*Research paper*

# CULTURAL INTELLECT POST PANDEMIC – Preparedness for Online and Offline Work Environment.

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Abstract

Civilizations across the globe have contributed to the present status of communication both at personal and corporate level.  Intercultural communication helps us understand the diverse work place norms and strengthen the art of communicating verbally and non- verbally. The very human nature of adaptation leads to the identification of similarities and work differences across cultures. The world mastered this art by being agile, open minded and becoming culturally self-aware. Pre pandemic cross culture communication rested on understanding and exchange of human behavior across cultures in terms of values, beliefs, corporate norms, skills, knowledge and experience prevailing in a nation. With the pandemic, the learning and sharing the insights gets extended not only in terms of technology in industry, merchandise, analytics, engineering and team collaborations but also in terms of understanding the new normal societal standards. It calls for not only revisiting the work standards in terms of hygiene, social distancing, government and regulatory guidelines but also learn to work with virtual teams. So it is establishing the learning insights where there is no past experience of face to face interaction, non-verbal gestures and interpretation of voice modulation. The new normal forces to redefine cultural acumen for leadership, personality, conflict and negotiations, corporate culture and virtual group dynamics globally with new insights.

Keywords – Virtual Group Dynamics, Cultural Acumen, Work Standards, Intercultural Communication, Cross Cultural Communication.

INTRODUCTION

Cultures are a result of civilizations and each culture has its specifications related to attitude, behavior, values and norms. These specifications get reinforced in generations there by firming them further. The identical law is applicable to work place culture as well. The work place culture is defined as set of written and unwritten rules followed by the people belonging to same geographical boundaries, regions and country as a whole.

The understanding of culture has great significance on the manner one communicates. It is the similarity in the verbal and non-verbal communication that is exhibited in personal and professional fronts. However this similarity turns out to be a threat in terms of interactions across geographical boundaries. It no more remains a similarity game, but becomes the

understanding and exhibiting the differences through verbal and non-verbal routes. Because there is a great influence of culture in our grooming, that our words and actions have cultural influences. But the work opportunities are beyond the geographical boundaries and so understanding the cross cultural differences is also important.

The way we work is subject to irreversible changes post covid-19. The reduced levels of worldwide agility, in person contacts, use of virtual platforms and lockdowns declared at different locations have induced greater misunderstanding in workplace. These changes affect work procedures, rules and operations as the extent to which they are obeyed differs. For instance cultures like India, Australia, Singapore and Hong Kong work on detailed procedures where as China, Europe and Africa give rules least importance.

Theoretical background –

The increasing interactions  with complex socio political and cross cultural diversity not only at work place but also for purposes of international studies have made people encounter challenges( Black et al 1990)

Cultural intelligence is also a measure of adaptability index and ability to adjust to new culture context ( Early and Eng 2002)

The cultural adjustment is a short and long term process and if carried out effectively leads to harmony, psychological satisfaction, healthy relation with host society and country( Harrison et al 2005)

The interactions lead to misunderstandings and emergence of conflicts. Thus emotional understanding of differences can be a relief ( Lin et al, 2012)

Thus Under such unstable work integrity, the need to augment cross cultural intellect and implement it to strengthen communication effectiveness rises.

Reasons why Cultural Intellect is Vital to Organizations

1.Applicable to functional areas - Cultural intellect doesn't just apply to working with offices and clients in other countries. It is equally applicable to different functional areas of organization. In this sense there exists culture within each team – sales, marketing, R&D, human resources, operations as well. Customers, too, whether corporate or individual, are multicultural – and the companies which can talk to these customers in in the customer's language have reasonable gains - The only approach which fits everywhere.

2.Keeps Stakeholders interest intact - Cultural intelligence helps cultivate a thorough understanding of working styles in other cultures, better acceptance, trust and understanding of global equals. Cultural differences become strengths to proactively respond to market changes. All the stakeholders work together, integrated in spite of cultural indifferences.

3.Equals Local understanding - Cultural understanding has interpretations which differ and remain applicable local, for instance, performance based pay in the west against reward system in the east. Local culture does have significant role which should not be overlooked. Whether you are throwing a dinner in Hong Kong, taking customers to a rugby match in US or playing golf iJn Japan, cultural intelligence will go a long way and help you avoid social blunders. Cultural understanding works other way round as well.

4.Appropriates developing markets - Cultural intelligence is even more significant when working with developing markets, as management style and perception may differ. These markets, prosperous in their own way, do not necessarily consider the holding company way of doing things to be the only right way. Cultural competence will help individuals understand vocalic, paralanguage and articulation when working in another language.

5.Fosters Learning -Culturally intelligent individual emphasizes on conviction. By integrating into a local culture, plunging yourself in its ways and behaviors and imitating the gestures of those around you, you will appear more compassionate – provided you are sincere.  This initiates learning to cooperate internationally.

6.Conveys Effectiveness in communication - Being culturally conscious, helps individuals to identify areas of their own communication that could be value-added, to make their daily interface with international colleagues more operational, and more enjoyable. Recruiting top talent with cross culture experience is the key to competitive advantage.

Companies that celebrate diversity, and are cultural inclusive, are likely to be more successful than ones that are considered as uncompromising and outdated in their attitude. As we have understood the importance of to and fro of business, the immediate call is for the efficient practice of Business etiquettes. Business etiquette is defined as the innate sense of behaving in business setting, especially in global team environment. The few instances where they were exhibited pre-pandemic are attire, meetings, talks with superiors, instructions to subordinates, presentations, at cocktail parties, business dining and many more. A brief history of Indian adaptation proves that Indians are recruited across the globe with prominent cultures dominating certain countries like Punjab with maximum work crowd in Canada, Gujarat in United States, Kerala in Oman and Tamil Nadu in Singapore and many more. This adaptation is equally applicable the other way round with Indians having acceptance for people from South Korea, Japan, and Russia not only in terms of behavior but also accepting the food habits as well. The major brands entering Indian borders bring with them cultural diversity and Indians get chance to enhance a better understanding of cultural differences.

Re-Examining Cross Cultural Intelligence Post Covid-19 Pandemic

"What is killing us is not connection; it is connection without cooperation".

Gideon Rose

From announcements made on prepared for pandemic to unprepared for pandemic, the corporate world is undergoing tremendous changes. All the interpersonal skills and psychology with which the global teams were well versed is now debatable and looking beyond the organizations boundary and searching for abstract behavior and mastering it is the need of hour.

Redefining Cultural Acumen

As we are grappled into socially distanced environments, reorganizing intercultural integrity is unavoidable. With implications in organization, the four-drive theory proposed relates that every person, from highest authority to the lowest in hierarchy, brings with him, a probable set of emotional device to work each day. This emotional device will guide every single conduct that takes place at work. The same emotional apparatus will be inhibited by all the stakeholders – insiders and outsiders associated with the organization.

The four drive theory proposes drives that influence human behavior. To sharpen the cultural acumen; there is great potential on the understanding of the drives that guide human choices. They are:

• Acquire

Humans have the need to acquire things. This need not only includes basic necessities like bread and shelter but also those things which have influence on people's perception about us. In context to cross cultural communication, this drive can be extended to how we are perceived in terms of business etiquettes and online conversation needs. The business etiquettes being transformed to adherence and acquisition of covid 19  protocols  includes setting up and employing physical distancing measures at the workplace with alteration of terminals, changing the use of common sitting rooms and transport vehicles, astounded work modifications, torn-apart teams and other dealings to reduce social association at the workplace.

• Bond

'Old habits don't necessarily die hard''. This saying does remain applicable to this emotional drive. Empathy and trust is generated for those whom we meet every day at work. The same bond can't be developed when the physical sharing is missing. Since pandemic times, the definition of creating bond in terms of collaborations to motivate team performance has shifted to creating bond through virtual platforms. This acts as a challenge as working in teams and building them and setting performance benchmarks suddenly gets shuffled with no previous emotional attachments. However, physical collaborations also exert thrust when like minds team up as 'us versus them', but virtual teams give rise to 'me versus them' attitude.

• Learn

Human nature is curiosity driven and so the more learning opportunities comes his way, the more is the satisfaction level at work place. Geographically dispersed employees give greater learning opportunities. For instance, with similar backgrounds and closer working place, the unspoken cues are understood. But with distantly located cultural teams, meeting the team requirements in terms of  tone of voice, reading and interpreting sub text leaves greater scope for learning. The employees have witnessed the learning of oral and written modes to enhance the communication process across cultures and generate positive feedback. The pandemic has paved the way for knowing and using technical platforms to satisfy the desire for learning. It has also brought learning about unexplored human behavior beyond physical interaction and group dynamics.

• Defend

We are born defenders, and it's the way we protect our family and also our beliefs and value system. This drive displays itself as defensive behavior, in terms of protecting the art of communicating practiced by an individual over the years. It acts as a threat as it regulates prejudices in judging the team members whom you have not met. The remedy is to embrace ambiguity. Individuals should wipe the doubt between what was meant and what was heard as an effort to overcome 'defensive drive'.

Communication Challenges with Virtual Teams – Cultural Group Dynamics

Team communication and collaboration is the key to achieve organizational goals. Opportunity to interact face to face with deep learning of cultural influence and incorporating it in behavior through eye contact and body language fostered the feeling of working for common cause. The pandemic, Covid 19, has left the corporate world with no other choices than working in virtual teams with the added platforms like e-mails, e-meets and conference calls. The dynamics of working with virtual teams have changed. In case of conference calls, systems should be developed to automate transcription with single click systems to record and assess the time spent on overlapped communication so that effectiveness in talking and listening in the stipulated time can be achieved. However the real leadership issue is to develop trust and empathy.

Connecting with team members placed in different interval zones can be challenge in terms of technology, energy and cost. The cultural challenges extends to approachability of team members, lack of involvement, , unfamiliar leadership style, different perception of dialogues, behavioral assumptions and use of regional language. Such challenges should be considered while selecting direct call vs. text message. Where the chances of perception and personal interpretations are high, the use of text message can be a relief. Such encounters can make an individual stray away from achieving personal as well as organizational goals.

Cross Cultural Intelligence Quotient and Communication Effectiveness in Virtual Teams

There will be more dynamism associated with work, engaging virtual teams in the near future. With physical engagement at work place being replaced due to pandemic, will bring with it new working models. Therefore, there is utmost requirement to address the challenges and problems associated with virtual working and the answer lies in the understanding and implementation of Cultural intelligence among virtual teams. The measures of virtual team performance are role clarity, collaboration, trust and communication. To enhance this performance, the four dimensions of cultural intelligence should be understood.

The cultural intelligence is assumed to have four dimensions namely – Cognitive, Metacognitive, Motivational and Behavioral. A culturally intelligent person needs to develop in four areas:

- Motivational Cultural Intellect Quotient

Motivational quotient forms the basis for Cultural intellect of a person. Individual-efficacy and inherent stimuli are the components of motivational drive. Therefore, motivational cultural intelligence is meaningfully related to virtual team effectiveness. Thus work culture with global teams, adds towards role precision of the members and therefore, indirectly also have bearing on their performance.

- Cognitive Cultural Intellect Quotient

It is the level of an individual's understanding about how cultures are similar and how they are different. The people with high cognitive cultural intelligence appreciate similar and diverse interactions. It comprises a blend of general culture knowledge and context specific culture knowledge. It is the cognition which leads to knowledge sharing among groups

leading to effectiveness in virtual teams. Cognitive quotient also limits conflicts among team members and fosters cohesion.

- Meta-cognitive Quotient

It is defined as extent to which an individual ideates for, remains conscious during, and evaluates after multicultural interactions. Metacognitive cultural intellect allows an individual to remain open and respectful towards others. The people with high metacognitive intelligence rate high in adaptation. Metacognitive intellect is also a measure of task performance and collaboration. Collaboration in turn helps to calm anxiety and mentally prepares individual for uncertainty, especially in virtual interactions.

- Behavioral Quotient

It is the range of an individual's    flexibility and suitable use of a broad collection of behaviors and skills during multicultural meets. Few of the measures i.e. non-verbal cues and gestures, which comprise of behavioral quotient, might not be relevant to the interactions which are not carried out through videos. However, the increased accessibility of user friendly technical platforms have augmented the virtual method to communicate. This helps them to ssuccessfully communicate with people from different cultures. This level defines an individual's attentiveness; People working at remote locations have the work flexibility but do not have one to one interaction with members of the team. It is difficult to understand the emotional and mental status of others without seeing their gestures, interpret tone with physical barriers around.

## PRACTICING CULTURAL INTEGRATION

With the emergence of advanced technological tools, pleasant to use, like Zoom, G-Meet, Microsoft Teams, Webex, Google Classrooms, Hangouts, Skype, Adobe Connect, Anymeeting, BigBlueButton and many more, the to and fro of communication is made accessible to virtual teams. Cultural intellect allows the members of the teams to identify non-verbal cues, determination, and confidence to function in culturally diverse settings through each conversation experience.

The organizations should also take the responsibility of giving everyone -

- Equal Chance to Voice

-        During virtual meets the organizations should ensure that every cultural group is heard.

-        Send the agenda well in advance at each location so that they can prepare discussion points in advance.

-        Insist everyone to use global English, assign translators when conversations speed up

-        Act as a moderator to avoid culture sensitive topics

\-        Invite participants from every location by coordinating "any input from India?" Australians, do you have feedback and so on.

- Train Teams For New Norms

\-        Train local employees to adapt to corporate norms

\-        Train corporate office for local markets

\-        Train to express disagreement through voice modulation on virtual platforms.

\-        Train for culture specific hygiene and social distancing norms

\-        Train to respect time lag during conversations.

\-        Train to understand time-zones

- Develop Task Oriented Mentality

\-        Try to formalize systems, processes and communications

\-        Draft precise job descriptions

\-        Develop creative units and teams

\-        Appraise and reward equally across all teams

\-        Develop culture specific rules for processes and procedures

- Embrace Heterogeneity

\-        Blend cultures at all locations

\-        Propose gender mix

\-        Synthesize the task and functions at all locations.

\-        Handle grievances and suggestions at locations and headquarter.

## CONCLUSION

Developing cross cultural intellect should never be afterthought. It should be considered utmost priority under present circumstances. Cultural intelligence is a skill that could prove valuable to promote strong corporate culture no matter how geographically dispersed the team is. It creates environment where assumptions and norms are shared, miscommunication erodes and trust sustains. Self-awareness, training and learning can break the barriers of prejudices. The world will witness permanent alteration of normal communication with establishing new normal. The interpersonal conversation will be digital driven, the non-verbal cues will be supplemented by overt communication involving emotional understanding. When the organisations are planning to revive offline work culture, the scope of research is to construct the model fit for online as well as offline work environment. The cross cultural agility will have to be developed with training, group activities and workshops. Empathy, open mindedness and conscious engagements will have to be practiced across all conversations. The ever-changing storms are paving the way for inclusion of cultural intellect as the principle to effective communication.

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