Process of knowledge management in intercultural context- a new approach

Dr. Neena Gupta-Biener

Universität Konstanz
CLUSTER/EXC 16 Kulturelle Grundlagen von Integration Zi. Y204, Fach D-173
Phone: +49-7531-885633 Email: Neena.Gupta-Biener@uni-konstanz.de

Introduction

As has been pointed out by Bartlett and Ghoshal (2003), multinational corporations working in a transnational environment and considered as an "internally differentiated interorganisational network"(Bartlett and Ghoshal,1990) have a weak linkage with their subsidiaries due to the large physical and cultural distance (Bartlett and Ghoshal,1990) . Knowledge sharing and knowledge management in such cases becomes a Herculean task. More so when there is lack of trust between the different units making it difficult for a globally distributed work team to successfully communicate with each other and to be successful (Newell et. al, 2007). If there is a lack of effective communication across organizational boundaries, it also hampers the development of innovation (Tuschmann,1977). Boundary spanning (Dombrowski, Kim et. al. 2007) or managing 'socialisation'(Moitra & Kumar, 2007) can only work if communication across cultures works efficiently.

However, intercultural trainings to bridge the communication gap and to develop trust among teams have many-a- times resulted in creating more distrust and increasing the communication gap (Newell et. al, 2007).

The weaknesses inherent in these training programs result to a large extent on the use of cross-cultural value models based on cultural comparisons and cultural differences, largely national cultural differences (ex. Hofstede, 1991; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner,1997). 'Conceptualising culture in terms of very general constructs at a national level provides a powerful explanatory framework for making sense of intercultural problems in management. Furthermore, it enables researchers to generate tools for conducting empirical comparative studies of management and organizations' (Friedman & Antal, 2005). However, it has certain disadvantages namely that it classifies individuals and groups in one culture; it assigns causal links between culture and behaviour; it prevents understanding of cultures and thus creates barrier for effective communication.

The question then arises: How can we create an effective intercultural dialogue in a complex organisation?

In this paper, I would be introducing a new interpretive constructivist methodology to analyse communication between different cultures. Further, I would try to show how hermeneutic as an operational instrument facilitates knowledge transfer between different units existing in different cultural settings and how it enhances the potential of innovation among globally distributed virtual teams by using the strength of different cultures. Since communication takes place in an organisational setting, I would also be analysing the organisations which would be receptive to new methods and will use intercultural dialogue as a knowledge-building process.

1.   Knowledge management between cultures

Fundamentally, there are two types of knowledge namely explicit knowledge and implicit/ tacit knowledge (Moitra & Kumar,2007). Explicit knowledge refers to codified knowledge whereas tacit knowledge refers to knowledge that resides in the minds of people (Buckman,2004). Since tacit knowledge is the real valuable knowledge which gives the firm its leverage (Moitra & Kumar,2007; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995), it is important to tap such knowledge. However, in globally diversified companies, it is difficult to create a unified environment to tap such knowledge (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1990). One of the key factors is the cultural distance (Govindarajan & Gupta, 2001).

As Moitra & Kumar (2007) point out that in individualistic cultures there is a tendency not to share knowledge and in collectivistic cultures there is a tendency to share knowledge.

1.1   Premises:

My discussion on the process of intercultural communication and knowledge management in multinational corporations is based on the first premise that institutional structures within organizations and in interorganizational networks are a result of discourse.The individual actors influence the discursive realm by producing texts and the process of discourse provides the socially constituted self-regulating mechanism (Phillips, N., et al., 2004).

Following the post-modernist 'linguistic turn' and 'critical approaches' to researching management (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000), the second premise places meaning making at centre stage.

The third premise focuses on the symbolic dimension of organizational life and that communication by individual actors is in the form of signs (Saussure,1974). Hence, communication is a tool to balance the information asymmetry between individual actors in the organization. Language in communication becomes a sign when the translation by the recipient results in a different meaning as compared to the meaning sent by the transmitter.

1.2   Proposition:

1.2.1   Intercultural knowledge transfer requires **hermeneutic** as an instrument for effective communication between individual actors and/or groups from two different cultures;

1.2.2   Hermeneutic can function only when the **idiosphere** (or 'cultural idiosphere') of the individual is known.
              The construct **'idiosphere'** which signifies the *mental universe* of an actor and can be defined as 'a collection of symbols, along with their meaning called knowledge categories in the mental sphere of an actor'. The idiosphere of each actor is unique and can change with time. This is one of the characteristics which distinguishes the idiosphere from the 'internalised culture' as mentioned by Hong et. al.(2000) of the actor in an organisation. However, certain elements in the idiosphere may be common with other idiospheres of

other actors working as a group in an organisation or in an inter-organisational network which is termed as '**systasosphere'**;

1.2.3   'Idiosphere' is imbedded in a larger cultural space which I would like to define in terms of Yuri Lotman's **'semiosphere'**(1990). Winner (1984) sees semiosphere as ' dynamically related systems of information conveyed by sign system in all possible modalities and organized by underlying psychobiological and related cultural perceptions of time and space as well as by central metaphors (or fundamental symbols), and values, all of which participate in the construction of world-views;

1.2.4   Innovation in organisation is only possible when the organisation is open to intercultural dialogue in inter-organisational discourse.

1.3   Example:

I would try to justify these propositions with the help of an example where I would try to interpret the basic elements of Indian culture in European tradition. This is necessary so as to grasp the base of the knowledge categories and the construction of world-views in the Indian semiosphere. Weaver (1964) defines it as the 'centripetal predilections discernable in all cultures': "There is at the heart of every culture a centre of authority from which there proceed subtle and pervasive pressures upon us to confirm and to repel the unlike as disruptive… At this centre there lies a 'Tyrannizing image' which draws everything towards itself. The image is the ideal of excellence. The forms that it can take and the particular manifestations that it can find are various …"

Dissanayke (1987) prefers to use the term 'guiding image' or the 'sacred well of culture'. According to Dissanayke, the guiding image in India is inextricably linked with philosophy and religion.

As Zilberman (1988) points out that the difference between Indian philosophy and western philosophy is that one is by product and the other builds a base for production in the society.

1.3.1   The basic concept of the Indian philosophy:

The basic philosophy of the Hindus comes from Upanishads (written around 1500 B.C.), which discusses the theme of **Karma, the cycle of death and rebirth** and the unity of **Atman i.e.** self and **Brahman** i.e. the cosmos (see Glasenapp, 1984; Abegg, 1945; Radhakrishnan,1983).

The **law of Karma** states that every man will inevitably face the consequences of his good deeds as well as his bad deeds (Paranjpe, 1984). If the account is not settled by the end of the present life cycle, the balance will be carried forward to the next incarnation of the soul (rebirth).

Behind this lies the thought of the **Universal Law or the Dharma, which** states that everyone has the duty to live according to his Dharma, which is stipulated, by his position in the society and everyone has to fulfil these duties. The Upanishads are a bit pessimistic when judging the existence of man in this world. Life is seen as painful and transitory and pain in one form or the other is repeated due to

the cycle of death and rebirth. The external elements, which exist or surround mankind in comparison to the infinite Brahman or cosmos, are valueless. Therefore, there is a desire to free oneself from the cycle of death and rebirth. The right way naturally is to free oneself from desire and activities. However, this remains fruitless without **knowledge.**

Knowledge has been given the highest recognition in the Upanishads, which represent the Vedanta school of philosophy. If one knows about the Brahman, then one is himself the Brahman. This is reiterated in Bhagwadgita, which, next to the Upanishads is the most important book for the Hindus. According to Bhagwadgita, there is only one cosmic principle i.e. considered as **Brahman** and the Self as **Atma**n is part of it. This is considered as the ultimate truth (**Advaita)** and the multiplicity of objects that one sees in the visible world around is only a grand illusion (**Maya).** According to Paranjpe (1984), for Vedantic philosophers, the world of plurality or the phenomenal world, is considered perfectly real from the standpoint of the ordinary cognitive states. It is however, a lesser reality when compared with the "**highest order**"

The **highest form of knowledge or Advaita**, according to Shankara, transcends the limitations of knowledge obtained through any other means since it transcends the knower-known distinction, which is necessarily implied in the ordinary concept of knowledge. While it is considered the ultimate form of 'knowledge', its scope is restricted to the domain of the absolute. The second type of knowledge, called **aparah vidhyah,** refers to the knowledge of the phenomenal world. In this domain, a being deals with the world extended in space and time and governed by the principle of causality. Here, according to Paranjpe (1984), it is perfectly legitimate to try to uncover causal relationships with the help of direct sensory observations and to draw legitimate inferences based on the rules of logic. Although the phenomenal world of Maya turns out to be unreal in an ultimate sense, it has an objective force. Once the being leaves the plane of Brahman, or the absolute, he accepts the world as being real and regular in much the same way as the materialist does.

1.3.2   Autocentric and Omnicentric: An approach to describe the Indian semiosphere for an observer:

Since various schools of Indian philosophy and their main proponents have given different terms and concepts for the relationship of the person with himself and with the universe (mostly in Sanskrit), there is a necessity to find a universal construct which encapsulates the different theories postulated in Indian philosophy and religion ranging from the Upanishads, Vedanta, Samkhya, Yoga, Jainism and Buddhism on one side and to understand their implication in daily life of an Indian on the other side. Therefore, it is necessary that a construct should reflect not only the ideal but also the living culture. It should also serve as a base for empirical research. Moreover, it should be comprehensible across different languages and cultures. Therefore, Greek and Latin have been used to construct the terms Autocentric and Omnicentric.

*Autocentric is defined as the tendency of a being to concentrate on his/her being while **Omnicentric** is defined as the tendency of a being to consider himself/herself as part of the universe.*

Both autocentric and omnicentric tendencies co-exist in the person at the same time[1] and the person uses both these tendencies as instruments to realise his/her 'true self' with the ultimate aim to free oneself from the cycle of death and rebirth[2] .

In the definitions above, **universe** implies not only the in-group but also the out-group; it also includes all the phenomenological and existential events around the person, spiritual events, living and non-living objects, and streams of consciousness, objective as well as subjective events.

In addition, the word **being** in this definition shows that a person as a living entity constitutes layer of *selves*, which are influenced by the innumerable number of experiences from past and present birth. There is an *inner self* (referred to as Atman in Vedanta philosophy and Purusha in the Samkhya philosophy), which is untouched by all these experiences and phenomenological events. It is also beyond the level of consciousness and sub-consciousness[1] .

Further, autocentric and omnicentric have the following **characteristics**:

- They are corresponding tendencies and not conflicting tendencies;
- They co-exist in the person at the same time;
- Change in autocentric behaviour leads to corresponding change in omnicentric behaviour;
- When the autocentric and omnicentric tendencies are equal to each other, then the person has reached his ultimate goal of self-actualisation that frees him from the cycle of death and rebirth (it should be noted that this self-actualisation is different than the self-actualisation referred to by Maslow and other western psychologists)[1];
- Autocentric and Omnicentric are positive tendencies with the aim of raising the person to a higher level of consciousness.

Knowledge plays an important role in both Autocentric and Omnicentric tendencies. Knowledge provides the fuel for both Autocentric and Omnicentric behaviour. Therefore, a person who does not seek knowledge possesses neither Omnicentric nor Autocentric tendencies.

What **implications** does the use of this concept Autocentric-Omnicentric have?

Firstly, it implies that the concept of individualism-collectivism does not apply in the Indian context. If used, then it results in contradictory and paradoxical results (ex. Hofstede, 2001; Triandis,1995).

It explains why in studies on work values (ex. Sinha & Tripathi, 1994; Dittman, 1972), professional success and need for achievement was more important than social relations.

Secondly, it implies that in the model of the Indian communication system, as explained by Yadav (1987), communication is defined as reaching oneness with the teacher. Communication modus

operandi is between teacher and student (Dissanayaka,1987). This has far reaching impact for knowledge management of a company[2] .

2.   Innovative organisations

As one can see from the above example, Autocentric-Omnicentric structures in the Semiosphere of Indian culture are also part of the Idiosphere of an individual actor working in an organisation which is embedded in a complex inter-organisational network. Tuschman (1977), illustrated that there are boundaries between various levels of organisational hierarchy. Boundaries in multinational corporations result automatically as a result of cultural and geographical distance. Tuschmann (1977), suggested 'boundary spanning' as a solution to bridge the communication gap between different levels and different units. Playing the boundary-spanning role is not only an action driven by a certain decisions but also an action closely related to organizational norms, contexts and cultures. However, considering the fact that knowledge from one organization existing in a semiosphere cannot be easily transmitted to another organization situated in a different semiosphere, the boundary spanner (or the knowledge manager) has to understand the complexities of both the semiospheres and be able to translate it in the language of the semiosphere of the receiving organisation.

For this purpose he should also consider the idiospheres of the individual actors and the group working in the organisation. If the message does not have the same meaning as existing in the idiosphere of the individual actors and the group, the message would be rejected.

However, actors in an organisation will be motivated to participate in such an intercultural dialogue only when the organisational climate imparts trust among employees along with incentives for knowledge sharing (Gupta, 2008). An encouraging leadership with vision and confidence to implement new ideas is also necessary (Gupta, 2008; Dombrowski et al., 2007). One of the best examples of multi-cultural knowledge sharing and innovation is the development of Nano - the cheapest car launched by Tatas (Lampartner, 2008). The developing team consisted of mostly Indian engineers who worked closely with German, French and American engineers and developers to produce the car.

Since knowledge is created as a result of discourse, an organisation is intelligent to the extent that it is not only aware of its knowledge but also of its non-knowledge (Seidl, 2003). An organisation is effective in its knowledge management to the extent that it not only defines the parameters of knowledge but also discusses and debates on these parameters in its system.

3.   Conclusion

Hence, from the discussion in this paper it follows that Hermeneutic embedded in a system of Semiosphere of the organisation, Idiosphere of the individual actors and Systasosphere of the group is one of the most effective instrument for a sustainable knowledge transfer in intercultural setting.

Footnotes:

1. For many Indian philosophers, there is only one true **self** and the layers around this true self are an illusion (Maya). However, a normal being due to his ignorance takes this illusion to be reality and starts identifying with this illusion with "I" which represents the ego.

2. An important method employed in the transmission of knowledge since the vedic times is the **Guru-Disciple** method. As Paranjpe (1984) says,"--a guru is not a priest, but a spiritual guide who facilitates the disciples spiritual development. Any person who aspires to enlightenment and spiritual progress may seek guidance from the guru who seems most suitable to his idiosyncratic needs without obstacles arising from differences in social background between himself and the guru. Discrepancies in age, sex, wealth, status, and even caste do not pose a barrier between the aspirant and his guru, although such differences prove to be formidable barriers in almost all other types of social relationships. The guru………..is a person, who, somewhat like a modern therapist, provides personal counselling".

Literature List

Abegg, E. 1945. *Indische Psychologie*. Rascher: Zürich

Alvesson, M.& Körreman, D. 2000. *Taking the linguistic turn in organisational research: Challenges, Responses, Consequences.* Journal of Applied Behavioural Science. 36(2):136-58

Barlett, C.,Ghoshal, S. 1990. *The Multinationalcorporation as an Interorganisational Network.* Academy of Management Review. Vol.15. Nr.4 603-625

Barlett, C.,Ghoshal, S.& Birkinshaw, J. 2003. *Transnational Management: Text, Cases, and Readings in Cross-Border Management.* McGraw-Hill Companies: Singapore

Buckman, R.H.2004. *Building a knowledge- driven Organization.* The McGraw-Hill Companies: USA

De Saussure, F. 1974. *Course in General Linguistics*. (Ed.) J. Culler. Fontana: London

Dissanayaka, W. 1987. *The Guiding Image of Indian Culture and Its Implications for Communication.* In Communication Theory, Eastern and Western Perspectives.(Ed.) Kincaid, D. Lawrence. pg 151-158. Academic Press Inc.: London

Dittmann, F. (1972). *Kultur und Leistung. Zur Frage der Leistungsdispositionen bei Luo und Indern in Kenia.*: SSIP-Schriften Heft 14: Saarbrücken

Dombrowski, C., Kim. J.Y., et al. 2007. *Elements of Innovative Cultures*. Knowledge and Process Management. Vol.14.Nr. 3 190-202

Friedman, Victor. J., Antal, A.B. 2005. *Negotiating Reality: A Theory of Action Approach to Intercultural Competence.* Journal of Management Learning. Vol. 36 Nr.1. 69-86

Glasenapp, H. V. 1985. *Die Philosophie der Inder.* Alfed Kröner: Stuttgart

Glasenapp, H. V. 1994. *Bhagavadgita: Das Lied der Gottheit.* Philipp Reclam Jun: Stuttgart

Govindrajan, V., Gupta, A. 2001. *The Quest for Global Dominance: Transforming Global Presence into Global Competitive Advantage.* Jossey Bass: USA

Gupta, K.S. 2008. *A Comparative Analysis of Knowledge Sharing Climate.* Knowledge and Process Management. Vol.15. Nr.3. 186-195

Hofstede, G. 1991. *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind.* McGrawHill: Maidenhead

Hofstede, G. 2001. *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviours, Institutions and Organizations Across Nations*. Thousand Oaks: Sage

Hong, Y., Morris, M.W., et. al. 2000. *Multicultural minds: A dynamic constructivist approach to culture and cognition*. American Psycholigist. Vol. 55. Nr.7. 709-20

Lampartner, D.H. 2008. *Bosch macht die Inder Stark.* Die Zeit. Nr.21-15 Mai 2008

Lotman, Yuri. M., 1990. *Universe of the Mind. A Semiotic Theory of Culture.* I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd.: London

Moitra, D., Kuldeep, Kumar. 2007. *Managed Socialization: How smart companies leverage global knowledge.* Knowledge and Process Management. Vol.14.Nr. 3 148-157

Newell. S., David. G. & Chand, D. *An Analysis of Trust Among Globally Distributed Work Teams in an Organizational Setting*. Knowledge and Process Management. Vol.14. Nr.3. 158-168

Nonaka, I., Takeuchi, H. 1995. *The knowledge creating Company: How Japanese Companies Create the Dynamics of Innovation.* Oxford University Press. USA

Paranjjpe, A. C. 1984. *Theoretical Psychology: The Meeting of West and East.* Plenum: New York

Paranjpe, A. C .1988. *Asian Contributions to Psychology*. Ho,D. Y. F. & Rieber, R. W. (Ed.). Praeger: New York

Phillips, N., et al. 2004. *Discourse and Institutions.* Academy of Management Review. Vol. 29. No. 4. 635–652.

Radhakrishnan, S. 1983. *Bhagavadgita.* Blackie and Son: Bombay

Seidl, D. 2003. *The dark side of knowledge.* Working Paper Series Nr. 3. Munich Business Research. Ludwig-Maximilian-Universität. Munich School of Management. Munich

Sinha, D., Tripathi, R. C. 1994. *Individualism in a collectivistic culture.* In: U.C. Kim, H.C. Triandis et. al. (Ed.). Individualism and collectivism: Theory, method and applications. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Triandis, H. C. 1995. *Individualism and Collectivism.* Boulder: West view

Trompenaars, F. and Hampden-Turner, C. 1997. *Riding the Waves of Culture.* Nicholas Brealey Publishing: London

Tushman, M.L. 1977. *Special boundary roles in the innovation process.* Administrative Science Quarterly 22: 587-605

Weaver, R. 1964. *Visions of order: The cultural crisis of our time.* Louisiana State University Press Baton: Rouge

Winner, I. P. 1971. *A Slovenian Village: Zerovnica.* R.I. Brown University Press : Providence

Yadava, J.S. 1987. *Communication in India: The tenets of Sadharanikaran.* In Communication Theory, Eastern and Western Perspectives.(Ed.) Kincaid, D. Lawrence. pg 151-158. Academic Press Inc.: London

Zilberman, D. B. 1988. *The Birth of Meaning in Hindu Thought.* D. Reidel Publishing Company: Netherlands