

The Struggles to Communicate Among Diverse Work Teams in Korean Companies

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ABSTRACT

In today's world global trade and FTA's are increasing the demand to get a better understanding of diverse backgrounds. International companies in Korea are no different; to improve their competitiveness worldwide they have recently begun increasing the number of foreign employees at their head offices in Seoul. Over the years there have been many studies conducted on diversity but most were in an already diverse area like Europe or North America. This paper was focused on the homogenous society of Korea with the objective of getting a better understanding of foreigners' communication with their Korean colleagues. The research was done through in-depth interviews with eight foreigners working in human resources departments in Seoul at Korean multinational headquarters. The research focused on areas like communicating in a second language and the importance of activities outside the office. The results showed that being involved in activities outside of the work place with colleagues was vital to communication. They also showed that the problems occurring from second language speakers are more affected by the company culture than Korean culture.

Keywords: South Korea, Communication, Diversity, Teams

1. INTRODUCTION

While conducting research for Effects of Increased Diversity on Job Satisfaction in Korean Multinationals in Korea (Nelson, 2014), there was too much information to compile it into one paper. After the research process was finished, it was determined by the researcher to separate the information into two papers based on job satisfaction and workplace communication. This was done to make the information both more easily understood and better suited for further research.

This paper is a follow-up to the paper, Effects of Increased Diversity on Job Satisfaction in Korean Multinationals in Korea (Nelson, 2014). It explores the effect diversity has on communication in a homogenous organization. It is not meant to undermine other research, but to provide a new point of view. Currently, most of the research on diversity is conducted in North America or Europe, and these societies naturally provide people with many opportunities to interact with coworkers from a large variety of backgrounds. In the case of South Korea, however, this traditionally homogenous country has only recently begun to welcome foreigners into the headquarters of their companies.

The purpose of this paper is to present an alternative view of how communication is effected when foreigners are placed into a homogeneous organization.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Organizational diversity and performance

The past few decades have seen an explosion of studies on cross-cultural communication and its effectiveness (e.g., Kealey & Protheroe, 1996; Redmond & Bunyi, 1991; Samovar & Porter, 1991), but the correlation between the two lacks evidence and past research shows that the relationship between entho-cultural diversity and performance is even more difficult to understand (Hoiher Saphiere, 1996; Wiseman & Shuter, 1994, Ng & Tung, 1998).

The term “diversity” is often thrown around too casually, and so it is important to first establish a clear understanding of how it will be used in this paper. Numerous researchers have split the meaning of diversity into two core segments: there are easily distinguishable characteristics as well as those lying under the surface (Cummings, Zhou, & Oldham, 1993; Jackson, 1992; Jackson, May, & Whitney, 1995). Distinguishable characteristics include gender, race, ethnic background, and age. Those under the surface are related to duration in the organization, personality, education, values, skills, and socioeconomic accomplishments (Cummings et al., 1993; Jackson et al, 1995; Tsui, Egan, & O'Reilly, 1992).

2.2 The Meaning of Diversity for this Research

The cognitive categorization model (Shaw, 1990) suggests that both managers and employees have culturally formed patterns which encourage them to interpret others' communication in specific ways. For example, one person's definition of a good manager or employee or how they view uncertainty can lead that person to misinterpret another's actions (Hofstede, 2013). Larkey (1996) defines misunderstanding as interpretation that distorts the content or intent of communication.

When an outsider is brought into a homogeneous organization, misunderstandings can appear to be the norm. It is important to understand the situation most Korean organizations face in trying to accommodate diversity. Most Korean organizations are basically monolithic organizations with a small number of minorities recruited from foreign nations. Due to the homogeneous atmosphere, little to no thought is given to issues of diversity (Larkey, 1996). The work teams are made up of employees from the dominant culture, leading to underdeveloped diversity. In this study, the foreigners are from another country, in most cases from the West. This intensifies the problems resulting from miscommunication because of the extreme differences in values or beliefs, misunderstood communication tendencies, and linguistic patterns (Banks, Ge, & Baker, 1991; Coupland, Wiemann, & Giles, 1991; Graddol & Swann, 1989). These findings led to the propositions in the following section.

2.3 Propositions and Research Framework

The way in which people communicate is a fascinating occurrence; people don't communicate with everyone equally. For example, two people are talking when a third enters the room. The conversation immediately alters or even ends. Even though the situation consists of both verbal and non-verbal actions, the outcome is the same. The behavior can be discriminating between those of different ethnicity or gender, and can occur in multiple ways in groups (Larkey, 1996). The hope is that in a multinational company members will slowly acclimate to the diverse workforce over time and the inclusion of all members would be the norm (Fisek & Ofshe, 1973).

Hypothesis I: Successful communication in the workplace is dependent on successful communication outside of the workplace.

Hypothesis II: Misinterpretation of the English language by either the foreigners or the Koreans slowly forces the Koreans to cut off the foreigners, which leads to them being cut off from information completely.

3. METHODOLOGY

A qualitative method was chosen to get a firm understanding of foreigners' experiences with communication in a Korean workplace. It was decided that theoretical sampling would be the ideal fit as a form of qualitative research. It allows the researcher to gain a better grasp of a variety of independent sources of information.

The research started with an idea that resembled a hypothesis. To make up for this problem, data collection was conducted in sort of a backward fashion using the ground theory strategy. In-depth interviews were the key to building a database that could be used to symbolize the broader research obstacle to provide better methods (Patterson & Bae, 2013). After the interviews were conducted, the ground theory was implemented to find the dominating thoughts throughout the research (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009).

The method selected depends on the development of constrained theories from the data; this will then point the research in a new direction and a new theory to target (Patton, 2002; Marshall, 1996). The sample consisted of lower-level employees of South Korean multinational companies, *chaebol*, with their headquarters located in Seoul, South Korea. The unique distinction of the sample was they were not executive-level employees; it was vital to the research that daily, real-life exposure to the subjects occurred regularly. It is believed these stakeholders held the most knowledge of the situation. All the in-depth interviews occurred between June and September of 2013.

3.1 Data Collection and Final Sample

The researcher wanted to find foreigners that were considered experts on the subject, but it was most important that the interviewees had a good understanding of other

foreigners' experiences as well as their own. For this reason, interviewees were asked to expand as much as possible on each answer and to focus on their experience as an expert and not personal feelings. Each interview was conducted at either a restaurant or coffee shop near their workplace in Seoul, Korea. The interviews averaged forty-five minutes in length and notes were written on a notepad. The interviews began with the interviewer explaining the purpose of the interview and a follow-up at the end to avoid any potential misunderstandings.

3.2 Respondent Demographics

There were eight stakeholders interviewed for this project, and each member was a foreigner and of non-Korean descent. They consisted of one Indian, four Americans, and three Canadians. To be considered an expert on the topic, each stakeholder was required to hold a master's degree, work in human resources, have worked a minimum of two years in Korea at a Korean *chaebol*, and not be the lone foreigner in their office.

3.3 Data Analysis

It is important to remember the role Korean culture plays in the answers. *The Hofstede Center* provides a great explanation of Korea as a collectivist society. The center explains that a "collectivist society is based on strong relationships where everyone takes responsibility for fellow members of their group. In collectivist societies an offence leads to shame and loss of face, employer/employee relationships are perceived in moral terms (like a family link), hiring and promotion decisions take account of the employee's in-group, management is the management of groups" (Hofstede, 2013).

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Communication among Colleagues

One of the first questions asked during the interview was "How much does communication matter in terms of feeling a part of the group?" Most of the interviewees pointed out the obvious in that communication breakdowns lead to massive problems. If people have this connection they will be more willing to put in the extra effort later to help one another.

One interviewee explained that their company realized the importance of open communication, and so had hired interpreters to be available to the foreign employees. On paper this appeared like a great plan, but after digging a bit deeper it was discovered that nobody trusted the interpreters. The Korean staff began to orchestrate fake meetings for the benefit of the foreign employees and their interpreters. Meetings in which real decisions were made were held secretly. Even when the foreign employees were present at real meetings, they still felt left out because of communication problems. The company's efforts had backfired, leaving the foreign employees even more isolated than before.

Another interviewee pointed out that communication is based on trust. The Korean staff at their company didn't share information, work or personal stories with the foreigners out of fear that they would tell employees higher up in the company. They said the Korean staff worried that because foreigners are more comfortable interacting with management, they have more opportunities to make their Korean peers look bad. The lack of communication pushed them out of the group.

The next question was "How important is it to join colleagues out for dinner and drinks?" An interviewee said in Korean culture communication in the workplace is not as important as communication outside of the workplace. One interviewee gave a reply that summarized all the others' perfectly when she said what causes problems for foreigners and communication is that a lot of it takes place after work, either at dinners or drinking establishments. She pointed out that most foreigners come from cultures that do not put an emphasis on dinner and drinking time (*wheyshik*). She even said how it could even be argued that in some cultures this is looked upon as a negative activity instead of a positive one. This misunderstanding puts a roadblock in the way of their opportunities to communicate with their colleagues.

One interviewee said that it is very important, going to lunch, having a sounding board; it makes everything easier during the day. Another person said gave a story about trust issues and said this is the only time a foreigner can try and win over the trust of their colleagues. The last person interviewed said trust isn't built at work; it is built outside of work over drinks.

4.2 Communication in a Second Language

The other focus was on how many of the communication problems exist because of different backgrounds. It is important to remember even native speakers sometimes have difficulty trying to communicate with one another. The teams in question are trying to communicate within a group of non-native speakers from different parts of the world.

It was asked "Do Korean colleagues lose patience because of misunderstandings?" One interviewee said a big problem is that Koreans and foreigners both speak English but attach different meanings to the same word. They then said this constant misunderstanding leads Koreans to slowly lose their patience when trying to explain tasks. The third interviewee had a similar answer and said over time, the Koreans start doing everything themselves instead of using the energy it takes to explain it to the foreigner. The result is the foreigner becomes isolated from the group, outside of the communication loop.

One interviewee said they see the foreigners slowly cut off and then the foreigner becomes too timid to ask for help with tasks throughout the day. They don't want to become a burden to their Korean colleagues. Two of the interviewees said something similar and very interesting; they said a lot has to do with the company culture, not just

Korean culture. Company culture, exerts a stronger influence, so companies with a rigid culture have employees with little to no patience whereas companies with looser cultures allow employees to have more freedom, and the lack of pressure leads to employees having more patience. This gives everyone the time needed to overcome difficulties.

The last interviewee said their company regularly has cultural education to try and prevent this type of situation from happening. They talked about how their company recognized this problem and are educating both the Koreans and the foreigners on methods to overcome the issue. Their company feels that both the foreigners and the Koreans on staff need to learn how to communicate across the gaps created by cultural differences.

The first interviewee pointed to lack of education too, explaining that company executives often simply throw a foreigner onto a team of Korean employees. Both groups are then expected to figure out on their own how best to work with their teammates while also performing various tasks for the group. The amount of pressure on the Korean employees is generally very high, as well, and so they take it out on the foreigner by simply cutting them off. I thought one interviewee said it something interesting, Korean staff are set up to fail in this all-too-common situation

5. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper was to find if increasing the number of foreign employees has an effect on communication at the head offices of Korean companies in Seoul. The paper was based around two hypothesis and it appears one was proven correct but the other remains incomplete. Spending time outside of work regularly with colleagues is critical to foreigners' communication during working hours. Foreigners need to make an effort to attend lunch, dinner, and after-work drinks as often as possible if they want to establish successful lines of communication during working hours. One interviewee summed it up as, *soju* (Korean vodka) is communication. This is a very important time to develop trust among their colleagues.

At first, the second hypothesis feels correct but after more thought appears to lack supporting evidence. As mentioned above, two interviewees brought up the idea that it could be just as much the company's culture as the country's culture. It also should be pointed out that employees need to learn how to work with different cultures through controlled education. To avoid these situations both foreigners and Koreans should be educated on how to work through communication problems.

Future studies should be conducted on two separate leads generated from these findings. The first question is, Does company culture play a role in foreigners being cut off from communication, and the second question is, Does cross-cultural education related to communication prevent this problem from arising?

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