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Cross-Cultural Communication Between Finland and America

Many conflicts have their roots in misunderstandings. This happens when people do not realize that things can be expressed and understood in different ways. This is a problem in intra-cultural communication, when we interact daily with people who have the same nationality, the same language and the same culture; it is an even greater problem in cross-cultural communication, between people from different cultures, speaking different languages, and having different customs and manners.

In this paper I want to discuss some cross-cultural differences which arise when Americans and Finns communicate with each other. In other words, what should we be aware of, if we want to improve communication between Finns and Americans?

America is a typical low-context-culture. In the typology of Edward T. Hall cultures are classified according to the amount of the information that has to be explicitly coded: a high-context (HC) communication is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in person, whilst very little is included in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message; a low-context (LC) communication is just the opposite, i.e. the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code. In America, the information is articulated, verbalized, the things are said. Practically nothing is taken for granted. The communication flow is linear, a logical presentation is preferred, no step is omitted. The whole communication process has a value of its own and it is verbalized. In face-to-face communication a dialogue is preferred, because every communicator is considered to be equal. The result of the discussion often depends on the arguments that are used during the discussion.

A typical high-context culture is the Japanese culture. The situational perspective predominates, who says something is of great significance, the communication is ritualistic. The communication is dotlike, only the product is verbalized, not necessarily the steps leading to this thinking product. Many things are taken for granted. Because they are considered to be obvious, they can be left

unsaid. Communication tends to consist of long monologues.

We can find characteristics of Finnish communication which strongly resemble those in Japanese society and differ from those in American society.

They seem to be eastern characteristics. Like the Japanese, the Finns do not verbalize the whole communication process, they assume that several things are obvious to the communication partner and do not need to be said.

It is mainly the product of thinking that counts, not the process. This attitude can cause cross-cultural difficulties. An American cannot easily follow the Finnish synthetic mode of communication, he wants an analytic, logical step-by-step explanation. For a Finn, this would sound too naive, too superficial. He interpretes the message and seeks the real meaning behind the words, in the background information, in the context. In the West one relies on communication, in the East on interpretation. We can easily imagine that these different communication habits can cause problems in international politics: Expressions which are meant to be taken literally are interpreted in order to find the "real message behind the words"; conversely, expressions which have several presuppositions to be considered are perhaps taken too literally.

The difference between America and Finland on the LC/HC-scale influences the discourse form at various levels. Consider e.g. the organization and structuring of the presentation. The American communication style is analogous to the headline. They announce at the start what they are going to talk about and where the discourse will end. They tend to follow primacy and anticlimactic principles of organization. In the eastern way, communication predominantly favours recency and climactic principles of rhetorical form, saving the most interesting points for the end of the series. They also give much more detailed background data than Americans are used to giving. So you may not always be able to identify the main point until reaching the end of the comments. As an American, you must keep in mind that in communicating to HC-members you must repeat your main point at the end or your listener may miss it. And as a Finn, you must remember to get down to the point, to put the main information first, to start a paragraph with a topic sentence, to develop it with specific details, and to conclude with a return to a general statement in the summary sentence.

Due to the fact that only the final product of thinking is announced by Finns, there will be many more silent pauses and slower reactions in Finnish than in American discourse. As an American, you thus have to be patient. The Finn will not have the American habit of thinking and listening aloud, but nevertheless the answer to your question will come - in most cases at least - but not as quickly as back home. I do not know if the Fulbright professor who came to Finland in order to investigate the silent breaks in the talk of the Häme-Finns (who are famous for their taciturn nature and chariness with words) has completed his work but the results might be very interesting from the cross-cultural point of view. The Japanese, as a typical HC-culture, have developed "aesthetics of silence" in place of rhetoric and logic. They tend to view silence as essential to self-realization and sublimation. This is diametrically opposed to the American way of looking at silence as symptomatic of a problem. In America, as a LC-culture, greater cultural diversity and heterogeneity are likely to make verbal skills more necessary and, therefore, more highly prized. One of the chief qualifications of a group leader, indeed, is his or her mastery of verbal expression.

On the other hand, a Finn should learn to display his or her thinking process in order to avoid misunderstandings from the American side. "Just a moment, I have to think about it", would clarify the silence of a Finn who needs time for his or her answer to a question of an American communication partner.

The slower reaction, i.e. the attitude to time, also influences the discourse form of dialogue versus monologue. The reaction time left by an American for a Finn is often too short, the Finn does not recognize it as meant for him or her. So he or she fails to react, whilst the American thinks he or she had nothing to say. On the other hand, a Finn is more used to speaking in monologues, his monologue consists mainly of statements, and he seldom asks questions. This could be interpreted to imply that the Finn is not interested in his communication partner.

Going further towards minor entities of the discourse, we can see a similar difference as is found in American/Japanese communication. Roichi Okabe, who has compared the cultural assumptions of East and West (i.e. Japan and the United States) distinguishes, on the basis of several investigations, between the "doing" (American) and the "being" (Japanese) orientations. Such American expressions as "getting things done", "How are you doing?", "I'm doing fine. How are you coming along?" all indicate that "doing" is the dominant activity

for Americans. In Japan an individual's birth, family background, age, and rank tend to be more important than his or her factual achievements and development. The Japanese think of things happening or being of themselves. Even things that have been decided upon are thought of as having happened. Asked what they have been doing, Japanese are likely to answer not "I did such and such", but "Things happen to be so and so".

A Finn is likely to react in a similar way, although this is perhaps not so probable as in Japanese, because the structure of the Japanese language and Japanese society are different. But in any case, there will be some kind of modesty which prevents the emphasizing of the personal and individual role. "Oltiin tässä kyläilemässä" instead of "Olin/olimme kylässä" would be the most natural oral expression a Finn uses thus: removing the personal responsibility. My wife -who, although she is a Finn, has the western analytic and linear mode of thinking and communicating - sometimes criticizes me for using expressions like "The vase broke" or "The cup happened to break". She means that these expressions imply no personal responsibility for what happened. Perhaps so, but these are also examples of the "Eastern" way of stating how things happened. I understand that I broke the vase and do not want to deny it. I only want to be modest and state the result not the process.

Being aware of these differences helps one to judge properly many political and social phenomena. Okabe names as an example the attitude toward peace. For those who have been reared in American culture, peace is something that must be built. They face outward to build peace and at the same time work for internal changes that will make peace more effective in the totality of things. In contrast to this American doing/building consciousness, the Japanese see peace as the status quo and something for them to preserve. I do not want to claim that this would be exactly the same in Finland, but I am convinced that there are tendencies in this direction in the traditional Finnish culture, too.

Another difference among minor entities is the difference between the American overstatement and Finnish understatement. Such categorial words as "absolutely", "certainly" and "positively" as well as the frequent use of the superlative particularly in American advertising and promotion are, in many cases, too strong for a Finn. In contrast, the modest Finnish expressions might sound unconvincing to an American.

Last but not least, I want to speak about the public and private nature of communication. Because they are presumed to be equal and symmetrical in their relationships, the Americans tend to maximize their "public self", that is, to expose more of themselves than the Japanese, who are apt to maximize their "private self" in interaction with others. As a result, Americans are likely to express their inner feelings and emotions openly, whilst Japanese tend to conceal them in an effort to maintain harmonious relations with people around them. I am not sure if this also holds true for Finns, but in any case Finns are not used to expressing their inner feelings and emotions. This is especially true for Finnish men, since "a Finnish man neither speaks nor kisses". It will therefore be a very difficult matter for a Finn to express verbally his attachment to another, whereas an American is used to saying and hearing the phrase "I love you" ad infinitum. So, an American who does not hear the phrase might think he or she is not liked at all, whereas a Finn who hears the phrase often tends to think it is an empty statement.

In situations like this, as well as in all cross-cultural situations, a great deal of empathy and mutual cooperation is needed for successful communication. It is not an easy task. No one can master cross-cultural communication perfectly. Still, I am convinced that efforts in this direction will always be rewarded. It is not only a question of a particular communication situation, a happy end to business negotiations etc., but also of international understanding as a whole. In Finnish-American connections and close relations we have an excellent basis to practise an increasingly better international and cross-cultural understanding.

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Business Tips, Courtesies and Local Customs according to:
"Multinational Executive Travel Companion" (11th Edition 1980;USA):

Finland

A conservative business suit (medium-weight) is recommended at all times. Prior appointments are necessary for all business and Government visits. Finnish businessmen prefer to be addressed by their title. If you are unsure of the title, use Johtaja (director). Even if he is not one, he will be pleased by the inference. Although the Finnish businessman is reserved and conservative, when he makes a decision his handshake is as good as a contract. Most business deals are negotiated in the office, not at lunch. After the business transaction is concluded the celebration follows - an extra-long luncheon, invitation to a Sauna, etc. It is wise to think twice about refusing an invitation to a Sauna, the Finnish steam bath. An invitation is great compliment and signifies that you are accepted. If invited to a businessman's home, you are expected to be prompt. Always bring flowers to his wife (an odd number - five or seven will suffice). Do not reach for a drink until the host has proposed a toast to your health. Avoid the subject of politics, especially Finnish neutrality and socialism. In Finland, both men and women always shake hands on meeting each other - a friendly gesture that should not be overlooked.

U.S.A.

A suit is recommended for all occasions. Prior appointments are necessary for all business and Government visits. Advance notice of arrival is advisable. The average businessman in the U.S.A. is a very busy person. Your business approach should be direct and to the point. Handshaking is not practised so much in the U.S.A. as it is in other countries. Punctuality, however, is insisted upon. U.S. businessmen are quite casual and informal, have a good sense of humour and a great reservoir of good-will for visiting foreign businessmen. The business breakfast and business luncheon are very popular in this country. Entertaining is frequent and exhausting.

Japan

A conservative business suit and a tie should be worn at all times; white shirt on initial appointments. Prior appointments are absolutely necessary for all business and Government visits. English/Japanese business cards would be of great help. They can be printed locally within 2-3 days. The Japanese businessmen almost never talks directly about the issue at hand but rather approaches it circuitously. You will be exhaustively entertained at authentic Japanese restaurants, and the party will be made of several businessmen. The entertaining does not necessarily mean business acceptance. They would like to know and see how you react in social situations even before discussing business. The entertainment does not stop when the business deal is consummated. Be on your best behaviour on these entertainment sorties. Japanese businessmen are quite formal. Subject to avoid: World War II. If you are on your way to Japan on business, you would do well to familiarise yourself with the Japanese business world before you go. The concentration of economic power in large financial and industrial groupings is a unique feature of Japanese commerce and industry. Although (sic!) the groupings are today less closely knit than before, they still represent powerful economic and industrial concentrations. Group control in Japan stems basically from the heavy dependence on banks for finance, as Japanese companies rely on loans for up to 89 % of capital, consequently the banks have considerable influence over companies. In most cases therefore the industrial groups are centred around the banks, financial institutions, and trading companies, whilst the identity of other leading companies in the group depends on the historical growth of the group, the strength of the management, and the size of the company. If a foreign businessman has a contact with one company of some industrial group, that contact can usually put him in touch with key officers of other corporations (sic!) which are members of the group. This can be a much more efficient way of exploring new opportunities than trying to make contacts on his own since he will come "recommended". Lacking any initial contact, the best point of entry into any group for a foreigner is the group's general trading company, which is experienced in dealing with non-Japanese and, by the nature of its business, has especially good connections throughout the group. Japanese trading companies play an unusually important role in facilitating Japan's export and import trade, and in recent years have come to play an increasingly significant role in trade among countries other than Japan. Almost 6,000 corporations in Japan are classified as trading companies, engaging primarily in exporting, importing or a combination of these two activities. The largest nine of these companies are called general trading companies or sogo shosha and have a minimum annual turnover of U.S.\$ 6 billion. These general trading companies are Mitsubishi, Mitsui, Marubeni, C. Itoh, Sumitomo, Nissho-Iwai, Tomen, Kanematsu-Gosho, and Nichimen. The most basic role that trading companies play, even today, is that of providing trade intermediary services. Because of the volume of business transactions they handle particularly the top nine trading companies are in a position to realise economies of scale in transportation, warehousing and other areas related to physical distribution and in the marketing of imports and exports. All decisions are made at the top even minor ones. This means a further delay because of the trading companies' myriad operations. If the business deal is complicated, bring an interpreter with you.