Carmen – Laura ZARZU
University "Politehnica"
Romania
clzarzu@yahoo.com

WHO NEEDS INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCES?

Empirical study

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Abstract

The current essay focuses on the need for formal education in the area of intercultural communication and training of intercultural competences. It builds on cultural identity and diversity literature, on the experiment conducted in the Low Countries in introducing a new topic for students from social sciences referring to intercultural communication and on reports and papers of international companies, organizations and agencies.

The argument of globalization which should give equal opportunities to each and every world's citizen adds pressure on managers dealing with multicultural teams. Intercultural competences gain importance in recruiting, while turning cultural diversity in team performance requires skills, knowledge and experience. Managing cultural diversity presupposes that people are aware, recognize, understand and deal with differences. Thus intercultural communication should be studied as a stand-alone topic or imbedded in other subjects in different forms of education or training, so people are prepared for intercultural, social and professional relationships.

1. INTRODUCTION

Competitiveness is one of the buzz words in the last decades, which together with the globalization leads to the profile of the contemporary winner. One main challenge is the intercultural communication which calls for intercultural competences.

Cultural diversity has the advantage of large pool of talents, extended markets and clients, creativity and various solutions in problem solving process. Cultural diversity is an important drive for change, innovation, creativity and, at the same time, it should preserve the heritage left by ancestors that defines uniqueness and keeps the world an interesting, resourceful place. Cultural diversity is therefore the essence of humanity.

2. CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Just in the last decades studies have been dedicated to the concept of culture in terms of norms, values, attitudes, in terms of what a group can learn while living and surviving in an environment, within a group (Schein, 2010; Trompenaars, 1993). The culture is the response, and reaction of the group to the environment, while people share a set of beliefs, and values (Hofstede, 2010), or a software that identifies the members of a group and distinguishes them from other groups. It is a sieve that allows only certain types of information and sensations to reach the individual (Fadey, 2010).

Jumping into a new culture may be a difficult process, theoretically described in six stages, by the Development Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (Bennett & Bennett, 2004), starting with the negation (not recognizing cultural diversity), followed by defensive (recognizing cultural diversity as a threat), then minimizing stage (considering human nature beyond cultural diversity), afterwords coming the acceptance (firstly norms and behaviours, and only later values), and ending with the integration (redefinition of values and identities from a multiple cultural prospective).

Intercultural communication is the existential vehicle in forming and transmitting cultures, ensuirgng the diferentiation caracter between cultures. Through communication a culture gets strength, but at the same time allows alteration of that culture due to the contacts and exchanges with other cultures (Guirdham,

2005). Lies Sercu (cited by Catteeuw, 2012) imagined a six concepts intercultural communication framework, all six defining the so called "savoir communiqué" and being: "savoir être" (intercultural attitude), "savoir comprendre" (understanding own and outside cultures), "savoir apprendre" (learning), "savoir fair" (incorporating the new), "savoir s'engager" (accepting and integrating the other culture in own processes).

Many efforts focused on defining the dimensions or framework to characterize different cultures, starting from Hofstede with his study on IBM staff, continued and developed by Trompenaars and extended by the GLOBE study. These were initiated for practical reasons and grew as important theories and debates. From particular interest in the efficiency of the personnel (Hofstede's study) to a marketing research (GLOBE) cultural dimensions and national profiles were drawn to guide business managers, politicians, tourists, social workers, military specialists or even students in various cultural environments, in various circumstances and for various purposes.

3. INTERCULTURAL RELATIONSHIPS

The individual or intergroup relationships could be connected to the very private, daily life of individuals, but at the same time it can be a predictor for the relationships of those individuals in their professional life or outside the comfort zone. The international relationships could be either private, or professional. Here, intercultural competences are important to the way people respond globalization process, more and more present in almost all areas, not just business, but in education, research, medical assistance, defence, art, aid programs.

The general concern for the way people address multiculturalism is due to the permanent contacts between different groups, contacts that are of various natures (professional, or social), at different levels (family, organization, region, country or world) as shown in Figure 1.

The level of communication and the way it deals with cultural diversity depends on the reference assumed, and depending on that are defined the intercultural competences. The success of each type of communication and

relationship is built on the others, starting from the core, private, family norms and values. The earlier multiculturalism is grasped, the easier for individual would be to tackle the complex reality.

For all levels effective communication, cooperation and teamwork require sensitivity, competence, and tolerance in dealing with the others, being from the same group or from different cultural backgrounds. Cultural

identity and diversity at the same time includes values, attitudes and practices, beliefs and customs inherited from family, national and regional experience, plus those organizational acquired from work or study, as it can be seen in the Figure 1.

family

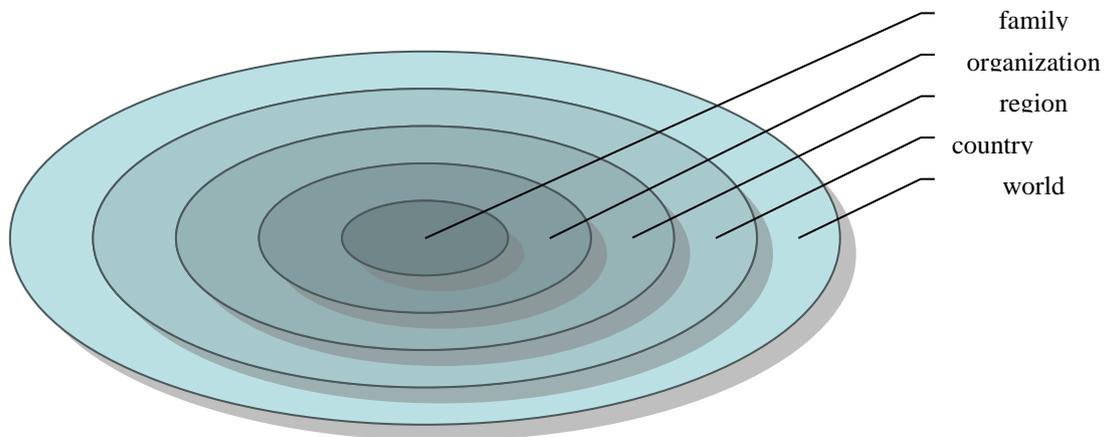organization

region

country

world

Figure 1 – Levels of communication

The current globalization has the advantage of pulling together world's resources, for which communication is crucial, but at the same time this process endangers some languages, some cultures, depriving the human canvas of many colours and pictures. Thus there is a need for diversity management, the process of melting together and recognizing the people's differences, being team members, clients, educators, or administrators, into all core organizational functions, processes, communications, in order to create a fair, harmonious, inclusive, creative and effective organization.

Reconciliation of cultures in a partnership can be obtained through imposing the dominant characters, or the culture of the dominant group or by avoiding common activities and direct cultural confrontation. There is however the risk of deculturalization, missing all the advantages of a heterogeneous, multicultural group. A special, different case is the Renault – Nissan alliance (Cacciaguidi – Fahy & Cunningham, 2007), where strategic metaphors were used to help effective intercultural business communication necessary for global success, and overcome Western – Asian intercultural differences and

maximize goal congruence. In this special case much attention has been given to the creation of a collaborative venture, to obtaining cross-cultural synergies. The process was long, cross-cultural operational teams learned from each other and how to work together.

4. DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCES

People feel safe in the cultural comfort zone, but crossing the borders may induce a cultural shock, a natural reaction when sinking in a strange environment. It is the case of a different country to live or work in, or a different organization, or even a new family to live with. And this calls for intercultural communication and training of intercultural competences. It is about language, but not only, as culture is defined through many dimensions, like values, norms, and beliefs.

The need for intercultural communication is thus obvious equally in social and professional life, for all groups, in all form of education and at all ages, and not only as a competitive advantage for employment. Once this need is identified it raises the problem of resources, how frameworks are designed, and who are the teachers or trainers to provide the training

and how do they acquire the necessary skills.

It is a worldwide issue, a subject that stays at the core of many initiatives developed by private or public organizations, by businesses, by UN agencies or EU, or national and local administrative bodies. Cultural competences include awareness, knowledge, skills, practices and processes people need in order to function effectively and appropriately in culturally diverse situations, and to interact with people from different cultures (Australian Multicultural Foundation, 2010).

One recent experiment took place in the Low Countries, as a reaction to the lack of formal cultural education which is in such demand these days, in a place where demographic statistics show high percentage of population with foreign origin and constantly increasing trends, with prospects for 2050 indicating that three out of ten inhabitants would have different cultural background. This is a place where multiculturalism is probably present for centuries because of the important hubs and the traits of the new population, divided in three cultural groups: highly skilled executives" "asylum seekers" and "illegal immigrants". The case described by Catteeuw (2007) hosted by the Karel de Grote Hogeschool Antwerp – Belgium covered three academic years (2004 – 2007), and consisted of introducing a new topic - Intercultural Communication and Training to students. The challenge of the initiative is the way curricula would be built around intercultural communication either as a standalone subject or embedded in general subjects as education plays an irreplaceable democratizing role, which defines a socio – economico – political attitude, a citizen's option in the end.

Any experiment of incorporating intercultural communication in education institutions needs a framework for intercultural competence to complement theoretical introduction. However, it was considered that intercultural communication falls into category of general knowledge, on which would be planted professional skills and knowledge. In order to introduce the topic the first job of the experiment was to produce a list of learning outcomes, and a postulate, or rather a definition: "Being competent means being able to combine knowledge, skills, personal characteristics, and attitudes in order to carry out a specific task in a specific situation in reality" (Catteeuw, 2007, pg. 12).

Intercultural communication does not mean having all groups embrace a common language and common values, but rather understand each other, accept each culture, and take advantage of diversity. It is not only about language, though the "Common European Framework of Reference for Language" initiated by European Council plays an important role in the promotion of intercultural communication. How should though be designed, if any, the framework for intercultural competences? Should be different or common for various cultures, should be harmonized? And how local cultures can be preserved for the autochthonous population? Which methodology is appropriate, and how deep the study should go?

5. INTERCULTURAL MANAGEMENT

Managing multicultural teams represents a huge challenge equally for companies, projects, or organizations (Hofstede, 2010). From that many cultural differences, it is difficult to measure individual impacts of each variable (Pfeffer, 1983). Hence, many times leaders make strategic decisions based on sets of norms and values that are valid just for some of the people in the group that are influenced by that particular decision, and as a result relationships may evolve unpredictably (Hambrick & Mason, 1984, Smith & al, 1994). The effectiveness of a leader is contextual, meaning it depends on the way he or she handles norms, values, beliefs of the organization or society the group belongs to. Furthermore, it depends on the tuning between own norms and values and those of the group, and that is an additional reason for every leader to develop intercultural competences is, regardless the level or field of activity. Generally, the stronger character or the outnumbering group gains control over the other culture, commonly in the business situations.

Some managers do not realize the importance of cultural differences and act ignoring them, or choose to simply eliminate differences (Nummelin, 2005). And many times successful managers are appointed to lead international projects, assuming that previous experience, common sense and intuition would help them replicate the success in a different

culture or even a multicultural environment. It is critical that the intercultural competences are experienced in the real life, otherwise the theoretical value is just for scholars, and it does not meet its purpose, to enhance economic mobility.

The general belief is that managers would succeed in international assignments if they have previous exposure or experience in multicultural endeavours and using their common sense and intuition. But this myth is destroyed and young professionals appreciate acquiring international competences during studies in order to increase their employment chances in many industries and professional areas. Intercultural competences are for sure required in the business management, and many times there is a general takeover, not only in financial terms, but also on the cultural dimension, and the stronger culture, or better represented one forces own norms and values in the new organization.

The globalization makes each individual a world citizen, in an environment that is continuously changing, thus the need for intercultural communication and training of intercultural competences is increasing in importance.

6. CURRENT CONCERN FOR INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCES

The need for intercultural communication is a must for international projects, companies and organizations. This is why UN agencies for example and also the Council of Europe, beyond national legislations, promote multicultural environments and non-discriminatory treatments. However, studies of the same Council of Europe ("Differing Diversities – Transversal Study on The Theme Of Cultural Policy And Cultural Diversity" by Tony Bennet, 2001), or the reports of UN agencies underline the fact that there is a lot to be done in improving intercultural communication.

Internationally there are many efforts towards assessing intercultural competences, like INCA Project (under Leonardo da Vinci umbrella) which started from construction industry and is further developing to cover other areas and industries where multiculturalism is present. On the other hand, schools have introduced intercultural communication as a standalone topic or imbedded in different subject.

Companies have their own PR departments trying to facilitate intercultural partnerships and alliances. Organizations like EU or UN go deeper and train people to manage multiculturalism. Additionally there are independent providers ready to train people to lead or work across cultures, like www.worldwork.biz which developed a score card for assessment of the international profiler.

Recently took place the second World Forum on Intercultural Dialogue in Baku, and like in the motto, "United through common values, enriched by cultural diversity", the forum focused on the way people could build the world future together, how to support cultural diversity while intercultural actions are ongoing, globalization creates hybrids that changes the world. There is a lot of international effort towards harmonization of human relationships, as expressed in the "Dialogue among Civilisations" adopted by the United Nations General Assembly (2001), or the UNESCO Convention on Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2005), the Islamic Declaration on Cultural Diversity ISESCO (2004), the Council of Europe White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue (2008).

7. CONCLUSIONS

The process of getting intercultural competences should cover at all levels at least understanding own culture, understanding other norms and values, coping with differences, willingness to tolerate diversity, to avoid ethnocentrism and preparedness to cooperate and operate in a heterogeneous environment, developing empathy. However, in spite of the scholars' research and international concern little is done for the young generation. The need for intercultural competences is recognized mainly by professionals who aim at a top managerial position in a multinational company. But education structures and media should, must promote, encourage, and facilitate intercultural communication.

Since most of the endeavours aim at attaining an objective through a process of problem solving, intercultural cooperation asks for knowledge on different cultures, skills of problem solving in a cultural dimension and open, flexible attitude towards building

interpersonal and intergroup relationships. Globally, beyond social and ethic implications, multicultural cooperation contributes to the sustainable development. The UNESCO Universal Declaration of Cultural Diversity for example was signed by 185 states in 2001 and defines fundamental concepts like identity, diversity and pluralism.

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Biography

Carmen – Laura Zarzu, PhD student at Politehnica Bucharest, studies multicultural teams managing industrial and international assistance projects. With MBA from University of Pittsburgh and master from Construction University Bucharest, she has management experience in private companies, and international organizations, and exposure to different cultures through assignments in Albania, Kosovo, Kazakhstan.