

**MINISTRY OF HIGHER AND SECONDARY
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SELF-STUDY

THEME: BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

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THE BASIC FORMS OF COMMUNICATION

As David Glass is well aware, effective communicators have many tools at their disposal when they want to get across a message. Whether writing or speaking, they know how to put together the words that will convey their meaning. They reinforce their words with gestures and actions. They look you in the eye, listen to what you have to say, and think about your feelings and needs. At the same time, they study your reactions, picking up the nuances of your response by watching your face and body, listening to your tone of voice, and evaluating your words. They absorb information just as efficiently as they transmit it, relying on both non-verbal and verbal cues.

NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

The most basic form of communication is non-verbal. Anthropologists theorize that long before human beings used words to talk things over, our ancestors communicated with one another by using their bodies. They gritted their teeth to show anger; they smiled and touched one another to indicate affection. Although we have come a long way since those primitive times, we still use non-verbal cues to express superiority, dependence, dislike, respect, love, and other feelings.

Non-verbal communication differs from verbal communication in fundamental ways. For one thing, it is less structured, which makes it more difficult to study. A person cannot pick up a book on non-verbal language and master the vocabulary of gestures, expressions, and inflections that are common in our culture. We don't really know how people learn non-verbal behavior. No one teaches a baby to cry or smile, yet these forms of self-expression are almost universal. Other types of non-verbal communication, such as the meaning of colors and certain gestures, vary from culture to culture.

Non-verbal communication also differs from verbal communication in terms of intent and spontaneity. We generally plan our words. When we say "please open the door," we have a conscious purpose. We think about the message, if only for a moment. But when we communicate non-verbally, we

sometimes do so unconsciously. We don't mean to raise an eyebrow or blush. Those actions come naturally. Without our consent, our emotions are written all over our faces.

Why non-verbal communication is important

Although non-verbal communication is often unplanned, it has more impact than verbal communication. Non-verbal cues are especially important in conveying feelings; accounting for 93 percent of the emotional meaning that is exchanged in any interaction.

One advantage of non-verbal communication is its reliability. Most people can deceive us much more easily with their words than they can with their bodies. Words are relatively easy to control; body language, facial expressions, and vocal characteristics are not. By paying attention to these non-verbal cues, we can detect deception or affirm a speaker's honesty. Not surprisingly, we have more faith in non-verbal cues than we do in verbal messages. If a person says one thing but transmits a conflicting message non-verbally, we almost invariably believe the non-verbal signal. To a great degree, then, an individual's credibility as a communicator depends on non-verbal messages.

Non-verbal communication is important for another reason as well: It can be efficient from both the sender's and the receiver's standpoint. You can transmit a non-verbal message without even thinking about it, and your audience can register the meaning unconsciously. By the same token, when you have a conscious purpose, you can often achieve it more economically with a gesture than you can with words. A wave of the hand, a pat on the back, a wink—all are streamlined expressions of thought.

The functions of non-verbal communication

Although non-verbal communication can stand alone, it frequently works with speech. Our words carry part of the message, and non-verbal signals carry the rest. Together, the two modes of expression make a powerful team, augmenting, reinforcing, and clarifying each other.

Experts in non-verbal communication suggest that it have six specific functions:

- To provide information, either consciously or unconsciously
- To regulate the flow of conversation
- To express emotion

- To qualify, complement, contradict, or expand verbal messages
- To control or influence others
- To facilitate specific tasks, such as teaching a person to swing a golf club.

Non-verbal communication plays a role in business too. For one thing, it helps establish credibility and leadership potential. If you can learn to manage the impression you create with your body language, facial characteristics, voice, and appearance, you can do a great deal to communicate that you are competent, trustworthy, and dynamic. For example, Wal-Mart founder Sam Walton has developed a homespun style that puts people at ease, thereby helping them to be more receptive, perhaps even more open.

Furthermore, if you can learn to read other people's non-verbal messages, you will be able to interpret their underlying attitudes and intentions more accurately. When dealing with co-workers, customers, and clients, watch carefully for small signs that reveal how the conversation is going. If you aren't having the effect you want, check your words; then, if your words are all right, try to be aware of the non-verbal meanings you are transmitting. At the same time, stay tuned to the non-verbal signals that the other person is sending.

VERBAL COMMUNICATION

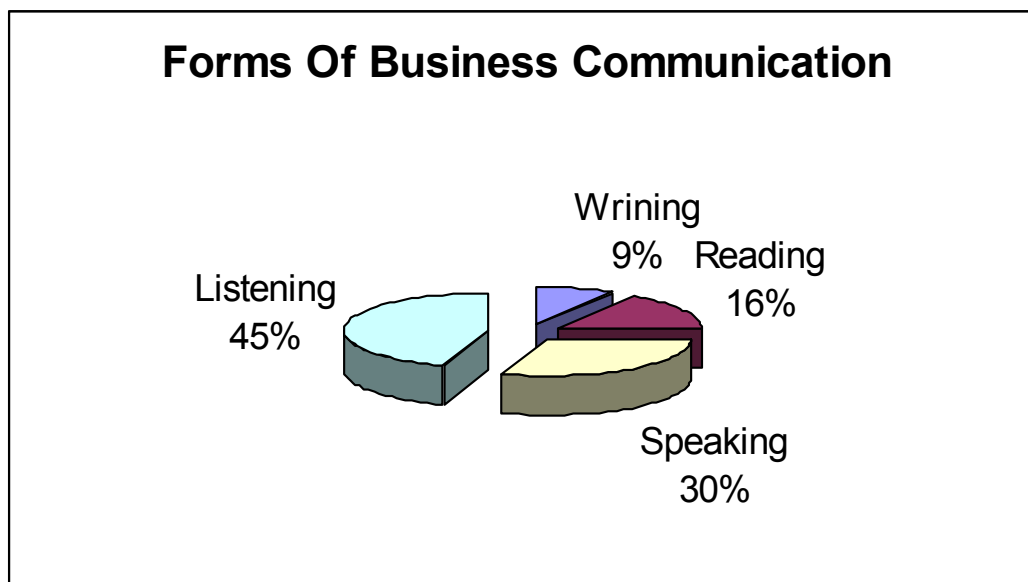
Although you can express many things non-verbally, there are limits to what you can communicate without the help of language. If you want to discuss past events, ideas, or abstractions, you need words—symbols that stand for thoughts — arranged in meaningful patterns. In the English language, we have a 750,000, although most of us recognize only about 20,000 of them. To create a thought with these words, we arrange them according to the rules of grammar, putting the various parts of speech in the proper sequence.

We then transmit the message in spoken or written form, hoping that someone will hear or read what we have to say. Figure 1.1 shows how much time business people devote to the various types of verbal communication. They use speaking and writing to send messages; they use listening and reading to receive them.

Speaking and writing

When it comes to sending business messages, speaking is more common than writing. Giving instructions, conducting interviews, working in small groups, attending meetings, and making speeches are all important activities. Even though writing may be less common, it is important too. When you want to send a complex message of lasting significance, you will probably want to put it in writing.

FIGURE 1.1 Forms of Business Communication



Listening and reading

It's important to remember that effective communication is a two-way street. People in business spend more time obtaining information than transmitting it, so to do their jobs effectively, they need good listening and reading skills. Unfortunately, most of us are not very good listeners. Immediately after hearing a ten-minute speech, we typically remember only half of what was said. A few days later, we've forgotten three-quarters of the message. To some extent, our listening problems stem from our education, or lack of it. We spend years learning to express our ideas, but

few of us ever take a course in listening. Similarly, our reading skills often leave a good deal to be desired. Recent studies indicate that approximately 38 percent of the adults in the United States have trouble reading the help-wanted ads in the newspaper, 14 percent cannot fill out a check properly, 26 percent can't figure out the deductions listed on their paycheques, and 20 percent are functionally illiterate. Even those who do read may not know how to read effectively. They have trouble extracting the important points from a document, so they cannot make the most of the information presented.

College student are probably better at listening and reading than are many other people, partly because they get so much practice. On the basis of our own experience, no doubt realize that our listening and reading efficiency varies tremendously, depending on how we approach the task. Obtaining and remembering information takes a special effort.

Although listening and reading obviously differ, both require a similar approach. The first step is to register the information, which means that you must tune out distractions and focus your attention. You must then interpret and evaluate the information, respond in some fashion, and file away the data for future reference.

The most important part of this process is interpretation and evaluation, which is no easy matter. While absorbing the material, we must decide what is important and what isn't. One approach is to look for the main ideas and the most important supporting details, rather than trying to remember everything we read or hear. If we can discern the structure of the material, we can also understand the relationships among the ideas.

BASICS OF INTERCULTURAL BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

As Bill Davila knows, the first step in learning to communicate with people from other cultures is to become aware of what culture means. Our awareness of intercultural differences is both useful and necessary in today's world of business.

UNDERSTANDING CULTURE

Person may not realize it, but he belongs to several cultures. The most obvious is the culture he shares with all other people who live in the same country. But this person also belongs to other cultural groups, such as an ethnic group, a religious group, a fraternity or sorority, or perhaps a profession that has its own special language and customs.

So what exactly is culture? It is useful to define culture as a system of shared symbols, beliefs, attitudes, values, expectations, and norms for behavior. Thus all members of a culture have, and tend to act on, similar assumptions about how people should think, behave, and communicate.

Distinct groups that exist within a major culture are more properly referred to as subcultures. Among groups that might be considered subcultures are Mexican Americans in East Los Angeles, Mormons in Salt Lake City, and longshoremen in Montreal. Subcultures without geographic boundaries can be found as well, such as wrestling fans, Russian immigrants, and Harvard M.B.A.s .

Cultures and subcultures vary in several ways that affect intercultural communication:

- **Stability.** Conditions in the culture may be stable or may be changing slowly or rapidly.
- **Complexity.** Cultures vary in the accessibility of information. In North America information is contained in explicit codes, including words, whereas in Japan a great deal of information is conveyed implicitly, through body language, physical context, and the like.
- **Composition.** Some cultures are made up of many diverse and disparate subcultures; others tend to be more homogeneous.
- **Acceptance.** Cultures vary in their attitudes toward outsiders. Some are openly hostile or maintain a detached aloofness. Others are friendly and co-operative toward strangers.

As you can see, cultures vary widely. It's no wonder that most of us need special training before we can become comfortable with a culture other than our own.

DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS

When faced with the need (or desire) to learn about another culture, we have two main approaches to choose from. The first is to learn as much as possible—the language, cultural background and history, social rules, and so on—about the specific culture that you expect to deal with. The other is to develop general skills that will help to adapt in any culture.

The first approach, in-depth knowledge of a particular culture, certainly works. But there are two drawbacks. One is that you will never be able to understand another culture completely. No matter how much you study German culture, for example, you will never be a German or share the experiences of having grown up in Germany. Even if we could understand the culture completely, Germans might resent our assumption that we know everything there is to know about them. The other drawback to immersing yourself in a specific culture is the trap of overgeneralization, looking at people from a culture not as individuals with their own unique characteristics, but as instances of Germans or Japanese or black Americans. The trick is to learn useful general information but to be open to variations and individual differences.

The second approach to cultural learning, general development of intercultural skills, is especially useful if we interact with people from a variety of cultures or subcultures. Among the skills you need to learn are the following:

- Taking responsibility for communication. Don't assume that it is the other person's job to communicate with you.
- Withholding judgment. Learn to listen to the whole story and to accept differences in others.
- Showing respect. Learn the ways in which respect is communicated—through gestures, eye contact, and so on—in various cultures.
- Empathizing. Try to put yourself in the other person's shoes. Listen carefully to what the other person is trying to communicate; imagine the person's feelings and point of view.
- Tolerating ambiguity. Learn to control your frustration when placed in an unfamiliar or confusing situation.
- Looking beyond the superficial. Don't be distracted by such things as dress, appearance, or environmental discomforts.
- Being patient and persistent. If you want to accomplish a task, don't give up easily.
- Recognizing your own cultural biases. Learn to identify when your assumptions are different from the other person's.
- Being flexible. Be prepared to change your habits, preferences, and attitudes.
- Emphasizing common ground. Look for similarities to work from.
- Sending clear messages. Make your verbal and non-verbal messages consistent.

- Taking risks. Try things that will help you gain a better understanding of the other person or culture.
- Increasing your cultural sensitivity. Learn about variations in customs and practices so that you will be more aware of potential areas for miscommunication or misunderstanding.
- Dealing with the individual. Avoid stereotyping and overgeneralization.

DIFFICULTIES OF INTERCULTURAL BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

The more differences there are between the people who are communicating, the more difficult it is to communicate effectively. The major problems in inter-cultural business communication are language barriers, cultural differences, and ethnocentric reactions.

LANGUAGE BARRIERS

If we're doing business in London, we obviously won't have much of a language problem. We may encounter a few unusual terms or accents in the 29 countries in which English is an official language, but our problems will be relatively minor. Language barriers will also be relatively minor when we are dealing with people who use English as a second language (and some 650 million people fall into this category). Some of these millions are extremely fluent; others have only an elementary command of English. Although you may miss a few subtleties in dealing with those who are less fluent in English, we'll still be able to communicate. The pitfall to watch for is assuming that the other person understands everything we say, even slang, local idioms, and accents. One group of English-speaking Japanese who moved to the United States as employees of Toyota had to enroll in a special course to learn that "Jeat yet?" means "Did you eat yet?" and that "Cannahepya?" means "Can I help you?"

The real problem with language arises when we are dealing with people who speak virtually no English. In situations like this, we have very few options: We can learn their language, we can use an intermediary or a translator, or we can teach them our language. Becoming fluent in a new language (which we must do to conduct business in that language) is time consuming. The U.S. State Department, for example, gives its Foreign

Service officers a six-month language training program and expects them to continue their language education at their foreign posts. Even the Berlitz method, which is famous for the speed of its results, requires a month of intensive effort — 13 hours a day, 5 days a week. It is estimated that minimum proficiency in another language requires at least 240 hours of study over 8 weeks; more complex languages, such as Arabic and Chinese, require more than 480 hours. Language courses can be quite expensive as well. Unless we are planning to spend several years abroad or to make frequent trips over an extended period, learning another language may take more time, effort, and money than we're able to spend.

A more practical approach may be to use an intermediary or a translator. For example, if our company has a foreign subsidiary, we can delegate the communication job to local nationals who are bilingual. Or we can hire bilingual advertising consultants, distributors, lobbyists, lawyers, translators, and other professionals to help us. Even though Vons operates within the United States, management hires bilingual personnel to help its Hispanic customers feel more comfortable.

The option of teaching other people to speak our language doesn't appear to be very practical at first glance; however, many multinational companies do, in fact, have language training programs for their foreign employees. Tenneco, for example, instituted an English-language training program for its Spanish-speaking employees in a New Jersey plant. The classes concentrated on practical English for use on the job. According to the company, these classes were a success: Accidents and grievances declined, and productivity improved.

In general, the magnitude of the language barrier depends on whether you are writing or speaking. Written communication is generally easier to handle.

Barriers to written communication

One survey of 100 companies engaged in international business revealed that between 95 and 99 percent of their business letters to other countries are written in English. Moreover, 59 percent of the respondents reported that the foreign letters they receive are usually written in English, although they also receive letters written in Spanish and French. Other languages are rare in international business correspondence.

Because many international business letters are written in English, North American firms do not always have to worry about translating their correspondence. However, even when both parties write in English, minor interpretation problems do exist because of different usage of technical terms. These problems do not usually pose a major barrier to communication, especially if correspondence between the two parties continues and each gradually learns the terminology of the other.

More significant problems arise in other forms of written communication that require translation. Advertisements, for example, are almost always translated into the language of the country in which the products are being sold. Documents such as warranties, repair and maintenance manuals, and product labels also require translation. In addition, some multinational companies must translate policy and procedure manuals and benefit plans for use in overseas offices. Reports from foreign subsidiaries to the home office may also be written in one language and then translated into another.

Sometimes the translations aren't very good. For example, the well-known slogan "Come alive with Pepsi" was translated literally for Asian markets as "Pepsi brings your ancestors back from the grave," with unfortunate results. Part of the message is almost inevitably lost during any translation process, sometimes with major consequences.

Barriers to oral communication

Oral communication usually presents more problems than written communication. If you have ever studied a foreign language, you know from personal experience that it's easier to write in a foreign language than to conduct a conversation. Even if the other person is speaking English, you're likely to have a hard time understanding the pronunciation if the person is not proficient in English. For example, many foreigners notice no difference between the English sounds v and w, they say **wery** for **very**. At the same time, many people from North America cannot pronounce some of the sounds that are frequently used in other parts of the world.

In addition to pronouncing sounds differently, people use their voices in different ways, a fact that often leads to misunderstanding. The Russians, for example, speak in flat level tones in their native tongue. When they speak English, they maintain this pattern, and Westerners may assume that they are bored or rude. Middle Easterners tend to speak more loudly than Westerners and may therefore mistakenly be considered more emotional.

On the other hand, the Japanese are soft-spoken, a characteristic that implies politeness or humility to Westerners.

Idiomatic expressions are another source of confusion. If you tell a foreigner that a certain product "doesn't cut the mustard," chances are that you will fail to communicate. Even when the words make sense, their meanings may differ according to the situation. For example, suppose that you are dining with a German woman who speaks English quite well. You inquire, "More bread?" She says, "Thank you," so you pass the bread. She looks confused, then takes the breadbasket and sets it down without taking any. In German, thank you (danke) can also be used as a polite refusal. If the woman had wanted more bread, she would have used the word please (bitte in German).

When speaking in English to those for whom English is a second language, follow these simple guidelines:

- Try to eliminate "noise." Pronounce words clearly, and stop at distinct punctuation points. Make one point at a time.
- Look for feedback. Be alert to glazed eyes or signs of confusion in your listener. Realize that nods and smiles do not necessarily mean understanding. Don't be afraid to ask, "Is that clear?" and be sure to check the listener's comprehension through specific questions. Encourage the listener to ask questions.
- Rephrase your sentence when necessary. If someone doesn't seem to understand what you have said, choose simpler words; don't just repeat the sentence in a louder voice.
- Don't talk down to the other person. Americans tend to overenunciate and to "blame" the listener for lack of comprehension. It is preferable to use phrases such as "Am I going too fast?" rather than "Is this too difficult for you?"
- Use objective, accurate language. Americans tend to throw around adjectives such as fantastic and fabulous, which foreigners consider unreal and overly dramatic. Calling something a "disaster" will give rise to images of war and death; calling someone an "idiot" or a "prince" may be taken literally.
- Let other people finish what they have to say. If you interrupt, you may miss something important. And you'll show a lack of respect.

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

As we know, misunderstandings are especially likely to occur when the people who are communicating have different backgrounds. Party A encodes a message in one context, using assumptions common to people in his or her culture; Party B decodes the message using a different set of assumptions. The result is confusion and, often, hard feelings. For example, take the case of the computer sales representative who was calling on a client in China. Hoping to make a good impression, the salesperson brought along a gift to break the ice, an expensive grandfather clock. Unfortunately, the Chinese client was deeply offended because, in China, giving clocks as gifts is considered bad luck for the recipient.

Such problems arise because of our unconscious assumptions and non-verbal communication patterns. We ignore the fact that people from other cultures differ from us in many ways: in their religion and values, their ideas of status, their decision-making habits, their attitude toward time, their use of space, their body language, and their manners. We assume, wrongly, that other people are like us. At Vons, management has spent a great deal of time learning about the cultural preferences of the store's Hispanic customers.

Religion and values

Although North America is a melting pot of people with different religions and values, the predominant influence in this culture is the Puritan ethic: If you work hard and achieve success, you will find favor in the eyes of God. They tend to assume that material comfort is a sign of superiority, that the rich are a little bit better than the poor, that people who work hard are better than those who don't. They believe that money solves many problems. They assume that people from other cultures share their view, that they dislike poverty and value hard work. In fact, many societies condemn materialism and prize a carefree life-style.

As a culture, they are goal-oriented. They want to get the work done in the most efficient manner, and they assume that everyone else does too. They think they are improving things if they can figure out a way for two people using modern methods to do the same work as four people using the "old way." But in countries like India and Pakistan, where unemployment is extremely high, creating jobs is more important than getting the work done efficiently. Executives in these countries would rather employ four workers than two.

Roles and status

Culture dictates the roles people play, including who communicates with whom, what they communicate, and in what way. In many countries, for example, women still do not play a very prominent role in business. As a result, female executives from American firms may find themselves sent off to eat in a separate room with the wives of Arab businessmen, while the men all eat dinner together.

Concepts of status also differ, and as a consequence, people establish their credibility in different ways. North Americans, for example, send status signals that reflect materialistic values. The big boss has the corner office on the top floor, deep carpets, an expensive desk, and handsome accessories. The most successful companies are located in the most prestigious buildings. In other countries, status is communicated in other ways. For example, the highest-ranking executives in France sit in the middle of an open area, surrounded by lower-level employees. In the Middle East, fine possessions are reserved for the home, and business is conducted in cramped and modest quarters. An American executive who assumes that these office arrangements indicate a lack of status is making a big mistake.

Decision-making customs

In North America, they try to reach decisions as quickly and efficiently as possible. The top people focus on reaching agreement on the main points and leave the details to be worked out later by others. In Greece, this approach would backfire. A Greek executive assumes that anyone who ignores the details is being evasive and untrustworthy. Spending time on every little point is considered a mark of good faith. Similarly, Latin Americans prefer to make their deals slowly, after a lengthy period of discussion. They resist an authoritarian "Here's the deal, take it or leave it" approach, preferring the more sociable method of an extended discussion.

Cultures also differ in terms of who makes the decisions. In American culture, many organizations are dominated by a single figure who says yes or no to every deal. It is the same in Pakistan, where you can get a decision quickly if you reach the highest-ranking executive. In other cultures, notably China and Japan, decision making is a shared responsibility. No individual has the authority to commit the organization without first consulting

others. In Japan, for example, the negotiating team arrives at a consensus through an elaborate, time-consuming process (agreement must be complete — there is no majority rule). If the process is not laborious enough, the Japanese feel uncomfortable.

Concepts of time

Differing perceptions of time are another factor that can lead to misunderstandings. An executive from North America or Germany attaches one meaning to time; an executive from Latin America, Ethiopia, or Japan attaches another. Let's say that a salesperson from Chicago calls on a client in Mexico City. After spending 30 minutes in the outer office, the person from Chicago feels angry and insulted, assuming, "This client must attach a very low priority to my visit to keep me waiting half an hour." In fact, the Mexican client does not mean to imply anything at all by this delay. To the Mexican, a wait of 30 minutes is a matter of course.

Or let's say that a New Yorker is trying to negotiate a deal in Ethiopia. This is an important deal, and the New Yorker assumes that the Ethiopians will give the matter top priority and reach a decision quickly. Not so. In Ethiopia, important deals take a long, long time. After all, if a deal is important, it should be given much careful thought, shouldn't it?

The Japanese, knowing that North Americans are impatient, use time to their advantage when negotiating with us. One of them expressed it this way:

"You Americans have one terrible weakness. If we make you wait long enough, you will agree to anything."

Concepts of personal space

The classic story of a conversation between a North American and a Latin American is that the interaction may begin at one end of a hallway but end up at the other, with neither party aware of having moved. During the interaction, the Latin American instinctively moves closer to the North American, who in turn instinctively steps back, resulting in an intercultural dance across the floor. Like time, space means different things in different cultures. North Americans stand about five feet apart when conducting a business conversation. To an Arab or a Latin American, this distance is uncomfortable. In meetings with North Americans, they move a little closer.

We assume they are pushy and react negatively, although we don't know exactly why.

Body language

Gestures help us clarify confusing messages, so differences in body language are a major source of misunderstanding. We may also make the mistake of assuming that a non-American who speaks English has mastered the body language of our culture as well. It therefore pays to learn some basic differences in the ways people supplement their words with body movement. Take the signal for no. North Americans shake their heads back and forth; the Japanese move their right hands; Sicilians raise their chins. Or take eye contact. North Americans read each other through eye contact. They may assume that a person who won't meet our gaze is evasive and dishonest. But in many parts of Latin America, keeping your eyes lowered is a sign of respect. It's also a sign of respect among many black Americans, which some schoolteachers have failed to learn. When they scold their black students, saying "Look at me when I'm talking to you," they only create confusion for the children.

Sometimes people from different cultures misread an intentional signal, and sometimes they overlook the signal entirely or assume that a meaningless gesture is significant. For example, an Arab man indicates a romantic interest in a woman by running a hand backward across his hair; most Americans would dismiss this gesture as meaningless. On the other hand, an Egyptian might mistakenly assume that a Westerner sitting with the sole of his or her shoe showing is offering a grave insult.

Social behavior and manners

What is polite in one country may be considered rude in another. In Arab countries, for example, it is impolite to take gifts to a man's wife but acceptable to take gifts to his children. In Germany, giving a woman a red rose is considered a romantic invitation, inappropriate if you are trying to establish a business relationship with her. In India, you might be invited to visit someone's home "any time." Being reluctant to make an unexpected visit, you might wait to get a more definite invitation. But your failure to take the Indian literally is an insult, a sign that you do not care to develop the friendship.

Rules of etiquette may be formal or informal. Formal rules are the specifically taught "rights" and "wrongs" of how to behave in common

situations, such as table manners at meals. Members of a culture can put into words the formal rule being violated. Informal social rules are much more difficult to identify and are usually learned by watching how people behave and then imitating that behavior. Informal rules govern how men and women are supposed to behave, how and when people may touch each other, when it is appropriate to use a person's first name, and so on. Violations of these rules cause a great deal of discomfort to the members of the culture, but they usually cannot verbalize what it is that bothers them.

ETHNOCENTRIC REACTIONS

Although language and cultural differences are significant barriers to communication, these problems can be resolved if people maintain an open mind. Unfortunately, however, many of us have an ethnocentric reaction to people from other cultures—that is, we judge all other groups according to our own standards.

When we react ethnocentrically, we ignore the distinctions between our own culture and the other person's culture. We assume that others will react the same way we do, that they will operate from the same assumptions, and that they will use language and symbols in the "American" way. An ethnocentric reaction makes us lose sight of the possibility that our words and actions will be misunderstood, and it makes us more likely to misunderstand the behavior of foreigners.

Generally, ethnocentric people are prone to stereotyping and prejudice:

They generalize about an entire group of people on the basis of sketchy evidence and then develop biased attitudes toward the group. As a consequence, they fail to see people as they really are. Instead of talking with Abdul Kar-hum, unique human being, they talk to an Arab. Although they have never met an Arab before, they may already believe that all Arabs are, say, hagglers. The personal qualities of Abdul Kar-hum become insignificant in the face of such preconceptions. Everything he says and does will be forced to fit the preconceived image.

Bear in mind that Americans are not the only people in the world who are prone to ethnocentrism. Often, both parties are guilty of stereotyping and prejudice. Neither is open-minded about the other. Little wonder, then, that misunderstandings arise. Fortunately, a healthy dose of tolerance can prevent a lot of problems.

TIPS FOR COMMUNICATING WITH PEOPLE FROM OTHER CULTURES

We may never completely overcome linguistic and cultural barriers or totally erase ethnocentric tendencies, but we can communicate effectively with people from other cultures if we work at it.

LEARNING ABOUT A CULTURE

The best way to prepare yourself to do business with people from another culture is to study their culture in advance. If you plan to live in another country or to do business there repeatedly, learn the language. The same holds true if you must work closely with a subculture that has its own language, such as Vietnamese Americans or the Hispanic Americans that Vons is trying to reach. Even if you end up transacting business in English, you show respect by making the effort to learn the language. In addition, you will learn something about the culture and its customs in the process. If you do not have the time or opportunity to learn the language, at least learn a few words.

Also reading books and articles about the culture and talking to people who have dealt with its members, preferably people who have done business with them very helpful. Concentrating on learning something about their history, religion, politics, and customs, without ignoring the practical details either. In that regard, you should know something about another country's weather conditions, health-care facilities, money, transportation, communications, and customs regulations.

Also find out about a country's subcultures, especially its business subculture. Does the business world have its own rules and protocol? Who makes decisions? How are negotiations usually conducted? Is gift giving expected? What is the etiquette for exchanging business cards? What is the appropriate attire for attending a business meeting? Seasoned business travelers suggest the following:

- In Spain, let a handshake last five to seven strokes; pulling away too soon may be interpreted as a sign of rejection. In France, however, the preferred handshake is a single stroke.
- Never give a gift of liquor in Arab countries.
- In England, never stick pens or other objects in your front suit pocket; doing so is considered gauche.

- In Pakistan, don't be surprised when businesspeople excuse themselves in the midst of a meeting to conduct prayers. Moslems pray five times a day.
- Allow plenty of time to get to know the people you're dealing with in Africa. They're suspicious of people who are in a hurry. If you concentrate solely on the task at hand, Africans will distrust you and avoid doing business with you.
- In Arab countries, never turn down food or drink; it's an insult to refuse hospitality of any kind. But don't be too quick to accept, either. A ritual refusal ("I don't want to put you to any trouble" or "I don't want to be a bother") is expected before you finally accept.
- Stress the longevity of your company when dealing with the Germans, Dutch, and Swiss. If your company has been around for a while, the founding date should be printed on your business cards.

These are just a few examples of the variations in customs that make intercultural business so interesting.

HANDLING WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

Intercultural business writing falls into the same general categories as other forms of business writing. How you handle these categories depends on the subject and purpose of your message, the relationship between you and the reader, and the customs of the person to whom the message is addressed.

Letters

Letters are the most common form of intercultural business correspondence. They serve the same purposes and follow the same basic organizational plans (direct and indirect) as letters you would send within your own country. Unless you are personally fluent in the language of the intended readers, you should ordinarily write your letters in English or have them translated by a professional translator. If you and the reader speak different languages, be especially concerned with achieving clarity:

- Use short, precise words that say exactly what you mean.
- Rely on specific terms to explain your points. Avoid abstractions altogether, or illustrate them with concrete examples.

- Stay away from slang, jargon, and buzz words. Such words rarely translate well. Nor do idioms and figurative expressions. Abbreviations, TSCFO-nyms (such as NOKAI) and CAD/CAM), and North American product names may also lead to confusion.
- Construct sentences that are shorter and simpler than those you might use when writing to someone fluent in English.
- Use short paragraphs. Each paragraph should stick to one topic and be no more than eight to ten lines.
- Help readers follow your train of thought by using transitional devices. Precede related points with expressions like in addition and first, second, third.
- Use numbers, visual aids, and pre-printed forms to clarify your message. These devices are generally understood in most cultures.

Your word choice should also reflect the relationship between you and the reader. In general, be somewhat more formal than you would be in writing to people in your own culture. In many other cultures, people use a more elaborate, old-fashioned style, and you should gear your letters to their expectations. However, do not carry formality to extremes, or you will sound unnatural.

In terms of format, the two most common approaches for intercultural business letters are the block style (with blocked paragraphs) and the modified block style (with indented paragraphs). You may use either the American format for dates (with the month, day, and year, in that order) or the European style (with the day before the month and year). For the salutation, use Dear (Title/Last Name). Close the letter with Sincerely or Sincerely yours, and sign it personally.

If you correspond frequently with people in foreign countries, your letter-head should include the name of your country and cable or telex information. Send your letters by air mail, and ask that responses be sent that way as well.

Check the postage too; rates for sending mail to most other countries are not the same as rates for sending it within your own.

In the letters you receive, you will notice that people in other countries use different techniques for their correspondence. If you are aware of some of these practices, you will be able to concentrate on the message without passing judgment on the writers. Their approaches are not good or bad, just different.

The Japanese, for example, are slow to come to the point. Their letters typically begin with a remark about the season or weather. This is followed by an inquiry about your health or congratulations on your prosperity. A note of thanks for your patronage might come next. After these preliminaries, the main idea is introduced. If the letter contains bad news, the Japanese begin not with a buffer, but with apologies for disappointing you.

Letters from Latin America look different too. Instead of using letterhead stationery, Latin American companies use a cover page with their printed seal in the centre. Their letters appear to be longer, because they use much wider margins.

Memos and reports

Memos and reports sent overseas fall into two general categories: those written to and from subsidiaries, branches, or joint venture partners and those written to clients or other outsiders. When the memo or report has an internal audience, the style may differ only slightly from that of a memo or report written for internal use in North America. Because sender and recipient have a working relationship and share a common frame of reference, many of the language and cultural barriers that lead to misunderstandings have already been overcome. However, if the reader's native language is not English, you should take extra care to ensure clarity: Use concrete and explicit words, simple and direct sentences, short paragraphs, headings, and many transitional devices.

If the memo or report is written for an external audience, the style of the document should be relatively formal and impersonal. If possible, the format should be like that of reports typically prepared or received by the audience. In the case of long, formal reports, it is also useful to discuss reporting requirements and expectations with the recipient beforehand and to submit a preliminary draft for comments before delivering the final report.

Other documents

Many international transactions involve shipping and receiving goods. A number of special-purpose documents are required to handle these transactions:

price quotations, invoices, bills of lading, time drafts, letters of credit, correspondence with international freight forwarders, packing lists, shipping documents, and collection documents. Many of these documents are standard forms; you simply fill in the data as clearly and accurately as possible in the spaces provided. Samples are ordinarily available in a company's files if it frequently does business abroad. If not, you may obtain descriptions of the necessary documentation from the United States Department of Commerce, International Trade Administration, Washington, D.C., 20230. (For Canadian information, contact the Department of External Affairs, Trade Division, Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 0G2.)

When preparing forms, pay particular attention to the method you use for stating weights and measures and money values. The preferred method is to use the other country's system of measurement and its currency values for documenting the transaction; however, if your company uses U.S. or Canadian weights, measures, and dollars, you should follow that policy. Check any conversion calculations carefully.

HANDLING ORAL COMMUNICATION

Oral communication with people from other cultures is more difficult to handle than written communication, but it can also be more rewarding, from both a business and a personal standpoint. Some transactions simply cannot be handled without face-to-face contact.

When engaging in oral communication, be alert to the possibilities for misunderstanding. Recognize that you may be sending signals you are unaware of and that you may be misreading cues sent by the other person. To overcome language and cultural barriers, follow these suggestions:

- Keep an open mind. Don't stereotype the other person or react with preconceived ideas. Regard the person as an individual first, not as a representative of another culture.
- Be alert to the other person's customs. Expect him or her to have different values, beliefs, expectations, and mannerisms.
- Try to be aware of unintentional meanings that may be read into your message. Clarify your true intent by repetition and examples.
- Listen carefully and patiently. If you do not understand a comment, ask the person to repeat it.
- Be aware that the other person's body language may mislead you. Gestures and expressions mean different things in different cultures. Rely

more on words than on non-verbal communication to interpret the message.

- Adapt your style to the other person's. If the other person appears to be direct and straightforward, follow suit. If not, adjust your behavior to match.
- At the end of a conversation, be sure that you and the other person both agree on what has been said and decided. Clarify what will happen next.
- If appropriate, follow up by writing a letter or memo summarizing the conversation and thanking the person for meeting with you.

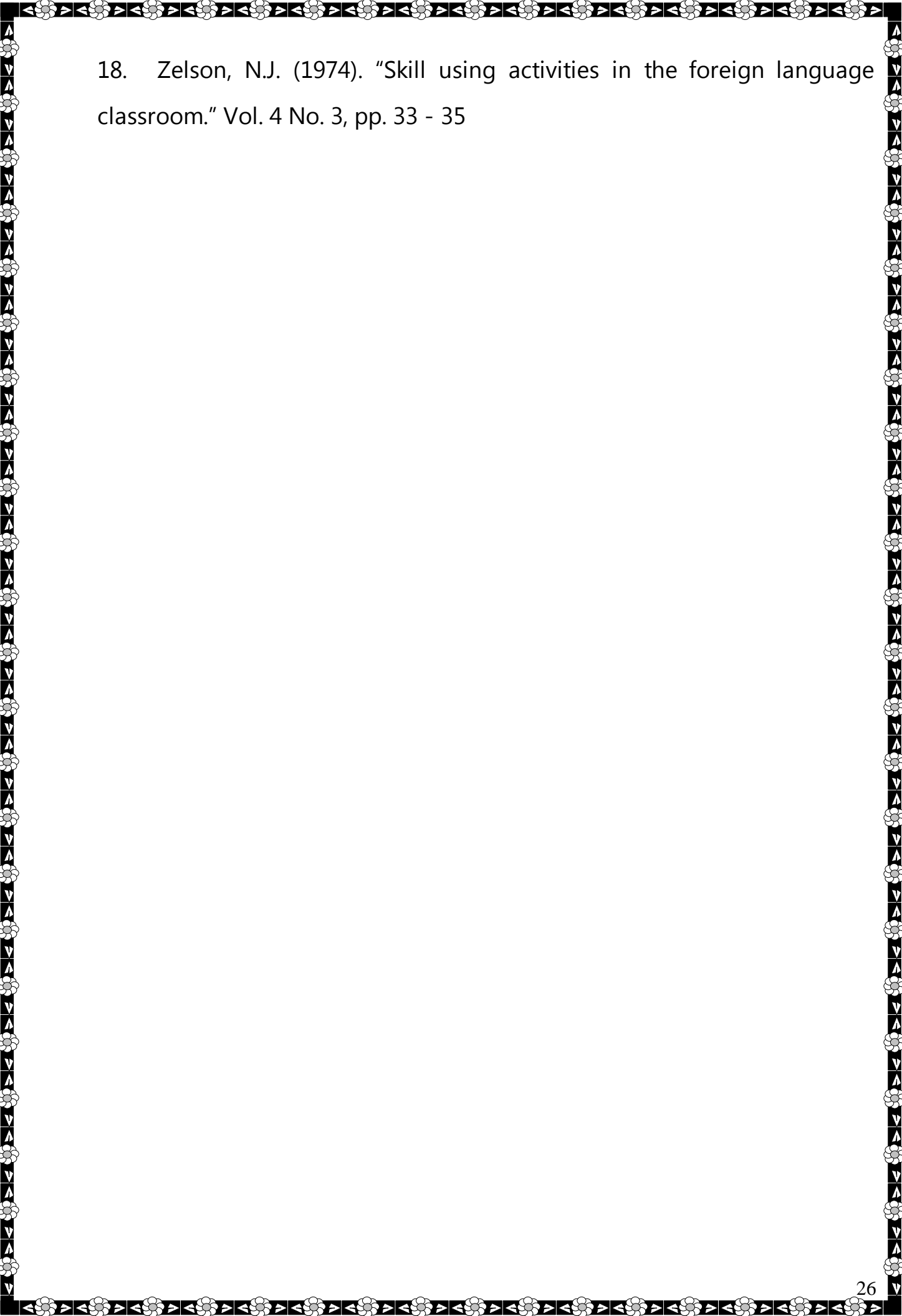
In short, take advantage of the other person's presence to make sure that your message is getting across and that you understand his or her message too.

Speeches are both harder and simpler to deal with than personal conversations. On the one hand, speeches don't provide much of an opportunity for exchanging feedback; on the other, you may either use a translator or prepare your remarks in advance and have someone who is familiar with the culture check them over. If you use a translator, however, be sure to use someone who is familiar not only with both languages but also with the terminology of your field of business. Experts recommend that the translator be given a copy of the speech at least a day in advance. Furthermore, a written translation given to members of the audience to accompany the English speech can help reduce communication barriers. The extra effort will be appreciated and will help you get your point across.

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