

Leadership behaviour in intercultural business meetings

Knowing how to communicate with people from different cultures, in different parts of the world, is vital to doing business in today's integrated global economy. It was previously assumed that people who share a common culture behave in similar ways. However, new research by Dr Angela Chan from Shantou University in China suggests that these cultural stereotypes are fundamentally problematic. By analysing the language used in authentic workplace settings, Dr Chan finds that successful intercultural communication depends on recognising the dynamic and complex nature of human interaction, rather than cultural differences.

Intercultural communication is a long-established tool of international commerce. Whether dealing in silk or spices, feathers or flint, our ancestors found ways to communicate and trade with people from other nations and cultures for thousands of years. Medieval merchants in the Mediterranean even developed their own common language – a 'lingua franca' – to help them do business.

Today's world is a much smaller place, thanks to the ease of transportation, the development of new communication technologies, and an integrated global economy. Many companies have offices and/or manufacturing plants in different countries. They also have teams of increasingly mobile employees who speak different first languages and come from different cultural backgrounds. In this global context, intercultural communication is more important than ever.

How does this affect business communication, particularly leadership behaviour and workplace interaction? How do business leaders use language to get things done, and how do cultural stereotypes affect this? These are some of the research questions posed by Dr Angela Chan, Associate Professor in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature at Shantou University in China. Published in the journal *Language and Intercultural Communication*, her recent work looks at the complex relationship between leadership and culture, and uses discourse analysis to study leadership behaviour in the workplace.

CULTURAL STEREOTYPES

Traditionally, it has been assumed that people who come from the same culture behave in a similar manner, and that people who come from a different culture therefore behave in a different manner. In this way, as Dr Chan explains, culture can be used as a 'quick explanation for communication clashes in intercultural encounters'. However, Dr Chan argues that stereotypical approaches are problematic, especially in the era of global citizenship.

A review of the academic literature conducted for Dr Chan's new research suggests that viewing culture as a 'collective programming of the mind', and viewing leadership styles as being culturally linked, is outdated. In addition, studies that promulgate this view often draw on research data that is based on self-reporting questionnaires and interviews. As Dr Chan explains, these may reflect 'what the interviewees or questionnaire respondents thought they did, rather than what they actually did'.



More recent research into leadership studies, including the work conducted by Dr Chan, reveals that the relationship between culture and leadership is far more complex and multi-faceted than cultural stereotypes suggest, and basing research on stereotypes may be open to bias. Dr Chan comments: 'Research based on stereotypes is necessarily caught in a vicious circle: if we assume that people will behave in a certain way, we will often look for confirmation of these assumptions in our data.'

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Drawing on language and linguistics theory, as well as strategies of conversation analysis and socio-pragmatics, the research method advocated by Dr Chan is discourse analysis. By studying video recordings of interactions in authentic workplace settings such as meetings, and by analysing every word that is spoken – as well as gestures, tones of voice and pauses – Dr Chan explores how workplace practices such as task allocation, chairing meetings, feedback giving and disagreeing are accomplished through language. She explains: 'Showing actual leadership practice relativises and sometimes challenges and rejects

cultural stereotypes in favour of a more complex and authentic picture of how leadership is done in situ.'

Previous discourse analysis conducted by Dr Chan of business meetings in New Zealand and Hong Kong has provided interesting insights into non-stereotypical leadership behaviour, and demonstrated the value of this approach in analysing how leadership is enacted and how leaders get work done.

For example, though New Zealand is traditionally regarded as an egalitarian culture in which exercising power over others is considered inappropriate, analysis of workplace interaction in one team demonstrated how a manager used their hierarchical status while giving negative feedback to a subordinate. A

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similar study was carried out in a business in Hong Kong, which is traditionally regarded as a high-power distance culture, in which individuals are strongly aware of their position in society. Analysis of workplace discourse there, however, showed how a manager used self-deprecating discourse strategies

to minimise status differences with subordinates.

LATEST RESEARCH

Dr Chan's most recent research has drawn on video recordings of two work meetings in a Finnish-Swedish corporation. Both meetings were conducted in English. Though none of the employees had English as a first language, most participants had an intermediate or advanced level of proficiency in English.

One meeting lasted 206 minutes and comprised nine members of a human resources team. Led by a Swede, the team also included two Swedish, five Finnish and one German employee. The other meeting lasted 165 minutes and comprised six employees who produced the corporation's in-house magazine. Again led by a Swede, the team also included three Swedish and two Finnish employees.

It is generally assumed that egalitarian cultures prevail in Nordic countries. As Dr Chan describes, business professionals 'value egalitarianism, prefer to be loosely controlled and expect leaders to consult their subordinates before making decisions'. In addition, 'Nordic managers tend to delegate

In some cultures managers were seen to use their hierarchical status while giving negative feedback to team members.



An effective leader constantly shifts their behaviour as an interaction proceeds.



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responsibility to subordinates, maintain close relationships with their subordinates, and adopt a direct communication style’.

However, Dr Chan and her collaborator’s detailed discourse analysis of the Finnish-Swedish corporation’s meetings reveals that, although meeting participants and leaders came from similar cultural backgrounds, the leaders displayed different behaviour in the way they conducted meetings to accomplish the tasks at hand.

EGALITARIAN LEADERSHIP

Dr Chan’s analysis showed that participants in the human resources meeting frequently self-selected to speak without going through the chair. They also repeatedly departed from the agenda, including for small talk and humour. There appeared to be a high degree of equality between the chair and participants.

However, some items on the agenda were contentious, and at times participants paused and looked to their team leader to provide a steer. In another instance, the leader showed disappointment at not receiving overdue reports from some participants. He issued a new deadline and threatened reprisals if it was not met, but used humour to attenuate the negativity of the threat.

Dr Chan found that the leader demonstrated his authority over the meeting, but brought people together in solidarity, and with humour, in order to achieve his desired outcomes.

AUTHORITARIAN LEADERSHIP

Discourse analysis of what was said and observed in the editorial meeting shows that its leader kept discussion strictly to the agenda. He determined who spoke and when, and participants accepted his control. At one point

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Online meetings can pose greater challenges for leaders than face to face interactions.

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the team leader asked someone to comment on an agenda item while framing the answer, limiting the content of the participant’s reply to what the leader appeared to want.

Dr Chan found that, while the editorial meeting showed a degree of equality, and, for example, people addressed each other by first names, there was an asymmetry of power between the leader and the meeting’s participants. The leader displayed an authoritarian leadership style and by not challenging

him, participants helped to construct his authority and affirm that he was the most powerful person in the team.

STUDY FINDINGS

Dr Chan and her collaborator’s study of these two teams shows how leadership is constructed differently in two groups within the same organisation. Despite employees sharing similar national and organisational backgrounds, the teams possess different norms and practices. Contrary to cultural stereotypes, the two groups of participants differed in terms of leadership behaviour and participants’ attitudes to power asymmetry, with one team revealing a distinct, more authoritarian leadership style, which team members, by acquiescing, helped to construct.

Dr Chan concludes: ‘My research, as well as other studies which adopt discourse analytical approaches to workplace interaction, provides empirical evidence

that an individual’s choice of discourse strategies is not solely determined by themselves but is the result of negotiation between interlocutors. An effective business communicator is able to constantly alter and modify their ways of interacting in response to others’ reactions to their communication practices. To me, an awareness of the dynamic and complex nature of interaction, rather than an awareness of culture differences, plays a vital role in successful (intercultural) workplace communication.’



Behind the Research

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Research Objectives

Dr Angela Chan researches how people talk with each other at work. Part of her research focuses on intercultural communication in business meetings, in order to counter reductive beliefs about cultural stereotypes.

Detail

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Bio

Dr Angela Chan is Associate Professor at the College of Liberal Arts, Shantou University, China. She is interested in how

workplace practices are accomplished through the use of language. She has published on various related topics including meeting chairing, task allocation, face and politeness, professional identity construction, and leadership discourse.

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Collaborators

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Personal Response

How do you think leadership behaviour has changed as meetings move online to accommodate home working?

Admittedly, online meetings seem to pose greater challenges to leaders than normal face-to-face meetings do. For example, there are unexpected technical issues; participants may become multi-tasking and easily get distracted when they work from home. However, regardless of being online or offline, research on leadership discourse has revealed that the key to effective leadership remains the same, that is the dynamic nature of interaction. Interaction progresses in a moment-by-moment manner. The enactment of leadership is jointly defined/negotiated by the leader and the other members of their work team. An effective leader constantly shifts their leadership behaviour as an interaction proceeds.



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