



## **Leadership & Management—August 2010**

### **Synchronous Communication for Global Leaders**

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Although there is no question that the Internet has offered a wealth of knowledge, it has likewise contributed to overwhelming us with an abundance of information and not enough wisdom.<sup>1</sup> For instance, the Internet has clearly played an important role creating access for our industry to a global market. However, with this privilege comes the responsibility to develop cross-cultural communication skills to interact with foreign organizations and consumers collegially. Thus, while the technology has opened the door to opportunity, the knowledge necessary to adapt to new cultures will need to transform into wisdom that can endure globalization. Consequently, one of the shortfalls of the Internet, which will need to be overcome, is the pervasive use of the asynchronous communication it uses to transmit a message, which has essentially proven to weaken a global leader's ability to emotionally connect with people.<sup>2</sup> Hence, although the Internet is unquestionably beneficial to conducting business in a global environment, it has limitations that need to be addressed to enable our global leaders to effectively communicate across the cultures they encounter.<sup>3</sup>

#### **Empathetic Listening**

One aspect of cross-cultural communication that is often overlooked is empathetic listening. This communication aptitude was analyzed throughout the financial services industry and found to have a direct correlation to an investment advisor's client retention and earnings power, regardless of the country in which he/she resided.<sup>4</sup> For example, the research indicated that an investment advisor who empathetically listened to clients for seventy-five percent of their conversations retained twice as many clients and earned five times as much income as the investment advisor who listened to clients for twenty-five percent of their conversations. This unequivocally linked success to listening.<sup>5</sup>

#### **The Silent Language**

Edward Hall, the founding father of intercultural communication as an academic area of study, researched nonverbal communication in great depth by examining cultural issues, such as how people attend to multiple events and the complexity of the messages they used with one another.<sup>6</sup> For instance, Hall coined the term "polychronic" to describe an individual's ability to attend to multiple events simultaneously, in contrast to his term "monochronic," which referred to individuals and cultures who have a tendency to handle events sequentially.<sup>7</sup> Hall used this research to analyze the many ways in which people talk to one another without the use of words. In the financial services industry, it could provide our investment advisors with a deeper understanding of their clients' tendencies.

Another widely used aspect of Hall's research, which is still referenced today, is a culture's use of complexity and brevity within their routine communication. Hall defines a "high context" culture as one in which few words are used to communicate and the use of words and their meanings are more complex, whereas a "low context" culture is more explicit and the amount of words they use to communicate are more abundant.<sup>8</sup> Given a culture's tendency to use high context messages over low context messages, this choice of communication styles translates into a culture that caters more towards its in-groups, rather than outsiders.<sup>9</sup> Thus, when our global leaders strive to get acclimated to a foreign culture, it is imperative that they bear this in mind, and are very selective of the words they use and the context in which they use them. Hence, words and word choice become very important in higher context communication, since a few words can communicate a complex message very effectively to an in-group, whereas in a lower context culture, a global leader needs to be more explicit and the value of a single word is less important.<sup>10</sup>

### **Nonverbal Communication**

In order for a leader to achieve a global mindset, many experts in this field believe that they must be fluent in at least one additional language beyond their home dialect.<sup>11</sup> However, many nonverbal aspects also play an integral role with respect to the impact they have on cross-cultural leadership communication. For instance, in Edward Hall's research, he found that if a male stands within 12 inches of a male colleague when talking face-to-face in the United States, it is considered aggressive, whereas in Latin American cultures, this distance is considered normal.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, object communication (i.e. clothing, hairstyle) also play a prominent role when we are interpreting a message.<sup>13</sup>

### **Impact of Communication**

Although the exact percentage of influence may differ due to variables such as the perceptions or biases of the listener and the speaker, communication as a whole is meant to convey meaning and thus, in some cases, can be universal. Consequently, it is vital for global leaders to understand the nonverbal nuances of local cultures, as well as the language of the countries in which they desire to acclimate.<sup>14</sup> Thus, to accomplish this feat will require global leaders to attentively listen and empathize with the locals.<sup>15</sup>

The key elements of communication were studied in depth by Professor Mehrabian at UCLA, where he concluded that the impact of communication is broken down as follows:

- 55 percent of impact is determined by body language (i.e. posture, gesture, eye contact)
- 38 percent by the tone of voice
- 7 percent by the content or the words spoken<sup>16</sup>

Thus, the words spoken have the least impact while the body language and tone of voice have the greatest impact, which speak to the importance of synchronous communication.

## Recommendation

In order to address the key issues in cross-cultural leadership communication that Edward Hall's aforementioned research uncovered, as well as account for the limitations of Internet communication referenced in this article, it is strongly recommended that a global leader should use synchronous communication when possible. When considering the remarkable additional impact that the silent language (i.e. body language, verbal tone, concept of space, object communication, etc.) has and the further complexity of messages when interpreting a foreign culture, it is imperative for a global leader to have as much context to the communication received as possible in order to increase his or her effectiveness.

Thus, as an organization starts its journey into globalization, it would behoove it to develop a Cross-Cultural Communication Program for all leaders who will deploy into foreign cultures. In this program, it is vital for these leaders to "seek first to understand before trying to be understood."<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the global mindset they develop should teach them to understand other cultures, rather than judge them, and ask questions to learn, rather than making generalizations.<sup>18</sup> The key will be to enable their leaders to "see the world through others' eyes"<sup>19</sup> and to understand the language of the culture they seek in order to allow them to listen empathetically.<sup>20</sup> Likewise, this understanding must be learned at a local level along with language, cultural norms, law, and customs.<sup>21</sup>

In summary, if global leaders can focus their efforts to utilize more synchronous communication, it will not only improve their cross-cultural communication but will also improve their overall relationships, which in the end will translate into stronger leadership.

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