



CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCY AMONG MANAGERS: A STUDY ON ORGANIZATIONS IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study aims to highlight the necessary competencies among the middle level managers, especially the cross-cultural communication competency. This study was designed to investigate the cross-cultural communication competencies in organizations through the focus group conducted among the senior management levels.

Methodology: This study applied the beauty of qualitative research by conducting a focus group of ten participants, where all of them were from various industries in Malaysia. They are well mixed of women and men Senior Managers level and above, where the minimum level of them was the Director, General Manager, and Vice President of private enterprises. Data from the focus group discussion was analyzed and presented in the findings in this article.

Results: The findings of this paper proven the need of cross-cultural communication competency currently in Malaysia through the ten (10) participants involved in the focus group research and ten (10) cases were presented in this article. Different participant provided different findings however, the data summarization was presented in the table in results. Majority concluded that employees nowadays are conscious competence and agreed that cross-cultural communication is the most crucial competency needed by all organization today.

Implications: This should provide several ideas to the senior management levels in incorporating this aspect into their management training programmes or other activities in all organizations. Further studies could be expanded through the methodology used.

Novelty of Study: As past research concentrated more on the leadership and other management competencies, this study was looking at the specific issue of cross-cultural communication competencies among these employees in organizations. With the peculiar scenario in Malaysia, this paper contributed to the management field as a reference for the higher and middle level managers.

Keywords: *Cross-Cultural, Communication, Competency, Management, Organization, Human Resource*

INTRODUCTION

The Concept of Culture

The word culture comes from the Greek word *Kultura* which means to act upon nature. It is expected for people to cope with the problems they encounter in the nature which necessarily requires problem solving strategies. Culture is the sum total of beliefs, rules, institutions, and artifacts which characterize human populations. It is the set of beliefs, values, and norms that have been shaped up as a result of the prevailing environment. It is the people who accept or adopt to different natural environment. Culture is the collective programming of the mind. It has various components as communication, language, dress and appearance, food habits, time, reward and recognition, and value and norms. The scope of culture also was categorized in both explicit and implicit concepts where different cultural background influence employees and organizations differently. The companies go for scanning, selecting, interpreting, and validating information and take strategies for effective acculturation of employees. [Hofstede \(1991\)](#) defined culture as the 'collective programming' of the mind which distinguishes members of one group from another.

Diversity and culture do give impact to culture and job performance. Scholars suggested that diversity is able to enhance performance by broadening the group's perspectives. There is a strong empirical confirmation that successful diversity management and a resulting improvement in organizational performance are positively correlated. However, there is a consistency finding that differences should be sought in moderation. Group members' ability to elaborate diverse information may also develop over time as members become more familiar with each other perspectives and develop transitive memory. For diverse work group, this shows how important for this group to reach more extended tenure, and they are also allowed more extended start-up phase than more homogenous groups. In multidisciplinary teams like in the oil and gas industry, expertise levels of performance diversity were most strongly associated with team performance at moderate levels of diversity.

The globalization and technology changes requires high adaptation among the recent generation group of employees. Diverse culture not just to increase job performance, but also to create and maintain positive work environment where the similarities and differences of individuals are valued, so that all can reach their potential and maximize their contributions to organization's

strategic goals and objectives. Diversity management ensure that all employees will have the opportunity to maximize their potential and enhance their self-development and contribution to the organization. It recognizes that people from different background or at least skills to adapt and communicate with people from different backgrounds, would be able to bring fresh ideas and perceptions which will make the way work is done more efficient and produce in better products and services. Success in working with or managing these diverse group of employees also will assist their organizations to nurture creativity and innovation thus to tap hidden capacity for growth and improved competitiveness.

Comparative analysis presented table or organizational strategies about management of culture diversity. The ‘parochial’ approach and ‘ethnocentric’ are the one ignoring or trying to minimize cultural diversity, and instead focus on the dominant culture. Culture diversity in the ‘synergistic’ approach is seen as superior and termination or its probable problems is emphasized.

Table 1: Adler’s (2008) Management of Culture Diversity

Organization	Perceived impact of culture	Strategy	Likely consequence	Frequency of the type of strategy
Parochial “Our way is the only way”	No impact	Ignore differences	Problem occurs but they are not attributed to cultural diversity	Very common
Ethnocentric “Our way is the best”	Negative impact	Minimize differences	Problems are avoided by reducing diversity by ignoring or eliminating them	Common
Synergistic “Leveraging our ways and their ways may work best”	Potential negative and positive impacts.	Manage differences	Benefits of the diversity if recognized and problems that arise out of it are managed	Less common

The impact of cultural diversity at workplace can be both favorable and unfavorable, depending on the employees’ cross-cultural skills and their skills in managing or specifically communication with their peers and subordinates. Among the prospective negative effects include dysfunctional conflicts, losing productivity, and difficulties in achieving harmony in group settings. While the positive effects would be strong knowledge base created by variety of cultural experiences, an in-house resource of cultural trainers and informers, and tendency to expand the business in foreign cultures as this is crucial for organizations to go global nowadays. Due to this, for the most part of the effects will be how well employees are being managed by the senior level managers or in another word, the organization leaders themselves. With suitable strategic planning, top managements like these senior level managers would be able to enhance the positive effects and reduce the negative ones on multicultural setting in the workplace like what we have in Malaysia and furthermore, to be able to expand their organizations abroad easily.

Communication Competency

Miscommunication can create misunderstanding, lead to conflicts, and thus pose barriers to cooperation (Tung, 1993). By having employees with strong communication skills, organizational performance can automatically be improved and excel due to this. Miscommunication can arise when the message intended by the sender fails to resemble the message perceived by the receiver. This gap between intention and perception can stem from different fields of experience of the sender and the receiver, including the meanings/interpretation assigned to specific words and the encoding/decoding of messages on either side (Howell, 1982; Ronen, 1986) and Ting-Toomey (1992) developed a Five-Stage Model of Communication Competency and suggested these can be applied to the process of Cross-Cultural Communication. Those Five-Levels of Communication Competency are:

1. Unconscious Incompetence,
2. Conscious Incompetence,
3. Conscious Competence
4. Unconscious Competence, and,
5. Unconscious Super Competence.

These Five-Stages Model progresses from one of incompetence in cross-national or international context to level characterized by great proficiency in handling such differences. Differences in employee’s background could lead to misunderstanding and result in organization failure. It is crucial to make sure the competencies level of employees are up to the organization’s standard or requirement by probably using these five-stage model.

Cross-Cultural Competence

The literature of cross-cultural communication offers overlapping set of definition with a set of shared elements. [Johnson \(2006\)](#) claimed that, the consensus is that ‘competence’ in this field of study means to be appropriate and effective in interactions between individuals from different national cultures. It looks like cultural competence requires or implies three factors which are attitudes, skills, and knowledge. [Hofstede \(2001\)](#) supported this and proposed a process of what he called intercultural communication competence that involves awareness, knowledge, and skills. He suggested that this competence can be taught, but indicates that personality factors also affect the levels of intercultural competence that individual can attain. In 1993, a scholar named LaFromboise et al. presented a more detailed description of awareness, knowledge and skills that suggested, in order to be culturally competent, an individual would have to:

1. Possess a strong personality identity;
2. Have knowledge of a facility with the beliefs and values of the culture;
3. Display sensitivity to the affective processes of the culture;
4. Communicate clearly in the language of the given cultural group;
5. Perform specially sanctioned behavior;
6. Maintain active social relations within the cultural group;
7. Negotiate the institutional structures of that culture.

This terms of definition are very broad, but one that is culture-general and goes straight to the point is cross-cultural is the result of behavioral adaptation that individuals undertake in order to interact effectively with people from different background or culture, whether that interaction takes place in individual’s home culture or, more often in multinational or international organizational if there are the employees in the working environment.

[Abbe, Gulick, and Herman in 2007](#) has drew a table of conclusion of the three components of cross-cultural competent as below. They touched on although theories of cross-cultural adjustment, acculturation, and learning are relevant to training (which they proposed in the same research), the development of research on cross-cultural training has infrequently drawn on those theories. This is because the cross-cultural training which were recommended to improve and expand the employees competencies in cross-cultural does not explicitly target the competencies identified as contributing to cross-cultural effectiveness. Although the dynamic nature of many competencies described as researched in the past, the degree to which each is developmental or directly trainable may vary substantially. In addition, research regarding some of the competencies is suggestive rather than conclusive in linking to cross-cultural outcomes.

Table 2: Components of Cross-Cultural Competent ([Abbe, Gulick, & Herman, 2007](#))

Knowledge & Cognition	Affect & Motivation	Skills
Cultural awareness Cross-cultural schema Cognitive complexity	Attitudes & initiative Empathy Need for closure	Interpersonal skills Self-regulation Flexibility

LITERATURE REVIEWS

This paper has brought deep understanding to the researcher before and along the way it is being conducted. This qualitative method was a great option to differentiate between the social science research and pure science which both have their systematic ways for doing things.

Often, when full understanding is required or the bigger picture is of interest, measuring quantitative aspects will not be enough; researchers have to study the qualitative aspects too. This is essential in order to answer the whys arising from studying subjects of interest. This suggests that for the purpose of this study and in order to meet the aim given for this research, to second the requirement for qualitative approach.

Yin (1994) pointed out that there are five fundamental research strategies within the discipline of social science. These research strategies are experiments, surveys, archival analysis, histories, and case studies. Each of these strategies bears its own advantages and disadvantages. Yin also stated that there are three conditions which should guide the researcher in establishing what strategy to use. These three conditions are; (1) The type of research question, (2) The control of an investigator has over actual behavioral events, and (3) The focus on contemporary versus historical phenomena.

This research design involved the utilization of qualitative research methodology in answering the research questions. The primary reason this method was chosen is because the research problem emphasis on understanding. This study aims to understand a phenomenon about which little the topic is known, and that is when qualitative methods are used. Qualitative data are attractive for many reasons: They are rich, earthly, holistic, and real; their face validity seems unimpeachable, they preserve

chronological flow where that is important, and suffer minimally from retrospective distortion; and they, in principle, offer a far more precise way to assess causality in organizational affairs than arcane like cross-lagged correlations.

Mohd Tobi, S (2016) in her latest qualitative research book seconded the earlier statement that both quantitative and qualitative though should be treated fairly. Both play equal role to understand the research in context. Both approaches are valid and should be able to achieve its validity, reliability and can be generalized accordingly. Researcher has chosen the qualitative method as recommended in statement when she said “it is you to decide”. She stated that researcher should choose the one he feels easy to carry on the view, and easy to undertake the whole research process which is the methodology chosen.

Yu (2005) in her chapter book explained that the information type for qualitative method contained in the form of concepts, definitions, facts, opinions, documents, reports, photographs, etc. Yu also mentioned that among the characteristics of qualitative method is essential character or nature of some event or phenomenon. It also refers to the meaning, definition, or metaphor characterizing something and information is expressed as words. She suggested qualitative method for research areas such as for exploratory studies; explain or seek to understand; explore a process; describe experiences. For example, social studies to understand human behavior, to analyze cases, and to set strategy, activity or relationship and structure. All these supported the decision to use qualitative as the method for this research.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology is applied in this research striving to achieve its target. Methods or techniques are not ‘better’ or more ‘scientific’, only because they are qualitative or quantitative. The main research instrument adopted for this study is a Focus Group interview between a moderator and ten (10) participants in two hours duration. The empirical data was gained through this approach, where the qualitative method is chosen. The positive advantage of personally conduct the session is the possibility to raise more questions and further discussion from all the participants based on the answers received. Researcher also should be able to clarify doubts, demand further explanations, create connectivity questions, and motivate respondents to deliver honest answers. The disadvantage however is the limited number of time these participants had to be interviewed during the period.

The ten (10) participants involved in the focus group come from various industries. They are well mixed of women and men Senior Managers level and above, where the minimum level of them was the Director, General Manager, and Vice President of private enterprises. The group which was a combination of 4 women and 6 men (due to some absentees) can be divided into the following details:

1. A professor who is a celebrity Chef with more than 30 years of culinary experiences and an entrepreneur who owns a culinary school.
2. A former trade expert with more than 30 years experiences in various industries, and now a General Manager with an international enterprise.
3. A General Manager of one private organization who served one of the state government in Malaysia, who has more than 35 years of experiences working from bottom to top.
4. A high ranking Navy officer in Malaysia with more than 25 years of Royal Malaysian Navy (RMN) experiences in various departments.
5. A Senior Manager from a private university who has 25 years of experience in education industry as well as others.
6. A lawyer by practice who owns 3 insurances and investment linked companies, with more than 25 years of financial, investment, and insurance industries.
7. A General Manager in retail section of a multinational company, with more than 25 years experiences from bottom to top in retail and entrepreneurship.
8. Senior Manager from financial background and more than 30 experiences in the same field.
9. Senior Manager in financial department but with more than 30 years of experiences in various sectors including marketing and education industry.
10. A celebrity who lead an NGO organization now with more than 20 years of experiences in broadcasting and entertainment industry.

The participants were asked by the moderator on the following questions in the durations of two (2) hours and trigger wider scope in terms of answers, but still based on the same topic.

1. What are the competencies sought at the Middle Level Managers?
2. Based on the competencies highlighted, could you rank the top 4 competencies and the percentages of time spent for each competency?
3. To what extend had they (Middle Level Managers) reached these expectations, especially the Communication Competency as ranked the highest among all?



4. What are the key programmes in force to achieve these expected competencies, especially the Communication Competency as ranked the highest among all?

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

A goal in one culture may not be so in another. This applies obviously to different culture locally or abroad. As for Managers, to succeed in today's global environment is extremely critical. In order to do so, Managers are expected to become proficient in cross-cultural communication, especially when they are dealing with international relations or businesses.

From the Focus Group Discussions done for this research, it was a clear cut that this Cross-Cultural Communication is one of the most crucial competencies mentioned by the participants. A group of ten (10) Senior Manager level personnel's and above being gathered for this purpose. Four (4) basic questions were asked and all ten came out with the same agreement on this issue. Besides cross-cultural communications, other competencies mentioned according to sequence are; organization, analytical, experience, problem solving, leadership, delegates, motivator, accountability, and PODC (planning, organizing, directing, and controlling) skills.

Internationalization logically in one way or another is about cross-cultural communication globally. The clashes within cross-cultural itself besides communication style is also literature, management styles, customs, and value orientations. It is very unfortunate that most of the time, such encounters are commonly analyzed without consideration on their processual character. Due to these, cross-cultural communication should be viewed and analyzed as a complex process, but not entirely as an encounter. This was clearly mentioned in the data findings from the focus group discussions whereby majority of the participants came out with this idea that when we want to talk about the communication competency, we should first highlight and understand the concept of cross-cultural. This is due to Malaysia as a multicultural society, and by mastering these skills, the employees are expected to have sufficient knowledge and experiences to be sent abroad for promotional activities and so on. The majority of the participants mentioned that nowadays, since most enterprises are aiming to go global, this is one important skill they are expecting from their Middle Level Managers and have placed this skills above all other competencies.

The ten participants in this research reveals that one of the differences between the Gen-Y and Baby Boomers in the past is, the new generation are naturally born with excellent skills, but not listening though. This is because they came from highly educated parents who are concerns on their children academic achievement and soft skills. However, this group is lack of other skills for example, not as independent as their parents and depends too much on the technology to survive. As the focus of this research is only on the cross-cultural communication competencies which all respondents agreed on, the following results were presented in the case study forms for each participant who represented their current organization, based on their experiences as explained earlier.

The below are findings of the focus group interview discussion results which were closely related to the Five Levels of Communication Competency which arrives from [Howell \(1982\)](#) and [Ting-Toomey \(1992\)](#) who had suggested that this version can be applied to the process of cross-cultural communication.

Case 1

A professor who is a celebrity Chef with more than 30 years of culinary experiences and an entrepreneur who owns a culinary school concluded that the new generations are excellent in cross-cultural communication but different competencies are more needed for them like discipline and entrepreneurial skills as they are lack of these. For example, this group often treated the organization like they have no sense of belonging and therefore are not interested to take care of the organization like their own. However, he agreed on how the employees required cross-cultural competency to work together especially if the organization wish to expand their businesses abroad. Unlike his cooking school, there is no need for the time being for this purpose, except the requirement to blend well as multicultural entity. He concluded that this new generation of employees in cross-cultural communication are conscious competence.

Case 2

A former trade expert with more than 30 years experiences in various industries, and now a General Manager with an international enterprise feels that the cross-cultural communication competency comes together with one skill the books does not teach, which is the office politics. This competency which basically derives from the communication skills itself is the key technique to the close networking relationship with the higher level managers. He claimed that the basic communication competency would only requires the cross-cultural aspects when the employees work at multinational organization, or international companies local or abroad. He concluded that this new generation of employees in cross-cultural communication are conscious competence.



Case 3

A General Manager of one private organization who served one of the state government in Malaysia, who has more than 35 years of experiences working from bottom to top thinks that most employees in Malaysia would require only the communication competency and not cross-cultural itself. Even from his experience dealing with lower and middle level managers involved with the government or even in the government sector, this competency was not obviously showed. He is however stress on other competencies such as analytical which is more required for the organizational development. He claimed that this new generation wants only higher salary but are not interested with additional work. In terms of cross-cultural communication, he feels they need more than what they have today, especially the writing skills in English language. He concluded that this new generation of employees in cross-cultural communication are unconscious incompetence.

Case 4

A high ranking Navy officer in Malaysia with more than 25 years of Royal Malaysian Navy (RMN) experiences in various departments threw out the idea of some organizations like the RMN required all the competencies any employees needed. Cross-cultural communication is just one of the competencies he sees and informed that he sees and believed all the royal army officer in Malaysia do not face any problem mastering and practicing this competency. He concluded that from the army point of view, this competency is required but naturally exist without any extra effort from the officers. He concluded that this new generation of employees in cross-cultural communication are conscious competence.

Case 5

A Senior Manager from a private university who has 25 years of experience in education industry as well as others deals with several private organizations whom the employees are multicultural as well. But speaking from his current work place, he sees this cross-cultural communication competency is lacking among the new university fresh graduates, compared to those he deals with in the past. He believes that this is due to the revised academic system among them and the differences in family background and brought up. He concluded that this new generation of employees in cross-cultural communication are conscious competence. He concluded that this new generation of employees in cross-cultural communication are unconscious incompetence.

Case 6

A lawyer by practice who owns 3 insurances and investment linked companies, with more than 25 years of financial, investment, and insurance industries who deals with mostly the young fresh graduates feels that this group is lack of this competency, but he believes that from his experience, this cross-cultural communication can be trained. Training is apparently a remedy for overcoming language and cultural barriers as stated by [Brach and Fraserirector \(2000\)](#). He has been doing this for more than 20 years for this own company and they are resulted in better communication skills, either dealing with multicultural audience or peers, or internationally when he sent them abroad. He mentioned there are several ways to train them but admit that this cross-cultural communication competency is definitely crucial for employees who work with his company and dealing with international colleagues or businesses. He concluded that this new generation of employees in cross-cultural communication are conscious competence.

Case 7

A General Manager in retail section of a multinational company, with more than 25 years experiences from bottom to top in retail and entrepreneurship feels that this new generations are in serious problems of discipline and lack of many competencies, and not just the cross-cultural competencies. She shared her experiences dealing with her employees of the current organization she is working with whereby instructions are difficult to be understood, and even if they were understood, her employees have difficulties to accept especially her instructions. This shows how lack of communication especially the listening abilities and skills the new generations of employees have. She however feels that having this competency is not sufficient enough to survive in the private organization nowadays. She mentioned about tips on how these employees need to shine in order to excel and compete with their other peers. It should come together with the cross-cultural communication competency especially if they work with a multinational company like where she is working at now. She concluded that this new generation of employees in cross-cultural communication are unconscious incompetence.

Case 8

Senior Manager from financial background and more than 30 experiences in the same field strongly feels that from her experience and observation, her employees are categorized as communication competent, including when they deal with the cross-cultural audiences. She however thinks that this probably due to the organization she is working now is very particular about this communication skills when they interviewed new employees to employ them. They never saw any of this organization's employees who are incompetent in communication. She shared several scenarios where she delegates her meetings and events and they are carefully and successfully handled by her middle level managers, and these are those

involved and required the cross-cultural communication competency we are talking about here. She concluded that this new generation of employees in cross-cultural communication are conscious competence.

Case 9

Senior Manager in financial department but with more than 30 years of experiences in various sectors including marketing and education industry feels that the level of cross-cultural communication competency among employees nowadays depends on which organization they are working at. Case 9 works in the same government agency as Case 8, but with different level of position and in different department and requirement of employees. They also handled difference kind of events and faced different scenarios and audiences. She compared the employees at her current organization with the previous ones whereby most of them according to her are more competent in cross-cultural communication now compared to before. She claimed that this is due to the different level of exposure and experience this new generation have. In the past, there was no technology assessment to be reference for the employees, while today, they can easily Google up information to improve themselves, including to master this cross-cultural communication skills. Since their parents nowadays are also highly educated, they had the experience of going abroad and travelling and this probably also contributed to this factor. She strongly believed that this cross-cultural communication competency can be developed and trained by the organization if they feel that they required their employees to polish and face international audience or deal with international business here or abroad. She concluded that this new generation of employees in cross-cultural communication are unconscious competence.

Case 10

A celebrity who leads an NGO organization now with more than 20 years of experiences in broadcasting and entertainment industry feels that the new generation are definitely lack of this cross-cultural communication competency. She experienced several scenarios that she shared including those employees she has now under her owned organization whereby the employees were too pampered by their parents and this is due to also the way they were brought up by them. This lack of independent skills and discipline have made them into one group of people with lack of confidence to face daily task during the absence of their parents. They depend too much on their senior level managers, their organizations, and peers including on the listening skills required in their daily communication. She agreed with the rest participants that due to this lack of listening which is part of the communication skills, they have problem to understand instructions from their upper level managers, thus incompetent in executing the organizations plans and so on. She claimed that they also refused to try to think critically in interpreting their upper level manager’s instructions besides lack of interpersonal skills. She concluded that this new generation of employees in cross-cultural communication are conscious incompetence.

CONCLUSION

With all the data findings through the focus group interview and discussions, we can conclude that there is a need of cross-cultural communication competency in today’s globalization environment, despite the background of the employees nor the nature of business of the organizations they are working at. The ten participants findings result in the following table where the categories below are based on the Cross-Cultural Communication Five Levels.

Table 3: Cross-Cultural Communication Competency Levels in Organization

	Case 1	Case 2	Case 3	Case 4	Case 5	Case 6	Case 7	Case 8	Case 9	Case 10
Unconscious Incompetence			√		√		√			√
Conscious Incompetence										
Conscious Competence	√	√		√		√		√		
Unconscious Competence									√	
Unconscious Super Competence										

Results above shown majority of the participants which is five (5) of them concluded that the employees nowadays are conscious competence and agreed that cross-cultural communication is the most crucial competency needed by all organization today. Four (4) participants however agreed on this competency needed but, strongly feel that the employees nowadays are unconscious incompetence. Only one (1) participants concluded that they are unconscious competence.

LIMITATION AND RECOMMENDATION

This focus groups interview was done as preliminary data collection for first step to investigate the cross-cultural communication competency, whether it is needed or not in today's globalization world, especially in multinational organizations. It is very limited data collection but answered the questions asked though. For future research, it is recommended that, more methodology can be used. For example, probably through quantitative methodology to find out on this topic itself, or further qualitative methodology to interview multinational organizations' senior level managers themselves, in larger scale. As recommended by one of the participants in line with improving the middle level managers cross-cultural communication competency, training can be given by the organization they are working at. Some ideas including those listed by [Brach and Fraserirector \(2000\)](#) including the cultural competency training which was designed to meet one or more of several goals: (1) to enhance self-awareness of attitudes toward minority group members, (2) to increase knowledge about minority population; cultural beliefs and practice, (3) to improve specific skills such as communication.

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