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Communicating across cultures in multinational Ibis West Africa

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ABSTRACT

This article examines effective communication in the midst of multi-varied cultures at Ibis West Africa adopting a qualitative approach of the constructivist's paradigm. Misinterpretations, misperceptions and misunderstandings of both verbal and non-verbal cues as well as differences in creating common meaning of messages encoded and decoded and the mindlessness of the communication environment characterised the interactions between the expatriate workers and the local staff of Ibis West Africa. The article recommended that Ibis West Africa could focus more on intercultural relationship and capacity building among their multicultural staff to enhance effective communication in this multinational organisation.

Introduction

We live in a world today where globalization has increasingly diminished the importance of borders. The consequence of this blurring of borders is resulting in mobility of labour, which has in turn led to the search for better economic, political and social wellness as against the status quo that might not guarantee improved conditions of life desired. In relation to this, Ting-Toomey (1999, p. 7) observed that “as we enter the 21st century, direct contacts with dissimilar others in our neighbourhood, schools and workplace are an inescapable part of life” and “acquiring the knowledge and skills of mindful intercultural communication is a necessary first step in becoming a global citizen of the 21st century” (p. 5).

This development is more so as on the international scene is the irreversible emergence of a multicultural workforce in many organizations and societies. Recent organizations are characterized by people of wide differences in terms of nationality, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, education, social class or level of abilities (Guirdham, 2005). Constraining this new trajectory is the issue of effective communication across this diverse and multicultural workforce in today's workplace (Rijamampianina, 1995). Ideally, everyone will feel delighted if what he/she communicates is well understood the way he/she wants it to be comprehended. Often, this effective communication is not realized because of the existence of varying cultural norms, languages, values and protocols within an organization.

The emergence of intercultural communication as a subject of great importance, which is also fundamentally a collaborative issue in business organizations goes beyond globalization. Domestic workforces also have become increasingly more diverse both ethnically and culturally (Goman, 2011). Adler (1991) observed that communicating effectively even within a culturally homogeneous workforce is challenging to managers worldwide. The communication challenge is more grievous when the workforce is heterogeneous with multiplicity of languages and cultural backgrounds.

The realization that today's competition can be won by modern firms if they draw on the creativity, expertise and know-how of the kaleidoscopic workforce adds to the significance of interpersonal communication (Guirdham, 2005).

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Given the importance and prominence given to intercultural communication and its relationship to business sustainability and competitiveness, this study seeks to investigate the research question ‘how does culture influence communication among expatriate workers and local staff in multinational Ibis West Africa?’ The study of the influence of culture on communication in multinational Ibis West Africa will have several benefits.

First, the study would highlight the effects of cultural variables on information encoding and decoding among expatriate workers and local staff of Ibis West Africa. Second, this study seeks to contribute to enrich the literature on intercultural communication, based on the premise that today’s workforces have been dramatically transformed and managers require the understanding, skills and competencies to communicate effectively in multicultural contexts these researchers envisage. Such a context is Ibis in West Africa. It does so by exploring the idiosyncrasies of the Ghanaian culture when it is exposed to a foreign culture in an interactive organisational set up.

Background to the study

Ibis is a Danish International Non-Governmental Organization. Historically, Ibis is originated from a world-wide and university based organisation (WUS), world university service which was founded in the 1920s (Ibis, 2005). Their main aim was to support the liberation movement in South Africa in their struggle against colonial rule and the apartheid regime. Ibis supports programs in 13 countries around the world, with about 50 Danish expatriates, and employing about 464 people across three continents (Ibis, 2005). The main activities of Ibis are: Education, governance and capacity building (Abdulai, 2011, p.4)

Vision and mission

The light which guides Ibis direction is to confront the fundamental causes of poverty and inequality in developing countries. Ibis applied the concept of poverty in its widest sense, “*implying the absence of opportunities for material well-being, access to education of individuals as well as collective rights of the chance to live in a clean environment of political power and influence*” (Ibis vision 2012, p. 4). However, the intervention most likely to lead Ibis towards the vision is Ibis mission statement. The mission statement of Ibis direct the organizational work towards “*a just world in which all people have equal access to education, influence and resources* (Ibis, 2005, p. 2). In this sense, the focus of Ibis is on empowering the poor and the marginalised no matter social status, race, gender and ethnicity.

Selection of case

The globalisation of International Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) has made it quite easy to make their services available to needy communities globally. In this connection, the global processes have facilitated Ibis to move outside their area of origin to Latin America and Africa to offer services to impoverish communities. Ibis was chosen for this study because Ibis is a Danish international Non-Governmental Organization, which has projects and offices in 13 countries around the world. Ibis operates in Latin America, West Africa, and Southern Africa. In this case, the tendency of employees of Ibis to be exposed to other cultures is very great (Abdulai, 2011). For instance, Ibis West Africa has eight (8) different nationalities who work at different projects at Ibis offices in West Africa. These different nationalities joined Ibis West Africa with different cultures or different ‘mental programmes’ (Hofstede, 1997). These different cultures or “mental programmes” in one way or the other might influence the way information is shared, interpreted and meanings generated. It is against this backdrop that this paper has chosen to explore how cultures influence communication among expatriate workers and local staff of Ibis West Africa.

Literature review/theoretical underpinnings

This part of the article highlights the definition and importance of multicultural communication, the concept of culture, context and communication as well as the concept of the stranger and effective communication. Also, the concept of expatriation is briefly explored. These concepts will exert relevant impact on the results that will be presented later in the analysis.

Definition and elements of multicultural communication

Rijamampianina (1995, p. 125) considered cultural diversity to mean the representation in a defined social system, persons with distinct group belongingness of cultural significance. In his own definition and words, he looked at cultural diversity to be “differences in people based on their identification with various cultural groups.” This implies that organizations are now globally-interdependent and interconnected with multicultural workforce rendering the business space complex and challenging. Leadership and management are left with no option than to gain the right acumen, orientation and strategies to engage in cross-cultural communication.

Adler (1991) viewed communication to be “the exchange of meaning: it is my attempt to let you know what I mean”. He stressed it further to include acts or behaviours that give a course to be interpreted and perceived. Cross-cultural communication takes place when message is transmitted from a person from one culture to another person from a different culture. Putting meanings into words and behaviours including symbols and vice versa will differ from one person to another because of their cultural orientations. This view point is in consonance with that of Ting-Toomeys’ (1999, p. 16), who considered intercultural communication to be “the symbolic exchange process whereby individuals from two (or more) different cultural communities negotiate shared meanings in an

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