Improving Cross-Cultural Communication Skills: Ask-Seek-Knock

by Alphronzo Moseley

> *"Ask, and you will receive; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you*
> *For everyone who asks will receive, and anyone who seeks will find, and the door will be*
> *opened to those who knock."* Matthew 7:7

Just as Jesus taught his disciples to persist in prayer as a way to improve their communication skills, global leaders must also be in constant pursuit of, and proficient in, cross-cultural communication skills if they are to succeed in today's global environment. Global leaders must be persistent in asking for ways to gain more cultural knowledge, seeking ways to understand rather than to be understood by people of different cultures, and knocking on the door of wisdom toward unlocking hidden meaning to better communicate across cultures.

Global leaders often use their own meaning to make sense of someone else's reality or lack cultural awareness of their own behavioral rules and apply them to others (Quappe & Cantatore, 2007). Gudykunst and Kim (2003) suggest that meanings cannot be transmitted in normal communication between individuals, primarily because of the ambiguity in the language spoken. It is the ambiguity that often leads to misunderstandings and misinterpretations (Quappe & Cantatore, 2007). The language we speak, verbal or nonverbal, varies depending upon cultural factors described as languages of context, time and space (Hall's Cultural Factors, 2009). Global leaders must strongly consider these cultural factors in their pursuit of asking, seeking, and knocking toward gaining more knowledge, understanding and meaning to enhance their cross-cultural communication skills.

I raise three questions. What can global leaders gain from Hall's three cultural factors? What is the impact of these factors on cross-cultural leadership communication? What can global leaders do to

improve their communication skills across cultures? First, let us examine the cultural factor pertaining to the language of context.

Language of Context

The first cultural factor is the language of context. Phelan (2008) suggests context is, "information that surrounds a communication and helps convey the message" (p. 3). As shown in Figure 1, Hall (1976) (as cited by Munter, 1993) divides the language of context into high-context and low-context cultures and makes vital distinctions between them.

High-context cultures employ high context communications in which information is either represented by the physical context or internal to the person (Harris & Moran, 1993). In other words, it involves unwritten rules that can cause misunderstandings (Hall's Cultural Factors, 2009). Japanese, Chinese and many Arab countries are cultural examples of where messages are highly coded and implicit (Munter, 1993).

On the other hand, low-context cultures employ low context communications in which most information is contained in explicit codes or the spoken word (Harris & Moran, 1993). Phelan (2008) notes, "the speaker says precisely what he or she means" (p. 3), so there is less chance of misunderstanding because little is taken for granted. Examples of these cultures are the United States, Swiss and Scandinavian (Munter, 1993).
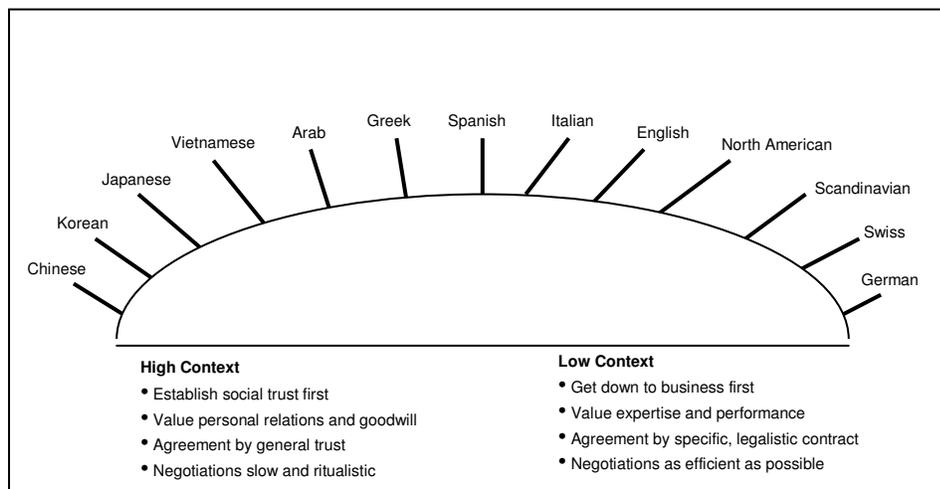

Figure 1: High Context and Low Context Cultures

Source: Munter, M. (1993). "Cross-cultural communication for managers." *Business Horizons;* May/Jun93, Vol. 36 Issue 3, p69, 10p, 2 charts, 1 diagram.

Language of Time

The second cultural factor is the language of time. Hall (1960) says that there are just as many different languages of time as there are different spoken languages. Phelan (2008) suggests time is a nonverbal communication referred to as either monochronic or polychronic.

In monochromic time cultures, "things are done in a linear fashion" (p. 21) and time schedules are viewed as very important and should be used in a wise manner. For example, in the U.S. time is money. So a delay either means poor organization, the matter has low priority or lack of interest (Hall, 1960). North Americans perceive time in lineal-spatial terms (past, present and future) and handle time like a material, "we earn it, spend it, save it, waste it" (Hall, 1973, p. 7).

In polychronic time cultures, "people place higher value on personal involvement than on getting things done on time" (p.21) and there is normally resistance in meeting deadlines (Harris & Moran, 1993). For example, in Latin America, certain cultures rank time as being of less importance. The phrase that has been popularized is, "*Hora americana, hora mejicana?"* which means, "Our time or your time?" (Hall, 1973, p. 6). Also, in the Japanese business culture, direct communication about money is avoided, while third party introductions are important (Harris & Moran, 1993). Salacuse (2003) purports: "Any solid relationship should begin with a period of introduction, or courtship" (p. 1).

Language of Space

The third cultural factor is the language of space. What one culture experience as being crowded, another might regard as spacious. Hall (1960) suggests that in the American business culture the relative importance given to an associate is through the size of his or her office. Similarly, ones status in an American organization is considered to be suffering if there is a feeling of being crowded. However, in Arab cultures, "the location of an office and its size constitute a poor index of the importance of the man who occupies it" (p. 90).

Phelan (2008) defines the non-verbal communication of space as proxemics, "the study of the way that people use physical space to convey messages" (p. 19).

He describes four types:

- Intimate Distance (ID): confidential communication
- Personal Distance (PD): family and close friends
- Social Distance (SD): business transactions
- Public Distance (PD): speaking to a group

In the American culture, ID is about 18 inches, PD is between 18 inches to 4 feet, SD is 4 to 8 feet and PD is 8-10 feet. Harris and Moran (1993) argue that the U.S. is often referred to as a noncontact society. Americans generally believe that they have ownership of their bodies punctuated by a bubble around them. In contrast, Latin American and Middle Eastern cultures are contact societies, meaning they enjoy close proximity to others while engaged in a conversation.

Taking contact verses noncontact societies a step further, when it comes to space, people are territorial and fit in one or two categories: high territoriality and low territoriality. People who exhibit high territoriality behaviors are more concerned with ownership extending to material things and associate more with low-context cultures. On the other hand, people exhibiting low territoriality behaviors have little interest in owning space and establishing boundaries. They tend to share ownership and territory with very little thought, hence aligning more with high-context cultures (Hall, 2009).

We have examined Hall's three cultural factors pertaining to the languages of context, time and space to understand their impact on cross-cultural leadership communication. Considering the obstacles posed by these cultural factors, the question to be addressed at this juncture is what can global leaders do to improve their communication skills across cultures?

Ways to Improve Communication Skills Across Cultures

As Jesus taught his disciples in the Matthean text to ask, seek and knock to persist in prayer communication, global leaders must be persistent in gaining cultural knowledge, understanding cultures and applying wisdom in unlocking hidden meaning. Figure 2 offers global leaders 12 ways in which to improve their communication skills across cultures. Formulated as an acronym from Matthew 7:7, global leaders must A.S.K., S.E.E.K. and K.N.O.C.K.

Acquire cultural knowledge by studying national cultures
Study role behaviors of different cultures relative to communication & decision making
Know and have an in-depth understanding of the language of context

Sell your ideas to your team
Engage in teaching active listening
Encourage impromptu and casual team interactions to build trust & respect
Know and have an in-depth understanding of the language of time

Know and have an in-depth understanding of the language of space
Negotiate from the proper cultural perspective
Open up to new ideas, be optimistic and appreciate cultural differences
Challenge yourself and your team by providing educational and training opportunities
Keep the faith and be patient!

Source: Adapted from Gudykunst, W., and Kim, Y. (2003). *Communicating with strangers: An approach to intercultural communication* (4th ed.). Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill; Munter, M. (1993). Cross-cultural communication for managers. *Business Horizons;* May/Jun93, Vol. 36 Issue 3, p69, 10p, 2 charts, 1 diagram; Hofstede, G. (2009). Geert-Hofstede Cultural Dimensions. Retrieved January 20, 2009 from http://www.geert-hofstede.com/; Harris, P. and Moran, R. (1993). *Managing Cultural Differences* (3rd ed.). Houston, TX: Gulf Publishing Co.; Good News Bible (1992). Today's English Version, 2nd Ed. New York: Thomas Nelson

Figure 2: Ways Global Leaders Can Improve Communication Skills

1. **Acquire cultural knowledge by studying national cultures**

   Acquiring cultural knowledge by studying national cultures is paramount to improving communication skills across cultures. It starts with studying a country's history, economics, geography, politics, religion and psychology (Rosen et al., 2000). Bholanath (2008) suggests learning about a country's subcultures, particularly protocol and business subcultures. He says: "This knowledge makes it easier to communicate with people of other cultures" (p. 10).

2. **Study role behaviors of different cultures that affect communication and decision making**

   It is essential to engage in cultural training to study and understand the role behaviors of different cultures to ascertain how they affect communication and decision making (Harris & Moran, 1993). For example, Hofstede's (n.d.) work on cultural dimensions details cultural differences between masculine and feminine cultures. In masculine cultures like Japan, Germany and Mexico, fathers decide on family size while mothers in feminine cultures, like Chile and Thailand, make those decisions. Furthermore, in feminine cultures, men and women are expected to be both modest and caring; while in masculine cultures, "men should be and women may be assertive and ambitious" (p. 11).

3. **Know and have an in-depth understanding of the language of context**

   Knowing and having an in-depth understanding of the language of context is crucial in gaining insight into cultural communications, particularly when implicit messages that include body language often requires one to read between the lines (Hall, 2009). Vance (2006) identifies China, Mexico, Vietnam and Malaysia as high-context cultures in which meaning is also conveyed by, "additional nonverbal cues within the context of the communications besides the words themselves" (p. 6). In contrast, Germany and the U.S. are low-context cultures in which communication is mostly limited to the written or spoken word.

   Unless global leaders are aware of these differences, it could lead to communication misunderstandings when, for example, individuals from the United States and Japan attempt to work together or when individuals from North America and Latin American cultures seek to negotiate contracts. People from high-context cultures seek to establish social trust first because they value personal relations and goodwill (Munter, 1993).

4. **Sell your ideas to your team**

   Another way to improve communication skills is learning to sell ideas. Hofstede (n.d.) examined the cultural dimension of the power distance index, or society's level of inequality. In small-power distance cultures like the U.S. and Australia, subordinates will expect to be consulted. Hence, a selling style is preferable that lends itself to working toward group consensus. Conversely, in high-power distance cultures, like the Philippines, subordinates expect to be told what to do, which lends itself to a telling communication style.

5. **Engage in teaching active listening**

   In order to improve communication skills across cultures, leaders should engage in teaching active listening to their workers. The focus should be on listening to understand, not to judge. Leaders should actively assist in working problems by sharing themselves with others and demonstrating respect and concern (Harris & Moran, 1993). Active listening breeds cross-cultural interpersonal sensitivity defined as: "The ability to hear what people from a foreign culture are really saying or meaning, and an ability to predict how they will react" (McClelland, 1973, p. 3). Bholanath (2008) argues: "Active listening helps to reduce misunderstandings" (p. 11).

6. **Encourage impromptu and casual interactions among team members to build trust and respect**

   Encouraging impromptu and casual interactions among teammates are excellent ways to build trust and respect that are so essential in improving communication skills. Having lunch as a team, celebrating birthdays together and soliciting ideas on ways to improve interactions in the organization go a long way toward developing personal relationships. Munter (1993) would put this in the category of goodwill credibility, which he says is based upon personal relationships and a personal, "'track record' with the audience" (p. 5). He claims that in some cultures, business relationships are, "built entirely on this kind of social and personal trust" (p. 5).

7. **Know and have an in-depth understanding of the language of time**

   Knowing and having an in-depth understanding of the language of time will prevent many sleepless nights. Understanding how both monochronic and polychronic time cultures can impact workers is essential. For example, if Filipino and Latin American workers, from polychronic time cultures, are habitually late for meetings, global leaders should never automatically jump to conclusions. They willl be guilty of ethnocentrism, negatively judging an individual by your own cultural standards (Harris & Moran, 1993). Global leaders should take the opportunity to build stronger relationships with these individuals, rather than chastising them.

8. **Know and have an in-depth understanding of the language of space**

   Knowing and having an understanding of the language of space is another way to improve communication skills. Unless leaders have given the language of space appropriate consideration before doing business in, or leading others from, different cultures, they'll experience what Hall (1973) refers to as culture shock. In Middle Eastern or Latin American cultures, global leaders will be expected to conduct business in ones intimate distance domain (Hall, 1960). Although comfortable for some cultures, this domain may evoke either hostile or sexual feelings in North Americans (Hall, 1973). If North Americans back away, they are perceived as withdrawn, cold and even unfriendly. Furthermore, leaders must be prepared for potential office boundary battles of workers exhibiting high territoriality behaviors.

9. **Negotiate from the proper cultural perspective**

    Another way to improve communication skills is negotiating from the proper cultural perspective. Typical Western behavior, associated with low-context cultures, is to rush into negotiations, seeking a win with individuals from high-context cultures. Individuals of low-context cultures desire to get down to business first, valuing expertise and performance. Munter (1993) argues that if you are working in these kinds of cultures, you will need to prove your competence or establish your expertise first, while giving little attention to personal rapport or an elaborate socialization process demanded by high-context cultures. Furthermore, negotiations are ritualistic and slow in high-context cultures, while quite efficient in low-context cultures (Munter, 1993).

10. **Open up to new ideas, be optimistic and appreciate cultural differences**

    Opening up to new ideas, being optimistic and appreciating cultural differences is another way to improve communication skills. This requires that leaders listen more, talk less and be honest with themselves and with their team. Specifically, leaders can improve by spending time with team members. They should attend social functions after work hours and get involved in sponsoring cultural awareness activities. These functions will enhance cultural understanding of diverse cultural teams, while going a long way to engender respect for one another's points of view (Hofstede, 2009).

11. **Challenge yourself and team by providing educational and training opportunities**

    Another way to improve communication is by challenging yourself and your team by providing educational and training opportunities (McCall & Hollenbeck, 2002). By offering educational and training courses in foreign skills and providing rotational programs encouraging cross-cultural assignments at headquarters, leaders send a clear signal that they value people of different cultures (Yamazaki & Kayes, 2004). They are also building relationships, listening and spending time observing and participating other cultures. As a result, leaders enhance their own, as well as their team's, interpersonal and information skills (Yamazaki & Kayes, 2004).

12. **Keep the faith and be patient!**

    The final way to improve communication skills is keeping the faith and being patient because operating outside of ones culture brings surprises. Misunderstandings and misinterpretations often prevail because what is appropriate behavior for one culture can

be inappropriate in another (Quappe & Cantatore, 2007). Culture, "represents a shared way of being, evaluating, and doing that is passed from one generation to the next" (Limaye & Victor, 1991, p. 280). The monochronic time culture, like the United States, dictates doing one thing at a time. However, in polychronic cultures, like the Philippines and Mexico, many things happen at the same time. For example, suppose a teammate from a polychronic time culture drops the ball, reaping havoc in the organization because he or she is trying to do too many things at once. Do not give up hope and do not shoot the messenger per se. See this as an excellent motivational opportunity for robust relationship building.

Conclusion

Global leaders must be in constant pursuit of, and proficient in, cross-cultural communication skills if they are to succeed in today's global environment. They must be persistent in asking for cultural knowledge, seeking ways to understand people of different cultures and knocking on the door of wisdom toward unlocking hidden meaning to better communicate across cultures. Without the proper meaning, misunderstandings and misinterpretations often prevail because what is appropriate behavior for one culture can be inappropriate in another. Global leaders often use their own meaning to make sense of someone else's reality or lack cultural awareness of their own behavioral rules and apply them to others. Global leaders must strongly consider the cultural factors of the languages of context, time and space because they impact the language we speak, be it verbal or nonverbal. This paper offers 12 ways global leaders can improve their communication skills across cultures formulated in the acronym A.S.K., S.E.E.K. and K.N.O.C.K. "…For everyone who asks will receive, and anyone who seeks will find, and the door will be opened to those who knock" (Matthew 7:7).

About the Author

Alphronzo Moseley is a professor of program management at the Defense Acquisition University, Fort Belvoir, Va. An Air Force veteran, he has more than 26 years of experience in various leadership and management positions in the acquisition of military systems. He holds B.S. and M.S. degrees in electrical engineering, and is a doctoral student in the Doctor of Strategic Leadership program at Regent University.

Email: Alphronzo.moseley@dau.mil

References

Bholanath, D. (2008, June). Communication in cross-cultural context. *ICFAI Journal of Soft Skills*, 2
(2), pp. 7-12.

Good News Bible (1992). Today's English Version (2nd Ed.). New York: Thomas Nelson.

Gudykunst, W., & Kim, Y. (2003). *Communicating with strangers: An approach to intercultural communication* (4th ed.). Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill.

Hall, E. (1960, May/June). The silent language in overseas business. *Harvard Business Review*, 38
(3). pp. 87-96, 10p. Retrieved February 17, 2009 from
http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdf?vid=3&hid=105&sid=b195b2e1-023a-4407-9914-
bb7d4f06cd9d%40sessionmgr108

Hall, E. T. (1973). *The silent language*. Anchor Books Edition. New York: Doubleday.

Hall's Cultural Factors (2009). Retrieved February 16, 2009 from
http://changingminds.org/explanations/culture/hall_culture.htm

Harris, P., & Moran, R. (1993). *Managing cultural differences* (3rd ed.). Houston, TX: Gulf Publishing
Co.

Hofstede, G. (n.d.). *Dimensionalizing cultures: The Hofstede Model in context*. Retrieved March 4,
2009 from http://www.ac.wwu.edu/~culture/hofstede.htm

Hofstede, G. (1991). *Cultures and organizations: Software of the mind: Intercultural Cooperation and its Importance for Survival.* New York: McGraw-Hill.

Limaye, M., & Victor, D. (1991). Cross-cultural business communication research: State of the Art
and Hypotheses for the 1990s. *The Journal of Business Communication*, Summer 28 (3),
pp. 277-299, 23p.

McCall, M., & Hollenbeck, G. (2002). *Developing global executives*. Boston: Harvard Business
School.

McClelland, D. C. (1973). Testing for competence rather than for 'intelligence'. *American
Psychologist*, 28, pp.1-14.

Munter, M. (1993, May/June). Cross-cultural communication for managers. Business Horizons, 36
(3), pp. 69, 10p.

Phelan, S. (2008). Cross-cultural communication and negotiations. Retrieved February 17, 2009
from http://faculty.unlv.edu/phelan/MGT480/Lecture%205.ppt#258,1,cross-cultural
communication and negotiations.

Quappe, S., & Cantatore, G. (2007). *What is cultural awareness, anyway? How do I build it?* Retrieved February 26, 2009 from http://www.culturosity.com/articles/whatisculturalawareness.htm

Rosen, R., Digh, P., Singer, M., & Philips, C. (2000). *Global literacies: Lessons on business leadership and national cultures.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

Salacuse, J. (2003). The solid building blocks of an international agreement. *The Global Negotiator* (Palgrave MacMillan), 2003. Retrieved February 26, 2009 from http://www.negotiations.com/articles/international-business/

Vance, C. M. (2006). Strategic upstream and downstream considerations for effective global performance management. *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management* (CCM), 6(1), pp. 37-56. Retrieved January 29, 2009, from ABI/INFORM Global database. (Document ID: 1037578911).

Yamazaki, Y., & Kayes, D. (2004). An experiential approach to cross-cultural learning: A review and Integration of competencies for successful expatriate adaption. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 3(4), pp. 362-379.