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Storytelling and Cross-Cultural Communication

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V. Storytelling and Cross-Cultural Communication

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Globalization has become the hallmark of this age. Cross-cultural interactions are increasing dramatically not only at the workplace but also in our daily lives, and, of course, on our campus. However, due to language barriers and cultural differences, communication between people with different backgrounds tends to produce some misunderstandings.

When I first arrived in the United States from China, I spent a weekend with an American family. After I got up on Saturday morning, I found one of my hosts preparing breakfast for me. I asked her if she needed my help and told her I could make the breakfast myself. In my mind, I think I am thanking her by offering some help. She paused and then responded, "Sure, you can make your breakfast yourself if you don't want me to touch your food." I was very surprised to find out that my intention of showing appreciation was interpreted as a refusal of my host's hospitality. In Chinese culture, a guest's offer of help is often used as a way to thank the host. And the host usually declines the guest's help to show their acknowledgment. At that time, I realized that sometimes the same sentence, or the same behavior, could be interpreted so differently in another culture.

Later on, I read a book by Roger Schank, *Tell Me a Story: A New Look at Real and Artificial Memory*. Dr. Schank is one of the leading pioneers of artificial intelligence and cognitive psychology. In his book, he explains that children learn new words because these words are used to describe situations that they have observed or they have taken part in. In order to learn a new word, they must construct a story that describes their own actions using the new word. Then, when they hear the word again, they must compare the former story with the new story that they encounter (Schank, 1990: 150). For example, if I want you to explain the meaning of the English expression "a piece of cake," what would you think? Cake may not be the only thing you would think of when you heard the expression "a piece of cake." You may also recall the things that you have achieved easily, situations that have been "a piece of cake." We not only learn languages through those stories we have experienced but also learn life lessons through those stories.

In this way, communication can be considered as "selecting the stories that we know and telling them to others at the right time" (Schank 150). Misunderstanding happens when a person is trying to apply a story of his/her native culture to people from another culture, and do not realize that the story might be interpreted differently by the audience. The same story may not deliver the same results as you predict in your native culture. In my story with my American host, I intended to give thanks by offering my help based on the stories of my native culture. I didn't realize that, in another culture, the same behavior can also be interpreted as a guest's signal of seeking more independence and hoping to do things in one's own way.

The same kinds of misunderstandings can also happen in the business world. When Best Buy launched their business in China, they named their stores *Baisi Mai,* which in Chinese which sounds like "best buy" in English. This Chinese translation also means "buy it after thorough considerations." To Chinese audiences, this is a clear statement that you should "think carefully before you buy something from our store." However, this doesn't mean that we have no solutions to misunderstandings. We can also reach mutual understandings through telling our own stories and sharing our interpretations of those stories. A recent brain-research study (Dehghani et al. 2017) discovered that English, Farsi, and Chinese readers use the same parts of the brain to decode the meaning of the personal stories they read, such as stories about friendship, divorce, or telling a lie. The patterns of activation in the brain serve as a memory retrieval function that influences our cognition related to the past, the future, ourselves, and our relationship to others. This indicates that exposure to storytelling can actually have an effect on triggering better empathy for others. To some extent, we can always find commonalities with others. We have all experienced excitement, happiness, sadness, sorrow, and disappointment. When we share those stories with others, we may find out we are just like each other, and this is how we breed trust.

Sometimes, when we observe something different from our native culture, we may come up with critical comments as funny, ridiculous, or sometimes, even unreasonable. Many of those distortions are unconscious, because our culture equips each of us with built-in blinders, with hidden and unstated assumptions that control our thoughts. When I first came to the U.S., I thought football was a brutal and boring sport. It seemed to me to be just a bunch of guys comparing their strength, competing and piling on each other to grab a small ball. I thought, unlike soccer players, football players may not need to employ much technique in their game, as

long as they are much stronger than others. Later on, after I learned more about football, I realized my original observations were distorted by my own cultural experiences. Nowadays, I would not say I am a huge fan of football, but I am willing to put down my build-it blinders and enjoy it. When I watched a live game with my friends in the stadium, I felt it is not only a game, but also a way to connect with others, to be part of the community. I believe if we make efforts to recognize the blinders placed on us by our own cultures, if we try to be not just observers but also earnest participants of another culture, we can be successful in cross-cultural communications, as we all share stories of being human beings.

References

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