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A Study of Intercultural Communication in a Multinational /Multicultural Company: Problems and Solutions

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Abstract

This is a study of intercultural communication conducted in a multinational / multicultural company, which is located in Zurich, Switzerland. The purpose of the present study was to find out what kind of communication problems are felt in such a company, and to study what constitutes intercultural communication competence, and to think about what would be an ideal multinational / multicultural business company from communication perspective. Interview method was used to collect information. Eight subjects of the company, who were from different countries, different languages, and different cultures, voluntarily participated in the study.

Communication problems were found in several different points: communication style, decision-making, work attitude & practice, language, and stereotype. The constituents of intercultural communication competence were observed to be in English proficiency as a lingua franca and several work attitudes and practice such as openness, flexibility, patience, etc.. Intercultural experiences and participation in intercultural communication training as well as improving one's English proficiency are recommended to develop one's intercultural communication competence. As for an ideal multinational / multicultural company, acceptance, inclusion, and utilization of a diversified workforce and a management system in which employees can feel a sense of participation, accomplishment, and good team spirit need to be recognized.

I . Introduction

Innovative improvements in transportation and communication have changed the business world so much. Also the globalization in many walks of life has enhanced

interdependence. Along these new streams of the world, the way of international business operation has been changing. A traditional operation in international business is to have head office in the home country of the company, and controls the international operation by sending various levels of managers to overseas branches and by hiring local people for daily production and services. Another type of operation is to have head office in the home country of the company, and controls the international operation rather loosely by establishing local company overseas and leaving the major management function to local people (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1990). The staffs sent by the head office of the company are to assist the top management of the local company. The latter type of operation is increasing in international business.

This type of new trend in international business is creating more and more multinational / multicultural companies. In the process of internationalization of a business company, the company hires local people, and to further strengthen the business operation (e.g. sales, advertizing, product planning, manufacturing, etc.), it hires employees based on credentials, achievements, and capacity. This kind of hiring system naturally ends up in drawing a diversified workforce into the company: age, sex, ethnicity, religion, language, etc. This change consequently leads the company to more multinational / multicultural direction in its employee composition. Thus, “managers and employees must be able to work effectively with more and more people with differing cultures, customs, values, beliefs, and practices” (Schmidt et al., 2007, p.5).

Unlike a more homogenous company consisting of the members of the same language, same nationality, same ethnic group and same cultural background, a multinational / multicultural company is composed of a more diversified workforce consisting of different languages, different nationalities, different ethnic groups, and different cultural backgrounds. In such a diversified work environment, people cannot escape from the issue of intercultural communication. People in a multinational / multicultural company must be able to develop a sense of cultural awareness, a skill to overcome various problems or difficulties in business handling which may arise from the differences of culture, and an ability to conduct intercultural communication (Beamer & Varner, 2008, Global leadership competency study group, 2005).

The purpose of the present study is first to find out what lies in business communication as stumbling blocks in a multinational / multicultural company, second to find out what constitutes intercultural communication competence, and finally to find out what an ideal multinational / multicultural company would be like. By this

research, some areas and contents of communication problems or difficulties in a diversified workforce will be revealed, and provide us with a key to think about how such problems or difficulties should be resolved. In addition, the study on the constituents of intercultural communication competence will help us design how guidance and training should be done to employees to develop such competence. Further, this study will help us understand what kind of workplace should be created as an ideal multinational / multicultural company.

Switzerland was chosen as a place of research, because it is a multilingual and multicultural country consisting of German area, French area, Italian area, and Romansh language area. It hosts many multinational / multicultural companies within the country, and therefore, it is filled with international atmosphere. This research was conducted at a well known multinational / multicultural company located in Zurich. The company has many partner companies in major cities of the world, each company being independent but closely linked with one another as a whole entity. The company includes employees from different countries. Their cultural backgrounds are different, and their mother tongues are also different. Many of them speak more than two languages, and have studied or worked in other countries. The composition of the employees, in this sense, is highly international, and the workplace is culturally highly diversified. Therefore, the company was an ideal place to conduct the present study.

II. Method

Qualitative interview research method was used for this study. Unlike quantitative research method such as survey and experiment, interview can collect more in-depth information from the subjects, which they cannot express well in quantitative method. Eight subjects from different sections of the company voluntarily participated in the study, and they were interviewed. They were two males and six females. Their nationalities were different: Swiss, Romanian, American, and Malaysian. They all had had study or work experiences overseas: in the U.K., U.S. Italy, Germany, Belgium, etc. The duration of each interview was about 45 minutes. The interview was conducted on an individual base between the interviewer and the interviewee. The interview questions were organized and given based on three aims of the present study. The interview was recorded for later reference with permission from each subject.

III. Result

The following answers were obtained from the subjects for each question.

1. Communication Problems

The subjects reported various communication problems they had faced in their daily business transaction with their colleagues, partners in other area of Switzerland or other countries, and clients. Their answers can be grouped into the following five areas.

(1) Communication Style

Subjects A, B, D, and E mentioned about differences in communication style between Americans, British, Germans and themselves. They perceived that Americans and Germans conduct rather open and direct communication while Swiss tend to be rather indirect and modest in their communication. Subject A described the way of Swiss communication as “less assertive and rather shy to express themselves forcefully.”

Subject D referred to the British way of communication in an interesting way. The subject thought that British style of communication is open, democratic, indirect and polite while the British insists on their own way ignoring what has been discussed. The British, though there is a clear hierarchy in a business organization, they try to communicate in a friendly manner by calling their colleagues by their first names. Contrary to this, Subject D continued, that Germans are assertive and more formal when addressing to their colleagues by calling their names with titles.

(2) Decision-making

Subject A, C, E, F, G, and H stated, out of their own experiences and perceptions, how decisions are made in their own company and partner companies. Subject A commented on the mindset of Swiss people, which is more democratic and acts toward consensus-making as is exemplified by “referendum” on a national level decision-making. Subject A also referred to the democratic decision-making of Americans; Americans discuss much among the colleagues in regard to what kind of risks or issues are expected as well as recognizing the merits of business before making decision.

Subject A perceived, on the contrary, that Germans are inclined to take the top-down decision-making. Subject A herself said that she prefers the top-down decision making while recognizing the importance of listening to the voices of all the people

involved in the same work.

Subject C said that Germans seem to have a more rigid and dominant hierarchy in their business structure, and therefore their decision-making follows the top-down system. Subject E mentioned about her work experience in Belgium. She observed that the decision-making was done by the top-down system there. Although she wanted to participate in the decision-making process by making relevant suggestions, her voice was not taken up when she actually did.

Subject F said that she would prefer the top-down decision making system while recognizing the importance of participating in a decision-making process. She thinks that, in a highly diversified multinational multicultural business company, the bottom-up decision-making system may take much longer time to reach conclusion due to its diversified workforces. This may end up causing a trouble to clients and losing profits of the company.

Subject G, reflecting upon her past experience with Germans, said the same thing; Germans take the top-down decision making, and subordinates have practically no opportunity to participate in the decision-making process. Subject H confirmed that the decision-making at his workplace is more democratic, and allows the team members to suggest ideas for decision-making.

(3) Work attitude and practice

Subject B told about her work experience in Italy. Her experience is related to a general work attitude, time in particular. Her attitude toward work used to be serious and punctual for anything. But after living in Italy and working with Italians, her attitude toward work had changed to be more tolerant and flexible. Italians, for example, take longer lunch time and if their residence is near the workplace, they go home for lunch. They are not necessarily punctual for appointment. In general, they seem to have a more relaxed attitude toward life and work.

Subject F also mentioned about her work experience with Italians. She described the business handling of the Italians to be rather relaxed and it took longer time than her work experience in other countries, which made her irritated. She joked, though exaggeration, that it takes 10 minutes in Swiss and Germany while in Italy it takes half a day to get the same information. In addition, she noticed that Swiss and Germans are quick and exact in documents making, while Italians lack closer attention and careful processing of business documents. As she is originally from the United States, she was surprised at the difference in document making. In the U.S., business documents are made with special care and closely checked due to rules and

regulations by the state and federal governments. If anything inappropriate or incorrect is detected in the business documents, they will be examined and may be punished.

Subject C referred to the different work attitude and practice between the French part of Switzerland and the German part of Switzerland. She herself is from the German part of Switzerland, and described her work experience with the partners in the French part to be rather annoying. She found it rather hard to communicate and to interact with those in the French part. This is because they tend to criticize and refuse the work she did whatever the work may be. They insisted on, she said, following their own way of business handling. She continued to say that they had better clarify what was wrong with her work and propose a way on how to solve the problem, which they didn't.

Subject G reported a difference of British and Swiss workers in socializing with their colleagues. Both British and Swiss recognize the importance of socializing with their colleagues so that they get to know well with one another. However, the socializing activity, dining together for example, takes a different style in two countries. In Britain, it is more acceptable and frequent to have socializing activities in the evening after work, while Swiss tend to prefer such socializing activities to be held during the work hours. Having lunch or coffee together is an example of ordinary socializing activity. This is because Swiss prefer to distinguish private life from work life, so they usually go home directly after work of the day.

(4) Language

All the subjects said that English is used as a "lingua franca" to communicate with people within the company and to communicate with partners and clients all over the world. All the subjects were very fluent in English, though all of their first language was not English. Subject B expressed her desire to receive more English lessons in technical areas of her work. Having worked for the company for seven years and gained much experience in international business, she felt it necessary to improve her English proficiency in technical areas. This is because the work she is engaged requires a good command of technical argument skill in English.

Subject H said a similar thing to what Subject B mentioned regarding the use of English. He stated that how language is used for communication can cause a problem. Even when using English, which is used as a lingua franca for international communication, people can fall into a problem, especially when they have to deal with technical discussion in a highly professional work. Lack of correct understanding of

the matter expressed in English can bring about misunderstanding, and lead to problems. In order to avoid such misunderstanding, he emphasized to check understanding of both sides by asking questions to what business partners or clients said.

Subject E reported her experience related to language issue in Belgium. Belgium, though it is a unified nation, is divided into two language areas: French area and Dutch (Flemish) area. While she was working in Flemish area, she felt that the society is rather closed in terms of the acceptance of other languages. She was expected to be able to understand and use Flemish. Otherwise, she wouldn't have been treated well. She felt rather alienated.

(5) Stereotype

Subject E reported her uncomfortable experience in Belgium, which seems to be related to the stereotype perception on women. She described that there prevailed a predominantly male leadership in Belgium. Her colleagues perceived the same way, she said. The male leadership comes from a perception that female is inferior to male in the work conduct. One time her junior, who was a male, was asked for advice on how to proceed in business handling, though she was more experienced in business and was in higher position. She was the only female in the project team, and the stereotype perception on women might have influenced the behavior of the man who had asked the junior fellow for advice.

2. Intercultural Communication Competence

(1) Language and Communication

Subject A mentioned that having a high level of English proficiency is the most important of all, as English is used as a "lingua franca" of all the people involved in international business. She further stated that British and Germans are more skillful in presenting their ideas inferring the reason may lie in a Swiss inclination to be rather modest and indirect. Subject D and Subject E said that it is necessary to have not only a high level of English proficiency but also to be able to understand and use the local language used in the place where they work.

Subject G referred to an aspect of communication ability of the workers as well as the level of English proficiency. She said that it is important to have an ability to express the same thing in different ways depending upon the persons one is working with and the situation one is in. Subject H, in addition to a good command of English, said that people need to have an ability to find more appropriate words or expressions

suitable to describe and explain the business matter.

(2) Attitude and Practice

All the subjects mentioned the following as important aspects of intercultural communication competence. First, "Openness". Openness means an open mindset and attitude to anything others say and do. People should not look at things with a predetermined or biased view, and should listen to what others say and observe what others do trying to understand what they mean by it. Subject B stressed the importance to keep on talking to one's colleagues or clients with open mind, trying to understand and accept the differences as much as possible.

Second, "Flexibility" or "Adaptability". People should not persist in doing one's own way. Instead, people should have a flexible attitude to make an adjustment to whatever others propose. Subject E, referring to flexible attitude in communication, mentioned about the importance of adapting oneself to a new work environment. Subject G said that flexible attitude is necessary to find a common ground of communication between oneself and colleagues or clients.

Third is "Listening and understanding correctly." In communication, it is most important to listen to and understand correctly what other person says. Under the influence of cultural differences, a possibility of misunderstanding increases in the process of communication interaction. In order to avoid such misunderstanding, it is important to listen attentively to what other person says and check whether one's understanding is correct or not whenever one cannot feel confident. Subject C suggested to do this checking not only by asking questions but also by paraphrasing.

Fourth is "Willingness". Willingness is a psychological drive to learn something new and different. It is somehow related to curiosity. In intercultural communication one may encounter new and different things in terms of ideas and the way of business handling based on different values. Subject C suggested one should be willing to step into a new world and learn something new and different. Subject E referred to willingness to understand others.

Fifth is "Sensitivity". This is to detect and be aware of what others are thinking and feeling. To put it in a different word, it is similar to "empathy". Subject A stated that it is important for us to have a sensitivity to other people: their values, beliefs, attitudes, etc. Subject D pointed out a sensitivity to what others are thinking and feeling. Subject F said the same thing in a different way. She said that one needs to be able to view things from different perspectives, and in particular from others' standpoints. So did Subject G.

Sixth is “Patience”. Subject F pointed this out. In intercultural communication, it usually takes time to find out what others want, what kind of people they are, why they do things in the way they do. It also takes time, after finding out those mentioned above, to adjust oneself to new people and new environment. Therefore, one needs to be patient in trying to realize one’s business goal.

Seventh is to “Know yourself”. Subject A mentioned that unless one knows himself/herself well, one won’t be able to understand the other well. This means to understand who you are and what you are in terms of nationality, cultural background, values, beliefs, attitudes and so on. If one knows himself/herself well, one can compare and contrast what are similar and what are different from the other and will be able to think about how to communicate and associate with the other. Subject F described her experience in Switzerland that she had never felt so strong that she was an American in her mentality. She reached this awareness through her work in Switzerland.

(3) Intercultural Experiences

All the subjects were highly international people with ample business experiences abroad or business experiences with people from different languages and cultural backgrounds. Some of them emphasized the importance of having intercultural experiences to develop one’s intercultural communication competence. Subject A said that at least 18 months of study or work experience abroad is necessary to learn about differences of people and culture, and to learn about how to adapt oneself to such a new environment. Subject B said that people need to be exposed to diversity, especially while they are young: diversity in people, culture and society. Subject H also suggested the same thing.

(4) Socializing Skill

Whatever the workplace may be and wherever the workplace may be and whoever the colleagues may be, some kind of and some degree of socializing is important to build a good team spirit and conduct a smoother business development. Some subjects referred to the necessity of having socializing occasions with colleagues or clients, and to develop socializing skills as a part of intercultural communication competence.

Subject B said that socializing helps create bond and good teamwork among the colleagues. As an example of socializing, she said that her department celebrates the completion of a project by eating, drinking, and chatting. Subject C, admitting the importance of getting know the colleagues better, explained the different attitude and

practice of socializing depending upon where one works. Subject G reported that in some departments, socializing events such as lunch or dinner are utilized to learn about other countries and other cultures, thus raising cultural awareness, which will eventually lead to developing one's intercultural communication competence.

(5) Intercultural Communication Training

To develop one's intercultural communication competence, some subjects mentioned about intercultural communication training. It is to expose people in artificial training programs. This kind of training programs supplement one's intercultural experiences. Subject C said that a kind of training program called "Global Smart" is used within her company to raise intercultural awareness. Subject D said that his company utilizes a book for its employee training which describes characteristics of cultural differences in different areas of the world and how to deal with them.

3. Ideal Multinational / Multicultural Company

Some subjects answered the question of what constitutes an ideal multinational/multicultural company in terms of communication perspective. Subject A stated that, regardless of the kind of decision-making style, a good company should value feedback to have its employees feel a sense of participation and being respected for what they have done to achieve business ends. Subject A also mentioned that a good company must have an awareness and respect to diversity of workforce: age, religion, culture, etc.

Subject C said that a good company should have an open and democratic atmosphere where people can express their ideas and opinions and ask questions freely without being afraid of criticism or unfavorable performance evaluation. Subject D introduced a list of reference his company made in which values an ideal company should follow when conducting its international and multicultural business. The list includes the following values: "leading by example", "working together", "respecting the individual", "seeking the facts and providing insight", "being open and honest in one's communication", "being committed to one's community", and "acting with integrity".

Subject F mentioned about the degree of information sharing among the team members. She said that a good company should offer a system to share the whole picture of the project among the team members. This is because team members can grasp where they are and where they are going and how they are going to do, if the

same degree of business information is shared among the team members. Subject F also referred to the importance of having a diversified workforce in the team. By having a diversified workforce in the team, new ideas and new approaches may be generated, and they may lead to better business outcome.

IV. Discussion

The subjects interviewed provided us with interesting and valuable information regarding the problems of intercultural communication, the concept of intercultural communication competence, and the concept of an ideal multinational / multicultural company. The underlying essence encompassing these three topics are culture and communication. A highly important seminal work, which taught us how culture and communication are related, is a book entitled *The Silent Language* by Edward Hall (1959). He said in the book “culture controls behavior in deep and persisting ways, many of which are outside of awareness and therefore beyond conscious control of the individual” (p.35). As Hall said, spiritual culture, which is underneath our conscious awareness, is the key to understand what people say and to think about how a better communication can be carried out in a multinational / multicultural company. The spiritual part of culture includes such concepts as worldview, values, beliefs, and attitudes. The following discussion revolves around these concepts of culture and communication, and aims at generating an answer, or at least finding a suggestion, on how to carry out a better communication, develop a better intercultural communication competence, and to organize a better multinational / multicultural business company.

1. Communication Problems

Language has a crucial importance to realize the intended communication. In a multinational / multicultural company, the language used for communication has to have a quality of lingua franca. As Moran & Youngdahl indicates, “the dominant language of international business has been English” (p.113). As this trend is still continuing, there is no doubt that the stable position of English as a lingua franca for international business has already been firmly established. Not everyone, however, working for a multinational / multicultural company uses English as their mother tongue. Often times, English is their second language. Among the interviewees, there was only one native speaker of English from the United States. But even in her

case, she spoke, among her family and relative members, in Chinese, which is her first language.

In such a business environment where most of the people engaged are non-native speakers of English, the correct understanding of what others say is very important. Also it is very important to make a message which can be passed to others correctly. Considering the importance of verbal communication, people in multinational / multicultural company must develop a high level of English proficiency so that they can communicate their intended message in an appropriate and effective way to others as well as to understand what others say.

However, for those whose native language is not English, it is not so easy to use English as well as their native language. No matter how well one may be able to use English and how much confidence one may have in employing English, one can fall into errors in choosing appropriate words and expressions. Here is a room where miscommunication could occur. Schmidt et al. (2007) points out this trouble spot that "Lack of fluency in a second language and a failure to understand the linguistic nuances of another culture can be problematic as well as a barrier to successful business negotiations" (p.231). Lewis (2006) also describes the same point as in the way that "language is a tool of communication ...but it is much more than that: it has strengths and weaknesses which project national character and even philosophy" (p. 63). This is even more so for those whose language structure is so far apart from the one of English. Japanese, for example, has no common element with English. Even among the European languages, which all belong to the Indo-European languages, the languages in Germanic group and the languages in Latin group are different.

As described above, communication in English among the people of non-native speakers of English needs to be carried out with care. Moran & Youngdahl (2008) warn that "most projects fail due to communication problems and lack of understanding" (p.25). People engaged in communication in English should check with one another from time to time whether their understanding is correct or not. Also, whenever one feels insufficiency in the degree of understanding or further questioning, one should not hesitate to ask for clarity or further information. This kind of checking process in communication in English will avoid the occurrence of misunderstanding between the two parties.

Regarding language issue in intercultural communication, one should pay attention to a natural feeling that everybody has toward one's native language. Mother tongue is a pride and soul of any ethnic group, and if possible, people want

to speak in their native language. People usually welcome those foreigners who can speak their native language and treat them favorably. A case in Flemish area which Subject E reported can be explained from the viewpoint above. What this case suggests us is that we not only should learn English, but also should learn the local language which is used in the area where we work.

Stereotype, according to Schmidt et al. (2007), is “a selection process that we use to organize and simplify perceptions of others” (p.35). It creates expectations, in our mind, regarding how others will behave, and we are inclined to process information in accordance to such stereotypical expectations (Snyder & Haugen, 1995). Stereotype is a very narrow and fixed view which is not based on the objective data. It is formed by a very limited direct experience with the object of evaluation and by the indirect information brought by mass media, books, and the third persons. Stereotype views often distort the true picture of the objective, and cause misunderstanding among the people who are engaged in communication.

In order to avoid misunderstanding caused by stereotype, one has to have a broader view based on wider and objective information, and refrain from hasty judgment. As a daily habit of judgment, one should ask himself / herself where the information comes from, how the information obtained, whether the information processed or not, etc. It is better to have multiple channels of information source and the information be examined by multiple people. The concepts of “subtype” and “subgroup”, proposed by Richards & Hewstone (2001), may be of a constructive control strategy. Subtype is to include members of other groups who don't conform to the rule of the groups. Subgroup is to put similar members of other groups into one subgroup while placing others who fit our stereotype into another subgroup. By doing this, we may be able to develop a more precise predictions about others.

2. Intercultural Communication Competence

The study of intercultural communication competence, as Martin (1993) reports, started from practical concern such as how to meet the needs of overseas sojourners. Early studies appeared in 1970s such as the one by Ruben (1976). Since that time, various research were conducted. Koester, Wiseman, and Sanders (1993) reported, reviewing the domain of inquiry on the concept of intercultural communication competence, that there are a few different views on the concept of intercultural communication competence. One of them is based on the evaluation of individual characteristics, including one's values, beliefs, and attitudes, and its

relationship to intercultural interaction outcomes. Another view is based on how one's communication is perceived socially appropriate and effective in its relation to others. The following discussion on the concept of intercultural communication competence can be referred to those views mentioned above.

In regard to intercultural communication competence, the report of the subjects was summarized from five aspects: language & communication, attitude & practice, intercultural experiences, socializing skill, and intercultural communication training. As for language & communication aspect, the major point of discussion has already been taken up elsewhere. So, a remaining point will be discussed briefly here. Subject G & H mentioned about an ability to express or explain the same thing in different ways depending upon the persons and the situations. Hofstede (1980) conducted a seminal work on the concept of intercultural variability targeting the employees who work at a world famous multinational / multicultural company. Schmidt et al. (2007), referring to Hofstede's work, commented that "(Hofstede's) study determined that managers had to adjust the corporate management philosophy to fit the beliefs, values, and behaviors of the country in which they were working if they hoped to be successful in a complex global arena" (p.28).

They also said about an ability to find more appropriate words or expressions to describe and explain the business matters. Their voice indicates that we must develop an ability to analyze the business situations and adjust ourselves to them in terms of communication practice. Some rhetorical techniques utilized in public speaking and composition (e.g. time order, space order, comparison & contrast, repetition, metaphor etc.) may be of use to help develop this kind of communication ability.

As for attitude & practice, this group constitutes the core of intercultural communication competence. Odenwald (1996) described several qualities to be an effective cosmopolitan team member to work in a multinational / multicultural organization. Some of the qualities Odenwald mentioned overlap with the qualities the subjects brought up. Seven items included in this group are closely related to how one's mindset or attitude influences intercultural communication. Four items in the group coincide directly or indirectly with four guidelines for international adjustment proposed by David Matsumoto, an American social psychologist (1999). The four guidelines are the degree of self-esteem and self-acceptance, the degree of self-control or patience for ambiguity, the degree of critical thinking and creativity, and the degree of openness & flexibility.

The four items the subjects reported in interview (openness, flexibility, patience, knowing yourself) coincide with what Matsumoto indicated. Although Matsumoto's guidelines are for international adjustment, it is easy to infer that the guidelines can be applied to intercultural communication considering that a good international adjustment is the outcome of good intercultural communication. Listening and understanding well what others say can be included, as a very important attitude and practice, in language & communication aspect of intercultural communication competence. Sensitivity can be included in intercultural communication training.

Intercultural experiences and intercultural communication training go hand in hand. Each one is reciprocal to the other. When one is exposed to some kind of intercultural experience, one can identify that experience more objectively in the intercultural communication training referring to intercultural communication theory. Likewise, when one receives some kind of intercultural communication training, one can apply the knowledge and skill of intercultural communication obtained through training to the situation one faces.

Intercultural experiences are not necessarily limited to the ones people experience abroad. Rather it covers a broad range of experiences. Experiences in foreign countries are easy to recognize. However, experiences within one's own country or within one's own ethnic group, or within one's own colleagues can be included in intercultural experiences. For example, meeting with someone from a different area of the same country, meeting with someone from a different ethnic and religious group, working with someone from different expertise in the same company. As long as one's encounter with a new experience is influenced by differences of culture, it can be an intercultural experience. Whatever the kind of intercultural experiences may be, what is important is to think about why one feels difference or difficulty in communication or adjustment, and how it can be solved or how the barrier can be lowered.

Intercultural communication training is often based on the concept of experiential learning which consists of three aspects: cognitive, affective, and behavioral. The types of training differ from each other depending upon the nature and goal of the training. Most popular and frequently used training aims at raising cognitive awareness of the participants for intercultural communication and its related phenomenon. Critical incident, for example, is a good tool of training to raise one's cultural awareness. It prepares an incident in which people from different cultural

backgrounds encounter some unexpected experience, for which one cannot explain why such a thing happens from one's own cultural perspective. Then in the briefing process, the participants realize what was the stumbling block for smooth communication. There are many other training programs depending upon the objectives of the training. The largest scale of training is simulation in which participants are requested to live exactly in the same way as to live in the target culture. Multinational / multicultural companies should utilize this kind of intercultural communication training for developing their employees' intercultural communication competence. Albert (1994) explained the reasons why multinational organizations lack intercultural training and emphasized the need for cultural diversity training. When this kind of training is used in combination with offering intercultural experiences to their employees, the level of intercultural communication competence of their employees will be raised even more.

In regard to socializing skill for intercultural communication competence, people need to recognize that socializing is an important aspect of successful business. Whether it be within the company or outside the company, some kind of socializing helps create better understanding of the other people, better human relationship, and smoother communication, thus leading the business to a successful outcome. The way of socializing may differ from workplace to workplace, region to region, or country to country. Starting with casual conversation over a cup of coffee, to having lunch or dinner, or even more to playing golf during the day and having drinks over the weekend. Sasaki (2002) explained that, in Japanese business firms, informal communication plays an important role, that is, sharing business information by way of informal association with colleagues is a Japanese business custom (p.154). It all depends upon the norms and rules the cultures of the company, region, or country expects people to do. Knowing what is expected and practiced in a given particular work environment and being able to adjust himself / herself to such a social condition is a part of constituents of intercultural communication competence.

3. Ideal Multinational / Multicultural Company

Regardless the type of business company, domestic or international, there are common elements which every firm has to have: goal to attain, ideal of operation, rewarding customers and stockholders, contribution to community and what not. In addition to these common elements of business company, there seem to be a few other elements to be included for the operation of multinational / multicultural company. They

are acceptance, inclusion, and utilization of diversified workforce, and democratic management system in which people can feel a sense of participation, accomplishment, and good team spirit.

In terms of diversified workforce, it is preferable for any multinational / multicultural company to have a competence and personality fitness based hiring and promotion system as much as possible. The difference in age, sex, ethnicity, religion, nationality and language should not be the barrier for employment, promotion, and work allocation. There has to be a lingua franca, usually English, used for mutual day-to-day communication in such companies. Employees in such companies are expected to have been exposed to some kind of intercultural experiences and intercultural communication training so that they have some degree of intercultural communication competence. Yet, it is also true that cultures formed in a long history do affect the company system and operation, and it can be a stumbling block to realize an ideal multinational / multicultural company.

As for democratic operation of multinational / multicultural company, a sense of participation, accomplishment, and good teamwork should be shared by all the employees of the company. A sense of participation will be felt in the process of decision-making and its implementation. Even if the style of decision-making may be the top-down system, the employees involved in the process should be able to feel a sense of participation if they could share the information, ask questions, and express their opinions regarding the issue. An important responsibility of the team leader is to listen to what his/her subordinates want to say, and give them feedback for what they have contributed, and share the whole process of business operation.

A sense of accomplishment may be felt when an individual or a project team can achieve the goal they set in the way they wanted to direct. Such a sense may be reinforced by rewarding them in the form of giving award, bonus, verbal compliments, extra holidays, and promotion. In view of democratic operation of the company, this kind of rewarding should be based on equal opportunity and fair evaluation of all the employees involved in the work.

A good result is often the consequence of good teamwork. Good teamwork is based on mutual trust and support to attain the common goal. Mutual trust and support can be made by getting to know one another and helping one another in times of difficulty. In order to get to know the team members well, socializing events will be of help. In such occasions, team members will be able to obtain more personal information which they cannot get during the work hours in the company. Personal information varies from

person to person depending upon how much or what kind of information one would disclose to others.

Yet, it is true that personal information helps the team members understand one another as a whole entity. As team members get to know one another well, they will be able to see what kind of support they should ask to their team members. So, in general, socializing events should be helpful to make a good team. But the answer to the question of how much socializing is appropriate may differ from company to company, region to region, or country to country. In a country such as Switzerland where people distinguish their work and private life rather clearly, it may be difficult to have such socializing events often and for longer hours. While in Japan where there is relatively little distinction between work and private life, socializing events are held more often and for longer hours, even to late at night or on weekends. How to balance this kind of difference in business culture in a multinational / multicultural company is a difficult question.

V. Conclusion

Through this study, it was confirmed that the knowledge and skill of intercultural communication had become an indispensable element in the operation of multinational / multicultural company. Its value and importance are increasing even more as globalization in business progresses. Although this study was a very limited case study conducted at a well known multinational / multicultural company located in Zurich, Switzerland, the answers obtained from the subjects of interview revealed a state of reality in business communication all the employees in multinational / multicultural companies could encounter in their daily life. The answers of the subjects were also insightful to think about what would constitute intercultural communication competence as well as to think about what would be an ideal multinational / multicultural company.

Communication problems the subjects reported can be reviewed from two points: language and culture. As for language, English proficiency is the matter of major concern. This is because English as a lingua franca is necessary to carry out business communication in a diversified workforce consisting of people from different native languages. For many people, English may be the second language. If it is the case, most people cannot express themselves in English as well as in their mother tongue. Here is a room for anyone to cause misunderstanding in his / her communication with others. In this sense, every employee in any multinational / multicultural company

must have as high English proficiency as his / her mother tongue. In addition, they need to form a habit of checking their understanding of message received from the counterpart in their communication in one way or the other.

Concerning culture, everyone needs to recognize that it is a major source of influence upon his / her communication behavior. Culture functions, as if it were an invisible hand, to regulate one's way of thinking and behavior since it is the source of one's worldview, values, beliefs, and attitudes in life. Of course, one's personal trait formed in the process of one's upbringing, education and career experience could be a major cause of communication problem, too. However, one's personal trait itself is also a product of cultural influence, and so this factor should not be a separate cause of communication problems.

Language and culture, as can be inferred from the causes of communication problems, are the two starting points to think about intercultural communication competence. Regarding language, as already stated elsewhere, English proficiency is the most important thing of all. For those employees whose native language is not English, this ability becomes very important to secure accurate and appropriate communication. In addition, an ability to understand and employ the local language used in one's business area can supplement one's deficiency to communicate with local people. Therefore, it is recommended to learn the local language as much as possible.

One's attitudes and practice toward business seem to be the core of intercultural communication competence. They are openness, flexibility, listening & understanding, willingness, sensitivity, patience, and self-knowledge. When all of these things are put together and utilized in daily business operation, intercultural communication should work out well. To reinforce these attitudes and practice, intercultural experiences are recommended: joining study abroad programs, traveling foreign countries, working overseas, etc. By exposing oneself to intercultural experience of some sort, one will be able to recognize the differences and similarities of language, people, and culture with reality. Further, one will be able to develop cultural awareness, sensitivity to others, ability to solve problems, and adaptability to foreign cultures by way of receiving intercultural communication training.

An ideal multinational / multicultural company must accept, include, and utilize diversified workforce. It must have a common ideal and goal, a common language, and a management system in which every employee can feel a sense of participation, accomplishment, and a team spirit. It must evaluate the performance of its employees

on the ground of fairness, and reward them accordingly. It must provide its employees opportunities to train themselves in developing intercultural communication competence as well as to expose themselves to foreigners and foreign cultures. For customers, stockholders, and community, it must contribute itself to maximizing their satisfaction, a universal truth.

Globalization in business and subsequent increase of multinational / multicultural companies is an ever growing international trend. In such a stream of the business world, various issues of intercultural communication must be further studied, and the findings of research must be returned to multinational / multicultural companies so that they can better operate in the world, and benefit all the people outside the companies as well as the ones within the companies.

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Appendix

The following are the interview questions used for the present study.

1. Intercultural communication problems

(1) Communication among the colleagues:

"What are the communication problems you have with your colleagues at your company who are from different cultural backgrounds?"

(2) Communication between the superiors and the subordinates:

"What are the communication problems you have with your superiors or subordinates at your company who are from different cultural backgrounds?"

(3) Problem solving / Decision-making communication:

"What are the communication problems you have when you have to solve some problem or make some decision at your company, which may be originated in the cultural differences of the staffs?"

(4) Intercultural communication with the clients or customers

- 1) “What are the communication problems you have with your clients or customers in your general day-to-day communication, which may be originated in the cultural differences between you and your clients or customers?”
- 2) “How do you solve the communication problems you have with your clients or customers?”

2. Intercultural communication competences

“What do you think are the intercultural communication competences that people need to have in international business?”

3. Ideal multinational/multicultural company

“What do you think are the ideal multinational/multicultural company in terms of communication and management of the company?”