**CROSS-CULTURAL INTERACTIONS**

Different countries have different cultures. The different cultures might have further differences. These differences are evident in interactions of people in the society and workplace settings. Culture is the values, beliefs and attitude of people that can either be associated with a certain society/ethnic group or can be adopted especially from the workplace over a period of time (Price, 2011). The world has become global. Many people are shifting into other countries for work and social activities. Technology has taken over and it has brought people together. I have used the dimensions identified by Dr. Geert Hofstede to analyze the interactions that I had with my group. He identified these concepts to differentiate various cultures (Morgan, 2000). These dimensions are;

1. Power Distance(PD) - power and inequality degree
2. Individualism – this is the measures whether people relate with other people in groups or as individuals
3. Masculinity - how much male and female roles are valued in a community
4. Uncertainty/Avoidance Index – this is an anxiety level that a foreigner would have when in a strange places or situations
5. Long Term Orientation – how much family traditions are valued in the society

The activities that we carried out during the cross-cultural seminar in groups made me more aware of the similarities and differences of the cultures that were involved. I also realized that I had little knowledge on this topic before apart from the universal stereotype of these cultures. Based on my group interactions, I noticed a number of differences and similarities. The social structure of my culture is more formal. You have to abide by the rules. This is different from the Western culture in that the different societal levels can interact with each other informal (Guirdham, 2005). The individuals from the western culture were much more relaxed during the interactions in the activities. This is different from my culture as I come from the eastern culture where certain social lines cannot be crossed. In business settings where a level of formality is mandatory, conflict can arise if the business involves individuals from the Eastern and Western culture because of this difference. The form of social structure of the west also allows direct and confrontational solution of issues. Compared to my culture, this is avoided and issues are solved in a private setting. It is done to avoid shame to the individual on the wrong. I used the dimension of Power distance (PD) by Hofstede to analyze the hierarchical relationships in these cultures and the differences that they have. China has a high power distance compared to the western countries. This is why the Chinese have to incorporate a high degree of honor and respect when they speak to their leaders and elders. The power distance theory also explains that people in power especially in the workplace must also honor people under their leadership (C. Hampden-Turner, 2002).

Individualism is a measure of cultural dimension that refers to the relationship that people have with one another in a society (Gannon, 2002). This is another area that I noticed a difference in the group interactions. The Chinese believe in group collectivism and not in individualism. From the group activities I noticed that compared to the western culture, my culture looks at issues more on a group level and not on an individual level. An example would be checking on how a personal act can affect the norms and values of a group. The individualism of the west, especially the American has been known and even considered to be responsible for its success (Ping Chen, 2004). Time sensitivity is a factor that is considered important especially in regards to businesses. The Eastern cultures, in which I fall, do not consider time as important as the western culture. In regards to deadlines and meetings, we are more flexible. The western culture on the other hand takes meetings and deadlines very seriously. This can also cause conflict in business settings and to small extent social settings. There was a level of similarity between Chinese and African culture especially on the collectivism virtue. Whatever happens to a member of a group will affect everyone else on the group. There is a sense of supportiveness and solidarity in these two cultures. This means that a sense of group harmony, concern of its welfare and cooperation exists. From the interaction and discussion with my group members we also realized that the family unit is very important in the African and Chinese culture. Using Hofstede’s dimension of Long Term Orientation (LTO), I have analyzed how much family traditions are valued in these cultures. This is the fifth dimension that was analyzed by Hoftede after realizing the strong links that the Asian countries have to their family and social obligations. People from the United States and United Kingdom have low LTO compared to those from the Asian countries (Larry A. Samovar, 2010). Another interesting factor that we discussed on the LTO dimension is that in the African culture, it is completely natural to respect authority and/or power. This is also seen with the Chinese culture. This is believed to be the source of their rapid socio-economic development. The people from a variety cultures are interacting more and working together. A cross-cultural knowledge and awareness must therefore be taken seriously by people from different backgrounds.

I experienced new feelings during the course and in my group activities. People from different cultures have different ways of dealing with cultural diversity. At first I was uncertain of how to relate with my group members. This is mainly because I did not have wide knowledge of how our values and beliefs varied apart from the basic knowledge. During the course I went through changes in ways through which I viewed situations and issues. Some of the group members from cultures different from mine were free in the way that they interacted with people at the beginning of the course. During the course, I learnt about cross-cultural diversity and awareness hence I deepened my understanding of the differences that I had noticed before. For instance, punctuality is the virtue that was most treated differently in my group. Time sensitivity culture is not an extreme issue in my culture compared to the western countries. In the African culture, time sensitivity is similar to my culture. At the end of the course, my group had a positive influence on me. For instance, being open to saying what is on my mind and also being confident in approaching people in an uncertain situation. I felt that I had a good experience through these interactions because it boosted my confidence in relating with different cultures. Through the group activities my group members learnt more about my culture and understood the differences that we had. I impacted the sense of collectivism, that is, a sense of harmony on my group.

The members of the group also had effects on each other during the interactions. Each individual had a special effect or influence on other members of the group. The different culture dimensions were different in members of the group. For instance, like I experienced, some members from my group from the same cultural background only worked or interacted with each other most of the time we participated in the group activities. This was common at the start of the course. The other thing is that the opinions that these members had in regards to certain issues were similar. Their form and channel of arguments were similar. It proved a bit difficult to change their minds in a conflict situation because coming from a similar cultural background; they believed to share the same challenges and views. During the course and after many group activities we managed to solve this. This was not done at an instant but gradually. The other members of the group including myself were affected by the cultural differences in that most of the time we were uncertain of what might trigger conflict or how to deal with it when it arises. From the lectures and information from the course, the whole group first of all accepted that differences in culture exist among us. We learnt about our differences in culture and we came up with a solution. We decided to work together as a team and not as individuals. We also opted to deal with the issue instead of the people. A sense of togetherness enabled us to cope with each other’s differences.

The interactions were different between the members of the group. Cultural variations influenced these interactions. There are important factors that I noted. One of these is a sense of communication. Different members of my group had different ways of communicating, i.e. verbally and physically. Different body languages may have different meanings. My group however had a common language that everyone understood. English was the common language. I also noticed that when there is a common language, the cultural differences are easier to cope with. Subgroups were also formed in my group. People divided themselves in to subgroups based on similar cultures and on different cultures with similarities. People in a cross-cultural setting usually form these subgroups because it is the only way to be open and there is no level of uncertainty of how to act with one another on the first time of a meeting. They were formed mostly in the beginning of the course when members of the group were not very familiar with each other. This means a divide on the group. This issue was solved as the course went on where we learnt the importance of working together and understanding one another in order to provide positive results.

**Management Culture**

Communication differs in various cultures. A multinational or a global company employs a great number of people with different cultural traits. Some may possess traits that are good for business when sent to countries away from home and some may not take up this responsibility well. People with different values respond in various ways to leadership especially from leaders from a different background or culture. Cultural diversity is very wide and this would cause to some extent difficulties for a foreigner in a strange land. This is mainly because the foreigner has little or no knowledge of the land’s culture (Gundersen, 2008).

For instance being a German and working in a subsidiary of the German mother company in China, I have come to realize the big difference that there is in various cultures. The team that I work with is a cross-cultural team. National culture does not fit with the organizational culture from my experience in this cross-cultural team. National culture is the values that an individual learns early in life and continues to grow or change slowly with generations. It is highly held in individuals hence difficult to influence (Hofstede, 2003).

Organizational culture on the other hand means the wide guidelines that are created by an organization and is rooted on the job tasks and practices. (Hofstede, 2003). It is a programmed way of thinking and reacting. It is used to differentiate a certain category of people from the other. Due to the deeply held national culture by people, it is difficult to change the organizational culture especially in a cross-cultural team. This is because for some, the organizational culture goes against the national culture therefore the practices of the organization will be taken for granted and undermined e.g. a leadership trait which falls under an organizational culture can be easily shunned by a particular employee from a different culture if the trait is against his/her national trait (Keyton, 2011).I encounter various tensions at my workplace. A group of a certain culture will follow or conform to ascertain set of values and beliefs, and the other would differ from them. A large group with a set of similar values would fall in the same culture. The minority and the majority therefore have conflict when it comes to certain situations within the team. For instance, Germans are always on schedule and very punctual. This is their national culture. In the cross-cultural team there are people who have different perception when it comes to keeping time. When it comes to attending meetings for instance, there will be a set of people who will be punctual and those who will be late. This is a cause for tension within the cross-cultural team.

Tension is a known cause for a decrease in a company’s productivity. Action should therefore be taken to resolve tension or conflict in these teams. Conflict is a challenge that is always faced by a team that is cross-cultural because it arises from time to time. The success and failure of a team depends on its response in time of conflict. To initiate organizational changes, I have done research and have come up with a plan of giving lessons to my team members. These lessons don’t give a direct solution to the conflicts but guidance on how to prevent, respond to and manage tension (D.Lewis, 2006).

The tips in my lesson plan include:

* Knowledge of one self and culture- when one becomes aware of his culture, i.e. where he/she comes from and who he/she really is, it becomes easier to understand other people’s background hence become open to different ideas. This can be achieved by establishing friendship within the team
* Being inquisitive- ask other members with a different background from yours about your new environment and how best things are run and more importantly know how to deal with situations to avoid conflict
* Listen to people from a different culture effectively to have a better understanding of one another’s ways. This should only be done in situations where it doesn’t cause discomfort.
* Learn the expectations of others by having conversations about conflicts and the way forward when it arises.

Management culture that suits every single person from a different culture should be put in place. Management culture is one of the most critical leadership tools. In my opinion, a type of management that respects the differences and similarities of all employees should be adopted. Excellent organizational culture is the main goal of a company or an organization in regards to a cross-cultural team. To achieve this goal, management culture must be put in place (Livermore, 2010).

First of all, understanding the uniqueness and the differences of each individual is very important. This is largely referred to as work place diversity. Diversity entails religious beliefs, gender, race, age, political beliefs, sexual orientation and ethnicity. To deal effectively with this, the HR should check on issues such as communication, coping with differences and change (Usunier, 2007).

Management culture is important because it creates a comfortable and positive working environment hence higher productivity from the employees.

The following management strategies should be adopted:

* Acquiring knowledge about different cultures and their ways of conducting business
* The leaders should nurture the communication, creative and cultural skills of various employees and utilize these skills to improve the policies, customer service and their products
* Being open minded. This involves leaders and their employees coming out of their comfort zone and accepting ways that they are not familiar with in terms of management. People from different backgrounds can factor in better and fresh ideas which could result in better services and performance (Henriett Primecz, 2011)
* Formulation of programs that will recognize the diversity of each individual. This will result in more interest in their roles
* Posting employees to areas where they can advance culturally
* Language training
* Taking care of employees’ complaints and issues
* Testing the organization’s practices to make sure that no discrimination against any culture is practiced (Bhuttacharyya, 2010).

At times, conflict becomes inevitable between members in the subsidiary. It always happens when there are people with a variety of different expectations. In a situation like this, I would resolve to a different way of handling conflict.

The first step would be to make the employees aware of the difference in culture among them. Apart from making them aware, I would formulate a program where all employees will be taught about the existence of diversity and to learn ways of respecting these different values and practices.

Encouraging the team to take up tasks overseas whenever an opportunity arises is another positive way to handle inevitable conflicts. This will improve the interaction of employees with different backgrounds and cultures. The more knowledgeable they get about a variety of cultures, the more understanding of each other they also get.

To avoid recurring tensions, another important strategy to follow through is to offer counseling to employees and their families that are moving to a new country. This can be done before and after the international assignment (Pauleen, 2007).

When positive relationships are built between diverse individuals, a deeper understanding of each other is formed. Friends tend to have less conflict and in the rise of such a situation, it is usually easier to solve it compared to individuals who only have a work relationship. I would therefore encourage friendship between the employees for instance by initiating team building activities and social activities from the workplace.

Another way would be to examine the whole organization, the management and all the employees to check if discrimination exists. Harsh rules of discrimination should be created e.g. loss of employment and taking up the matter to legal authorities. This will change discrimination issues positively.

Lastly I would advise my team to always attack the problem at hand rather than the person they seem to have a problem with. This can prove difficult but when made a habit can be a positive way of resolving inevitable conflict even before it happens.

In conclusion I would recommend organizations to create and implement programs that offer diversity experiences that fit into every employee’s values. These programs must target the needs of the employees and of the whole organization. This approach will lead to a better management of diversity hence understanding between individuals from different cultures.

Organizations or companies should encourage communication between the culturally different people. This should be done by effective communication, education about differences and building positive relationships among the team.

Organizational culture and national culture and their relationship play a very big role in the development, improvement and sustainment of operations in organizations with a cross-cultural team. When the national culture of every member of the team is taken into consideration, then the organizational culture will be easier to implement because every value at hand has been made part of the organization. This is because changing the national culture is difficult especially when the organizational culture dictates one to do so (Moreland, 2012).

Tension affects the productivity of employees. Strategies should therefore be put into place to both prevent and resolve conflict. Resolving conflicts creates a positive work environment. When issues of tension are effectively handled, then all the employees will reach their maximum potential hence higher productivity which is the ultimate goal of every company or organization.

An adoption of management culture is another recommendation I would give to my subsidiary company in terms of operation sustainability. This a leadership tool that every organization with a cross-cultural team should employ. To develop, improve and sustain operation, leaders or the HR should consider, be open and learn about their team’s background in order to provide excellent leadership. Organizational culture is created by the management. The management must therefore have excellent leadership, organizational development, communication and assessment skills in order to sustain the team (Habbel, 2002).

**Role of power in Cross-cultural Interactions**

Power is a trait of leadership (Livermore, 2010). If this trait is used correctly, it will maintain a positive cross-cultural relations in every given aspect, be it national or organization culture.

The interaction between people from different cultural background is increasing. This is due to interdependence and globalization of the world. Differences will always arise in cross-cultural settings because of the different ways of doing things. This is where the role of power comes in (Debebe, 2012). Cross-cultural interactions need leaders who can manage cultural diversity. This is only possible when the leaders in power are vastly knowledgeable on cultural differences and similarities. People from different cultural background have a tendency of associating with the characteristics of their leaders from different cultures. In some cases, power can be culturally biased in that a leader can incorporate his/her deeply held values into organizational culture irrespective of the culture of his subordinates. A case of this kind of power can lead to negative consequences e.g. conflict, dissatisfaction of employees and even poor communication which is very crucial in leadership (Hofstede, 2003).

Excellent managers/leaders are those who play a positive role in cross-cultural settings to reduce tension that may exist among people from different cultures. The leader can achieve this through power sharing hence improved performance. In addition, the awareness of cross-culture existence and how to work with people from various backgrounds would make a great influential leader in terms of performance (Sage Journals, 2012).

Power therefore impact great influence on the development and sustenance of a cross-cultural interaction. This difference can either be negative or positive. It solely depends in the leader.

Power plays a significant role in the suppression of diversity. There are various types of diversity, namely; Gender, race, spiritual beliefs, language, sexual orientation, nationality, ethnicity, socially excluded groups, mental and physical abilities, age, educational, family and health status, skills, customs, ideas etc. (Community Tool Box, 2013).

An example is the suppression of the advancement of women in managerial positions within organizations. This is an example of the influence of power on gender diversity. Leadership has been historically and up to today, culturally believed to fit only with men. Most of the influential and powerful positions are occupied by men. Women still face the challenge of advancing into top leadership positions in their careers. This is attributed to cultural barriers and expectations. For instance, a man who is in power will most probably incorporate fellow men like him into managerial positions hence the cycle is repeated leading to the suppression of women advancement into these positions.

Major work place diversity is that of race. Race is a term that is used to compare the observable physical traits, especially the skin color of people. A cross-cultural organization has people of different race. The leaders and the employees are always multi-racial. For example, when the manager of the organization is black, the organizational culture will be largely influenced by the culture that is often associated with this race. This means that the diversity of race will be suppressed in that the value of the employees from a different race will not have been included in the organizational culture.

National and ethnic diversity refers to the beliefs, values, policies and behaviors of people from different nationalities and ethnicity. When all these values are not accepted or respected by leaders, then it shows national and ethnic diversity suppression. The individuals in power have their own personal beliefs and values which they hold deeply. They will automatically assume that every person that they lead or control also abide by the same. This will definitely result in the monopoly of his/her beliefs and values in the guidance and leadership of people from various backgrounds. The members of the cross-cultural team under this kind of rule will be dissatisfied and left out. There is no diversity of national and ethnic values in this case because of the power the leader has on the people he/she is leading (Nessa Wolfson, 1985).

Power can suppress all of the diversities mentioned above. This means that power influences these diversities negatively. In cross-cultural interactions, there is a leader that has a specific culture and comes from a specific background. Excellent ones will involve every member of the cross-cultural team’s values and policies when formulating the work place values and rules. The bad leaders will automatically consider only his/her values, policies and behaviors in leadership (Nessa Wolfson, 1985).

Cultural competence is an important factor that should be considered when choosing leaders or the people to be put in power. These leaders directly affect the productivity of an organization or any form of business. Employees’ maximum potential can only be achieved by excellent leadership that is culturally aware and sensitive, a kind of power that does not suppress diversity.

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