**Topic: Achieving High Performance in Cross-Cultural Teams: A Guide for Western Managers in Asia**

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**1.1. Barriers to the Successful Employment of Cross**-**Cultural Employees**

According to the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Workforce Development Board (2002), linguistic and cultural hurdles can hinder effective communication and create complications in the workplace. This could create a sense of insecurity amongst employees. Day-to-day business operations can also be affected by perception barriers, prejudices, and stereotyping at work. Moreover, systemic barriers such as employment policies and practices can also affect the classifications of certain jobs to a great extent. For example, certain organizations expect potential candidates to have both educational as well as work experience credentials to suit their requirements. The board also states that this eliminates otherwise qualified applicants from the potential labor market. A large number of immigrants, including many refugees, come from their home countries already equipped with adequate educational qualifications and work experience. However, on account of the cultural gap and their limited communication skills, their experience-backed credibility does not count. In fact, a report from T.J. Maxx states that a Vietnamese worker at a company distribution centre was actually a practicing lawyer before moving to the United States of America. Increasing cultural diversity in North America has brought in several changes at the workplace. The business community has now woken up to the need of the hour and has started educating its employees, including management professionals, to be sensitive to linguistic and cultural differences among workers from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds. Empathy and sensitivity to cultural differences is very important for improving communication and interpersonal relations. These attitudes also play a vital role in decisions concerning recruitment, hiring, and retention of immigrant workers. In the long run, having a strong, stable, productive, and safe workforce will help businesses remain competitive by focusing on their core competencies.

Through interactions with job-seeking immigrants, human resource professionals have been able to identify certain common cultural challenges and misunderstandings that are evident at the workplace. These can be classified in two categories: roles and statuses. This feature is typical in cultures having a hierarchical social structure that disturbs the smooth flow of communication in the workplace. For example, in many regions of the world, women face serious gender discrimination and are considered subordinate to men. When women from such regions work in European or American firms, they might feel that same sense of inferiority. Therefore, they might find it difficult to interact with male colleagues at all levels. Studies have shown that women from such cultures exhibit their subordination to men by avoiding direct eye contact with their male associates and manager (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Workforce Development Board, 2002). Such women employees can experience some amount of discomfort or inconvenience in daily workplace interactions. Similarly, men exposed to such cultures would find it difficult to work on equal terms with their women counterparts and would not easily adapt to female supervisors. They loathe being supervised by women and consider it a kind of demotion. Therefore, it is very important to understand and appreciate the importance of interacting with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Such interactions will help us respond appropriately in a work environment distinctly different from our own.

The recognition of personal space is evident from the body language exhibited during interpersonal interactions. For example, the North American cultural behavior is quite unique. North Americans often prefer to keep a distance of five feet while conversing; this signifies the importance they give to their own comfort zones. People from Germany and Japan are also comfortable maintaining this distance or a little more, whereas Arabs and Latinos enjoy conversing at close quarters. These subtle differences in personal space preferences can be used quite effectively to improve communications. Body language provides important clues to understanding personality development. Eye movements, body postures, and facial expressions are specific to persons from specific cultural backgrounds; they might express confidence, respect, gratitude, or etiquette. Most eastern cultures have religious and cultural mores that have become integral parts of their respective social systems because of consistent use over many generations. North Americans might find it difficult to comprehend the dominant role of religious observances in the day-to-day lives of persons. For example, they might find it strange that Muslims pray thrice daily even during office hours so as to subscribe to their religious practices. They also set aside certain days when they do not attend to any other work and focus entirely on fulfilling their religious obligations. According to Gannon (2002), one must always respect religious customs and traditions prescribed by various religions and must never ignore them. The outward appearances of persons must also be in keeping with local norms. Some cultures prescribe headdresses for men and women, whereas others prescribe veils such as the *purdah* (curtain) that secludes a woman from the outside world (Mead, 200; Usunier, 1998). Therefore, persons born and brought up in these cultures prefer to continue following these norms and traditions even in the North American workplace so as to maintain consistency with their belief systems. Certain employers might object to the use of such customs in the workplace, especially when the staff is expected to be in uniform. There have been instances when immigrants from Turkey, India, or other countries have used spices that emit (what some think is) an unpleasant odor. This might be perceived by some as dirty or unhygienic, though that might not necessarily be the case.

Johann (2006) notes many cultural nuances in society, yet the diversities also widen with an increasing number of nationalities within a workforce. It is not so easy to identify all the potential cultural differences. Employers can educate themselves on specific cultural backgrounds if they are keen to do so. The path is ridden with challenges, especially in the workplace. Lack of fluency in English might make it frustrating and very difficult for a person to strike up a conversation at work. Limited English-speaking abilities could also lead to miscommunication or ineffective communication. Employees might not always admit that they have difficulty comprehending the communication. According to Tjosvold and Leung (2006), this makes life quite difficult. A recent business journal article on the rising number of Hispanic staff in Charlotte-Mecklenburg’s construction industry reports that a lack of adequate knowledge of English puts the workers at a greater risk of being involved in occupational accidents. This happens because they are unable to grasp the prescribed safety standards and operational procedures. In the Charlotte-Mecklenburg case, the Carolinas Associated General Contractors (AGC) provides onsite training to help bridge the gap caused by the language barrier; this helps enhance the safety situation. Despite this, on the basis of the AGC reports, some local contractors are making full use of the training whereas some others are not doing much about it—they prefer to wait until tragic circumstances compel them to act. This kind of perception could prove to be expensive, especially because of the huge dent that an on-the-job death or injury would cause to the credibility and finances of the company (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Workforce Development Board, 2002; Bhattacharyya, 2010).

Haghirian (2011) is of the opinion that while language barriers do not always result in grave consequences, they could lead to mistrust and miscommunication that result in poor productivity and mistakes at work. Such situations can be avoided when the communication is smooth and clear. Even when there is smooth communication in English, problems could crop up in areas concerning unfamiliar colloquialisms, slangs, and jargon. For example, when different industries use distinctly different words and jargon, the foreign staff might find it difficult to comprehend them; this in turn could negatively affect their work to a large extent. Moran (2007) states that misinterpretations commonly occur from an inadequate knowledge of the nuances of a language. For instance, the phrase “off the top of my head” would mean different things in different cultures. A South African staff used this phrase to mean that she was completely confused when someone asserted that he had “donned a toboggan.” In fact, the staff visualized a person with a sled on the head. One automatically assumes that everyone comprehends the lingo of different cultures. It is important to remember that not knowing the jargon or the peculiar phrases of a culture does not automatically imply a lack of intelligence; it is mostly just a lack of awareness of the linguistic nuances or colloquialisms used in everyday communication (Jackson, 2011; Dale, 1993; Magala, 2005).

**1.2. Role of Employers in Helping Bridge the Cultural Differences at the Work Place**

Murray et al., (n.d) state that immigrant workers are bound to learn the English language because it will make it easier for them to adapt to the cultural norms of the North American workplace. This process might take some time; co-workers can help immensely in smoothening out this transition process. To a great extent, employers have to depend on their workforce for this process. However, the employers often have the attitude of surviving by “hook or crook” (Selmer, 1998; Kras, 1995). This attitude forces immigrant workers to work hard and figure out things on their own. If employers are prepared to invest time and effort in helping workers acclimatize to the workplace, the productivity and performance will improve. Also, it will strengthen ties within the company in terms of morale, trust, and loyalty. Jackson (2002) has reported that this often delivers much more profits in the long term.