

LEVELS OF CULTURE AND BARRIERS IN ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

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Abstract:

In an organization, the communication problems may occur even if the employees come from the same nation. The individual is influenced by multiple levels of culture, each of them contributing in some way to shaping his cultural identity. National culture, which exerts the greatest influence, may be the basis for creating the cohesion in the organization, beside other values-as its instrument, if it is not the case of a multicultural company. In the latter case, managers are tasked to develop a strong organizational culture, able to ensure the employees' integration and organization's adaptation to the environment. The objectives of this article consist in presentation and descriptions of these levels of culture, as well as in suggestion of the induced influences. The qualitative analysis based on deductive-type explanations emphasizes that organizational communication barriers are generated by these levels of culture that, through specific combinations, induce differences between individuals.

Key words: cultural barriers, organizational communication, levels of culture

JEL classification: M19, Z1

INTRODUCTION

The employees in an organization belong to particular different groups and categories at the same time. This can happen even within the organization, especially when we consider the human being as a whole and we perceive him as the result of influences manifested over time. These influences come from various levels of culture, as follows (Hofstede, 1996):

- National level, depending on country or countries (for people who migrated during their lifetime);
- Regional and / or ethnic and / or religious and / or linguistic affiliation level, because most nations are composed of different cultural and / or ethnic and / or religious and / or linguistic regions;
- Gender level, depending on the person's gender;
- Generation level, which separates the parents' generation from the children's etc.;
- Level of social class, associated with educational opportunities, occupation or profession;
- Organizational level, depending on how employees have been socialized into the organization process of their work (Hofstede, 1996).

Cultural influences, from several levels, lead to differences between the individuals' perceptions, creating barriers in communication in general, and in the organizational communication in particular.

ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION - MANIFESTATION FIELD OF CULTURAL INFLUENCES

Although the organizational culture is intended to be a tool for the company's management, through which consensus and full integration of employees are achieved, experts admit that the employees do not enter disarmed culturally in the organization, and there are many levels of culture that influence them. Even if we make reference to an organization that has employees from its own country, communication problems still occur. There is, indeed, a common background, consisting in specific elements of national culture, but also differences, which are particular combinations of the characteristics described by other levels of culture. Problems are manifested more pointed in

multicultural organizations, because of the differences that arise from the national cultural level and whose influence is stronger on individuals.

Below we describe each level of culture in order to identify its influence on the members of an organization, but also the problems that may occur due to the barriers it induces.

- **National culture** refers to the culture of a country. It is the level with the highest influence on individuals, because that is especially acquired early in life, when the image on world is formed. The national culture is distinguished by its particular characteristics that transcend the sum of individual cultures of the groups that compose it. Although we may speak about a continuous evolution of this type of culture, changes are so slow, that they can be observed after several generations (Meier, 2004, p. 22-23). In case of multicultural companies, the barriers generated by the differences identified at this level raise the most numerous problems. This happens also due to the occurred language problems.

Nationality reveals specific features of communication at the working place, induced by values that guide the choices of individuals. These grouped values correspond to some *dimensions of cultural specificity* or to some *orientations of societal values*. The bigger the differences between values of individuals' national cultures, the more likely to occur misunderstandings in the organizational communication.

- A particular influence on individuals is also manifested by **regional culture**. When we consider regional cultures we take into consideration several countries or parts of the same country. Regional cultural differences come from historical, geographical, political, ethnic, linguistic, religious, economic, etc. variations, manifested over time. Common elements that gather the members of a region lead to the appearance of some specific cultural features that may start cultural disagreements sometimes, even within the same country. The influence of regional culture on individuals from a particular country depends on the extent of its variations in relation to national culture. That is also a level of culture that leads to barriers in the organizational communication, and stereotypic descriptions can be an example of what differences' perception is. Obviously, devaluing stereotypes will lead to communication barriers.

- More ethnicities can live together on a national territory, as one ethnic group may be located on different national territories. **Ethnicity** designates a group of people who claims to have a common origin, a name (*ethnonym*) and a common cultural tradition. Its members are aware they share the same language, same territory and same history (Lapouge, cited Ferreol and others, 2005, p. 283). Each ethnic group is characterized by attitudes, behaviours and positions regarding action, which, in contrast to those of other ethnic groups, lead to new barriers in the organizational communication. There are stereotypes at this level that reflect intolerance, discrimination, unacceptance of alterity.

- The **linguistic affiliation** offers other distinctive features that may sharpen new levels of culture, generating barriers in the organizational communication.

Language as externalization and mean of forming the spiritual specificity of nations (Humboldt, 2008) is the central element of language, ensuring understanding between individuals of the same culture. It determines the manner of thinking, the logic schemes, the nature of reasoning, the preference for a particular type of communication, the accuracy, the acting position. Each language is actually a gnosiological-type grid that can alter the perception upon the environment, cause of the misunderstandings that occur.

Cultural differences related to linguistic affiliation refer not only to the language, but all the idiom related elements. Saussure (1998) distinguishes between idiom (as a possibility to use a language), language (as a set of signs used by a community) and speech (as a speaker's formulation in a particular language). All these reflect possible areas of building barriers within the organizational communication.

- **Religion** is one of the cultural levels that influence the individuals. This level is particularly important as influence on individual, its values corresponding to the deepest field of values in the human soul. Blunders can be easily produced by ignorance at this level, with the most

devastating effects. Often it is indicated to avoid topics on religious subjects, especially when the collocutor's opinions are not known

With reference to this level, we further present the criteria of differentiation related to religion as a factor determining a certain cultural specificity, which may suggest areas where problems may occur in the organizational communication. In Table 1 we present the main characteristics that describe two distinct religious universes (Thery, 2002, p. 225-241).

Table 1 - Main features in the monotheistic and samsaic universe

Criterion	Monotheism	Buddhism and Hinduism
Person/group	- the person matters; - individual responsibility;	- the family matters; - transmigration leads to the decrease of individual responsibility;
Time	- important, valorous;	- it does not matter;
Hierarchy	- equal people, same rights;	- fair disparity, according to actions from the past lives;
Economic involvement	- the production effort is seen as unit of measurement;	- it appears the moral of relinquishment, of cancellation of desire.

Adaptation [A.N.O.] cited Thery, 2002;

- Another criterion that may stay at the basis of a cultural demarcation is the **gender**. Gender differences are not usually described in cultural terms (Hofstede, 1996, p. 33), but in every society exists a feminine culture and male culture. Women and men have different symbols, specific ones, which may make the traditional roles of gender be hardly interchangeable in some societies, or, on the contrary, easily. There are labels that were traditionally attached to the individual in society. The differences are developed in early childhood and they are emphasised in school period, as a result of the groups formed between the members of the same gender. Variations towards the world are induced through these groups. For example, the manner in which the two genders perceive the present in relation to the future varies: for men it is important what they do, for women it is important what they are (Hall, 1992). Similarly, at the level of language, which reflects the social role: women consider communication as the essence of relationships, while men perceive it as a form they exercise control, they keep or demonstrate their independence, they improve their status (Mulvaney, 1994). Hence, men and women have different communication styles, reflected by different objectives and strategies. We talk, therefore, by examples of different perceptions, which lead to communication barriers.

- **Generation** is another criterion of demarcation of new levels of culture, with influence on individual's behaviour. There are well-known disputes, controversies that arise between generations, due to different mentalities. At the organizational level a reticent attitude towards newcomers occurs quite often, thus problems of status and experience raise barriers to communication.

An important factor that contributes to the difference between generations is the technological progress. It should be recognized that, at least in the last half century, progress was impressive, affecting lifestyle, manner of solving the tasks at work, etc. Employees with seniority in the organization, with fewer skills in information technology perceive young people as a threat to their jobs. In this regard we mention that specific research revealed that the American workforce, early this century, came from four different generations, situation that caused problems at work (*The Silent Generation, The Baby Boomers, Generation X, The Millennial Generation* – see Stanciu, Ionescu, 2005, p. 63).

- **Social class** can be considered as cultural level or criterion of demarcation of *some* cultures within a culture. Stratifications made upon social class have three elements: *similarity of the ways of working, living and thinking; consistency and coherence in time; sense of belonging and solidarity* (Halbwachs, cited Ferreol and others, 2005, p. 128). There are close links between these

elements (for example, the income level determines choices related to career, marriage / partner, area / district of residence).

Social class, *defined as the position in the hierarchy of society, guided by the economic criteria (income level, ownership, accumulations), education, occupation, system of values, attitudes, language and forms of expression, lifestyle* (Jandt, 2007, p. 16; Urse(1)) affects individuals. There are studies (EVS - European Values Survey) that reflect differences induced by this level. According to them, superior social position is associated with positive attitudes towards gender roles, marriage, abortion and euthanasia, environmental policies, support for democratic institutions, intrinsic motivation, and work ethic. Economic elite (managers and owners) is more conservative than the cultural elite (professional workers). Lower social position is characterized by higher levels of religiosity and egalitarianism. The educational variable induces also differences: the more educated people support gender equality more; they are more secular, more post-materialist, more tolerant with immigrants and more intrinsically motivated (Vasile, 2008, p. 374). Professional identity, based on secondary socialization, through which is acquired specialized knowledge relating to a given field of activity, with a specific language and a symbolic world, is required in other elements of specificity, with impact on individuals, inclusive at the level of organizational communication.

For Romania, these categories appear in various forms. We illustrate one of the formulas considered relevant to understanding the approached issues (Urse, *cited works*): *the upper class* (successful entrepreneurs, bankers, managers of large companies, famous successful lawyers, famous doctors with outstanding professional achievements, some representatives of intellectual elite); *middle class* (businessmen, entrepreneurs, managers, traders, clerks, technicians, university graduates) *working class, peasantry, lower class*.

• **Organizational culture (corporate culture)** is another level of culture with a recognized influence on the individual who is analysed, this time, from the activities and working relationships' point of view. There are different definitions of the organizational culture and we do not intend to develop a deeper analysis on different perspectives from which the concept is discussed; that is the reason we further reference only to few definitions that describe the general meaning.

By organizational culture we understand "all the references and records shared in the organization and developed along the company's history in response to the environmental problems and internal cohesion that are brought in it" (Thevenet, *cited Zaiț*, 2002), "system of representations and values shared by all members of the company" (Lemaître, *cited Zaiț*, 2002), "the specific way of thinking, feeling and acting that people in an organization have learned, as a result of all the procedures designed by managers, but also the influence of the social environment in which they have lived and have been formed"(Nica, Iftimescu, 2004). Because the organizational communication is the main issue, it is evident that the procedures, rules, organizational practices related to it will influence the employees. It is important that by organizational culture to encourage values such as tolerance / respect for diversity, flexibility, acceptance of the new, cooperation, orientation to learning.

From the above mentioned aspects, we notice that nationality is only a factor that leads to differences and when we refer to communication barriers, the linguistic code is only one of them. Other barriers come from the diversity of the axiological valorisation forms in the other cultures of the individual (the social, political and religious environment, the ethnic status, age and gender, etc.), cultures that define him, shape his identity and influence him in the communication process. Misunderstandings may occur due to differences manifested strictly in the communication plan (intonational and rhythmic codes, codes for non-verbal language, narrative codes, ritual codes, regionalisms, professional jargon, etc.), but also because of differences in attitudes, perceptions, thinking etc.

CULTURAL BARRIERS – CONSEQUENCES OF DIFFERENT LEVELS OF CULTURE

Describing the levels of culture that influence an individual, we attain the following findings:

- The national culture, the level with the highest influence on individuals, provides a common axiological basis to the individuals from the same country, having a unifying role;
- The action of other levels of culture "individualises", fragmentises, diversifies.

Important is the plan of discussion. If we consider organizational communication in companies whose employees belong to the same country or which operate in a single country, without business relationships that involve other national cultures, we may speak about that "value core" provided by the national culture. But, if it is about a multicultural company, differences related to national culture also intervene.

Which are the consequences of influences coming from these areas, influences that mark the communication behaviour of the employee? Differences appear at the level of perceptions, attitudes, behaviours, positions towards action and towards solutions. Moreover, stereotypes and prejudices that work towards those who are "different", but also the natural tendency to ethnocentrism, lead to barriers in organizational communication.

CONCLUSIONS

Different levels of culture with influence on the employee generate cultural barriers by the induced differences. It is important in organizations, managers be aware that employees have a cultural background which can lead to problems in communication. The national cultural background can be exploited to enhance consensus in organizations with employees from the same country. This is possible by using the organizational culture as an instrument of employees' induction. If the company's value system will consist of values compatible with the employees' ones, but also of new values, which ensure the company's performance in the specific field of activity and adaptation to the external environment, employees will identify a common ground with what they possess, but, at the same time, they will integrate new values, the same for all, developing thus the common axiological plan. Developing cultural sensitivity and skills on management of differences by the managers are ways to overcome cultural barriers. This should be considered not only in terms of internal organizational communication, but also for external communication. The conclusions remain also valid for the multicultural company, provided that, when employees belong to different cultures, the managers are tasked to develop a strong culture, able to ensure the integration in the organization and to adapt it to the external environment. Although differences lead to problems, we must not forget their positive role (access to a "wide range" of solutions) and that they can be valorised.

ENDNOTE

(1) Urse, L., *Clase sociale și stiluri de viață în România*, <http://www.scribd.com/doc/6810550/Clase-Sociale-i-Stiluri-de-Via-In-Romania>

AKNEWLEDGEMENT

This work was supported by the project "Post-Doctoral Studies in Economics: training program for elite researchers - SPODE" co-funded from the European Social Fund through the Development of Human Resources Operational Programme 2007-2013, contract no. POSDRU/89/1.5/S/61755.

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