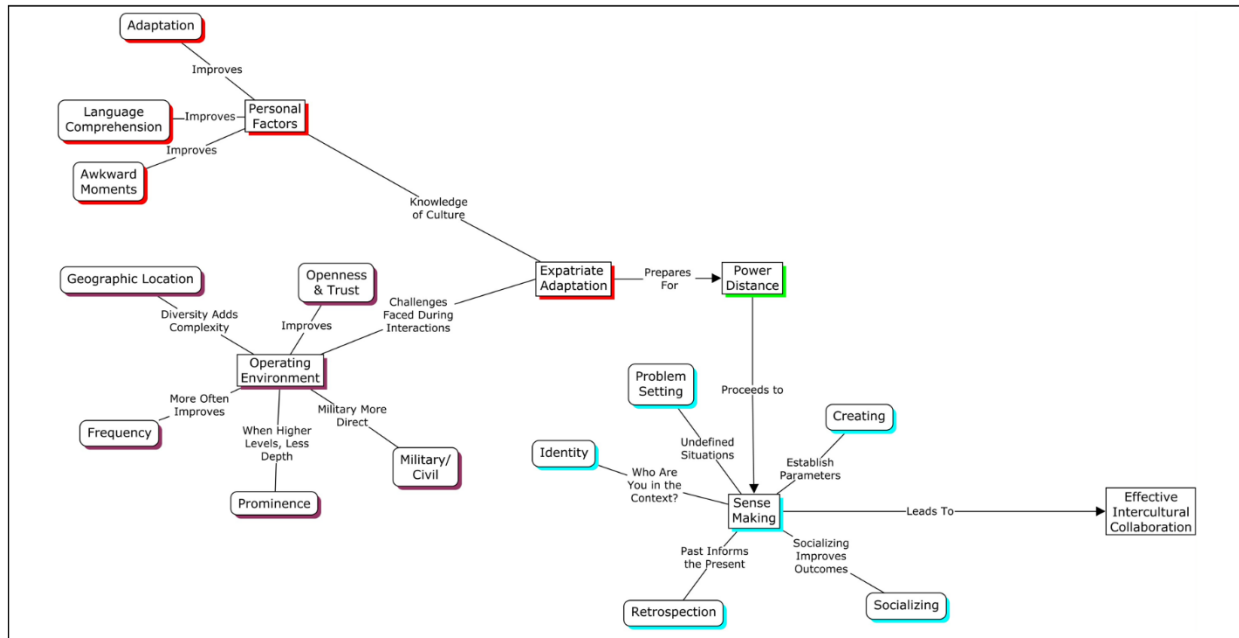
Figure 1. Conceptual Model – Effective Intercultural Communication, by author

When participants in intercultural settings self-monitor, and then make conscious changes to their behaviors to adapt to foreign cultures, it improves their intercultural communications effectiveness. It often results in reciprocation by persons from the foreign culture(s) with which he/she is interacting, which further improves communication.

Where to Find Out More

The dissertation this research summary references is currently in a pre-publication status. This is due to an extensive and ongoing U.S. Department of Defense review. Once the article is published this information will be updated with a reference. In the interim, some of the artifacts that provided literature foundations have been shared in the following reference list. The author may also be reached at strakad64@hotmail.com or Douglas A. Straka, 4604 John Moore Road, Brandon, Florida, 33511 if you have additional questions on this topic.

Review

This article was accepted under the ***constructive peer review*** option. For futher details, see the descriptions at:

http://mumabusinessreview.org/peer-review-options/

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Doug Straka has worked as a Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction (CWMD) Program Analyst for the U.S. Department of Defense Enterprise for the past eight years. He has worked closely with nations the U.S. partners with, to develop action plans to increase their abilities to prevent, protect, respond to and mitigate WMDs. Through developing composite teams from U.S. military joint service components and the U.S. government interagency, he has tailored programs that best meet each partner's needs.

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