Communicating Across Cultures in a New Zealand Workplace: an investigation of attitudes, policies and practices at Excell, Auckland

A 75 point thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Management in Communication Management at Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand.

Mariska Mannes

2006
Communicating Across Cultures in a New Zealand Workplace: an investigation of attitudes, policies and practices at Excell, Auckland

Copyright © 2006 by Mariska Mannes. All rights reserved.

I assert the moral right to be identified as the author of this work. For purposes other than research and private study, no part of this work may be produced or distributed in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system without prior written permission of the author.

To contact the author for any queries regarding this thesis, please write an email to mariska@deliquo.co.nz

Mail address:
PO Box 247
Albany Village
Auckland
New Zealand

Reference information:
Mannes, M. (2005). Communicating across cultures in a New Zealand workplace: an investigation of attitudes, policies and practices at Excell Auckland, Palmerston North, New Zealand: Massey University, Department of Communication and Journalism.

Includes References and Bibliography.

Subject search words:
Stereotype, Power distance, Cross-cultural communication, High and low context communication.
Abstract

From a sociocultural perspective, the aim in this study was to find out whether or not New Zealanders in one Auckland workplace consciously communicate in a different way with colleagues from migrant cultures. Because New Zealand has become increasingly culturally diverse, workplaces have to adapt to a multicultural workforce. Migrants have cultural values that may conflict with New Zealand values; therefore, it is possible that misunderstandings may occur.

The objectives in this study were to find out if in one research site whether New Zealanders adjusted their communication when communicating with colleagues from migrant cultures. Methodology was concentrated on intercultural concepts of positive and negative stereotyping, high and low context communication, hierarchy and cultural differences in power distance to explore any awareness of differences in communicating with migrants compared with the way in which communication was conducted with New Zealanders. Informal interviews were conducted to guide the direction of an initial questionnaire which led to the development of the questionnaire used in a survey carried out with 53 Pakeha and Maori working at Excell Corporation, a New Zealand company in Auckland.

Results indicated that New Zealand employees of Excell did adjust their communication when communicating with colleagues from different cultures. However the extent of adaptation depended on the situation. The results confirm the significance of this study for organisations with a multicultural staff by highlighting why and where communication breaks down. For example, avoiding migrant colleagues occurred because of previous frustrating encounters, stereotypic attitudes and not having the time to try to understand migrant colleagues.
Short List of Contents

Abstract........................................................................................................................................... iii
Table of Contents............................................................................................................................... v
List of Tables and Figures.................................................................................................................. ix
List of Tables and Figures.................................................................................................................. ix
Preface................................................................................................................................................ x
Chapter 1. Introduction...................................................................................................................... 1
Chapter 2. Literature Review ............................................................................................................ 31
Chapter 3. Research Objectives ....................................................................................................... 60
Chapter 4. Methodology..................................................................................................................... 70
Chapter 5. Results ............................................................................................................................. 96
Chapter 6. Discussion.......................................................................................................................... 123
Chapter 7. Conclusion........................................................................................................................ 144
References......................................................................................................................................... 148
Bibliography....................................................................................................................................... 162
Appendices ......................................................................................................................................... 162
# Table of Contents

Abstract........................................................................................................... iii
Short List of Contents....................................................................................... iv
Table of Contents............................................................................................ v
List of Tables and Figures.................................................................................... ix
Preface............................................................................................................... x
  Research Background....................................................................................... x
  Acknowledgements......................................................................................... xii
Chapter 1. Introduction.................................................................................. 1
  1.0 Introduction............................................................................................... 1
  1.1 Excell Corporation Limited........................................................................ 6
    1.1.1 Employee Attitudes towards Multiculturalism.................................. 17
  1.2 Definition of New Zealander for this study............................................. 19
  1.3 Definitions of Dimensions of Culture used in this Study...................... 21
    1.3.1 Stereotyping.......................................................................................... 22
    1.3.2 Power Distance..................................................................................... 23
    1.3.3 High and Low Context Communication............................................. 25
  1.4 Structure of this Case Study..................................................................... 27
    1.4.1 Research Field...................................................................................... 28
    1.4.2 Instruments and Preparation................................................................. 28
    1.4.3 Data Analysis and Interpretation.......................................................... 28
  1.5 Summary.................................................................................................... 29

RESEARCH FIELD......................................................................................... 31

Chapter 2. Literature Review....................................................................... 32
  2.0 Introduction............................................................................................... 32
  2.1 Stereotyping.............................................................................................. 33
  2.2 Power Distance.......................................................................................... 44
  2.3 High and Low Context Communication Styles....................................... 51
2.4 Summary.............................................................................................................. 58
Chapter 3. Research Objectives ................................................................................. 60
3.0 Introduction ........................................................................................................... 60
3.1 Research Objective ............................................................................................... 61
   3.1.1 Specific Objectives ......................................................................................... 61
      3.1.1.1 Stereotyping ............................................................................................ 61
      3.1.1.2 Power Distance ....................................................................................... 62
      3.1.1.3 Context in Communication .................................................................. 62
3.2 Research Question ............................................................................................... 63
3.3 Importance of this Research ................................................................................ 64
   3.3.1 Importance of the study of Stereotyping ......................................................... 64
   3.3.2 Importance of the study of Power Distance ................................................... 66
   3.3.3 Importance of the study of Understanding Context ...................................... 67
3.4 Summary ................................................................................................................ 67

INSTRUMENTS AND PREPARATION ........................................................................... 70
Chapter 4. Methodology ............................................................................................. 71
4.0 Introduction ........................................................................................................... 71
4.1 Procedures ............................................................................................................. 72
   4.1.1 Data Collecting Procedures .......................................................................... 72
   4.1.2 Multiculturalism at Excell ............................................................................. 74
      4.1.2.1 Interview with CEO ............................................................................. 74
      4.1.2.2 Excell Policy on Cultural Diversity ......................................................... 75
      4.1.2.3 Informal Interviews with Two Staff ....................................................... 75
   4.1.3 Informal Discussion – focus group or not? .................................................... 76
   4.1.4 Questionnaire ................................................................................................. 78
      4.1.4.1 Distribution and Collection of the Questionnaire .................................... 78
      4.1.4.2 Breakdown of Questionnaire ................................................................ 79
      4.1.4.3 Questions of Section A ........................................................................... 80
      4.1.4.4 Questions of Section B ........................................................................... 81
      4.1.4.5 Questions of Section C ........................................................................... 83
   4.1.5 Questionnaire Collation .................................................................................. 87
6.5 Limitations.........................................................................................................................142
   6.5.1 The small sample size.................................................................................................142
   6.5.2 Participant confusion over the use of two scenarios in the questionnaire............142
   6.5.3 Perception from participants of who and what constitutes a migrant...............142

6.6 Future Study....................................................................................................................143

Chapter 7. Conclusion...........................................................................................................144
   7.0 Introduction....................................................................................................................144
   7.1 Conclusion to Stereotyping..........................................................................................144
   7.2 Conclusion to Power Distance.....................................................................................145
   7.3 Conclusion to Context in Communication.................................................................146
   7.4 Last Words....................................................................................................................147

References.............................................................................................................................148

Bibliography..........................................................................................................................162

Appendices .............................................................................................................................162
   Appendix I – Questionnaire...............................................................................................165
   Appendix II – Notification of Low Risk Research............................................................171
   Appendix III – Copy of letter to participants..................................................................172
   Appendix IV – Notes from Informal Interviews...............................................................173
   Appendix V – Results of Questionnaire............................................................................173
List of Diagrams and Tables

Diagram 1. Cultural diversity in New Zealand 2001 ................................................................. 4
Diagram 2. The fastest growing of the top 50 Ethnic Groups in 2001 ........................................... 4
Diagram 3. Evolution of Excell Corporation Limited ................................................................. 6
Diagram 4. Excell Corporation Limited Organisational Chart ..................................................... 8
Diagram 5. The population grouped by ethnicity of Auckland compared with New Zealand 2001 .... 25
Diagram 6. Continuum indicating Power Distance Index Values for Cultures Involved in this Study .... 27
Diagram 7. Continuum indicating High and Low Context for Cultures Involved in this Study .......... 73
Diagram 8. Convergence of Multiple Sources of Evidence ......................................................... 90
Table 1. Participants by ethnicity, gender, and age ................................................................. 99
Table 2. Ethnicity, age, and gender in terms of agreement or disagreement on avoiding communicating with immigrant colleagues for fear of not being understood ..................... 103
Table 3. Ethnicity, age, and gender in terms of agreement or disagreement indicating stereotypic attitude toward a particular race ................................................................. 104
Table 4. Ethnicity, age, and gender in terms of high or low stereotypic attitudes toward immigrant colleagues ........................................................................................................ 105
Table 5. Ethnicity, age, and gender in terms of high or low stereotypic attitudes toward fellow New Zealand colleagues ..................................................................................................... 106
Table 6. Ethnicity, age, and gender in terms of agreement or disagreement whether managers should make decisions without consultation with employees ......................................... 108
Table 7. Ethnicity, age, and gender in terms of agreement or disagreement for power and authority use by managers ...................................................................................................... 109
Table 8. Ethnicity, age, and gender in terms of high or low power distance attitude toward immigrant colleagues by addressing them using a title .................................................................. 110
Table 9. Ethnicity, age, and gender in terms of high or low power distance attitude toward fellow New Zealand colleagues through use of name titles .................................................. 111
Table 10. Ethnicity, age, and gender in terms of agreement or disagreement with the statement “people should say what they mean” ......................................................................... 112
Table 11. Ethnicity, age, and gender in terms of agreement or disagreement on how an ambiguous message is perceived ......................................................................................... 113
Table 12. Ethnicity, age, and gender in terms of high or low context communication used when not understanding an immigrant colleague in a meeting ............................................. 115
Table 13. Ethnicity, age, and gender in terms of high or low context communication used when not understanding a New Zealand colleague in a meeting ........................................... 116
Table 14. Ethnicity, age, and gender in terms of high or low context communication used when responding to immigrant colleagues whose communication manner they found offensive .......................................................... 117
Table 15. Ethnicity, age, and gender in terms of high or low high or low context communication used when responding to fellow New Zealand colleagues whose communication manner they found offensive ......................................................... 119
Preface

Research Background

I have always been fascinated with people from different cultures and what it is that enables us to communicate to a greater or lesser degree. This interest took me overseas for many years and I enjoyed the diversity of people and the challenge of communicating with others from different cultures. Returning to New Zealand in the late 1990s came as quite a culture shock as I came back to a New Zealand which was quite different from the one I had left. A New Zealand that, it seemed, had seen an explosion of migrants from all corners of the world, but especially from Asia.

The New Zealand population is made up of various cultures including many that differ from the New Zealand culture. By New Zealand culture I mean the culture comprising Maori and Pakeha values that have shaped New Zealand. In my field as a consultant I work with various organisations and people from different countries and backgrounds and often see challenges or misunderstandings arise between New Zealanders and migrant colleagues when delivering messages, sometimes at a high cost to the organisation. Too many times I have seen colleagues, both migrant and New Zealand, avoiding each other because of not being able to understand the other's language or accent, as well as being offended by and/or misunderstanding each other. Often it is not language that is the problem but rather the different communication styles and cultural norms that each person uses to get her or his message across. However, I have found that most people do not understand these concepts, therefore, without some intercultural learning, do not have the ability to deal effectively with intercultural exchanges.

Further, this study helps me with my own work in understanding real issues being faced by organisations today because of challenges in communication styles. Also it
is important for me to understand how we do or do not adjust our communication when communicating with migrant colleagues in order to understand how to address the challenges some multicultural organisations in New Zealand are facing. This project has also been of great value to me in understanding how I communicate with migrant colleagues and has made me aware of how I adjust my communication, or - in some cases – do not adjust it, and how it has affected further communication and relationships with migrant colleagues.
Acknowledgements

Many people have supported me through the long journey of this project. Firstly I am grateful to Marianne Tremaine, my supervisor, whose encouragement throughout has been tremendous and for the breakfasts she shouted when I flew down to Palmerston North at some ungodly hour in the morning to work on the project. Marianne has been with me from the beginning when she first answered my queries about undertaking writing a thesis and her enthusiasm and honesty helped me to reach the decision to go ahead - and she is still here at the bitter sweet end, helping me prepare the research results for publication. Thanks, Marianne - it was a pleasure working with you. In addition I greatly appreciate the help of Heather Kavan, my second supervisor.

Needless to say I could not have achieved the results without the 53 participants from Excell who completed the questionnaire and whose enthusiasm and commitment to the research made my job easy. I would like to thank also the CEO of Excell at the time the information was gathered, who was supportive of this research.

Being an extramural student is sometimes very lonely, and surrounding yourself with good friends who are there for you when you need support is critical. I acknowledge the support I received from Sally Young and Karen Duncan off whom I have been able to bounce ideas. Very special thanks go to my mentor, Catherine Harris, who has kept me on track and spent many hours working with me. Finally, the most important person whose patience and encouragement have been unyielding throughout my studies - I acknowledge and thank my partner, Geoff. Without his support you would not be reading this today.