1.3: Intercultural Communication

As mentioned in the Communication and Culture section intercultural communication generally describes communication efforts between different cultural groups or subgroups. Differences between those groups, even if they speak the same language, can create problems and make understanding each other much harder. As globalisation has brought the whole world closer together, business between different cultures happens on a daily basis. To make things run smoothly, intercultural communication skills are crucial.

Intercultural communication research mainly focuses on national comparisons and is hooked in the background of management and organizational theories. One pioneering model is the one Geert Hofstede derived in worldwide studies of different nations along certain characteristics.

Hofstede refers to culture as “the collective programming of the mind distinguishing the members of one group or category of people from others” (Hofstede, 2013). Comparing values, behaviours and organisation for different nations Hofstede developed five dimensions to classify cultural principles. Each dimension builds up between two poles who describe the idealised extremes of it.

Hofstede's original dimensions included power distance (PDI), individualism vs. collectivism (IDV), masculinity vs. femininity (MAS) and Uncertainty avoidance (UAI) (Hofstede, 2001). A fifth definition, the one of long-term vs. short-term orientation or in other words pragmatic vs. normative, was added by Michael Bonds research in 1991, followed by the definition of indulgence vs. restraint by Michael Minkov (Hofstede 2013). In each dimension the lowest possible score is 0 and the highest is 100.

The following questions give a better understanding of the six dimensions which have been researched to a broad extent in the last couple of years:

**Power distance:**
• How flat are hierarchies?
• How does a culture deal with inequalities?
• Is societal influence concentrated in the hands of a few or distributed throughout the population?
• How authoritarian is a country’s organisation?
• Are communication efforts interactive?

New Zealand Score: 12
New Zealand’s low score indicates a culture with flat hierarchies and a very low power distance. Communication in organisations is interactive and rather informal.

**Individualistic vs. Collectivist culture:**

• Does the interest of the group or the individual matter the most?
• Are people only looking after themselves and their immediate family?
• How well are individuals integrated and networked?

New Zealand Score: 86
With the rather high score of 86 New Zealand can be described as a rather individualistic culture with people looking after themselves and their immediate families first.

**Masculinity vs. Femininity:**

• Which values are aimed for?
• How strong is a society following material values and success in comparison to the quality of life, interpersonal relationships and the concern for the weak?

New Zealand Score: 59
A score of 59 signalises masculinity rather then femininity. People strive to be the best they can be in work or school-related settings with the focus on winning, being proud of their achievements and success in life.

**Uncertainty avoidance vs. taking risks:**

• Do members of a society feel threatened by unknown situations?
• Are there attempts to control the future or do people just let it happen?
• How high is the willingness to try something new or different?

New Zealand Score: 39
With a score of 39 New Zealand can be described as a pragmatic society that deals with uncertainties in a relaxed and flexible fashion. Originality is valued. People are willing to accept new ideas, give innovative products a try and a not too averse to taking risks.

**Long-term vs. short-term orientation (Pragmatic vs. normative):**

• How are individuals subordinating themselves for longer term purposes?
• How are the tendencies towards short-term spending and long-term savings, perseverance and quick results?

New Zealand Score: 28

New Zealand is shown to be a normative country with a normative way of thinking. Motivation to save for the future is rather low, therefore the focus on quick results is high.

Indulgence vs. Constraint:

• How freely are hedonist drives as gratifications towards enjoying life and having fun tolerated and allowed?
• Is the gratification of needs restricted by strong social norms?

New Zealand Score: 75

A rather high score of 75 pictures New Zealand’s society indulgent. With it people tend to possess a positive attitude and a tendency towards optimism. Leisure time is regarded as important, also the ability to spend money as one likes and to follow desires and needs to enjoy life and have fun.

As you can see in the questions above Hofstede’s model is all about comparison. National cultures and their distinct attitudes, behaviours and norms can be seen as specific through boundaries and differences in comparison to others. Although Hofstede’s model is widely accepted in organisational communication and management theory critics argue that most research is not integrated with findings from research that is not concentrating on purely economic and organisational values (Kirkman et al, 2006).

While values change with the developments of society globalization and convergence tendencies of new technologies and communication structures lead to a broader integrated international consumer culture and national values. General tendencies towards a culture of networked individualism are researched and referred to in literature (Castells 1996; Wellman 2002). Still Hofstede’s dimensions seem to be quite stable and remain over time. Changes in technology affect a lot of countries at the same time or with only a small delay and therefore make their relative position amongst the other nations rather stable as every nation shifts in the same direction.

Discussion

1. What can you say about your nation’s culture?
2. How would you classify it in terms of Hofstede’s model?
3. How do you evaluate New Zealand’s scores? Do you agree?
4. Have a look online to compare your estimation with your country’s scores!
5. Compare with other countries you know.

Alternative links

Hofstede youtube channel "Hofstede insight": http://www.youtube.com/user/HOFSTEDE.../5/PVbkjobD8ao

**References**


