Massey University

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.

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2006

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Reference information:
Mannes, M. (2005). *Communicating across cultures in a New Zealand workplace: an investigation of attitudes, polices 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

Table of Contents

List of Diagrams and Tables

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