

The Skills and Impacts of Relationship Building on International Business Communication

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1 Introduction

All relevant business information is delivered through relationships. Relationship building and management is playing an increasingly important role in the development of international business communication theory.

Holm & Johanson(1996) focused on relationship cooperation in international business networks.

In the internationalization environment, it is complicate to build relationship because of the physical distance and cultural gap between partner firms. Moran (2014) argues that cultural differences have profound influence on international joint ventures and have led to many problems and obstacles in international partnerships. It is important for firms to develop and build lasting relationships especially for internationalization.

This essay will focus on the importance of building relationship in order to achieve successful international business communication. First, the essay will identify the differences of communication philosophy, which explain the necessity of relationship building. After that, the essay will illustrate some skills concerning to relationship building in international business communication, and critically evaluate their importance through practical examples and cases. Finally, this report will draw conclusions of the extent to relationship building in international business communication and sum up the main skills about relationship building.

2 Main Body

2.1 Understanding of High/Low Context Culture

Cross-cultural communication and understanding leads to many problems and barriers in the building of relationships between international partnerships. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the distinctions between different culture communication philosophies and adapt appropriate ways to build relationship is quite essential for successful international business communication.

2.1.1 High Versus Low Context

Edward T Hall(1976) proposed the concepts of high context and low context, which showed the differences of people's communication styles in different cultures.

High context indicates that verbal message is indirect and context is more important than words. People in high context cultures such as France and Japan tend to build up relationships slowly and emphasize the importance of relationships in business.

Low context is the opposite. Most information is transferred in the explicit form. There are few uses of nonverbal elements. People in low context cultures such as Germany or America tend to communicate straightforwardly and begin and end relationships quickly. (Hall,1976; Moran, 2014)

2.1.2 Survey

Kim & Park(1998) designed a survey (Appendix 1) to explore the main terms of high and low context culture concepts and to conduct a cross-cultural comparison between the U.S., China, and Korea.

The results(Appendix 1) showed that in a high context culture (such as China and Korea), people tend to be more socially-oriented, less confrontational, and more satisfied with living ways, and its authorities assume more responsibilities than people in a low context culture (such as America).

What can be referred from the survey is that there are actually many differences between high context and low context cultures, which could have great influence on relationship building.

If people in different cultures fail to understand the opposite communication style in business, it may lead to misunderstanding and serious consequences.

2.1.3 Case

A case between a French company and its Japanese subsidiary(Carte, 2008), in appendix 2, can generally show the extent to which the differences between high context and low context cultures influence business partners' relationship.

The Japanese thought they had already made it clear that they did not plan to source supplies from France, while the French was also sure that the Japanese had no resistance towards their arrangements.

Both sides thought they had already behaved in their straightforward way. It is the difference between communicational styles in business relationships that led to their conflict.

As a result, without full understanding of partnerships' communication styles, it is definitely impossible to build a firm relationship between each other, which could disrupt firms' cooperation.

Greater understanding of the partners culture can also facilitate partner's trust in the relationship.

2.2 Trust Development

Trust facilitates the intent of knowledge acquisition and external sharing of organizations. Based on trust, business partners determine the scope and nature of knowledge sharing(Pantelia, 2005). It is the precondition of successful business communication.

Trust and relationship building are mutually reinforced. Trust is developed and founded in relationships(Weck, 2013). Relationship building can be a driving force for the beginning and maintaining of trust development with partners. The construction of covenantal relationship is based on the elements of trust and authenticity(Seto, 2016).

Meanwhile, trust also supports the development of business relationships, whether those relationships are between the core business and its suppliers, customers or joint venture partners(Ahmed & Styles, 2015).

Trust can help building relationships in business, especially in the following terms:

Enduring relationships

One of the most important advantages of having trust in a business relationship is to ensure an enduring connection with business partners. Constantly seeking for new business partners is costly and uncertain. A solid foundation of trust can help ensure a lasting relationship.

Ease of Cooperation

It is much easier to work effectively when two business partners trust each other. Otherwise, they are much more likely to hold back potentially useful information from one another and to spend time and effort taking precautions about working too closely with each other.

However, trust can also have its downsides.

Reduce Emphasis on Individual Goals

Perhaps the primary characteristic of working towards a firm trust relationship is that individual goals must often be subordinated to the goals of the partnership. The higher the level of self-orientation is, the lower the level of trust will be. Therefore, consideration of trust relationship can also reduce opportunities for individual benefit.

To sum up, developing trust is often an immediate antecedent of successful businesses, which stresses the importance of relationship.

2.3 Balance of Social Forms

The nuances of social forms can be very misleading. While ignoring social differences, establishing a warm and constructive business relationship with people could be difficult, as people tend to make subliminal negative judgments. There is always a gap between social conventions in international business. (Carte, 2008)

This part will introduce social forms which vary from culture to culture. Knowing more of the differences and understanding them better will make it much easier to overcome the negative judgments in business relationships.

2.3.1 Greeting people(Carte, 2008)

Business people around the world tend to shake hands with tourists as they arrive and leave. But the French (and some other countries) also shake hands with everyone in the office every morning when they go to work. The difference can be defined as the physically distant scale (Carte, 2008).

Arabs, Africans, Indians, South Americans, Southern Italians and Greeks tend to be very tactile. With them, handshakes can go on forever, and they're likely to stand very close to you. In East and South-East Asia, on the other hand, people tend to be far more physically distant. In Japan, for example, physical contact between business people in the office is almost non-existent.

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2.3.2 Making small talk (Carte, 2008)

Some cultures prefer to focus on business first and personal relationships later; others feel the need to build a personal relationship before they can do business.

Some cultures prefer to focus on business first and personal relationships later; others feel they need to build a personal relationship before doing business.

In Japan, people expect to spend plenty of time exchanging personal information before getting ready to discuss specific business proposals. In more functional cultures, on the other hand, people expect to start on the business agenda at first. With Germans, Swiss, Scandinavians and Finns, for example, small talk is often few sentences.

2.3.3 Giving Feedback(Ginka, 2016)

Constructive criticism is an essential part of global teamwork.

It helps eliminate some inevitable conflicts that aggravate stereotypes and disrupt cooperation. But feedback can be of its own cultural style. Executives from more individualistic and task-oriented cultures, especially the U.S., are accustomed to see it as an opportunity for personal development. In their culture, it is better to deliver and receive criticism immediately even in front of the working group.

In contrast, people from more collectivist and relationship-oriented cultures may be unaccustomed to posting or listening to criticism in public, even if the team would benefit. They may prefer to have one-on-one meetings in an informal setting, possibly over lunch or outside the workplace.

If they come from hierarchical cultures, such as Malaysia or Mexico, they may not even feel it is their duty to provide direct feedback to colleagues, but choose to deliver it to the team leader to convey.

Good manners are expressing warmth, care and respect for others. The trouble is that the good form in one's thinking might be considered as bad at some other places. Even if dealing with a culture whose social behaviors look similar, people cannot think of them as exactly the same ones.

It is important to identify major differences and to consciously try to respect local customs, which will facilitate the building of firm relationship.

3 Conclusion

Through exploration of high & low context culture, trust's importance in business and different social forms, this essay concludes that relationship building is of great importance to international business communication.

Understanding high & low context culture, developing trust, balancing different social forms are all beneficial to relationship building, and are all basic elements of successful international business communication as well. The importance of relationship building especially in international business environment can be illustrated from the cases and examples.

Although there are still some points which must be paid attention to during relationship building, such as adapting appropriate communication methods according to different cultures and social forms. The drawback of trust development -fail to put the whole emphasis on individual goals- also need to noticed.

Appendix

Appendix 1: A survey of Kim & Park(1998)

Kim & Park chose 96 business managers in the part-time MBA program in a major mid-western business school as the American sample, 96 Chinese business managers in a short-term management-training program in Beijing as Chinese sample, and 50 managers enrolled in the part-time MBA program in a university in Seoul as Korean sample.

They used 16 items to cover the following six possible aspects of high and low context culture concepts: social orientation, responsibility, confrontation, communication, commitment, and dealing with new situations.

The results are shown below:

Table 1. High- Versus Low-Context Culture Scale

Measures	Means			F
	American	Chinese	Korean	
Social orientation				
• It is very important to me to feel I am a part of a group. (+)	2.99(0.90)	3.46(1.24)	3.86(0.73)	12.89*
• My social status is an important part of my life. (+)	3.14(0.94)	3.84(0.97)	3.62(0.88)	12.90*
• I often feel left out of things going on around me. (+)	2.46(0.85)	3.08(1.14)	2.68(1.08)	8.74*
• Being able to work in harmony with others should at times come before doing the job well. (+)	3.14(0.92)	3.85(1.05)	4.06(0.89)	19.72*
• In general, it is more important to understand my inner self than to be famous, powerful, or wealthy. (-)	3.83(1.00)	3.67(1.23)	3.38(0.95)	2.87***
<i>Social orientation composite</i>	<i>2.78(0.43)</i>	<i>3.31(0.55)</i>	<i>3.37(0.44)</i>	<i>36.99*</i>
Responsibility				
• The primary responsibility for a mistake in an organization is on the supervisor rather than on the subordinate who actually made it. (+)	3.00(0.97)	3.32(1.35)	3.26(1.12)	ns
• It is not wise to sacrifice one's interests for the benefit of the organization he/she belongs to. (-)	3.19(0.96)	3.36(1.23)	2.74(0.94)	5.49*
<i>Responsibility composite</i>	<i>2.90(0.65)</i>	<i>2.98(0.93)</i>	<i>3.26(0.77)</i>	<i>3.38**</i>
Confrontation				
• I conform to social norms even when they conflict with my personal desires. (+)	2.40(0.98)	2.94(1.19)	3.14(1.07)	9.76*
• Insults to our honor are not always important enough to bother about. (-)	2.62(1.15)	2.52(1.40)	2.02(1.00)	4.15**
• It is all right for people to raise questions about even the most sacred matters. (-)	4.13(1.09)	3.87(1.22)	3.70(1.07)	2.55***
<i>Confrontation composite</i>	<i>2.55(0.60)</i>	<i>2.87(0.82)</i>	<i>3.14(0.50)</i>	<i>13.26*</i>
Communication/commitment				
• A person's word is his bond and you need not spell out the details to make him behave as he or she promised. (+)	2.88(1.11)	3.18(1.27)	2.45(0.96)	6.61*
• A person cannot think unless he/she can put it into words. (-)	2.05(1.09)	2.19(1.25)	2.54(1.07)	2.97***
<i>Communication /commitment composite</i>	<i>3.41(0.74)</i>	<i>3.49(0.94)</i>	<i>2.96(0.74)</i>	<i>6.76*</i>
Dealing with New Situations				
• Learning new ways to think does not excite me very much. (+)	1.70(0.78)	2.01(1.06)	3.98(0.94)	106.11*
• I have difficulty thinking in new and unfamiliar situations. (+)	2.22(0.96)	2.58(1.21)	3.62(0.97)	28.54*
• I try to anticipate and avoid situations where there is a likely chance I will have to think in depth about something. (+)	1.72(0.80)	2.62(1.26)	3.64(1.26)	52.07*
• Everything is changing too fast today. (+)	2.26(1.04)	3.85(1.22)	4.04(0.95)	64.44*
<i>Dealing with new situations composite</i>	<i>2.19(0.49)</i>	<i>2.78(0.64)</i>	<i>3.72(0.64)</i>	<i>114.21*</i>
Overall composite score	42.90 (4.91)	49.12 (5.74)	53.5 (5.37)	70.84*

Note: Numbers in brackets are standard deviations. Composite scores are calculated as means of items in the group after reverse scaling the appropriate items

* $p < .01$.

** $p < .05$.

*** $p < .10$.

Table 2. Pairwise Test of Differences between Means (Numbers in Table are *t* Values and Significance is Tested with the Use of a Two-Tailed Test)

Item	A-C	C-K	A-K
Social orientation			
Item 1	-3.01*	-2.45**	-6.30*
Item 2	-5.07*	1.38	-3.05*
Item 3	-4.28*	2.08**	-1.25
Item 4	-4.98*	-1.27	-5.86*
Item 5	0.99	0.69	2.67*
Responsibility			
Item 1	-1.89***	0.32	-1.39
Item 2	-1.07	3.39*	2.73*
Confrontation			
Item 1	-3.43*	-1.03	-4.08*
Item 2	0.54	2.49**	3.26*
Item 3	1.59	0.87	2.29**
Communication/commitment			
Item 1	-1.74***	3.88*	2.43**
Item 2	-0.82	-1.77***	-2.61*
Dealing with new situations			
Item 1	-2.31**	-11.49*	-14.70*
Item 2	-2.25**	-5.63*	-8.30*
Item 3	-6.00*	-4.64*	-9.80*
Item 4	-9.94*	-1.04	-10.40*
Composite score	-2.78*	-1.45	-4.13*

Note: A = American sample(*n* = 96), C = Chinese sample(*n* = 96), K = Korean sample(*n* = 50).

**p* < .01.

***p* < .05.

****p* < .10.

Appendix 2: A case of high/low context culture

“A large French company decided to introduce a new global purchasing policy. In the past, subsidiaries had sourced many of their supplies locally. In future, they would be expected, where possible, to use the same suppliers as the French parent company. The French purchasing manager visited the subsidiaries one by one to explain the new arrangements. In each case, she presented the facts and figures very clearly, and made sure the purchasing teams were fully aware of the considerable cost savings that would be achieved. She had been expecting a certain amount of resistance from the Japanese subsidiary. So she wasn’t particularly worried by the surprised glances and exhalations of breath that greeted her announcement. Nor was she unduly concerned when one of the team said: ‘This will be very difficult for us.’ After all, they were bound to say that. The important thing was that no one rejected the proposals. She went home feeling relatively pleased with herself. Six months later, she was surprised to see that the Japanese had not made one single purchase through the new system. She phoned Tokyo to find out what was going on. Her colleague said: ‘We made it very clear, when you were here, that we couldn’t use this new system.’”(Carte, 2008, p.17)

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