

Building Personal Relationship in Intercultural Communication

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Abstract: In this world of a global village, intercultural communication plays an integral part in one's life. People from high context and low context culture may face some difficulties in understanding and appreciating each other. Sometimes, building a kind of satisfactory personal relationship is not an easy thing. This paper focuses on the techniques in this aspect with less pervasive but more informative intention to ease some tension and anxiety in intercultural communication.

Keywords: Intercultural Communication; High-Context Culture; Low-Context Culture

Introduction

There are occasions nowadays for people of various professions—lawyers, business managers, educators, artists, physicians, so on and so forth—from different parts of this world to encounter in such places as business settings, entertainment centers, academic seminars, school campuses, even the shopping malls and other public places. And this encounter can also take place through Internet communication or other air communication methods. However, many people often complain that it seems no chance for them to know the people from other culture well and to set up satisfactory intercultural personal relationship. Such complaints are specified by those English Language students, though majoring in English language and being instructed by at least four native English teachers, never build personal relationship with one of them. This also goes to many others who are working on certain things involving intercultural communication. Therefore, it's necessary to make clear the techniques that can help to build rather permanent personal relationship in cross-cultural communication, which may start with casual greetings, continue in discourse and maintains in mutual appreciation and help.

In order to modify the skills of intercultural communication, first and foremost we have to define a general dimension of communication in different cultures. According to Hall, it can be defined as two categories: high-context communication and low-context communication. A high context communication is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. People from Latin America, Japan, Korea as well as China are very typical of this, and they are very homogeneous with regard to experiences, information networks, and the like. High-context cultures, because of tradition and history, change very little over time. These are cultures in which consistent messages have produced consistent transactions in daily life; they do not require, nor do they expect, much in-depth, background information. Meaning, therefore, is not necessarily contained in words.

On the other hand, people from German, Swiss as well as American are representatives of low context cultures, and they are less homogeneous and therefore tend to be compartmentalize interpersonal contacts. In these cultures, the verbal message contains most of the information and very little is embedded in the context or the participants. There are many things to manifest this characteristic. For example, the Asian mode of communication is often indirect and implicit, whereas Western communication tends to be direct and explicit—that is, everything needs to be stated. These differences may influence communication. For example, members of low-context cultures feel uncomfortable with the vagueness and ambiguity often associated with limited data from high-context people's cultures while high-context people are apt to become impatient and irritated when low-context people insist on giving them information they don't need.

In intercultural communication, in order to build personal relationship, high-context people and low-context people have to share common experience first. For example, you, a Chinese with the English name like Sophia Ren, and Mary, an American, happen to be in the same beauty parlor to undergo foot massage in one district of China. Though there are curtains used separating the different consumers, you can hear her anxious voice flow in "Do you know Yao Ming? The top basketball

player in China...” she, shows her intention of communication explicitly to the feet masseuse. Obviously, the masseuse knows nothing about English more than “no, no” response. At this moment, you, though being educated to keep silence before strangers in traditional Chinese culture, do not hesitate to insert your help to bridge the communication gap between Mary and the masseuse. Then you two naturally start a conversation. From this we can see common experience does not only refer to the common thing you both do but the common wish of communicating through English language.

The shared experience or conversation does not ensure the building of personal relationship in intercultural communication. Lots of people whether in high-context culture or low-context culture do things like this, they meet, talk even play together, but after that nothing happens to have further contact. It’s also regarded rude to ask for others’ telephone number or home address at the first time both sides meet. The more acceptable way is to talk about each other’s work and the help you both may offer when time permitted. And when discourse reaches this level, E-mail address or other will be possibly available to you both. And then who will be the first Email sender? It often goes to the person in the host country, for the person from the guest country is not sure and worried whether you, the person in the host country has the intention to keep on this intercultural relationship. So a well-considered Email letter will be very urgent. Again go back to the example above, between high-context you and low-context Mary.. After giving the letter a deep thought, you with encouragement, send an Email to Mary,

Dear Mary, how are you going in these days? I am not sure if you still remember me, a stranger you happen to meet in the beauty parlor several weeks ago.

Last time, you said you want to visit the Stone Tablets, and I do not know if you have been there. Recently, I have got a book-Handbook For Xi'an (English and Chinese version), which gives a specific introduction about some famous touring sites in or around Xi'an, including the Stone Tablets, the Shaanxi History Museum, the Banpo Museum and so on. Concerning that you are so interested in the ancient culture of Xi'an, I think this book is rather helpful for you to know more about it.

How about your Chinese language learning? Can you communicate better in Chinese with the local people? Hope everything goes on well with you.

Christmas is coming soon, what's your schedule during it? Could you please come to my house to spend some merry time with my families, I want to prepare some Chinese food for you.

I am looking forward to your reply.

In this letter, the sender mentions their encounter in a very modest way,-typical Chinese manner to share their common experiences but unwilling to come up to terms with the common English tendency to begin with a topic statement. To Chinese, stating one’s request or main point at the beginning would make the person seem immodest, pushy and inconsiderate for wanting things. Then something related to the receiver’s interest is mentioned, it can easily arouse the desire of the receiver to share something with the sender. The next followed is about a dinner party, this is an invitation of direct meeting to build long-term relationship. Naturally, this invitation will be accepted.

Hi Sophia, I've been thinking about you. I already have plans for Christmas Day, but I would like to visit you sometime soon. How about next week? Please let me know when it is convenient for you. Thanks for keeping in touch.

With appointment made, the following critical thing is to have cultural awareness which covers many aspects like time punctuality, table manners, food preferences space conception and so on. Besides this, how to entertain the guest from other culture is also important. There are some techniques to follow.

Food You may serve your guest typical Chinese food while generally favored by most foreigners-Jiaozi, which is prepared by your families. Together, slices of steak are also favored by many westerners. Some Chinese dishes with special connotations can also be served. For example, fried or salad lotus root. In Chinese lotus means “lotus”, which symbolizes purity and connection of one party or two parties. Eight-Jewel Rice Pudding is “Eight Delicacies Ricein Chinese, which expresses a pray for fortune and happiness. At the same time some Chinese dishes may cause strong cultural shock should be avoided in food serving. For example, stewed dog, steamed snakes, for the people who concern their pets all their life, these kind of food is unbearable.

Conversation Without your translation, your families cannot communicate well with your guest. At this moment, you play a key role in the intercultural communication. Then you have to know how to make the conversation pleasant and

friendly. Maybe your husband may want to know the political preference of your guest, you cannot translate it directly to your friend for which may bring a sense of discomfort or awkwardness. During the conversation, sometimes we have to meet the loss of information, but this is convenient to do in that we avoid some taboos therefore some unpleasant feelings is blocked.

Entertainment. Movies are universal language. Download the current popular movie with original sound and language, which may interest your guest in case that you are busy in the kitchen, your guest may watch some movies with other family members in the study room. So your guest may never feel he/she has nothing to do in your house. Or you may accept your guest's offer of "give you a hand." in the kitchen. For most Chinese, if a guest comes into the kitchen and asks "Can I help you." Chinese host or hostess will hastily replies a refusal to show their concern and hospitality for the guest. But in intercultural communication, to make the others feel at ease requires us to behave something nontraditional, so at this time, when your guest wants to "offer you a hand", say "Sure, that's a great idea!". And you both may have a good time together.

Trough the above effort, personal relationship is under its right way, it crosses the barrier, whether you are low-context or high-context, you may see lots of communication takes place because there is a truth that people of every culture all need concern and friendliness of others.

Hi Sophia, I arrived safely in Bangkok last night.(I got the suitcase in KunMing.).I'm reading your e-mail today for the first time.

If the problem we talked about can be solved, I would like to rent an apartment near you. You can discuss that issue with Rebecca (the lady who called you).

I need lots of light (two 100 watt bulbs or three 75-watt bulbs) in the kitchen and more electrical wall outlets than are usually found in a kitchen. I need a water heater in the bathroom so that I can have a hot shower whenever, and I would like to have hot water in the kitchen for washing dishes. I like kitchen cabinets with no doors. If closets can be built into the bedrooms, that would be nice (but I can use wardrobes if that's too hard). I need an adjustable clothesline (goes up and down) on the balcony. All of these things can be discussed between me and you (not between you and Rebecca).

Thanks for all your help at the train station. There was a man with a bicycle cart in KunMing who waited very patiently for me to get the suitcase (I had to pay only 2 RMB to pick it up) we shipped and then he pedaled to where I could get a taxi to the airport.

I'm looking forward to seeing you in May and I will cook supper (wherever I'm living, but I hope it's near you) for you and your husband and your son.

Mary

Dear Mary,all the people in the world are concerning the hurricane-ravaged Gulf Coast,I am one of them who feels so eager to offer one hand if possible. As we know, more and more relief efforts have been done to the stricken states. God bless those people to have the food and the medical service they need soon. Whenever you need me,? call me.

Best regards!

Sophia

Hi Sophia, I've been watching internet news about the storm every day this week. The storm was as big as the state of Florida, and the area of devastation is as big as Great Britain. All the people who lived in the city of New Orleans have to leave and they may not be allowed to return for three months.(There was a mandatory evacuation before the storm, but many people didn't leave because they were too poor.)There are many problems to be solved .Some people still need to be rescued from attics and rooftops, I think.

Thank you for thinking of us.

Mary

With the emphasis on establishing friendly and pleasant intercultural relationship, persons from high-context culture and low-context culture have minimized their differences and maximized their similarities. They are not strangers or just simple acquaintances anymore, but close friends. Definitely there are other obstacles and misunderstandings on their way of

intercultural communication ahead, but with good wish and initiatives of personal relationship, they will hit their target anyway.

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