Über Grenzen gehen – Kommunikation zwischen Kulturen und Unternehmen

Crossing Borders – Communication between Cultures and Companies

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Cultural Barriers in Industry and the Public Sector in Østfold

Introduction
Over the past two decades, the awareness of cultural differences and problems related to business communication has clearly improved. Through her research, teaching, and cooperation with business, Ingrid Neumann has done more than most teachers to contribute to this development. Her untiring work has been especially beneficial for Østfold University College and the county of Østfold. Here, and elsewhere in Norway, the development and maintenance of skills in intercultural business communication are of great importance if businesses are to become even more successful internationally.

In spite of the increasing awareness of cultural differences, there are still numerous barriers in intercultural communication which continue to cause difficulties for the private and public sectors in Østfold in their interaction with foreign partners. Such communication problems can probably never be eradicated completely, but it should nevertheless be possible to contribute more in the development of intercultural communication skills. For this purpose we need information about the nature of communication problems, as well as the degree of difficulty involved in communication between various cultures. This article attempts to shed some light on the level of cultural awareness and on the self-perception of cultural barriers in the private and public sectors of Østfold.

Background and sources
In the fall of 1998, Bjørg Hellum and I conducted a survey of foreign language use and cultural awareness in the private and public sectors in Østfold County. A total of 216 questionnaires were distributed in October 1998. By the end of the year we had received 83 answers, a response rate of 38%. The respondents comprised (1) small, medium-size and large manufacturing companies, (2) key public sector units such as customs, harbor and police authorities, town and county administrations, and (3) hotels. Only 80 answers could be used in our study; two respondents used no foreign languages and one found that the questi-
onnaire did not apply to their situation and answered in general terms. The questionnaire was answered either by the Managing Director or by the general manager, less frequently by the administrative/finance manager or the personnel manager.

Two of our aims were to establish more local contacts for future research projects and to develop our study programs in accordance with the needs of Østfold businesses. We chose to limit our survey to Østfold, but there is very little reason to doubt that the private and public sectors of this county should be fairly representative of Norway as a whole. In 1999 Østfold was ranked as number five out of 19 counties in the export of traditional commodities (Statistics Norway, 2000); it is the fifth most populated county in Norway; and it is also the fifth largest industrial county in terms of employees. Furthermore, all sizes of companies are well represented in Østfold.

In 1999 the results from the survey were first used to design a tailor-made business English training program for the private and public sectors. Then the results were used to improve our regular study programs in Business English. A report on the survey and the program development, called "Business Communication and Cultural Awareness in Norwegian Companies" was presented by the authors at the 11th ENCoDe conference in Barcelona on July 1-3, 1999 and published in the proceedings from the conference (Hellum and Dyppedahl, 1999).

I will base my discussion on the same 80 answers which Bjørg Hellum and I found to be relevant for the 1999 report. Since the survey was conducted in Norwegian, I have translated the relevant questions, answers and definitions into English for the purpose of this article. The findings I will make use of here are taken from the section of the questionnaire devoted to "intercultural competence in the company/organization", particularly (1) "specific instances in which the company/organization has felt that lack of intercultural competence has caused problems", (2) "the perception of communication barriers when dealing with people from other cultures", and (3) "the impression Norwegians think people of other cultures have of them." In the questionnaire, intercultural communication was defined as "theoretical and practical knowledge about how your cultural background influences your way of thinking and behaving".

**Self-perception of miscommunication due to cultural barriers**

In the survey the respondents were asked if they had experienced communication problems because of lack of cultural awareness and/or understanding. 9% of the companies/organizations had experienced such problems, whereas 33% did not know and 58% said they had had no problems. It is very likely that far more than 9% of these companies/organizations have experienced miscommunication because of cultural barriers, but the focus here was on the self-perception of communication problems. Two respondents gave answers which focused on language barriers in a more literal sense, rather than communication barriers
involving cultural miscommunication. One of these respondents said that miscommunication occurred because people in other cultures did not understand the language the Norwegians used, which probably would be English. Another respondent said that it was the difference between British and American business language that caused the communication problems. However, most of the respondents mentioned communication problems which were related to cultural barriers. These respondents made comments such as:

a) "Speakers of foreign languages say they understand what is being said, but in reality they do not. Safety risk!"
b) "We are surprised all the time by the Chinese."
c) "Communicating with the people from Asia is difficult."
d) "We lost a contract!"
e) "Basically, it is all about what they really mean and say."
f) "Interpreting contracts is difficult."

Norwegians and people from East-Asia

When it comes to the two comments about the Chinese (b) and people from Asia (c), it is only to be expected that the Norwegians should be surprised by the Chinese or that communication with people from Asian countries is difficult. Among the cultures which several of the Østfold companies interact with regularly, few differ more from the Norwegian culture than those of the East-Asian countries. Thus people should expect to be surprised when doing business in Asia. It is no coincidence that Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner - from a European perspective - have called Asia a "world turned upside down" (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1996:275). All systems of value dimensions and orientations clearly indicate that there are many obstacles in the communication between Norwegians and people from Asia.

In Geert Hofstede's system of five value dimensions (power distance, individualism-collectivism, masculinity-femininity, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term orientation), only the scores for uncertainty avoidance are anywhere near similar. Because China is not included in Hofstede's individual index values of 50 countries and regions, I have chosen Taiwan as an example of an East-Asian culture for the purpose of this comparison. The score for Norway on the power distance dimension is 31 (on a scale from 0 to 100), whereas the score for Taiwan is 58 (Hofstede, 1991:26). The score for Norway on the individualism-collectivism dimension is 69, whereas the score for Taiwan is 17 (ibid.:53). On the masculinity-femininity scale, the scores for Norway and Taiwan are 8 and 45, respectively (ibid.:84). Perhaps the most important difference in this regard would be the scores for long-term orientation, which Michael Harris Bond called Confucian dynamism (ibid.:166). There is no score for Norway on this dimen-
sion, but Sweden's score of 33 is probably close to Norway's level. The score for Taiwan is 87 (ibid.:166).

Geert Hofstede's methods and results can of course be questioned. There is no doubt, however, that various cultural taxonomies can give valuable indications of the type of value differences Østfold companies meet in other cultures. They can, as Lustig and Koester have stated, "offer lenses through which cultural variations can be understood and appreciated, rather than negatively evaluated and disregarded" (Lustig and Koester, 1999:133). This means that Hofstede's scores can offer assistance in finding possible sources of miscommunication between people from different cultures, but they cannot offer final answers. If we were to give Østfold companies some concrete advice with regard to miscommunication between Norwegians and the Chinese, we would have to do a very thorough job in determining the values of the Norwegians and the Chinese who are actually involved in the interaction. According to Peter B. Smith, "researchers rather often have characterized the samples they have studied as individualist or collectivist simply on the basis of the scores Hofstede and others have assigned to a given pair of nations" (Smith, 1996:100). The characterization of a nation as a whole can of course be inappropriate for a particular individual or a group of individuals from that nation.

In addition to general intercultural communication skills, a thorough knowledge of one's own culture and the target culture is very important if one is to avoid too many surprises. This culture-specific knowledge should not be limited to "visible" aspects of culture, such as the organization of society and business. On the surface, for instance organizational structure and management systems in East-Asia can in fact appear very similar to ours. However, when comparing an East-Asian culture (Japan) with a Western culture (USA), Fujisawa, co-founder of Honda Motor Corporation, once said that they are "95% the same and differ in all important respects" (Tung, 1996:233). Cultural knowledge should definitely include "invisible" aspects of culture, such as world view, beliefs, attitudes, values, and norms. With regard to East-Asian cultures, it will for instance be a considerable advantage to know something about the teachings of Confucius because his pragmatic rules and ideas from around 500 BC have survived as guidelines for proper behavior to this day.

**How difficult is it to communicate with people from other cultures in a business setting?**

The respondents in the survey were asked to state their opinions about communication between Norwegians and business partners from Sweden, Denmark, the United States, Britain, Germany, and France. The categories were "no problems", "generally okay", "sometimes difficult", and "often difficult".
The degree of difficulty in communicating with other cultures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>No problems</th>
<th>Generally okay</th>
<th>Sometimes difficult</th>
<th>Often difficult</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Britain</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There were also empty boxes for other nationalities which the companies/corporations found relevant to mention. The respondents included information about interaction with people from Finland, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Spain, Italy, Russia, Poland, the Ukraine, Latvia, Lithuania (and other former Soviet states), former Yugoslavia (countries not specified), African countries (not specified), Vietnam, Thailand (and unspecified Asian countries). It is not possible to draw any general conclusions based on these additional comments, but the Dutch would be an example of a nationality which represented few communication problems. Various value scale systems, such as Geert Hofstede's value dimensions and Fons Trompenaars's value orientations, also confirm that the Norwegians and the Dutch are not that far apart with regard to values. The Italians are listed under "generally okay" and "sometimes difficult", and "often difficult", whereas the companies which had done business with Russians generally found communication very difficult.

I have chosen to comment on the interaction between Norwegians and Americans in more detail because Norway and the United States are often considered to be very similar with regard to values such as equality and egalitarianism. Furthermore, the high percentage of respondents (61%) who found communication with the French to be "sometimes difficult" or "often difficult" requires some investigation. Since these respondents were encouraged to make comments on why they found it so difficult to communicate, there are more than 20 comments which illustrate the type of communication problems involved. One respondent only commented that "everything" was difficult when communicating with the French, whereas other respondents gave more concrete indications of the causes of the difficulties.

Norwegians and Americans
As mentioned above, the companies or organizations which had found it difficult to communicate with people from other cultures were asked to comment on this. One respondent, who sometimes found it difficult to deal with Americans,
felt that what the Americans said did not represent what they actually meant. According to the theories of Edward T. Hall, both Norway and the United States are *low-context* cultures (Hall, 1966) and fairly direct in their verbal communication. It could be, however, that the Norwegians have been confused by Americans using far more words than the average Norwegian. The importance of written documents should also be observed. According to Richard Lewis, "with Americans one always has to read the 'fine print', for their apparent openness and trust in the other party are usually underpinned by tight legal control in their contract, and they will not hesitate to sue you later if you do not comply with every clause you have put your name on" (Lewis, 1996:169). Another possibility is that Americans often put more emphasis on polite phrases and small-talk than Norwegians.

Other respondents who often found the Americans difficult to deal with blamed this on factors such as cultural differences in general and differences in corporate culture. Americans have a reputation for being much tougher and more competitive than Norwegians in business. In Hofstede's value system, Americans have a considerably higher score on the masculinity-femininity dimension (62 versus 8), which can explain the focus on competition and "toughness" (Hofstede, 1991:84). However, for Norwegians the most surprising aspect of American corporate culture is often a stronger sense of hierarchy, indicated in Hofstede's value system by a somewhat higher score on power distance, namely 40 versus 31 (ibid.:26). Like Norwegians, Americans value equality and informality, but the understanding of equality in corporate structure is far from identical in the two cultures. This can often lead to miscommunication.

**Norwegians and the French**

When it comes to difficulties in Norwegian-French relations, five respondents gave reasons such as the lack of foreign language skills in France or an unwillingness to use English (or German). An equal number of respondents mentioned their own lack of knowledge of French or language barriers in general as the causes of miscommunication or difficulties. Differences between French values and Norwegian values were mentioned by one respondent. Here are a few examples of comments on factors which make it difficult to communicate with the French:

a) "The French cannot speak English or German."
b) "Both concrete communication problems and cultural differences."
c) "The need in France to use time on developing the relationship before doing business."
d) "When the French only speak French."
e) "The language and French value systems."
The many comments about the French not being able to speak other languages than French, for instance a) and d), are quite interesting. Unfortunately, the comments reveal a degree of Norwegian ethnocentrism or "Anglophile ethnocentrism". It could be that the use of English as a lingua franca in Norway makes these Norwegians believe that it should be just as natural for the French to use English. This is ethnocentric in the sense that the position of the French language indirectly is made as marginal in the world as Norwegian. Obviously, this will not go down well in France. The French may of course be no less ethnocentric than the Norwegians, but it is a fact that the French language enjoys a position as one of Europe's major languages. For Norwegian businesspeople who want to increase their chances of success in France, it might be a very good idea to accept that the French do not necessarily see English, and certainly not German, as natural choices of language.

With regard to comment c), we see an example of a typical difference between Norwegian and French attitudes to business. First of all, the Norwegians are more monochronic than the French, which among other things means more emphasis on sequential time, schedules and plans (Hall, 1959). According to Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, "the cultures concerned with sequential time tend to see relationships as more instrumental" (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1997:131). Some other indications of the emphasis on relationships could be that France in many respects is more high-context than Norway. According to Edward T. Hall, "the French as a rule are much more involved with their employees and with their customers and clients as well" (Hall, 1976:109). Moreover, ascribed status (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1997:102) would be more important than what most Norwegian businesspeople are used to from the United States or Scandinavia.

All these factors could help explain why it often is more interesting for the French to spend some time getting to know their business partners before doing business. Norwegians often feel that "time is money" and that efficiency means spending as little time as possible talking about other things than the business issues and spending as little time as possible away from the negotiation table, for instance on having lunch. The French, on the other hand, are known to use logic and analyze all aspects of an issue extensively. Furthermore, the meeting itself is definitely not the only important arena for business. According to Richard Lewis, the French "rarely make important decisions inside the meeting" (Lewis, 1996:203). Thus they find that time spent with business partners, for example over a meal, is an integral part of the negotiations.

How Norwegians believe they are perceived by others
The survey had a question about what impression the companies/organizations thought people from other cultures had of Norwegians and Norwegian companies in a business context. The categories were "very positive", "generally posi-
"Somewhat negative", and "negative". 5% had no response to this question, whereas 6% answered "somewhat negative". However, 8% answered "very positive" and 81% of the respondents felt that "generally positive" was the most accurate description. Although there was no truly neutral category to choose from, the answers suggest that Norwegians have a good self-image.

The respondents who answered "somewhat negative" when asked this question were also asked to comment on this. One respondent claimed that "Norwegians focus on themselves and nobody else", whereas another respondent wrote that "Norwegians may be perceived as being honest and serious, but may also frequently be perceived as being too informal, too dull/rural, and maybe too naive". These respondents may be close to the way many business partners actually perceive the Norwegians in a business context. According to Elizabeth Su-Dale, "Norwegians can be guilty of narrow parochialism, which makes them imagine that what they know is best" (Su-Dale, 1995:195). It may also be parochialism which can make Norwegians come across as naive in many situations. As Su-Dale writes, "Norwegians perhaps are still traders rather than marketeers ..." (ibid.:191). Furthermore, many statements have been made about "rural" Norwegians who may be perceived as dull. Tord Larsen claims that a Norwegian is no homo ludens (Larsen, 1984:21). The reason can be a strong sense of primary responsibilities in life and a transparent society which makes it more difficult to break or bend strict social norms, at least without having alcohol to blame for any "mishaps".

Stumbling blocks of intercultural communication

In 1940 W.G. Sumner introduced the term ethnocentrism in the study of culture and defined it as "the technical name for the view of things in which one's own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it" (Samovar et al., 1998:46). The respondent above who claimed that "Norwegians focus on themselves and nobody else" is in other words targeting Norwegian ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism is definitely one of the stumbling blocks in intercultural communication.

LaRay M. Barna has identified six major "stumbling blocks in intercultural communication" (Barna, 1991:345-353): (1) Assuming similarity, (2) language difference, (3) nonverbal misinterpretation, (4) preconceptions and stereotypes, (5) the tendency to evaluate, and (6) high anxiety. The tendency to evaluate (5) and the tendency to evaluate based on one's own values (ethnocentrism) must necessarily represent problems in intercultural communication. In general, a very positive self-image on the part of Norwegians can be an asset, but combined with ethnocentrism it can also be a sign of a slight superiority complex.

The answers in the survey seem to confirm that there is a tendency to assume similarity. According to Barna, misunderstanding may occur because "some people naively assume there are sufficient similarities among peoples of the
world to make communication easy" (ibid.:345). Naturally, assuming similarity is easier the more surface similarity there is between the source culture (C1) and the target culture (C2). For Norwegians, the surface and language similarities between the Scandinavian countries sometimes represent a trap. Most respondents in the survey nevertheless feel that it is fairly unproblematic to communicate with for instance the Swedes. There is no reason to doubt that this is true, but as it turns out, even when Scandinavians sit down to do business, the "deep structures" of the cultures and corporate structures can prove to be quite different. We could perhaps say that Sweden and Norway are 99% the same, but they differ in some important respects.

Educational implications
The past few decades have seen a greater focus on cultural differences in education, and there is evidence that such knowledge has filtered through to more areas of society than ever before. The findings in the survey clearly show that the emphasis on cultural awareness and intercultural communication is justified. It is evident that many of the respondents look upon communication simply as a matter of putting the right words together. This could partly be a result of the way language courses are taught both at school and elsewhere. In education at all levels it is advantageous to focus even more on source culture (C1) and target culture (C2) when the source language (L1) and target language (L2) are discussed. It is crucial for people to be aware of cultural differences which are reflected in behavior and discourse patterns. As Michael Clyne states: "The cultural area with its communicative style and especially the Kommunikationsbund provide a powerful argument for the culture rather than the language determining discourse patterns - there are areal communalities in both the discourse patterns and the value systems underlying them" (Clyne, 1984:198).

This does not mean that language barriers in a strict sense should be underestimated. Although as few as 4% of the Østfold companies/organizations in this survey had avoided new markets or avoided dealing with another culture as a direct result of language barriers, the survey shows that there is a need for better language skills and knowledge of verbal communication. 78% of the companies/organizations responded that they had not avoided new markets or avoided dealing with another culture. This means that most companies/organizations seem to find ways in which they can approach new markets. However, as the survey shows, the will to approach people from other cultures does not mean that the companies are able to overcome language and/or cultural barriers. On the contrary, there are examples of Norwegians who assume too much similarity, and who struggle with language problems, preconceptions, stereotypes, and ethnocentrism.

There is no simple solution for avoiding the stumbling blocks of intercultural communication. However, there is no doubt in my mind that increasing aware-
ness of cultural differences and intercultural communication training will help. In this Østfold survey only 16% of the respondents answered "yes" when asked if there were people in the company or organization with formal training in the field of intercultural communication. When asked to give more details about the courses, it turned out that very few of these courses lasted more than a few days. 15% of the companies/organizations in the sample said they did not know whether they had people with formal training within this field of study or not, whereas 69% said "no".

More theoretical education in intercultural communication will not prevent people from "stumbling" in the beginning of their careers. However, I think they will more easily discover why they have "stumbled", reflect on the situation, and be able to adjust their attitudes and their behavior more rapidly. Sometimes the results may not be very different, but the ability to adjust to a situation quickly rather than slowly can also mean the difference between success and failure. That is exactly why intercultural communication skills are so important.

Bibliography


