

# Role of Cultural Sensitivity in International Business Communication and a Case Study of Kenya

Samson Nyarondia

Assistant Lecturer, Rongo University, Rongo - Kenya

---

**Abstract:** The viability of International Communication (IC) has immensely increased due to globalization, liberalization, and multinational corporations which have increasingly erupted. It has become imperative for private individual companies, financial institutions, governments and international organizations to develop effective means of communication in order to conduct their smooth business. The acceleration from advancement of Information and Communication technologies (ICTs) has made it possible for them to have successful IC. However, the difference comes from different cultural set up in different countries. This paper is an attempt to explore the factors behind cultural variations, examine means of developing intercultural communications and controlling oral-written communication in global business context. The paper also aims to examine briefly the case of Kenya on the context of culture and International Communication. The paper suggest that, in the current global village, IC is mandatory for all those aspiring to take their business global or work in globally set up institutions or corporations. Also the success of any global business will lie on understanding the fundamentals of different cultures especially within the reach of business or new markets and which opens an avenue to effective communication. Effective international communication destroys more international boundaries and extends the scope for international business for better living of global inhabitants.

**Keywords:** Communication, Culture, International, Kenya, ICTs, IC, JEL.

---

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, globalization has become more than another piece of fancy jargon of the business lexicon (Rosenbloom and Larsen 2003). In fact the sense of firms from all over the world interacting and dealing with each other is expected to be the normal state of affairs for the majority of businesses (Czinkota et al.2001). Cultural differences are readily apparent in comparing international markets and it is considered paramount in international business communications (Munro 2006). This is because; globalization of business and the breakdown of national frontiers particularly in international business has been a highlight of the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In Industrial and Business to Business (B2B) sectors, this pattern may be even more pronounced because advanced communications and transportation technology have the potential for enabling the laws of comparative advantage to be realized to a very high degree. Thus, the businesses that were used to dealing with other business from all over their country will now seek relationship from all over the world. Internet based at the vanguard of the expected revolution in the way global business will be conducted in the future and has led to uncounted predictions of a world-wide e-business revolution where virtually all industrial firms will be linked together in a gigantic electronic global networks.

It is important to note that till now this scenario seems a bit too simplistic. All of the hype about global B2B e-commerce, networks, hubs, electronically linked businesses on a global scale is the right technological hardware and software that once put in place will have global business operating with the precision and reliability of a Swiss watch. After all this techno-centric view suggests that the only difference between operating around the block or around the world is cultural variations. Therefore it is just a matter of having the right satellites, telecommunication networks and supply chain in place to solve this problem of distance. The main goals of this article are to discuss the role of cultural sensitiveness in international business communication and also to analyze a Kenyan case study.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Researches have been conducted to examine aspects related to cultural sensitivity and international communication. Some of them include the ones reviewed below. All the papers reviewed tend to suggest that communication and culture are positively related. In other words culture affects the result of communication especially in business. This section has reviewed some selected studies.

Morgan and Hunt (1994) confirmed in their study that there is a positive relationship between communication and development of trust within a relationship.

Rosenbloom, and Larsen (2003) examined whether and how cultural variations influence channel communications. Objectives were examined in international B2B marketing channels comprised of channels members representing different cultural context. The findings show that there is a relationship between culture and channels communications in international channels. This influence stemming from cultural distance may have significant implication as business moves into the e-commerce era of internet based B2B international channel of distribution.

Koski et al. (2004) examined the impact of communication on accounting Firm and Client relationship and found that, the use of effective communication technique by accounting firms is positively related to firm/client conflict. The overall result suggest that accounting firms can effectively use collaborative communication, which focuses on using communication to build better relationship between firms to manage clients relations.

Palakshappa, and Gordon (2005) found that communication is positively influence trust, while opportunistic behavior is proposed to negatively influence trust. They also suggested that there is a positive relationship between communication and trust.

Munro (2006), attempted to measure change in cultural sensitivity before and after exposure to cultural differences. He hypothesized that a change in attitudes might provide an insight into the ability to persuade students to be more tolerant and accepting of cultural differences. The study found that cultural awareness and sensitivity can be increased through exposure to cultural differences. Also, it appeared that it is a value in adding a simulation of exposure to a foreign culture to deepen the degree of culture sensitivity. Lastly, the study asserted that there seems to be a slight entrenchment in one's own culture when moved the first time into a foreign culture.

Wyatt (2006) found that companies that communicate effectively have 19.4% higher market premium than companies that do not. Also, the study found evidence that communication effectiveness is a leading indication of financial performance. In this study it was revealed that companies that are highly effective in communications are 20% more likely to report lower turnover rates than their peers.

## 3. RESEARCH DESIGN

The study aims at finding the role of cultural sensitivity in international business communication. The scope has been limited to culture and international communication and its relationships. The source of data is secondary in nature and was obtained from journal articles, books, magazines and news papers. The paper has been organized into 6 sections including this. The previous section revisited the existing literature on related to culture and international communication, the next section discusses meaning, role and basis for cultural variations and will highlight strategies for international communication in the context of cultural sensitiveness. Section 5 presents a case study of Kenyan and the last section will conclude.

#### 4. CULTURAL SENSITIVENESS AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN BUSINESS CONTEXT

In an era of relative instantaneous contact between organizations a cross the seemingly shrinking globe, people consider cultural distance because culture affects virtually human behavior. Culture has been defined by Rosenbloom (2003) as the software of the Mind and Kushal (2009) defines it as the shared ways in which groups of people understand and interpret the world. Majority of Businesspeople may not be aware of the most basic features of their culture until they come into contact with people who do things differently. In this context different cultures are categorized into two contexts viz Low-Context (LC) and Higher- Context cultures (HC). This dichotomy is a simple categorization which helps us understand the hidden codes of communication in different countries before planning to transact any business. In L.C Cultures, most of the information flowing between sender and receiver is contained in the message itself. Consequently, the message needs to be explicit and detailed because each party will rely almost solely on the information contained in the message itself. On the other hand in an HC culture, less explicit and detailed information is carried in the message itself. Instead, the sender and receiver rely more on the context of the communication process to convey the message. Rosenbloom and Larsen (2003) have categorized countries as LC and HC cultures in Table 1. Communication issues have been extensively researched by business scholars and link between culture and communication has been reviewed.

**Table 1: Countries Categorized as Low-Context and High Context Cultures**

LC Culture Countries	HC Culture Countries
Australia	Argentina
Austria	Brazil
Belgium	China
Britain	Israel
Canada	Italy
USA	Japan
France	Korea
German	Mexico
New Zealand	Spain
Kenya	Turkey

*Source:* Rosenbloom and Larsen (2003)

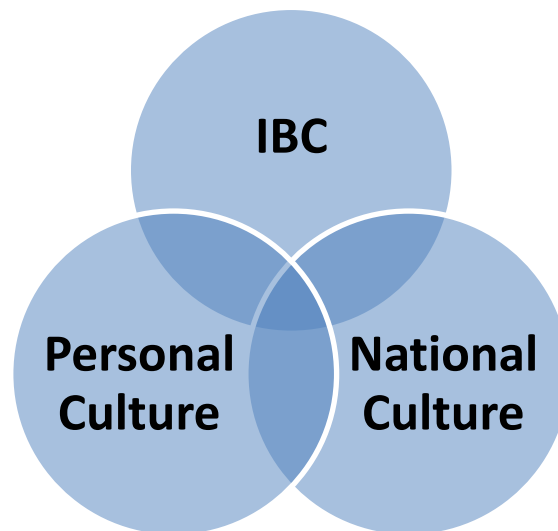
Yet, efforts addressing the importance of communication across cultures have been primarily conceptual. It is importantly accepted that the facet of marketing channels and effective communication in international business is difficult enough to achieve than in domestic business where culture is relatively homogeneous.

##### 4.1. Cultural sensitiveness and its effects on Business Communication in Global arena:

Every nation is sensitive to its own culture. Cultural sensitivity (CS) means the faith in one’s own culture and difference with other cultures. Cultural sensitiveness depends on values, beliefs and practices by different persons. It affects our responses to people and situations. When looking at the global scene, Most of North Americans for example, value “fairness” “You are not playing fair” is a sharp criticism calling for changed behavior. Most of them accept competition and believe that it produces better performance. The Japanese, however, believe that competition leads to disharmony. US business people believe that success is based on individual achievement and is open to anyone who excels. In England and France, success is more obviously linked to social class. And in some countries like India, people of some social groups or races are prohibited from full participation in society.

In India success is linked to both materialistic and spiritualistic achievement. In US many people value individualism while in other countries like India may value the family. In Japan groups routinely work together to solve problems in class while in other countries it may be considered cheating. Values beliefs may be influenced by religion. The Christians regard wealth as a sign of Devine favour. In Indian culture, a simpler lifestyle is considered to be close to God.

CS influences every single aspect of business communication: how to show politeness and respect, how much information to give, how to motivate people, how loud to talk, and even what size of paper to use. It is also influenced by organizational culture and by personal culture, such as gender, race and ethnicity and social class. Hence, it is essential to learn about CS for effective international communication. Fig 1 shows intersect of antecedents of effective international communication.



**Figure 1: International Business Communication, Personal and National Culture**

IBC=International business communication.

Experienced International Business people give tips based on their experience:

- In Spain, let a handshake last five to seven strokes; Pulling away too fast may interpret a sign of rejection. In France however, handshake is a single stroke.
- In Pakistan, do not be surprised when people excuse themselves in the midst of the meeting to conduct prayers. Muslims pray five times a day.
- Allow plenty of time to get to know the people you are dealing with in Kenya. They are suspicious of people who are in a hurry. If you concentrate solely on the task at hand, Kenyans will distrust you or avoid doing business with you.
- Stress the longevity of your company when dealing with the Germans, Dutch and Swiss. If your company has been in business since long, the date when it was established be printed on your business card.
- Never give a Chinese business man a clock gift. You will offend him/her as it is considered a bad luck for the recipient.

Cultural sensitivity depends on cultural variations. In fact, it is due to the cultural variations that misunderstandings are especially likely to occur. The following include reasons why variations occur.

- Religion and values
- Roles and status
- Decision making customs
- Concept of time
- Concept of personal space
- Body language
- Social Behavior and Manners

Considering the above one should learn the other cultures before planning to execute a business deal in the context of international business.

#### **4.2. Strategic Communication in International Business Scenario:**

Technology has changed the way communication is done. It has reduced the time lag, blurred the boundaries, reduced the cost and made the world a global village where each one claims a space. Striking business deals with anyone from anywhere in the world within five minutes or less is not a difficult task as it used to be some years back. Internet has dynamically transformed the international and national business deals which may lead to effective communication and efficiency in business. A lot is expected in the coming years when business is going to be conducted only in cyberspace. This will reduce the burden of building mortar and brick premises. Some of the modern strategic channels adopted for most of the businesses are online capabilities. This include: Emails, Fax, Cellular Phones, Videoconferencing and Voice Message System

### **5. THE CASE STUDY**

Kenya is a small country found in East Africa, on 5.0 Latitude North, 4.0 south, and 34.0 East with its capital city Nairobi. The country attained independence from United Kingdom on 12th December 1963. The legal system of Kenya is based on English and Kenyan common law, statutory law of Kenya, Islamic law and tribal law. The president of Kenya is both chief of the state and head of the government. Kenya is three hours a head of GMT and the main currency is Kenyan Shilling (KSH)

The country is an East African state, where English is the official and Kiswahili a national language. The geographic coordinates of Kenya are 1° North latitude and 38° East longitude. The total area of Kenya is 582, 650 Square Kilometers. The population of the country as per the estimate of July 2009 was 39mn.

In the context of international business communications and cultural sensitivity, Kenya can be grouped under LC culture category. In this country cultural factors in interactions can be explained under the following selected heads.

**Religion and Values:** Religion and social values are the main reasons for religions variations. In Kenya where majority of the population are Christians and believe that material comfort is the sign of superiority. The rich are little bit better than the poor, people who work hard are better than those who do not. They believe that money solves many problems. You can become upper class overnight if you get a lot of wealth overnight. Unlike many other societies condemn materialism and prefer a simple life.

**Concept of Time:** Time concept for businessmen from Kenya is very important. They value much time as a sign of satisfaction and less time as a sign of uncompleted deals. When they transact deals they need time to know the people they are dealing with. Otherwise they may withdrawal the deal if you are in hurry. The best way to do business with them is to give them time to get to know you.

**Gender and Status:** People from Kenya do not consider gender difference as an issue except in some isolated cases. You can transact business with person of any gender unlike in Arab countries where women are separated from men and do not play major roles. Also status is recognized in Kenya. The most successful companies are located in the most prestigious buildings. The big boss has the corner office on the top floor, deep carpets, an expensive desk and handsome accessories. This story is the otherwise in some other countries.

**Body Language:** Gestures help us clarify confusing messages, so differences in body language are major source of misunderstanding. As sign of acceptance business men in Kenya shakes their heads up and down while sideways means doubt. But in other countries like India sideways shaking of the head means agree. Also, showing Namastee to a Kenyan who does not know its meaning it might be a surprise to find him/her moving away or telling you no! no!. This sign or gesture means worship to God only and no body would like to be worshiped as it may bring a curse to him from God.

**Shaking of Hands:** The number of strokes in handshaking matters and can be interpreted differently. For instance several strokes means a warm welcome and few or one stroke can be interpreted as a sign of rejection. Shaking hands with something in your hand means disguise and shaking with two hands means respect to Kenyans. Greeting by shaking hand while looking a side is un-respectful to Kenyans

## 6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The culture means the software of the mind which means, beliefs and values of a society. They can not be changed but can be adjusted to. This paper has explored how cultural sensitivity affects the process of International business communication. It is worth to mention that the culture of each society fits that society, however, the recognition that one has come and belong to a different cultural background, while transacting any international business is of great paramount. This is because; it will give you an inner understanding on how to treat the person. This is acceptable on the understanding that you must learn the cultural background of the people you are communicating and dealing with. So the only requirement behind successful business deals is the understanding and adjusting with one's own culture and way of doing business

## REFERENCES

- [1] Czinkota, M.R., Ronkainen, I., Moffett, M.H., Moynih, E. (2001) Global Business, 3rd ed. Harcourt College publisher,83
- [2] Koski, T.R., Ehlen, C.R. and Saxby, C.L. (2004) Impact of Communication on the Accounting Firm/ Client Relationship, The Journal of Applied Business Research, 20, (3), 81-90
- [3] Kushal, J. (2009) Business Communication, V.K. (India) enterprises, New Delhi: 364
- [4] Morgan, R.M and Hunt, S.D. (1994) The commitment-trust theory of relationship marketing, Journal of marketing 58 (3): 20-38
- [5] Munro, M.S. (2006) Increasing cultural Sensitivity through traditional methodology and via A Simulation Enhancement. Journal of Business Case Studies 2 (3):11-16
- [6] Palakshappa, N. and Gordon, M.E (2005) Trust and commitment in collaborative Business relationship involving new Zealand Firms, ANZMAC 2005 Conference: Business interaction, Relationships and Networks: 74-84
- [7] Rosenbloom, B. and Larsen, T. (2003) Communication in International Business-to-Business marketing Channels. Does Culture Matter? Journal of Industrial Marketing Management, 32: 309-315
- [8] Samover, L.A., Porter, P.E., Jain, N.C. (1981) Understanding intercultural Communication, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth
- [9] Terpstra, V and David, K (1985) The Cultural environment of International Business 2nd ed. South-Western Publishing, 90-116
- [10] Wyatt, W. (2006) The 2005/2006 Watson Wyatt communication ROI study