

A Comparison of Vietnamese and Korean Organizational Communication

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Abstract: Communication is central to the life of our culture. Within communication theory, scientists often study the interaction of people from different cultures. The study of communication involves the study of culture with which it is integrated. This paper discusses on the differences of communication in Korean and Vietnamese organizations.

Based on their national culture, Korean organizations have developed distinctive organizational cultures and practices. As Asian Confucianism based cultures, Korea and Vietnam share lots of values and have many things in common. In the field of organizational communication, there are some main features like collectivism, hierarchy, harmony orientation and indirect communication style. Within these four features of communication, Vietnam and Korea express in different way at different level.

Key words: Communication; Organizational Communication; Korea; Vietnamese comparison.

1. Introduction

Communication is one of those human activities that everyone recognizes but few can define satisfactorily. Communication means exchange of ideas, views, opinions, understanding, feelings, emotions, facts or information between two or more persons by any sources or medium. It is talking to one another, it is television, it is spreading information on the internet, it is our fashion

style, it is literary criticism etc, the list of it is endless.

Communication is both social and cognitive because it is a process by which individuals exchange information and influence one another through a common system of symbols and signs.

Communication is one vital activity in the establishment, performance, and development of any organization. Some authors even regard communication as organizations themselves “*Communication isn’t something that happens inside the organization but is the organization, or, to communicate is to organize. From a*

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communication theory point of view, the communication behaviors of organization members are what constitute the actual organization. The organization, then, is composed of much more than walls, signs, desks, pencils and computers. The organization is the continuing communicative construction of its members. It is continually evolving as the participants engage in the normal drama of their lives” (Pepper, 1995).

Organizational communication is a process through which organizations are created and in turn create and shape events. The process can be understood as a combination of process, people, messages, meaning and purpose (Shockley, 1991). We may define organizational communication as *the sending and receiving of messages among interrelated individuals within a particular environment or setting to achieve individual and common goals* (Wikibooks, 2009) or more simple, *the display and interpretation of message among communication units that are part of a particular organization* (Pace and Faules, 1994).

Within communication theory, scientists often study the interaction of people from different cultures. According to Fiske (1990), communication is central to the life of our culture, without it culture of any kind must die. Communication is “the basic social process that is influenced by the philosophical foundations and value systems of a society” (Yum, 1987 in Woon Young Cho, 2005). Consequently, the study of communication involves the study of culture with which it is integrated. Accordingly, this paper will discuss on the differences of communication in Korean and Vietnamese organizations.

Based on their national culture, Korean organizations have developed distinctive organizational cultures and practices. As Asian Confucianism based cultures, Korea and

Vietnam share lots of values and have many things in common. In the field of organizational communication, there are some main features like collectivism, hierarchy, harmony orientation and indirect communication style. Within these four features of communication, Vietnam and Korea express in different way at different level.

2. Collectivism

According to Hofstede (1997), individualism-collectivism is one among five main dimensions differentiating national cultures. Collectivism pertains to societies in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people’s lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty (Hofstede, 1997). Korea and Vietnam are both categorized as a high collectivistic culture, which values family and group goals ahead of individual goals. This can be traced back to the long history of religion and agriculture based economy of these two countries.

The individualism index (IDV) of Korea is 18 and of Vietnam is 20 (Hofstede, 2009), the gap is not much but in fact there are some differences in expressing the collectivism between the two countries.

Koreans always consider themselves as part of a group like family, company, group of friends or colleagues. In the workplace, being part of an in-group seems to be very important to Koreans. A Study at Tongyang Nylon Company (TNC) in Korea revealed that TNC employees generally respected group opinions and are usually willing to comply with group decisions, regardless of their own opinion.

Sixty-five percent of TNC employees stated that they were willing to go along with the group opinion even when they might not agree with it (Woon Young Cho, 2005). Korean managers are stingy about praising their subordinates and the employees are even stingier about praising one another even when their peers are more successful as they think “the achiever is no better than they are because they once belonged to the same group” (Kim Young Eun, 1996). So, to Korean employees, receiving an individualized compliment may be embarrassing because they think the group, but not the individual, should take credit. A person who thinks or acts differently will be labeled as *twinda* (conspicuous), which is a negative description of someone who is renegade (Kim Young Eun, 1996).

Living in a collectivist cultures, Koreans care more about what others think about them than what they think of themselves, in other words, public image is very important in Korea. In their decision making process, Koreans first consider what other would think of them and tend to avoid any risky deviation from conformity. Koreans are also very sensitive to shame and they would control their expression, suppress their feelings and engage in a type of ritualistic behavior designed to defend themselves and avoid any type of behavior that risks causing them shame. Furthermore, in case some one is shamed, the shame will then be transferred to their family. Hence, preserving the family honor becomes the utmost importance and the loss of family honor might be the most degrading, shameful occurrence (Z.N. Lee 1999 in Shim et al 2008). In this aspect, Korean culture is much in common with Vietnamese’s one. In Vietnam, young employees’s making mistakes in behavior might be labeled as their bad manner rooted in the family’s education.

Being collectivistic, Korean employees hardly be absent from a collective activity even

though they are not compulsory (a party or a picnic, for example) as they are afraid of being “excluded” from the group. For Vietnamese employees in Vietnamese organizations, this feeling of being isolated from the group is not so strong. A Vietnamese student in Seoul National University, who is now working part time for a Korean company in Seoul, said that when she worked for a company in Vietnam, she hardly joined any extra activities held by her colleagues as she is introversive but while studying and working in Korea, she has never been absent from any group activities with her colleagues in company or friends in lab though just a dinner even when she is sick or has another important task to do as she feels very unpleasant if she can not join.

Moreover, collectivism is expressed deeply in Korean language. When refer to any community they belong to, Koreans always say “our family”, “our school”, “our company” rather than “my family”, “my school”, “my company”. And they even say “our wife” or “our husband” which make many foreigners surprised. It is said that “when an individual uses the pronoun “I” repeatedly instead of “we” in expressing an opinion or recounting a personal experience, he or she is considered strange or egoistic” (Song and Meek, 1998). To this aspect, Vietnamese language is more individualistic than Korean.

Although Koreans admit that they are more self-interested compare to other collectivist cultural Asians like Japanese or Chinese (Eun Young Kim, 1996), and researchers also found that members of Korean organizations were pursuing more individualistic values, the core of traditional collectivism remains quite strong and still play a profound role in shaping Korean organizational practices (Shim et al, 2008).

3. Hierarchy

Confucianism, which is the religious-philosophical system in most East Asian countries, has a great impact on social, behavioral and thought patterns of East Asians. Unequal human relations within hierarchical social structure are justified under Confucian ethics (Shim et al, 2008). Confucians believe if people perform their role in the authority based relationships, society will be peaceful as well as better (Shim et al, 2008). With Confucianism's roots set deep in the national culture and continuously shape the moral system, both Vietnam and Korea have distinctly hierarchical social relations. Confucianism sees all human relations in the light of a vertical relationship: upper classes always wield authority and lower classes always obey authority. In organizations, it meant employees were to obey employers and juniors to respect seniors (Eun Young Kim, 1996).

Korean companies are well known for their vertical social structure based on age and social status. The organizational arrangement of them is highly centralized with authority concentrated in senior level. High-ranking individuals or the elders tend to have much power over their subordinates or juniors.

Age is quite a vital valuable in setting someone's social status and relationship. Koreans make friends in similar age group, intergenerational friendships are not common. Among Koreans, even a one year age difference requires deferring one's language and manners, Koreans become comfortable when they know that the other party is younger than themselves (Eun Young Kim, 1996). In the workplace, although age is still important to people on setting their way of

communication, their use of language to each other and many Korean companies continue to emphasize seniority and hierarchy based on age, the elders seem not to have all the power over their juniors like before, like a female employee working as an associated researcher and project assistant in a Korean non-profit organization has said to me "Age used to seem to have a strong invisible, but now it is gradually shifting to position. In other words, regardless of age, in present Korea society, position is more important in the organization".

While age is not anymore a severely significant valuable, the positional hierarchy is still vital and may be considered the most importance in workplace communication. Within these hierarchical relationships, interaction in the workplace is highly ritualized, with great importance placed on the proper behavior and the proper language for both subordinates and superiors. For examples, subordinates have to bow down to great their superiors and seldom drink alcohol or smoke in front of the seniors. Shim et al (2008) cited an interviewee of them who told of an incident where she had to sign something that she did not believe was right. Her superior was signing, so in Korean culture the lower ranked people, in that particular context, were all supposed to sign.

In their communication processes, Koreans are very cautious about using linguistic codes, because the Korean language, Hangeul, is very complex and differentiated according to social status, degree of intimacy, age, sex and level of formality (Yum, 1987, in Woon Young Cho, 2005). Employees also have to use formal, honorific language to seniors, while seniors may use the informal – impolite one to them. It is quite popular and maybe popularly accepted

that a superior shout at his subordinate. Many Vietnamese employees who work for Korean companies admit that it troubles and annoys them a lot when their boss loses his temper and shouts at them even when they think they do not make a (big) mistake.

Koreans also care lots about the titles. They call each other by their name followed by their titles like Park *Sonsaeng-nim* (means professor Park), Lee *Sajang-nim* (means president Lee) or Kim *Parksa-nim* (means Dr. Kim). They keep calling people with their titles even after they retire or are dismissed from their positions. In addition to using the proper titles, proper respect should be shown to them. This way of addressing is quite different from Vietnamese's way as in Vietnam, people call each other by their first name with a personal pronoun and without their titles.

Decision making in Korean organizations seems to follow a formal procedure in which senior approval is necessary. In most Korean organizations, a proposal is developed at a lower level and routed vertically all the way to the top. This process is more of a formality to diffuse the responsibility for making a decision. Consensus-based decisions are rare in Korean organizations. In many companies, particularly at small to medium-sized companies, it is often the top executive who makes the final decision, the mid-level managers have to get approval from the top even if they have the power to make decisions (Eun Young Kim, 1996). In other words, the power structure of making decision in Korean companies is often rigidly hierarchical.

The vertical hierarchy continues to play outside the workplace. For example, a group of coworkers go to a karaoke room after work,

the person in the lower rank usually makes the reservation and even in the seating order in that karaoke room, the younger or lower rank people sit next to the door to order food or drink, and the singing order also follows those ranks by age or by the company hierarchy (Shim et al, 2008).

All in all, the social status rigid hierarchy prescribes the communicative behavior in Korean workplace and at times makes the communication climate here uncomfortable, some authors even assumed that "open communication and debate does not exist in Korean firms" (Zhang and Yew, 2009).

4. Harmony orientation

Harmony is always vital to a collectivism-based society. Like most Asia cultures, both Korea and Vietnam value balance and harmony. But it seems that harmony in social relationships is more important in Korea. Harmony plays such a vital role in social relations to Koreans that it can be said "if there is a single condition which virtually all Koreans value, it is harmony in social relations" (Song and Meek, 1998). "If it's not polite, don't say it" or "Only if a family works together in harmony can it succeed" are some popular proverbs which show the importance of harmony to Koreans. Throughout the generations, the sense of working and living within certain groups made Korean people avoid fiction and confrontation. Till this day, Korean people pride themselves in having harmony in their culture (Shim et al, 2008).

For Koreans, a way to preserve harmony within vertical relationship was by a refined sense of saving other's (and one's own) face. Consequently, in understanding Korean's harmony orientation, the key concept "*kibun*" should not be excluded. Although it has no

exactly translation in English, *kibun* can be understood as the inner feelings, pride, mood or taste of mind. It can be said that “in its full cultural context, *kibun* incorporates most of the values Koreans hold dear”. Due to the Confucian emphasis on harmony and hierarchal order in relationships, an individual should always express respect and concern for another’s *kibun*, as well as express a concern for the *kibun* of the entire group/situation (Shim et al, 2008). Accordingly, Korean culture is much about the feelings of others. To develop and maintain harmonious relationships, Koreans must be able to accurately “read” and keep the *kibun* of others. To ignore *kibun* in Korea will generally lead to problems on your side. To hurt someone’s *kibun* is a terrible thing to do as it means you hurt their pride, cause them to lose dignity, and lose face. So, trying to keep other people’s *kibun* intact while maintaining your own is actually quite a job. It is important to maintain a peaceful, comfortable atmosphere at all times, and caring other’s *kibun* is such a way to maintain harmony.

Korean organizations tend to emphasize not arrogance but humility and ability to work harmoniously with other members (Shim et al, 2008). Working in a group, to maintain harmony, Koreans may choose to work to gain a consensus before a decision is made, rather than letting the majority rule and getting support for a decision afterward. In a meeting, subordinates do not challenge their superiors even if the latter might be wrong, colleagues seldom correct each other unless the factual error will bring disastrous consequences. Direct confrontation of another person is considered rude and undesirable, disagreement is usually carefully and cautiously expressed so as not to damage the “face” of others or hurt their inner feelings (*kibun*), especially in public setting (Song and Meek, 1998).

5. Indirect communication style and nonverbal communication

If harmony orientation is one of the consequences of collectivism, indirect communication style may be seen as a corollary of this harmony because communication within such culture is supposed to have the goals to maintain harmony, or at least the appearance of harmony and “the emphasis on preserving harmony and trust in relationships suggest indirect communication and the virtue of silence in conversations” (Shim et al, 2008).

In indirect speech, individuals say one thing which actually implies something else, it is often reflected in polite forms of expression. Koreans hardly say “no” directly but find another way to express their refusal or disagreement, “you maybe right” or “we will think about it” are examples of polite ways to turn down a request. Some Korean scholars gave out an example of workplace communication between colleagues like this: someone in your office drops by but you do not have time to talk with them because of a pressing deadline, in this situation, the indirect Korean style of communication message should be “What time is it now?”. The visitor should then realize that the coworker knows very well what time it is and is simply providing an indirect means of communicating the fact that the visitor should leave so that the coworker can continue with the work at hand. Then, the indirect response message should be “Oh, it’s already 4 o’ clock. I’d better leave now. I’ve got an appointment at 4:15”. In such case, two parties could communicate their “real” intentions without either party indicating knowledge of the internally transmitted message. The faces of both parties are saved

(Robinson, 2003). In that way indirect communication style may help people “saving face” as it prevents the embarrassment of rejection by the other person or disagreement among partners, leaving the relationship and the face of each party intact.

Another significant feature of Koreans in indirect communication style is their silent remaining. Koreans used to think that silence is golden and for a long time verbal communication skills were not emphasized in Korea, they believed that “if it is in one’s heart, it will be transmitted to another’s heart” and did not think that communicating their ideas verbally is necessary all the time, they assumed their colleagues already know what they were thinking, therefore, Koreans often omit the information that they assume others already know (Eun Young Kim, 1996). For Koreans, silence is more than just a virtue, it is a necessary component of everyday communication, reflecting communicative competence and skill, it may say that Korean cultures do not reward talkative people (Shim et al, 2008). And although being direct and specific is getting more emphasis nowadays, keeping silent is still a way of communication within workplace, especially in bottom – up communication. Subordinates often stay in silence or simply say “yes” to their boss even when they do not understand nor agree with him.

Nonverbal language is very important in communication process. In 1967, Mehrabian was the first to draw attention to the significance of nonverbal communication and concluded that nonverbal channels such as facial expression, body movement and voice tone contribute 93 percent of the “attitudinal” message to the receiver (Graham, 1991). Nonverbal behavior functions as the dominant

force in interpersonal communication, it is the most accurate way of exchanging emotions and feelings (Park and Klopff, 1997). This is particularly alarming given estimates that upwards of 60% of the meaning in any social situation is communicated nonverbally (Birdwhistell, 1955; Philipott, 1983 in Greene et al 2003) and research indicating that nonverbal cues are especially likely to be believed when they conflict with verbal messages (Burgoon, 1985; Burgoon, Buller,&Woodall,1996 in Greene, 2003). Nonverbal behavior always occurs in a context and the meaning of the behavior is always related to the situation and the circumstances, it is also affected much by culture (Greene, 2003). Accordingly, in a high-context communication culture like Korea, nonverbal communication is even more vital. In Korean language, there is a concept which is considered a critical variable in the maintenance of social relationships, that is “*noonchi*”. In Korean, *noonchi* means “eyes measured” but it is beyond reading the eyes and is the attempt “to read one’s mind, probe one’s motives, study one’s face, grasp a situation, see how the wind blow” (Robinson, 2003). *Nononchi* is a form of high-context communication and is often used to interpret and comprehend another’s thoughts, intentions, feelings and desires which are seldom verbally expressed (Shim et al, 2008). Every culture may has its own type of *noonchi* but to Koreans, *noonchi* is so popular and important that it is said a Korean can not survive in Korea without this perceptive skill (Robinson, 2003). This even creates something call “*noonchi* culture” that is communication relies much on covert expression or what is not said and not done more than on overt verbal or nonverbal communication. In this *noonchi*

culture, Koreans do not express individual needs or thoughts directly but through a “silent mind” or *noonchi* may lead Koreans to speak words which differ from the meaning they wish to convey (Shim et al, 2008), in other words, Koreans use *noonchi* as a tactic for gathering data, as a mean to analyze that data and as a mean of keeping one’s own secret (Robinson, 2003). A mutual understanding of both parties’s *noonchi* results not only in successful communication, but also in the maintenance and preservation of both parties’s faces.

In workplace communication, *noonchi* is even more important, especially to the employees, subordinates or juniors. Subordinates must use their *noonchi* in the interaction with their superiors to gain their individual needs, without *noonchi*, subordinates would be absolutely helpless, a good employee is expected to read what his boss wants before he says it. Every student or company worker I met in Korea, regardless of their nationality, admitted that they can not leave their lab or office without the permission of their professor or superior even it is very late and not working time anymore. The point is that the “permission” will never be directly come from a verbal speech but they have to use their *noonchi* to read the mind of the seniors to see whether he or she has a good mood and guess if it’s okay for them to leave.

6. Conclusion

Because communication is complex and complicated, and related to every aspect of life, it is one of the most scrutinized phenomena. Not only voluminous in quantity, communication literature is really rich in

content. It contains different theories, approach, perspectives, trends, and debates. There are perennial debates in some keys issues of communication. Nevertheless, there is no argument that in every aspect of a business, communication holds the key to improving cooperation and understanding.

As mentioned above, Vietnam and Korea share many commons in their communication style. They are both collectivistic culture which are hierarchical, harmony oriented and indirect in communicating. But each of the country has its own way and level of expressing the shared features as well as has distinctive characteristics. Korean language supports those features at a very high level. Communication climate in Korean organizations seems to be more stressful due to its more rigid hierarchy and the popular, effective use of organizational discipline. Besides, Koreans highly estimate other’s (and one’s own) inner feelings and mind, and tend to use tact much in their communication.

To sum up, as Asian countries with Confucianism based culture, Korea and Vietnam share many values and have lots of common in organizational communication patterns. However, each has their own features and even in shared characteristics, they express in their own way at different level.

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