

Problems of Effective Cross-Cultural Communication and Conflict Resolution

In this article, Dr. Reza Najafbagyis outlines the importance of cross-cultural communication in conflict resolution, arguing that communication based on cultural understanding and solidarity can be effective in addressing political, economic and social problems worldwide.

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Many failures in international cooperation and conflict resolution seem to be related to communication problems and cultural differences. In other words, the establishment of realistic, proper and effective communication, based on mutual cultural understanding and on goodwill, would solve many national and international disputes. This article examines the contention that honest and effective communication, based on cultural understanding, would contribute positively to the solution of political, economic and social problems among nations.

Effective Communication Based on Intercultural and Political Understanding

Communication can be considered one of the most pervasive problems among nations. Even within a single culture, communication tends to have many complex effects. When communication takes place between two cultures, these effects get even more complicated, primarily because they are symbolized in one context and transferred into another. Intercultural communication, therefore, needs co-orientation as a prerequisite. Co-orientation refers to any effort that may be necessary to familiarize and train an individual in the life, work, social and political relations, norms, values, traditions, religion and other aspects of one's own culture and those of other concerned nations. The following principles could clarify the kind of co-orientation needed for conflict resolution:

- * To increase our awareness and understanding of our own rights.
- * To increase our awareness and understanding of our own culture.
- * To become more cognizant of our attitudes and feelings towards people of another country or community and vice versa.
- * To better understand the social, political and economic environments of other cultures and their impact on personal behavior.
- * To gain better awareness and appreciation of the similarities and differences between the different cultures.
- * To be flexible and realistic to an extent that could contribute to resolving conflicts.

But certain factors facilitate the understanding of the reasons behind a conflict and help in dealing with its solution. The study of history, language, religion, traditions, values and norms of other nations definitely helps in intercultural understanding and problem-

solving, but it is only a starting point. Goodwill, honesty and respect are bases on which to develop political and cultural knowledge.

In the West, technological progress seems to have somehow undermined the need for the sound understanding of various levels of social and cultural reality. People who are more adventurous and who visit and live among societies other than their own are able to acquire a realistic knowledge of other cultures. But it is not sufficient to understand how others differ; we must also understand how we differ. Lack of attention to these norms, values and traditions and lack of basic knowledge of intercultural communication among different nations is a general problem even among officials and politicians at the highest levels. Successful communication can only be achieved through sound and sincere reciprocity. It is to nobody's advantage to impose his or her culture or power on others. In fact, cross-cultural contacts are harmful unless they are conducive to constructive communication, and this can only occur if the parties have respect and sympathy for each other and show a large measure of flexibility.

It is through acculturation that we can learn about cultural differences and the need for adaptation and change. Many misunderstandings have occurred, not only because of mistakes in the usage of words or expressions, but also because of the lack of goodwill and cultural knowledge, which makes adaptation and change difficult.

Factors Affecting Relationships between Nations

The idea that culture should be seen as communication is useful in that it has raised issues that had not previously been considered, and, as a result, has provided solutions that otherwise might not have been possible.

Communication is often blocked by the deliberate cultivation of cultural prejudice. Feelings of superiority towards the Other are most harmful when one is trying to **build** relationships and solve conflicts between two nations.

Preconceptions about other peoples or nations as being hostile, alien, illiterate and uncivilized create antagonism and pessimism between the two parties and destroy other possibilities for development and success. Some countries are more individualistic than others in their orientations, which cannot be a sensible attitude in cross-cultural communication and could lead to misunderstandings between the two nations. Individualism is defined as "a social pattern that consists of loosely linked individuals who view themselves as independent of collectives and who are motivated by their own preferences, needs, rights and contracts."

Among the many factors that inhibit cooperation and constructive relationships between nations is the expectation of being treated as important, as exceptional and as having the right to enjoy extra privileges.

Adjustment to the values of the other country, together with goodwill and respect for the status quo of the other party, are elements of successful communication (particularly used by anthropologists). Those who know their own culture and rights and are secure and

content with it, and can realize and appreciate the good that they observe in the communities in which they work, live or come together to solve a conflict."*

Another obstacle to the process of cross-cultural communication and conflict resolution is that the upper and upper-middle classes, i.e., mostly wealthy people, industrialists, merchants and top government and private-sector officials, etc., tend to become integrated into a transnational socio-cultural system of their own. Experience has shown that groups have contributed very little to the development process, and have ignored their duty to orient and give direction either to the expatriates or experts in arranging programs that are right and relevant for the development of their country.

It is essential to remember that most development projects, political and technical assistance provided to developing countries do not take cultural and social factors into consideration. A lot can be learned from past experiences, such as the case of the failed technical assistance to Iran. In 1980 (a year after the Iranian Revolution), a seminar was organized by a number of American academics and advisers who had been trying for years to introduce reform to Iran. Their lack of understanding of the society, the culture, politics and history of the country had not only led to the failure of their reforms, but it had created additional problems, conflicts and pessimism among the people of the host country.

The aim of the American seminar was to study "the failure of U.S. technical assistance in public administration: the Iranian ease." American aid to Iran started in 1953 in the form of aid to ministries and continued for nearly 25 years. But even after decades, technical assistance failed to produce the hoped-for results, and many more mistakes were made than successes achieved because:

- * Nearly all advisers in the public administration program arrived in Iran with no knowledge of the language and with a superficial knowledge of Iranian culture, history and social, economic and political systems;
- * For an American to become attuned to the internal politics of a foreign country requires a radical shifting of his habits and attitudes; and
- * Although one must caution against generalizing from a single case, or a few cases, the Iranian ease — and others — strongly suggest that developed countries do not know how to help developing nations in their reforms.

The other case is the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. This is essentially a dispute between two national identities with claims over the same area of land. Many attempts have been made to broker a two-state solution, which would entail the creation of an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel. Perhaps among the factors that have hindered the resolution of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is the lack of mutual trust — a fundamental condition for the advancement of understanding between the parties. Another reason is the feeling of delegitimization, for the delegitimization of the adversary seems to be one of the major obstacles to a peaceful resolution of any conflict. However, it is the violence between Palestinians and Israelis that is the major obstacle to a readiness within both societies to make major concessions towards a final settlement of the conflict.

To sum up, in the area of cross-cultural communication, whatever is done should be based on understanding, reciprocity and successful cooperation. Today's world order is crumbling, and there are unprecedented economic, social and political crises which cannot be solved through traditional means. It can only be done through the creation of a new world order, i.e., basically, the creation of a world culture, a global culture, whereby all people will develop collaboratively and responsibly, preserving not only their biological and cultural heritage, but furthering their natural development with greater awareness of and sense of solidarity with the Other.

Endnotes

1. Douglas Medin et al.. *Sacred Bounds on Rational Resolution of Violent Political Conflict*. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America (PNAS), March 1, 2007.
2. Paul Beamish, Allen Morrison and Andrew Inkpen, *International Management* (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2003), p.201.
3. Rabi Bhagat et al., "Cultural Variations in the Cross-Border Transfer of Organizational Knowledge: An Integrative Framework," *Academy of Management Review* (April 2002), p.208.
4. Norman Daniel, *The Cultural Barrier* (Edinburgh: Western Printing Services Ltd., 1975), p.62.
5. John Seitz, "The Failure of U.S. Technical Assistance in Public Administration: The Iranian Case," *Public Administration Review*, Vol. 40. No. 5 (Sept/Oct. 1980), pp.407-413.
6. Neta Oren et al., "The Detrimental Dynamics of Delegitimization in Intractable Conflicts: The Israeli-Palestinian Case," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*,-No. 3\ (2007),p.111