CULTURAL SENSITIVITY AND DIVERSITY AWARENESS

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Összefoglalás

Effektív interkulturális kommunikáció nem létezhet politikai, gazdasági és kulturális tények ismerete nélkül sikeres nemzetközi együttműködés érdekében. A kulturális sokszínűség megköveteli azon képességek jelenlétet, melyek lehetővé teszik az ismeretlen kulturális környezethez való alkalmazkodást a produktív együttműködés szintjén. Ezen célok megvalósítása szükségessé teszi a kulturális tudatosság és érzékenység kialakítását minden interkulturális kommunikációban részt vevő egyén számára.

Kulcsszavak
Interkulturális kompetencia, tudatosság, érzékenység, modell, intelligencia, gondolkodásmód.

Summary

The requirement to function effectively in culturally diverse environments demands an international perspective and an understanding of the various political, economic and cultural factors that influence the interaction process in other countries. This paper points out that increased cultural diversity in different settings calls for abilities to adapt to the unfamiliar environment and to learn to work and live productively with people from different cultural backgrounds, which highlights the importance of cultural awareness and sensitivity.

Keywords
Awareness, cross-cultural competence, intelligence, mindset, model, sensitivity

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Introduction

The ability to engage successfully in cross-cultural interactions has become one of the most dominating skills individuals need to promote, because in the 21st century, more than ever, they are being challenged by a future in which they will have to collaborate with people from a wide spectrum of diverse cultural backgrounds. Cross-cultural encounters depend upon the ability to interact effectively with individuals who are culturally different, to demonstrate adequate behaviour in a culturally unaccustomed environment, and to attune behaviour to the cross-cultural interaction context. Littlejohn (2002) argues that each cross-cultural encounter is momentous and will be framed by the context in which it occurs, the expectations of the individuals involved, and their perceptions of what is essential in the encounter.

A mindful approach to cross-cultural encounters means that individuals will approach any information about other cultures with an open mind and that they will reject stereotypical categorisations of members of cultures that are different from their own. Mindfulness involves attending to one's deep-rooted inferences, cognition, and emotions, and simultaneously attuning to the other's inferences, cognition, and emotions. It requires individuals to tune in thoughtfully to their inherent mental scripts and predisposed assumptions. Langer (1997) refers to it as readiness to reconstruct one's frame of reference, motivation to utilise unfamiliar categories to construe cultural differences, and promptitude to experiment with creative approaches of decision-making and problem-solving. He claims that an individual needs to understand the value systems that influence the self-conceptions of culturally diverse others, needs to be open to unique ways of identity development, needs to be willing to perceive and analyse behaviour from the others' cultural and personal perspectives, and needs to be observant to recognise that multiple perspectives exist in interpreting behaviour in cross-cultural settings.

Cultural Diversity and Cross-cultural Competence

The expanding diversity of cultures, which is apt to change, dynamic and transformative, implies specific competences and capabilities for individuals to learn, re-learn, and unlearn to enhance personal satisfaction and social harmony. A culturally inclusive environment requires reciprocal recognition, practical relationships, unambiguous communication, explicit understanding about expectations and critical self-reflection. Valdes (1986) claims that at the base of cross-cultural understanding is a recognition of the ways in which two cultures resemble one another. He argues that resemblances usually occur through the investigation of the differences.

The diversity-wheel model focuses on the investigation of such differences. This model refers to the four layers of diversity including personality, internal, external and organisational dimensions. Personality, relating to individual style and characteristics, points out whether an individual is an introvert or extrovert, reflective or expressive, fast-paced or structured, a thinker or a doer. This dimension affects how the individual will be treated, get along with others, and succeed in versatile interaction events. The second layer, or the internal dimensions, includes the six uncontrollable aspects of an individual. Gender, age, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, and physical ability are, for the most part, not choices, yet they affect the individual's treatment in varied cross-cultural interactions, or the roles he plays in life. The third layer, or the external dimensions, indicates the outcomes of life experiences and choices. Aspects such as religion, education, marital status, work experience, and recreational habits are areas around which individuals can connect or disconnect, be valued or humiliated, depending on how these dimensions are perceived and applied. The last layer, or the

organizational dimensions, contains those aspects of similarity and differences that belong to work in the organization.

The ability to interpret and understand other cultures in fair and meaningful ways is supported not only by an open and pluralistic spirit but also by cultural understanding and appropriate interaction skills, i.e. cross-cultural competence. It refers to the ability to promptly understand and effectively react to a culture different from one's own. It supplies individuals with the requisite knowledge, skills, abilities, and personal characteristics that allow them to perform pragmatically in culturally diverse situations. It provides the individual with the insightful knowledge of when and how to change from a spontaneous home-culture mode to a more culturally appropriate, adaptable mode. Cross-cultural competence helps mitigate undesirable and costly outcomes by supporting critical skills, including those needed for conflict resolution, stress coping, language acquisition, tolerance for ambiguity, and adapting to living in other cultures.

Byram (1997) argues that cross-cultural competence consists of five factors, such as knowledge about social groups, skills of interpretation, skills of interaction, attitudes towards individuals of different cultures, and critical cultural awareness. It includes affective, cognitive, and behavioural components. The cognitive component refers to cultural awareness which leads to a change in one's thinking about his environment based upon the understanding that one should not constrain oneself to his own perspectives due to the fact that there are manifold perspectives. This modification in one's manner of thinking can cause alterations in their behavioural component on the basis of the influences of culture on one's behaviour or cultural awareness. The affective component of cross-cultural competence, or cross-cultural sensitivity, focuses on diverse feelings which are brought about by changes in people, environment, and communicative encounters while renouncing ethnocentrism (Chen & Starosta, 1996). Hammer, Bennet, and Wiseman (2003) indicate that cross-cultural sensitivity is a prior condition for cross-cultural competence, since it is in fact the behavioural manifestation of cross-cultural awareness and cross-cultural sensitivity (Peng, Rangsipaht, & Thaipakdee, 2005).

Cross at al. (1989) emphasise three critical elements in their model of cross-cultural competence, i.e. self-awareness, culture-specific knowledge, and skills supporting effective socio-cultural interactions by an individual. Their model describes cultural competence as movement along a continuum that is based on the premise of respect and appreciation of individuals and cultural differences. The Cross model includes six stages, i.e. cultural destructiveness, cultural incapacity, cultural blindness, cultural pre-competence, basic cultural competence, and advanced cultural competence. The stage of cultural destructiveness refers to individuals who perceive culture as a problem, and presume that one culture is superior and should liquidate weaker cultures. The second stage of cultural incapacity refers to individuals who lack cultural awareness and skills, believe in the racial superiority of a dominant group, assume a paternalistic attitude toward others, and sustain stereotypes. The third stage of cultural blindness refers to individuals who perceive others in terms of their own culture and argue that all people are exactly alike. The fourth stage of cultural pre-competence refers to individuals who recognise that there are cultural differences and instruct themselves and others about these differences, and acknowledge their deficiencies in interacting within a diverse environment, but are still unconcerned in their efforts. The fifth stage of basic cultural competence refers to individuals who accept, appreciate, and accommodate cultural differences, value diversity, accept and respect differences, accept the influence of their own culture in relation to other cultures, understand and manage the dynamics of difference when

cultures converge, and are prepared to scrutinise components of cross-cultural interactions. The sixth stage of advanced cultural competence refers to individuals who move beyond accepting, appreciating, and accommodating cultural differences, and actively instruct less acquainted individuals about cultural differences, search for knowledge about diverse cultures, and develop skills to function in diverse environments.

Chen and Starosta (2000) define cross-cultural competence as an umbrella concept that involves an individual's cognitive (awareness), affective (sensitivity), and behavioural abilities (adroitness) in the process of cross-cultural interactions. Cross-cultural awareness is the cognitive dimension of cross-cultural competence that refers to an individual's ability to understand similarities and differences of others' cultures. This dimension includes two components, i.e. self-awareness and cultural awareness. Awareness is an ability to see culture's role in shaping a situation in a cross-cultural context. Cross-cultural sensitivity is the affective aspect of cross-cultural competence, referring to an individual's ability to develop a positive emotion towards understanding and appreciating cultural differences that promotes appropriate and effective behaviour in cross-cultural interactions. Cross-cultural adroitness is the behavioural dimension of cross-cultural competence that refers to an individual's ability to achieve communication goals while interacting with people from other cultures. This dimension contains four components, namely message skills, appropriate self-disclosure, behavioural flexibility, and interaction management (Chen & Starosta 2000).

Cultural Sensitivity

Cross-cultural sensitivity is a natural by-product of awareness and refers to an ability to read into situations, contexts and behaviours that are culturally rooted and be able to react to them appropriately. A suitable response necessitates that the individual no longer carries his own culturally determined interpretations of the situation or behaviour which can only be nurtured through cross-cultural knowledge and awareness. Triandis (1997) highlights that cross-cultural sensitivity is associated with the emotions of an individual toward cross-cultural encounters. Chen and Starosta (2000) further conclude that a cross-culturally sensitive individual must possess six personal attributes, i.e. self-esteem, self-monitoring, open-mindedness, empathy, interaction involvement, and suspending judgment. Self-esteem refers to an individual's ability to express an optimistic outlook and confidence in cross-cultural interaction. The way an individual feels about oneself has a determining impact on his interaction with others. Research has revealed that low self-esteem individuals have a higher tendency than high self-esteem individuals to apply harsh strategies, such as coercion and legitimacy, in social interactions. Self-monitoring is an individual's ability to intentionally coordinate behaviour as a reaction to situational limitations and to execute a conversationally effective behaviour. Individuals high in self-monitoring will experience a lower manifestation of interpersonal collision than individuals low in self-monitoring. High self-monitors demonstrate higher preferences than low self-monitors for relatively solicitous conflict resolution modes, such as collaboration and compromise. Open-mindedness is an individual's ability to openly and appropriately explain oneself and to accept other's explanations. Open-minded individuals tend to compromise and address conflict directly in conflict situations. Empathy refers to an individual's ability to project oneself into another individual's point of view in order to accept different roles as necessitated by different situations. Interaction involvement refers to an individual's ability to perceive the topic and situation in order to initiate and conclude a cross-cultural interaction competently and appropriately. Highly involved individuals are sensitive and attentive to the self, the other, and the circumstances,

and, thus, can react to the situation accordingly. Suspending judgment refers to an individual's ability to refrain from prompt judgments about the inputs of others and to induce a feeling of enjoyment of cultural differences. Individuals who acknowledge the lack of appropriate information when making judgments tend to make less extreme evaluations and are willing to modify a judgment as additional information becomes available.

The developmental model of cross-cultural sensitivity by Bennett (1993) describes the ways in which individuals construe cultural differences. He theorises that acquiring cross-cultural sensitivity is a developmental process, in which an individual moves from denial of, defence from and minimisation of cultural difference (ethnocentric stages) to acceptance, adaptation, and integration of differences (ethnorelative stages). The crux of cross-cultural adaptation is the ability to have an alternative cultural experience. Individuals who have received largely monocultural socialisation normally have access only to their own cultural worldview, so they are unable to experience the difference between their own perception and that of people who are culturally different. The development of cross-cultural sensitivity describes how individuals gain the ability to construe an alternative experience that more or less matches that of people in another culture. Individuals who can do this have a cross-cultural worldview. This model anticipates that experience with cultural diversity generates pressure for alterations in one's worldview. This occurs because the default ethnocentric worldview, while adequate for dealing with relations within one's own culture, is inadequate to the task of creating and maintaining social relations across cultural boundaries. Assuming that there is a need for such cross-cultural relations, then there is pressure to develop greater competence in cross-cultural matters. It is a model of how the assumed underlying worldview moves from an ethnocentric to a more ethnorelative condition, thus generating greater cross-cultural sensitivity and the potential for more cross-cultural competence. Changes in knowledge, attitudes, or skills are taken as indications of changes in the intrinsic worldview.

A Cross-cultural Mindset
Early and Ang (2003) define a cross-cultural mindset as the ability to scan diverse cultural settings from a broad perspective, always looking for unexpected trends and opportunities that may constitute a threat or an opportunity to achieve cross-cultural interaction objectives. It is the ability to develop interpretation schemes that are independent from the assumption of a single culture or context, and to implement those schemes appropriately in different cultures and contexts.

A cross-cultural mindset is seen as a combination of awareness and openness to the diversity of cultures with an inclination and capability to integrate across diversity. It is an ever developing and evolving process built upon cognitive feedback mechanisms that encourage the search for experiences that expand and refine an individual's mental models. A cross-cultural mindset is seen as a combination of knowledge and skills. Knowledge is the appreciation of the existence of differences; and skills are the ability to put knowledge into action. Cultural intelligence and cross-cultural experience have a complex relationship. They are mutually reinforcing interrelationships, therefore, as cross-cultural experience increases, the development of cultural intelligence will increase, and it will consequently contribute to the development of a cross-cultural mindset. Cross-cultural experience decreases the psychic distance and helps individuals integrate the learned culture with their own, therefore, such experience will have a considerable impact on the values and cognitive orientations of individuals.

Conclusion

Cross-cultural communicators need a cross-cultural mindset to cope successfully and mindfully with cognitively understood interaction standards. They are regarded as prerequisites of cross-cultural competence enhancement through changes in ethnocentrism, cross-cultural communication apprehension and international awareness. Cross-cultural competence allows individuals to perceive the correlations between a culture and its context, history and value orientations. They understand that knowledge of a culture is only considerable in the context of understanding its religious, philosophical, and historical realities. The process- of developing cross-cultural competence requires that individuals lower their defences, tolerate new ideas and beliefs, and practice behaviours that may feel unfamiliar and uncomfortable. It requires a sensitive mind, and the willingness to accept alternative perspectives.

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