Barriers to intercultural communication assignment

In today's competitive global economy, frequent cross-border movements of employees occur, resulting in a growing diversity at the workplace. As this trend takes place between cultures, breakdown in communication is inevitable. This is known as the barriers to intercultural communication. These barriers hinder effective communication and hold back globalization of the world. Seven barriers to intercultural communications have been identified and will be further discussed.

The following barriers consist of Anxiety; Assuming Similarity Instead of Difference; Ethnocentricity; Stereotypes and Prejudices; Nonverbal Misinterpretations; Language, and Modern Technology. The first barrier is the experience of high anxiety. This is especially common when one first steps into a new organisation or work environment in which he or she is totally unfamiliar with. People often feel more anxious when they are not aware of what they are expected to do and will subconsciously focus on their feelings more than the surroundings.

Thus, when people are in such situation, they may not pay attention to what others are saying or telling them. For instance, one may have experienced anxiety on the very first day in a new job. He may be too conscious of being new and out of place that causes him to focus so much of his attention on that feeling, that he makes common mistakes and appear awkward to others (Sagepub 2003). The second barrier is assuming similarity instead of difference. There are many differences between cultures thus one should not assume that everyone working in the same environment practise similar cultures.

Cultural difference is a sensitive issue and making assumptions can be dangerous. It can be apparent between individuals or within an organisation. Cultural difference between individuals exists because people are being brought up differently. The types of values and principles instilled to them when they were young shape the culture they adopt today. Cultural difference between organisations exists when one firm practises differently from another. For example, employees of a Singapore firm normally knock off from work punctually while employees of a Japanese firm would often stay back and work longer hours than they are required.

This is due to the different levels of attitude they possessed in their jobs. The Japanese tend to show more commitment to their jobs as compared to the locals. However, when one has no information about a new culture, it might make sense to assume that there are no differences and to behave like how he behaves in his home country. Nonetheless, each culture is different and unique to a certain extent (Sagepub 2003). Therefore, it is always better to ask than to assume. The third barrier is ethnocentrism. It can also be defined as judging another culture by one's own culture's standards.

When a person makes ethnocentric judgements, he believes that his culture is better than those of others and strongly believes in the superiority of his own culture. Everything in a culture makes sense if one understands it. In contrast, the extreme can take place if individuals were to experience " culture shock" (Sagepub 2003). This means that when they are exposed to a new culture, they may go through a stage where they consider the new

culture to be worse than their own culture and hence cannot agree or conform to it.

Taking the same scenario as the one used for the Japanese firm, assuming that a particular employee who used to work with an employer that is people-oriented were to switch to working with a Japanese boss who is demanding and task-oriented, will this employee be likely to adapt to the new culture? He may be required to work overtime everyday and this may be unacceptable to him as he may have other commitments like spending time with his family and kids. The fourth barrier to effective intercultural communication is stereotypes and prejudices.

This is one of the most dangerous barriers nowadays and is used to judge unfair and differential treatment. In present society, stereotypes and prejudices may occur between different races, religions and beliefs. This includes stereotypes between Muslims and Christians in country like Indonesia. In the past, there are prejudices against females. Many believe that females are less capable than men in most areas especially in the area of having both a successful career and family. However, this prejudice is no longer apparent in today's society.

People's perception has changed and the phenomenon of more females stepping into the workforce and becoming more successful than men has risen. They have proven to be as capable as men as they too can juggle between both work and family lives. Some are in fact more capable due to the higher level of education they pursued. This has in turn made them more knowledgeable and affluent. The fifth barrier is nonverbal misinterpretation.

People interpret nonverbal signs and symbols through the frame of reference of their own culture.

This can lead to misunderstanding when the signs or symbols are interpreted differently from the initial meaning. For instance, Asians are generally more conservative as compared to Westerners. A typical Chinese worker who has never for once been exposed to a western culture may find it outrageous for her new western boss to hug and kiss her on the cheek upon their first meeting. She will perceive that this act is too intimidating and will naturally think that her boss wants to take advantage of her thus putting her in an uncomfortable spot.

The sixth barrier is language. Although, in a business context, the English language dominates, this barrier is common in many workplaces. The three main components of language are slang, dialects and accents. A Chinese nationale may not comprehend what his western boss says and vice versa. This creates language barriers as the employee may only have limited literacy in English while the employer could not speak Mandarin to convey the message he wishes to bring across to her.

Even within the same language, there are different usages of certain words in diverse countries. Finally, the last barrier is the introduction of modern technology, especially the Internet. This easier access and cheaper choice of communication has not only provided convenience to people worldwide but also help speed up globalisation. However, the pervasive use of Short Message Service (SMS) and emails among individuals can also bring about cultural catastrophe.

This is so as the expressions of the recipients cannot be seen but only visualized through assumptions made. Therefore, the ease of communicating through these electronic tools eliminates formality and business etiquette that leads to a breakdown in communication (Sagepub 2003). In conclusion, the various barriers to intercultural communication are certainly costly to the multinational enterprise in terms of workplace relations, returns and revenues, customer relationship and the firm's competitive advantages (Sagepub 2003).