Intercultural communication between Chinese and Slovak managers

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Abstract
Recently the political, economic and educational contacts between the People’s Republic of China and the Slovak Republic have been intensified. Chinese language has been taught at the Slovak University of Agriculture since 2014. In order to overcome the cultural limits in the international business negotiations we will concentrate attention on the cross-cultural communication between Chinese and Slovak managers as the successful negotiations require the careful consideration of cultural differences and business etiquette. This article will focus on the behaviour at meetings, verbal and nonverbal communication including some useful suggestions to Slovak and Chinese negotiators involved in the intercultural business negotiations.

Key words: cross-cultural communication, cultural factors, intercultural business negotiations, verbal and nonverbal communication

JEL Classification: F16, I25

1. Introduction

"The 19th century belonged to England, the 20th century belonged to the US, and the 21st century belongs to China. Invest accordingly" (Warren Edward Buffett).

At the beginning we will concentrate attention on the conception of communication. Communication is generally understood as a process of information exchange. A message or communication is sent by the sender through a communication channel to a receiver, or to multiple receivers. The sender must encode the message (the information being conveyed) into a form that is appropriate to the communication channel, and the receiver(s) then decodes the message to understand its meaning and significance (http://www.skillsyouneed.com/general/what-is-communication.html).

With the trend of the economic globalization and integration, the international negotiators have met the challenges of different cultures during the process of international business negotiation. Cultural factors have often been ignored in making global marketing strategies and decisions. Therefore, some negotiators always commit the mistakes of seeing foreign cultures through their own habitual lenses, which leads to many missteps that can cost the company business. This means that the successful operation of negotiation requires careful consideration of cultural differences.

2. Data and Methods

Cultural diversity should be taken into account as an assumption of mutual understanding. R. Lewis (2006) claims that people of different cultures share basic concepts but view them from different angles and perspectives, leading them to behave in a manner which we may consider irrational or even in direct contradiction of what we hold sacred.
Intercultural communication refers to exchanging information between people from different cultures. It is defined as the situated communication between individuals or groups of different linguistic and cultural origins. This is derived from the following fundamental definitions: communication is the active relationship established between people through language, and intercultural means that this communicative relationship is between people of different cultures, where culture is the structured manifestation of human behaviour in social life within specific national and local contexts, e.g. political, linguistic, economic, institutional, and professional (http://www.lanqua.eu/theme/intercultural-communication).

According to Lewis (2006) international business apart from practical and technical problems, national psychology and characteristics frequently interferes at the executive level, where decisions tend to be more complex than the practical accords reached between accountants, engineers and other technicians.

Recently the political, economic, cultural and educational contacts between the People’s Republic of China and the Slovak Republic have been intensified. China is the world’s most populated country in the world with 1,406,000,000 inhabitants and its history goes back 5,000 years. Its culture spread itself over many centuries throughout East Asia. Chinese language has been taught at the Slovak University of Agriculture for two years. Since 2009 the Slovak and Chinese Chambre of Commerce has provided the consulting and counselling service connected to trading. As a result of this development more and more business meetings are held between the managers of these two countries.

The students of the Chinese language at our university are divided into two groups – intermediate and beginners according to their level of proficiency. Knowing Chinese Mandarin is a gateway to immerse them into one of the oldest and most fascinating cultures in the world and to be able to understand its vast cultural heritage. It is very helpful when doing business with Chinese locals and it helps to build better relations with Chinese partners.

In our paper we will use the method of comparison.

Lewis (2006) states that the superior Chinese values are as following:

- modesty,
- tolerance,
- filial piety, courtesy, thrift
- patience, respect for elderly
- sincerity, loyalty, family closeness, tradition
- trustworthiness, stoicism, tenacity, self-sacrifice, kindness
- moderation, patriotism, asceticism, diligence, harmony
- resistance to corruption, learning, respect for hiererchy
- generosity, adaptability, conscientiousness
- sense of duty, pride (no losing face)
- undemanding nature, friendship
- gratitude for favour
- impartiality, purity
- wisdom.
Confucianism has a strong influence on both the daily lives and business culture. The other factors which have impact on the behaviour of the Chinese are: Taoism with its insistence on a healthy lifestyle, vegetarianism and generosity of spirit, Buddhism emphasising harmony through meditation, Feng shui (wind and water) superstition, herbal medicine and acupuncture.

Lewis (2006) gives the characteristics of the Slovak values:

- respect for education, closeness to nature,
- love of music and sport, attachment to folklore, folk art,
- defense of the Slovak nation and culture, epicureanism,
- rather religious (marriage, baptism, funerals), attachment to popular traditions,
- lack of self-confidence, sense of historical victimization,
- sensitivity to criticism.

2.1 Verbal communication

“The term verbal communication comes from the Latin word *verbum* – a word and means speaking, communication through words, language in which certain individuals have a common structure of knowledge“ (Nagyová et al. 2012).

The official language in China is standard Chinese, which is derived from the Mandarin dialect. In this country with its numerous population people are speaking many different dialects. The Chinese perceive their language as a cultural tool that has the important impact on Japan, Korea and Southeast Asia and also as an instrument which served for the transmission of cultural values.

In the company culture in China seniority is valued bearing in mind that age brings seniority which means the older executive is the higher position he can take. Subordinates are expected to be told what to do. Consensus is generally highly appreciated in China. The Chinese are courteous and kind interlocutors. They usually do not contradict your opinion. If the Chinese speakers want to express any criticism, they do it indirectly.

Politeness is an interesting research theme in the study of intercultural communication, sociolinguistics, psychology, and pragmatics. Fundamentally, politeness is an expression of concern for the feelings of others. Different cultural and linguistic groups express politeness in different ways. The closest Chinese equivalent to the English word politeness is Limao. The word Limao is derived from the old Chinese word——Li. The classical notion of Li formulated by Confucius (551-479B.C.), whose influence remains strong to this day. Denigrating self and respecting others remain at the core of the modern concept of Limao. To the Chinese, businessmen’s style of communication is the politest one. They often use positive commitment, recommendation and guarantee, however, they use threats, orders and warning remarks less. In their polite talking style, the most outstanding factor is that they usually do not use “No”, “You” or facial gaze, but often maintain a moment of silence.

Lewis (2006) explains that in the speech of the Slovak managers there is a certain tendency toward vagueness, and the talk can often be ambiguous. This is because the participants of negotiations are non-confrontational and dislike saying anything that might offend the listener.

2.2 Nonverbal communication

“In this context it is interesting to mention usage and perception of the nonverbal symbols in accordance with the neurolinguistic programming. This theory originates from the basic premises related to the differenciated (i.e. conscious and subconscious) perception of the nonverbal signals and their complex, however, individual interpretation and the subjective
perception in the contextual and situation relations“ (Klincková, 2011, Documents\20and\20Settings/User/My\20Documents/Downloads/Neverbálna\20komunikácia.pdf).

Nonverbal communication means expressing ideas and feelings by facial expressions, gestures, movements, i.e. body language. Before entering any business negotiation it is advisable to acquire body language of your business partners, otherwise it can cause many misunderstandings.

We will show some typical Chinese examples of body language.

If you put your right hand on the position of the heart means it "sincere promise". Covering mouth with palm is the sign of self-satisfaction. Two hands joined express thankfulness and wishing good fortune. Touching hair means hesitation and confrontation with difficult problems. Touching cheek with the index finger is the sign that the person looks down on you, which is a kind of insulting gesture (http://www.ling.gu.se/~biljana/gestures2.html#dead).

The Slovak managers usually try to keep the eye contact with their business partners. It means that they are interested in them and the eye contact evokes trustworthiness. Crossed arms are the signs of defense and opposition. A palm covering mouth means a person wants to hide something, also uncertainty and embarrassment (http://www.ligsuniversity.sk/e-zin/rec-tela-aka-gesta-pouzivat-aby-ste-p-sobili-sebavedomo/).

2.3 Business negotiations

2.3.1 Space and time

In China the population density is low. However, the big cities are crowded. During conversation the Chinese keep the distance of more than one meter and they are extremely punctual, as they do not want to waste their business partners’ time. In China, it is a serious offense of business etiquette to be late and your hosts will be greatly annoyed.

The businesspeople in Slovakia try to have the distance within the social zone of 1.25 – 1.5 m from their counterparts. Good managers are always on time for meetings and negotiations. Slovaks and Czechs are considered to be more punctual than most Slavs.

2.3.2. Behaviour at meetings

1) It is necessary to make appointments one or two weeks in advance with the Chinese officials. The Chinese prefer the formal business meetings, bearing in mind the formal business dress code. Conservative suits for men with subtle colors are the norm. Women should avoid high heels and short sleeved blouses. The Chinese frown on women who display too much. Subtle, neutral colors should be worn by both men and women (http://www.cyborlink.com/besite/china.htm).

2) Bowing or nodding is the common greeting; however, you may be offered a handshake. Wait for the Chinese to offer their hand first. At the beginning they will hand their business cards to anybody present in the room. Present and receive cards with both hands. When given a business card, do not stuff it into your pocket or wallet. Inspect it carefully and hold it along the edges in a respectful manner. Place it into a business card case or on the table in front of you. Introductions are formal and formal titles should be used. Seating is always hierarchical.

3) Lewis (2006) emphasizes that the senior man must be shown great respect and attention all times, even though he takes little part; the deputy or vice chairman is often the decision maker. The real decisions are not made during the meeting but elsewhere. The pace of negotiations is slow and politeness is observed at all times. Confrontation and loss of face must be avoided. A collective spirit prevails. Decisions have a long-term orientation. Negotiations in China are
important social occasions during which one fosters relationships and decides if the people on the other side of the table are suitable partners for the long run. The Chinese dislike eagerness to sign a contract. They prefer mutual trust in the long term. In negotiating process, they avoid friction; put the friendship on the first consideration. What they want is permanent friendship and cooperation.

4) The Chinese do not use large hand movements. Most of Chinese do not like to speak with their hands. Your movements may be distracting to your host.

5) During the business dinners, when approaching the table, wait for your hosts to begin sitting; there is a hierarchical method to sitting. You will usually be seated on the right of your Chinese host, who will always serve you first. You should try all the delicacies from the table without leaving any dish empty. It can be surprising for the Slovak managers to hear their Chinese counterparts slurp and make all sorts of noises when eating. It is also advisable to try using chopsticks. Do not place your chopsticks on the bowl; this is considered bad luck. Also, do not stick them straight up in the food.

6) Bringing a gift is seen by the Chinese culture as an act of respect and gratefulness. Exchange of gifts between the companies should only be done after all negotiations are concluded. Here are some of the acceptable gifts: a fine pen except color red, a fine liquor or wine, solar calculators, eight of anything or food items. You also need to avoid giving gifts such as clocks; four of anything; scissors, knives or sharp objects; and gifts wrapped in black or white. Quality writing pens as considered favored gifts. The most acceptable gift is a banquet.

7) Chinese taboos involve egotism, loudness, arrogance, lack of consideration and any form of boasting. Regarding modesty as a virtue, the Chinese respect modest people, and dislike conceited and arrogant fellows. Therefore, over-stressing oneself might lead to the aversion of the Chinese when dealing with them.

“Be patient, everywhere and always!” this is the most important advice when making deals with the Chinese partners. The Europeans try to finish everything as soon as possible, effectively, without any delays. They think that some minutes of tardiance can lead to the enormous loss. On arrival to China many Europeans lose patience if the contract is not signed at the second meeting, which is a serious mistake (http://www.manazerskecentrum.sk/clanok/ezisk-10-odporucani-na-obchodne-rokovanie-s-cinskym-partnerom.htm).

During the business meetings the Slovaks are normally polite and courteous and they wish to learn therefore they are attentive listeners. They rarely interrupt a foreigner and they admire daring and interesting conversationalists. Meetings in the Slovak companies are held in a rather formal manner, using the titles until people get to know each other well. The formal dress code is also required. In the seating arrangements hierarchy is respected. Slovaks usually follow Central European courtesies in diplomatic communication. They are tenacious in negotiating, but not forceful. A warm and personal approach is appreciated too. The typical gifts which can be appreciated are the presents with a company logo, expensive pens, a bottle of fine alcohol and business dinner.

3. Results and Discussion

The managers who want to be successful in foreign markets have to be aware of the local characteristics that affect the way business is done. The insight as to what to emphasize and what to avoid during the business interactions between the Chinese and Slovak managers can result in long-term and efficient cooperation based on the mutual respect and trustworthiness. The counterparts should take into consideration their partners’ values, priorities, behaviour,
perception of time and space. It is also vital to become familiar with the principles of verbal and nonverbal communication of the business partners.

4. Conclusion

Our objective is to help Slovak and Chinese negotiators learn to work together more efficiently with mutual respect and gain the ultimate prizes. To move dealings to the next level, the Slovaks and Chinese need to understand the cultural contexts of Chinese and Slovak business styles. For Slovaks eager to do business in China, here is the last word: Move now, and learn the rules of the game by developing the relationship needed to grow your business there. Do not expect immediate results. Old friendships work their magic through time; every year invested in China now will pay off in the future — because in a world of millennia-old memories, relationships of the moment need long and patient nurturing.

References


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