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SMEs and Intercultural Communication

In every case, a business relationship is more than just the deal.

Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1994)

"Only connect..."

E. M. Forster, *Howards End*

In a speech at the World Economic Development Congress in September 1996, former US Under-Secretary of State for Economic, Business and Agricultural Affairs Joan E. Spero described some of the important trends in the world economy. Capital was moving around the world at immense speed: every day more than \$1 trillion was being traded in a global foreign exchange market on which the sun never set; technological advances in computers and telecommunications were creating a new information-based economy; and small and medium enterprises were coming to recognise that the competition for market share was now global, and that therefore participation in the global economy was no longer a matter of choice but of necessity (Browne: *Go Global*).

Many individual SMEs have long been proud of the worldwide reputation that they have gained for producing a particular range of tools or components or small machines or household goods of the very highest quality. For example, some of Germany's *Mittelstand* companies are widely considered to be among the world's best in their own particular niche (see Simon 1996). And yet the idea of SMEs as *global players* still seems surprising to many people. Why *should* SMEs go international? Following Jenster / Jarillo (1994: 10ff.), the main sources of competitive advantage to be gained by internationalisation could be described as follows:

- In order to follow the example of regular customers who themselves have gone international.
- To achieve greater efficiency, for instance through economies of scale if production can be pushed above a certain level as a consequence of internationalisation. This is the basis of the "market niche" philosophy, for once you have invested very substantially in research and development on a product of fairly narrow-range appeal, you may then be able to dominate the world market long-term, a secret that was discovered long ago by many well-known German SMEs.
- It may be attractive to reduce production (and especially labour) costs by moving production abroad, so as to be able to take advantage of particular local conditions such

as lower wage-levels. Multinational companies have been doing this for a long time – why shouldn't SMEs?

- It may also be possible to take advantage of better technological know-how, in a country where a high degree of experience of working in the area in question has been accumulated.
- Then there are the advantages to be gained (in terms of market expansion) from exploiting a common language, as (for example) between the various English-speaking countries, or between Spain and much of Latin America, or between France and many of its former colonies.
- Finally, in a highly competitive industry, it may be useful to be able to spread the risks, and balance profits and losses, rather than putting all your eggs in the one basket of an uncertain domestic market.

Generally speaking, many SMEs are forced to go international, because the home market for their specialised products is simply too small to allow for much expansion. As Joan Spero pointed out in her statement, the time has come, and SMEs must now adjust to the requirements of world trading (just as they must also get used to the idea of aggressive foreign competitors penetrating their domestic market with ever-growing frequency). Intercultural business communication is one of the most important of these requirements, yet its focus so far has tended to be restricted to the experience and problems of large corporations.

With respect to intercultural communication, the question of what advantages SMEs might have over large companies – and which disadvantages – should begin with *structural factors*. In the typical SME, with its comparatively narrow resource base, there is not likely to be anyone with a China, Japan or Middle East desk, but rather someone who is responsible for a wide range of foreign connections, or even for all of them – and who therefore has less time to devote to the individual country, fewer direct contacts with a specific culture, and less opportunity to gain experience in depth. (This would obviously apply less to an SME focused strongly on, say, only China or the United States or Latin America). It might be thought that most SMEs are therefore at a great disadvantage compared to large international organisations.

However, the larger the company happens to be, the more likely it is that the specialist will have considerably restricted functions and powers, and will truly be precisely that – a specialist; whereas the representative of the SME will of necessity need to be an all-rounder, and will have to deal with the foreign partner company at all levels, in all departments, and in almost any possible matter as and when required. He will more likely interface with the foreign partner as a true representative of his organisation, as a *spokesman*, and not merely as

someone to whom limited functions have been delegated.¹ He will be closer to the top of his company. With their limited personnel resources, SMEs genuinely cannot afford to get tied up in the complexities of corporate bureaucracy, labyrinthine decision-making, and finicky division of labour that hamstringing many large companies (although it should be said that outsourcing and over-reliance on middlemen or local subsidiaries, all temptations to which SMEs have been known to fall prey, are not the answer either). Generally speaking, a "hands on", spontaneous approach may prove to be a better way of getting into a new market than an overplanned, over-cautious campaign. It works in the other direction, too – when delegations come from abroad, perhaps returning the visit, they will more quickly establish rapport with people from the host organisation who have real clout, and have not just been assigned to "look after" the foreign visitors. See, for instance, the horror story recounted in Bittner / Reisch (1993: 7-11).

It is well-known that international business cooperation tends to fail in the "soft" zone of intercultural, negotiating and managerial skills rather than in the "hard" areas of finance, technology or even supply infrastructure. Admittedly, the dangers of things going wrong are far greater when all the responsibility rests on the tired shoulders of, say, Fritz Kleinmeister Junior (of the fictitious German SME Fritz Kleinmeister & Sohn GmbH), but the opportunities are also much greater. Outside Western Europe and the United States, in regions of the world where the cultures are *relationship-oriented* rather than *task-oriented*, many companies prefer to establish their international links on the basis of personal trust. They want to know who they are dealing with, and the most important phase of negotiation will be the "getting to know you" phase.

The Western visitor will have to find the time to win the trust of his hosts, and this may (depending on the culture) involve, for example, a heavy programme of visits to the opera or to tiresome concerts of local folk culture, enormous meals, sometimes with the obligation to eat things that most Westerners would not even recognise as "food", or participation in endless drinking sessions. Alternatively, it may require him to make himself humanly ridiculous in a karaoke parlour or in a Japanese geisha or a Korean kisaeng house. As the author of a classic early essay on business negotiation observed in the context of Japan: "Night entertainment also serves as an avenue for learning about the personality and character – including trustworthiness – of counterparts" (Weiss, with Stripp 1984: 87). When

¹ "He" is not intended to be sexist, but merely to avoid the pedantic repetition of "he or she", "his or her", and so on. Yet it reflects what is still the predominant situation in the Western business world – a point made by a recent American cartoon (in *The Christian Science Monitor*, March 20th-26th, 1998) which showed the doors to a company's "Executive Restrooms", i.e. toilets, labelled "Men" and "Woman". Many Western companies take the view that it could be problematical to send a female employee to negotiate in a country where women's roles in business are restricted to typing, looking decorative, and serving light refreshments, or where women are not even able to move freely in public. Against all the odds, self-confident women managers have occasionally been spectacularly successful in such situations. Women sometimes have better interpersonal skills than men, which can be an advantage when working in relationship-oriented cultures, but first they have to be given the chance, and not every company is willing to take the risk.... For a brief discussion of the problem by an eloquent advocate of women in international management, see Adler (*Success of Women*).

(and probably only when) his hosts feel that they know young Fritz Kleinmeister, they will do business with him. There will be written contracts, although these may not always be taken very seriously, and maybe the lawyers will have their say, too, but these factors will be relatively unimportant compared with the groundwork that has been achieved on the human level.

This is potentially a great advantage for smaller companies. When Fred Müller, who represents the giant (and equally fictitious) German company BIG AG in Southeast Asia, goes to Thailand, he will be met at the airport, organised, briefed and featherbedded by the BIG AG office in Bangkok. He may know quite a lot about the local culture, he may know how to behave in social situations, and he will be given full technical back-up by the regional office of his company, but his negotiating partners on the other side of the table are going to be aware that he is only a comparatively small cog in a huge machine: they know that his emotional identification with his employer may be opportunistic and temporary; also that it is harder for him to say, "yes, I'll stay here for a few days longer" (in fact, every time that he has to confirm details or changes in arrangements with head office he loses a bit of his credibility); and, furthermore, that he is less likely to be able to back any agreement that is eventually reached with the full weight of his own personal dignity and honour, which is a necessary requirement when doing business in many non-Western societies. "Who is this man?" they will ask, and: "When he gives his word, what is it worth?"

When major companies from different cultures deal with each other, there are other potential drawbacks:

- Top-level specialists or managers often negotiate with other top-level specialists or managers, who may share many of the same cultural attitudes, who may have acquired their MBAs from the same American institutions, and who may know the same people internationally, and so on; the "corporate cultures" of the enterprises, at this level, may be strikingly similar. Yet when serious difficulties occur at a lower working level, these may be traced to cultural differences and to intercultural conflicts that could not easily have been predicted from high up there on the top-floor.
- The "goodwill bonus" usually given to foreigners may be quickly withdrawn once it is realised that the foreigners in question are highly trained specialists, and not all-rounders or "amateurs": that they are mercenaries rather than members of the company family.
- Or: teams of specialists from cooperating partners may be set up in so-called *fluid constellations* to deal with a particular project. They will fly in to do a certain job, negotiate metacultural ground-rules – a temporary "third culture" – for the task in hand, try to reach an agreement, and then fly out again. At its most drastic, this is not so much intercultural communication as the suspension of cultural differences for a limited time and a specific purpose. All international undertakings require this, but neither deep understanding nor long-term trust can be achieved by these means alone, and at its worst this kind of relationship is a little bit like a manipulative cloning process. If trust and understanding are needed, then there must be a willingness to take risks, to make yourself vulnerable, and to

let yourself be seen (in cultural terms) as a whole person. As Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1994) of the Harvard Business School has observed, the relationship will be *strategic*, involving continuous contact at a high level; it will be *tactical*, bringing middle management and professionals together to plan joint activities; it will be *operational*, allowing those people who carry out the job access to the other team's personnel, information and resources; it will be *interpersonal*, where the person-to-person contacts enable a degree of communication and cooperation that would be impossible simply within the framework of formal structures; and, finally, it will be *cultural*, necessitating new skills in intercultural communication. Needless to say, not all cultures are equally capable of this. As Moss Kanter notes, North American companies tend to take a narrow, opportunistic view of relationships, neglecting political, cultural, organizational, and human aspects in favour of the economic element; Asian companies are far more comfortable with relationships, and better at making something of them, while European companies tend to fall between Americans and Asians.

There is a consensus in the literature that the biggest single hurdle to be jumped in the process of internationalisation is the *initial one* (see, for example, Prince / van Dijken 1998: 129). And when SMEs start out on this track, "the serious question [...] is whether to internationalize alone or in cooperation with other firms" (Ahokangas 1998: 82). What kind of internationalisation might this then be? There is a broad spectrum of possibilities, including direct exporting, setting up a manufacturing outpost or subsidiary, licensing arrangements to manufacture or distribute the products, setting up a mutual service consortium, and embarking on a joint venture. The decision for one or the other of these will be based upon how independently the SME feels that it can operate, how much local help or knowledge is needed (and available), and how flexible the SME would in the longer term prefer to remain.

In this situation, the benefits of cooperation between culturally heterogeneous companies are obvious. The encounter with different cultures through long-term *networking* necessarily leads to an improved understanding of their business, political, social and cultural systems. It makes it easier to work in those countries (through more accurately targeted marketing) and to collaborate with their nationals (whether these are clients, business partners, government officials, or employees). "Networking is at the heart of [the] emerging focus on soft assets, reputation and trust centred on people and communication skills" (Hayes 1996: 4).

Unlike the transaction-driven, short-term, individually-motivated mind-set of the 1980s, [...] the 1990s and the new millennium will truly be the Age of the Network, where "social capital" – the capacity for members of an economic group to forge trust and recognize their mutual interests – will gain importance as a spur to a greater sense of community and economic growth in the West (*op. cit.*: xiv).

Networking offers the chance for *synergy*, that working together of separate elements that creates a whole that is greater than the sum of the constituent parts, indeed, which produces possibilities that were not noticeably inherent in them. Too often, it has been the potential drawbacks of international cooperation that have been emphasised, and not the synergistic opportunities that can arise from it. During a panel discussion on "multicultural human resources development" in Koblenz, one of the participants, Otto Filtzinger, noted

dass Multikulturalität zunächst und vor allem unter einer Problemoptik gesehen wird: Was bringt das an Reibungen, wenn jemand die deutsche Sprache nicht versteht, wenn er andere Verhaltens-, Reaktions- und Sichtweisen zeigt, wenn er zur Arbeit, zu Kollegen eine andere Einstellung hat. Weniger gesehen werden die positiven Elemente und Möglichkeiten einer multikulturell geprägten Gruppe: das Revisions-, Innovations- und Kreativitätspotential, das darin steckt, Dinge mit anderen Augen zu sehen, anders an sie heranzugehen, sie anders einzuschätzen (quoted in Henzler / Expertendiskussion 1994: 103-104).

And he added:

Kreatives Potential entsteht nicht aus der Kultur der Konformität sondern aus der Kultur der Verschiedenartigkeit. An einer solchen Maxime sind unsere Bildungs- und Ausbildungseinrichtungen noch zu wenig orientiert (108-9).

It has also been put very succinctly Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1994):

[Alliances between companies] must yield benefits for the partners, but they are more than just the deal. They are living systems that evolve progressively in their possibilities. Beyond the immediate reasons they have for entering into a relationship, the connection offers the parties an option on the future, opening new doors and unforeseen opportunities (97).

The synergistic possibilities of cultural diversity have been discussed by a number of writers, perhaps most notably by Nancy J. Adler (1986 / 1991). She describes the expanding meanings that are thus made available – including multiple perspectives, a greater openness to new ideas, and the possibility of multiple interpretations – and the expanding alternatives that they lead to – such as increasing creativity, flexibility, and problem-solving skills. There are three steps in the synergistic approach: that of *situation description*, i.e. defining the problem as it is seen by all the cultures that are involved in it; *cultural interpretation*, involving analysis of the logic of each culture's particular standpoint; and *cultural creativity*, which entails finding a compromise solution that does not violate the norms of any of the participant cultures.

Cultural diversity is a powerful resource, but to employ it as such it is necessary to recognise the cultural differences, manage the disadvantages that arise out of them and learn to exploit the advantages. The most obvious of these is that

multicultural groups invent more options and create more solutions than do single culture groups. Diversity makes it easier for groups to create more and better ideas. It allows them to avoid the trap of "groupthink" (Adler 1986 / 1991: 133)

What Adler means here by "groupthink" is those in-group pressures that lead to a decrease in mental efficiency and power of judgement. As she points out, the synergistic potential of cultural diversity is more useful in *divergent* situations, when a company is expanding, changing itself, investigating new approaches or new markets, innovating, etc., than it is in more routine, *convergent* situations, i.e. the stage of implementation as opposed to those of planning or research and development.

By this logic, the advantages of cultural diversity would make themselves most felt higher up in the corporation rather than lower down – but this need not apply to SMEs. They should and

can avoid the trap that well-meaning large concerns tend to fall into, of prescribing or simply assuming different levels of cultural awareness for the different levels of the company hierarchy, e.g. a multinational focus for top and upper middle management, binational cooperation at lower management levels, and a purely local focus for the rest of the workforce. The distances are much shorter in SMEs and there ought to be a greater willingness for flexibility and improvisation. All-rounders are needed. There should be no handing down of clever international agreements from the people on the top floor to a working level that cannot easily implement them – as is unfortunately still a common experience in large companies. As one recent writer with considerable experience of networking, Roger Hayes (1996), has pointed out,

a small organization with an enthusiastic but limited staff can quite literally [*sic*] "punch above its weight" via international partnerships, pulling together groups and organizations to achieve success on a global issue at regional, national and local levels (27).

As already indicated, it is large companies that have generally been the focus of attention in research into intercultural business communication. For example, discussion and speculation about the differences between cultures were given firmer support by serious empirical work in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when Geert Hofstede (1980, 1991) conducted an extensive survey of 72 national subsidiaries of IBM, with overall more than 116,000 questionnaires. His objective was to identify significant dimensions of work-related cultural values. Initially he discovered four of these: *power distance*, meaning the way in which different societies handle situations of inequality; *uncertainty avoidance*, referring to matters of stress and the degree to which human experience needs to be given structure; *individualism / collectivism*; and what Hofstede rather unhappily termed *masculinity and femininity*. Later, his attention was drawn by Michael Harris Bond to a further dimension, that of *long / short termism*. Other handbooks or taxonomies of cultural difference include Fons Trompenaars (1994), Terence Brake *et al.* (1995) and Jürgen Beneke (1998).

Invaluable as Hofstede's work undoubtedly was, its methodological weaknesses have been pointed out on many occasions. To mention just a few of the points that were made:

- On "power distance", Hofstede only surveyed the opinions of subordinates, and not those of their superiors, thereby necessarily inviting a distorted picture to be formed (Janson 1992: 63).
- On "uncertainty avoidance", if the employees answer that they disagree with the statement "company rules should not be broken", it may not indicate an atmosphere of low uncertainty avoidance so much as a situation of numerous and rigid rules and therefore *high* uncertainty avoidance; conversely, agreement with the statement may simply mean not high uncertainty avoidance but rather that there are very few rules and that therefore nobody minds keeping to them, i.e. *low* uncertainty avoidance (Janson: 66).
- "Masculine" and "feminine" are very awkward terms, in that while the qualities associated with them are clearly derived from old-fashioned, stereotypical European role perceptions,

it would be necessary to spell out what it is that defines "masculine behaviour" or "feminine behaviour" in a specific culture. Triandis (1982) has suggested that "egocentrism" and "allocentrism" might be better terms here (87).

- IBM used to be well-known for its strong and distinctive *corporate culture*. It seems unwise to draw controversial conclusions about differences in national culture in areas of experience in which corporate culture may exercise a powerful influence on attitudes - especially because that influence may vary in strength from culture to culture, determining the level of identification that employees have with their company, their willingness to risk criticism of their employer, and so on.

This approach to cultural difference has been under attack in some parts of Europe as too static and descriptive; what is needed, its critics say, is more study of the *processes* of intercultural interaction. To some extent, territories are now being marked out in what is a new discipline: linguists, for example, stress the detailed analysis of interaction because it is what they teach and research, unlike the more statically-minded cultural historians or social scientists, with their "contrastive" rather than "interactional" approach.

It needs to be said, however, that there remain huge areas of embarrassing and expensive misunderstanding that are the result of simply not knowing some basic fact, e.g. that many large cities in East Asia have hardly any streetnames (and buildings numbered in the order in which they were built), thus requiring a more complex distribution system, operated hierarchically rather than directed from headquarters, with predictable effects on delivery times, different margins for perishable products, and so on. Or: that in some countries certain goods (such as for instance toothbrushes in Greece) may not normally be displayed by shopkeepers, but kept behind the counter and on suitable occasions "recommended" to interested customers, so that to sell these products effectively, retailers have to be organised and motivated to "push" the product more aggressively than would be normal practice in that particular culture (Both situations are discussed in the "cases" presented by Jenster / Jarillo 1994).

What then can be done to prepare for increased international cooperation, to make the contacts with foreign partners easier, and to sensitise personnel who are required to work internationally to the difficulties of intercultural communication? The following points could be made:

- Broadly speaking, there must be a greater readiness to seek and project an inter- or multinational corporate identity. This will require the employment of both German-speaking foreigners and Germans with foreign language skills. That should be no problem as far as Europe is concerned. Young graduates with the appropriate skills and a willingness to work abroad are being produced in "foreign language-centred" multidisciplinary degree programmes in countries like Ireland, for example. Although this goes against the grain of German academia, where degree structures are in bad need of reform, there are a growing number of suitable programmes in German universities – for instance, the Hildesheim degrees in International Information Management (MA) and International

Technical Communication (*Diplom*) – and in many of the German *Fachhochschulen*. The point has been understood at last that, just as language training alone is insufficient, so too is language training combined with (but separated from) business studies, science and technology, law, or whatever. The degree course must therefore be enriched with elements like area studies, cultural studies (in the British style) or intercultural communication that both straddle and connect the separate disciplines, and which – wherever possible – are taught by staff with interests and qualifications in more than just one narrow field (or by means of intelligently organised team-teaching).

- SMEs must try to offset their competitive disadvantage in providing only modest opportunities for career advancement. This can be achieved through dynamic salary plans and interesting career structures, offering greater responsibility at an earlier age.
- SMEs in family ownership must be particularly careful not to allow this to cramp their ability to work effectively with foreign partners. Fröhlich / Pichler (1998) found that managers with a higher degree of family capital or equity at stake were less inclined to take risks (63ff.) According to Donckels / Aerts (1998), who had been working on SMEs from a wide range of different countries, family businesses attach less importance to most factors in internationalisation, quality of management, technology, market share, or creativity, but *not* reputation and local image – presumably because of the local focus that family-run SMEs often have (153ff.).
- More must be invested in training and educating personnel to meet the challenges of global business. It should not be forgotten that this means meeting standards that are set on an international and not the domestic level. Taking Germany as an example: it would probably not be difficult for German companies to meet international expectations as far as product quality or delivery deadlines are concerned, but it might be harder to avoid disappointment when it comes to services provided in, say, catering or the retail trade.²
- For more than twenty years it has been the policy of major companies in Japan and South Korea to send thousands of their young employees to the United States and Europe every year, not just for technical and managerial training, but also to acquire a feeling for the language and the cultural environment – in other words, to find out how the culture *functions*. In their survey of Dutch SMEs, Prince / van Dijken (1998) rather unsurprisingly found that the discriminating factors between exporting and non-exporting companies included foreign language use, and that among the significant management characteristics were the number of languages spoken and the amount of time that

² Slogans like "The customer is always right" or "The customer is king" should be posted up in German shops and restaurants in letters ten foot high. There is a common unwillingness among Germans to behave in what is held to be a servile or hypocritically amiable manner, and a preference for a bluff, direct, "honest" way of talking to people ("*Im Deutschen lügt man, wenn man höflich ist*", *Faust, II*). It is possible to explain these deep-seated attitudes historically in terms of a German reaction against the elaborate courtliness of French culture, which was once dominant in the "civilised" parts of Europe (Lessing's drama *Minna von Barnhelm* is a key text here). Nevertheless, foreign customers do tend to come away with the impression that German service is often rude and unhelpful.

managers spent abroad. Although SMEs are at an obvious disadvantage here, they can compensate at least in part through the staff exchange possibilities that are generated by international networking.

- People who are involved in foreign business contacts should be encouraged to keep a record of their personal experience of multiculturalism. This could be from the point of view of intercultural communication, and in the form of, say, a notebook or diary, or it could be from the human resources and diversity management perspective – see, for instance, the very personal account given by Boris Voss (1998) – or it could simply be a subjective but honest description of the problems that were encountered and the solutions that were found.
- Appropriate and expert preparation / training is needed before any foreign assignment of considerable length is undertaken, and this should aim to include the person's husband or wife if possible. Intercultural training is best done with the participation of at least one trainer from the "target culture". As an alternative (or supplement) to professional courses, networked partners in international cooperation can support each other by providing (inter)cultural backup, information, counselling, and even joint projects in intercultural exploration. By this means, *culture shock* can be anticipated and analysed before the business traveller has even left home. It may not be possible to prevent culture shock altogether, but at least the "victim" will have been suitably prepared to meet it when it does occur.
- In the rare event (for an SME) of the stay abroad being for a longer period of time, there is a need for clarification of the participant's future career prospects with the company – which should not be harmed by the assignment – and also for an appropriate programme of reintegration after the assignment has been completed.

Although their size can be a disadvantage to them, if they set about it in the right way SMEs can tap into a rich vein of international opportunity, and these areas of economic potential need not remain the preserve of multinational companies.

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