Consequence of Cross Cultural Misunderstanding – A Shipboard Perspective

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Abstract

Cross cultural issues are on the rise, be it a shore based environment or a shipboard environment. If cross cultural issues are not identified at the grass root level, it can cause disharmony in an individual or group productivity eventually affecting the integrity in a working environment. Several research studies are being done on this issue to haul out feasible solutions to subdue and surmount cross cultural issues before it could surface. One such solution is to provide cross cultural awareness training to an individual during the induction process and progress it throughout the period of employment. At times solutions that are implementable in a shore based set up may not bring out the much expected outcome in a shipboard environment. This paper brings out the impact of cross cultural issues more so in the case of shipboard working environment.

Keywords: Acceptance, Cross Culture, Culture, Empathy, Environment, Ship, Shore

1. Introduction

Shipping being a global industry employs crew from various nationalities and hence cross cultural issues are rampant onboard ships. There are varieties of cross cultural issues that originate at work place due to conflicting priorities of an individual. There is a pressing need to identify and resolve cross cultural issues in an enabling manner to strike harmony at work place. The following part of this paper explains the contributing components that determine the priorities of an individual which is defined by an abstract term called "culture" and the procedures to mitigate cross cultural misunderstanding.

2. Culture and its Components

The term culture has several definitions and explanations encompassing wide range of activities related to perceptional abilities of an individual. The perceptional abilities is more often influenced by the environment in which an individual dwells and the period of exposure to that environment. Prolonged exposure to a specific environment infuses intangible aspects such as beliefs, communication, priorities in life, behavior, body language, ethical and unethical concepts etc. that are accepted to be a fundamental need for the survival of an individual in that particular environment. Environment rarely remains constant which varies with a zone, region, and country thus influencing an individual or a group of people to adapt to its demands. Fundamentally, the innumerable experience faced by an individual through surrounding community brings about a unique transformation which could be termed as another definition for "culture".

Figure 1 shows that, while several aspects make up the culture of an individual, there are three aspects which could be considered as important; they are food, clothing and communication. The first one "food' is vital for survival, the next one "clothing" is vital for comfort and to

defend one's modesty and then "communication" which is the basic tool to get across one's intention and requirement to others.

When an individual from a particular community travels across places and people of different community a cultural transmission and transformation is bound to take place. This transmission may at times be seamless, if there is no change in the said important components of culture which often depended upon the geographical area. Conversely, when a major change is suffered by the three important components of culture, an individual experiences a "cultural upheaval".
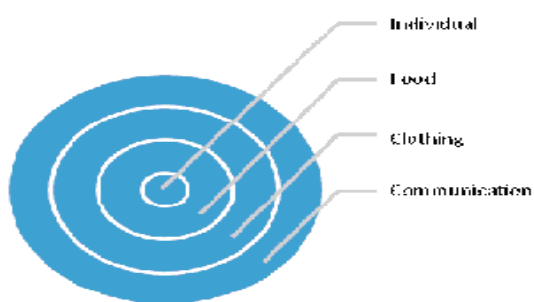

Figure 1. Cultural Concentric.

3. "Globalization" Effect on Culture

Figure 2, shows how cultural transmission takes place due to globalization. With dawn of globalization a few decades ago, the need for cultural awareness is on the rise because when people migrate from their place of birth to their place of work which are geographically separated by thousands of miles the consequences of cross cultural misunderstanding are the primary issues that surfaces and it has often proved to be costly. It becomes inevitable on the part of the employer to fix these issues even before they surface through awareness programs as a part of induction training as well as progressive training throughout the period of employment.

Surmounting or succumbing to cultural upheaval is depended on the tenacity of the individual which in turn arises from the need. When an individual is fuelled by a dire need, it gives way to tolerance and adaptability to the changes experienced and thus a new culture transmitted upon the individual is successfully received. At times, the cultural transmission fails resulting in withdrawal symptoms such as aggression, hostility, fear, loneliness, despair,
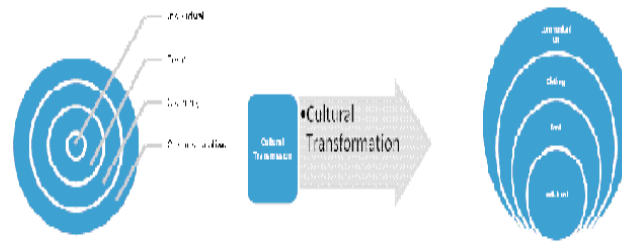

Figure 2. Transformation of "cultural concentric".

anxiety and other such destructive feeling which are far reaching to extent of affecting not only the individual but all related activities carried out by the individual and thus the individual becomes a potential safety hazard.

4. Cross Cultural Conflicts

Any environment involving people hailing from more than one culture is said to be multi cultural environment. Such environment is vulnerable to trigger cross cultural issues. Often gestures and words which are considered to be pleasing for one may be harsh for another. Table 1 shows some conflicting gestures:

Thumbs up sign is considered to be insulting in Bangladesh and rude in Nigeria and Australia. Handshake with a Saudi Arabian woman is considered to be immoral as per Sharia law. "OK" means offensive in Brazil, Latin America, Germany and Austria, "Zero" in France and "Money" in Japan. Using the "Index finger" to call someone is considered as offensive and humiliating in many countries across the world especially so with European and oriental nations. Japanese people often smile when they are confused, angry or even embarrassed. Excessive eye contact between man and woman at work place will qualify sexual harassment and considered disrespectful and offensive in Japan, Latin America and Caribbean. Touching the head of some person is considered as an invasion of privacy in Asian cultures, particularly Southeast Asia, because it is believed that the person soul or spirit resides there. Resting ones hands on hip conveys arrogance and haughtiness in some Asian countries. In Mexico it is seen as a sign of hostility. Middle Eastern countries, China, Japan, Russia, Taiwan and Korea consider the feet to be dirty and the heels of the feet should never be shown to another. Germany, Sweden and China consider slouching a sign of poor manner as well as rude.

Table 1.

Sign Language	Common Inference	Other than Common Inference	In Countries
Thumbs up	Okay/Positive	Insulting/Rude/Negative	Bangladesh/Nigeria/ Australia
Handshake	Greeting/Positive	Immoral as per Sharia law/Negative	Saudi Arabia, To greet women
Smile	Greeting/Positive	Confusion/Negative	Japan

5. Cross Cultural Issues and Emotional Susceptibility

It is imperative in a multicultural environment to be aware of gestures and words which could mean contrary to one's intention and thus could ignite passion. While an individual is expected to understand that any unacceptable mannerism when confronted for the first time from a culturally different person may not be intentional, it is essential to make the person aware about such mannerism and its implications in an enabling manner before it escalates into a conflict.

If a person continues to experience such objectionable gestures or challenging interaction such as name calling, use of offensive language, degrading comments in reference to a person's ethnicity, culture, religion or background, ridicule based on a person's physical appearance, teasing or put downs, shouting/abuse/aggressive language, excluding/isolating/ignoring, which has the potential to make a person feel, angry, upset/sad, ashamed, frightened, isolated, intimidated thus causing an emotional disturbance and ultimate breakdown immediate measures should be instituted to report the incident to authorities at work place.

While there are several avenues available in a shore based working environment to check and control cross cultural misunderstanding it is not so in a shipboard working environment. The reason being isolated working area away from land, the absence of the near and dear one's who could always lend a shoulder to comfort a person at times of despair and such other aspect which cannot match in providing the same emotional balance that could be obtained through the comfort of the loved ones. In such a scenario cross cultural misunderstanding can drive a person to isolation and can seriously affect the person's productivity.

The toughness of shipboard working environment is augmented by aspects such as personal space for privacy, challenging language barriers, limited food choices, pressure from group work, conflict in leadership styles, inexperience in cross cultural interaction, false expectations, work and rest hours and lack of active entertainment, hence ship crew response to any cultural indifference may greatly differ from that of a shore based worker.

6. Cross Cultural Understanding

Three main aspects which could foster cross cultural understanding in a shipboard environment is Empathy which means to see oneself from other's point of view, Not to conclude or judge in haste and trying to act upon it and Acceptance which is more depended on the tolerance of an individual in identifying the similarities and differences between cultures and accepting the same. In today's shipping environment a crew or officer who is not competent to understand the cultural difference and similarity can be considered as substandard crew and ship owners can no longer take the risk of ships getting detained because of such crew members. The manila amendments to Standards of training, Certification and watch keeping (2010) has failed to recognize the importance of inculcating cross cultural studies to seafarers as a standalone subject and this needs to be addressed in a more impressive manner.

Table 2 shows some of the marine accident that had take place because of language barrier which is an outcome of cross cultural misunderstanding. In all the cases mentioned in Table 2 although language incompatibility was the key reason that triggered the disaster, it had further led confusion, anxiety, anger because of the eventual change in the intonation, diction which caused aggression transforming the sequence of errors from bad to worse which could have been averted if the crew were made aware of their lapses with respect to cross cultural understanding.

Table 2.   Consequences of Cross Cultural Misunderstanding

Sl. No.	Name of the Ship	Nature of Accident	Reason
1	M.V. Trade Daring	Ship Broken into two pieces	Language barrier during loading
2	M.V. Eurobulker X	Ship Broken into two pieces	Lack of cultural awareness and weak English
3	M.V. Bright field	Collided with port structures	Communication break down
4	M.V. Chou Shan	Collided with CMA CGM Florida	Use of vernacular language mandarin and filipino

7. Conclusion

Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) is an integral part of cross cultural understanding which should be inculcated at the time of induction training. ICC has been interlaced with Maritime Training and Education (MET) only by some maritime nations of the west and a few oriental nations but it is still not happening in large scale manner at the global level. ICC involves integrating students between MET institutions from different parts of the world student exchange programs. It enables the students to study as well as to dwell in culturally different environment which help them to understand questions like "why people behave in a particular manner?" "What are the factors that influence them to think and respond in a way that is different from other culture"? "What is the extent of influence by the prevailing environment on the people and their culture?' and so on.

Ideally it its cross cultural awareness training which will help to surmount issues that surfaces in a shore based or shipboard environment. Once a person is made aware of the reason for a particular way of behaviour at least it will help the person not to conclude quickly and negatively whereas it will enable acceptability and adaptability which is the essential tool to overcome cross cultural mis-understandings.

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