Jakub Bielikowski

# Case Studies in Cultural Communication Patterns in South Africa

**Abstract:** *Based on the Case Study of actual IT workshops conducted for the telecommunication company in South Africa in 2011 and 2012 the observation of cultural, ethnic-based, communication patterns has been performed. As the workshops were conducted in multi-national environment, with most distinct participants being Indian nationals, white South Africans, South Africans from Previously Disadvantaged Individuals, Nigerian and a Portuguese, it has been analyzed which of the already researched communication patterns can be observed. It has been analyzed whether those patterns influence the final workshops outcome. Particular attention was paid to: spoken communication, argumentation and decision-making. The author of the publication is a practitioner in IT consulting and holds an MBA degree from the*

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## Summary

The objective of the article is to discuss, based on the real-world case studies:
1. how cultural differences, coming from different ethnic background, affect process of discussing IT-related issues during the workshops, the decision making during those workshops and specifically agreement of action plan
2. whether cultural differences described in the literature, particularly in Hofstede (Hofstede, 1980) and his followers and critics e.g. (Purohit & Simmers, 2006) or (Jackson, 2011) and models defined by (Lewis, 1996) can be observed in the case studies
3. how the issues arising because of cultural differences were overcome in case studies practice
4. and if other factors affecting communication behaviors were more prominent.

### Cases background

The author has conducted series of IT workshops for a major telecommunication services provider in South Africa (thereafter the Client). Author was brought in as a packaged software (Commercial Off-the-Shelf (*COTS*) software) vendor expert, specifically to cover best practices in software package implementation (designs, business alignment, project practices) and to help Client management reduce implementation risk. The workshops were conducted with Client personnel, either directly employed or contracted, representing IT division and business and with System Integrator personnel, who were responsible for the implementation. Objectives of the workshops were:

1. To review proposed software requirements and designs. This review may result in changing the scope of the project, design and even in overturning the decisions previously approved by the Client and System Integrator
2. To agree the new solution design
3. To agree action plan related to implementation resulting from design decisions

According to the one of the classic Systems Development Life Cycle definition (*SDLC*) as defined for example in ITL Bulletin (CRSC, 2009) the workshops belonged to the Initiation, Development / Acquisition and Implementation Phases of the Client program.

The workshops were conducted during the following periods:

– September 2011
– October 2011
– November – December 2011
– January – February 2012
– May 2012
– June 2012
– August 2012

### Cases studies objectives

The above workshops formed basis for observation of communication effectiveness (as defined in) in the multi-cultural environment. In Renata Winkler *Zarządzanie komunikacją w organizacjach zróżnicowanych kulturowo pp. 180-183* [Winkler, 2008], a summary of factors influencing communication effectiveness, the socio-cultural model is cited as one of the potential influencers of communication. The workshops in which author participated provided good opportunity for observation of possible ethnic cultural communication patterns (robustly discussed in *Richard D. Lewis "When Cultures Collide"* [Lewis,

1996]) as the representatives of the following nations / ethnic backgrounds were participating in the workshops:

1.  South Africans of white Afrikaans origin, representing client[1]
2.  South Africans from previously disadvantaged individuals (*PDI* or historically disadvantaged individuals, as defined in *Broad-based Black Economy Empowerment Act* [South Africa Government, The Presidency, 2003]), which in the cases discussed were South African citizens of black origins, representing client[2]
3.  Nigerian nationals, representing client[3]
4.  Ethnic Indians, representing System Integrator[4]
5.  Ethnic Portuguese representing software vendor[5]
6.  Polish national being article author, so not included in the case studies.

### National / ethnic communication patterns background

Already in the 60's E.T. Hall in his work *The Hidden Dimensions* [Hall, 1966] introduced the proxemics, the study of the human use of space within the context of culture. In particular he analyzed a different need for intimate space i.e. distance from the other person during the conversation, which varies by countries, e.g. with US distance being twice that of European, which may result in withdrawal during the conversation or otherwise lead to communication failures in cross-cultural context. That work turned research attention to national influence on communication behavior.

In 1980's Hofstede in his work [Hofstede, 1980] suggested that national background may change people's attitude to work, which in turn may affect rationale for decision-making process. In that primary work he indentified 4 dimensions:

1.  Power Distance – the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations and institutions (like the family) accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. Thus the low power distance will allow for more democratic decision making (rather than leader decision-making).
2.  Individualism versus collectivism – the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups, where collectivism makes them feel loyal to the group (and stand by group decisions).
3.  Masculinity versus feminity – the distribution of emotional roles between

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[1]  Between 2 to 8 participants in every workshop

[2]  Between 1 to 3 participants in every workshop

[3]  Between 1 to 3 participants in every workshop

[4]  Between 3 to 10 participants in every workshop

[5]  One Portuguese

the genders, which in practice means either more emphasis on assertiveness and competitiveness versus more on relationship and quality of life.

4. Uncertainty Avoidance – is the degree to which society feels comfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity. The high degree of Uncertainty Avoidance makes people to follow rigid rules and not tolerate unorthodox ideas.

In late 1980's Michael Bond research in Asia made Hofstede [Hofstede & Bond, 1988] to include fifth dimension:

5. Long-term versus short-term orientation, where societies with a short-term orientation generally exhibit great respect for tradition, and focus on quick results, whereas long-term orientation helps people to believe that truth depends on condition, adapt tradition to new situation and show perseverance in achieving results.

And in 2001 publication together with Minkov [Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010] also sixth dimension was added:

6. Indulgence versus restraint – where indulgent society allows for more gratification, enjoyment of life and "having fun", and restraint will follow more strict social norms.

There was significant research both supporting and criticizing Hofstede and other model introduced such as GLOBE commenced by Robert House in 1991 and published most comprehensive research results in 2004 [House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004]. The critical review of both researches can be summarized for example by [Tung & Verbeke, 2010]. The comprehensive review of research in question would require significantly larger publication and it is not author objective, however in the present article I leverage selected research related to African nationals and Indians [Purohit & Simmers, 2006], [Jackson, 2011] and national characteristics from [Lewis, 1996] where his classification into linear-active, multi-active and reactive, together with different attitudes to time and leader role can provide good insight into decision-making and commitment influences and data-orientation, dialogue-orientation and listening orientation give some insight into the discussion process itself (design review part of the workshops).

As the cases were limited to behavior observation during the workshops and here we have behaviors related to presenting an existing view or solution, disputing the view, reaching an agreement and committing to action, only some characteristics, easily observable, are taken into account. From the Hofstede dimensions [Hofstede, 2012]:

**Table 1.** Hofstede dimension scores for nationals included in the case studies [Hofstede, 2012]

| Dimension | White South African[6] | Indian | Portuguese | Nigerian | South African PDI (black)[7] |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Uncertainty Avoidance | 49 | 40 | 104 | 55 | 52 |
| Power Distance | 49 | 77 | 63 | 80 | 64 |
| Long-term versus Short-term orientation | Not available, predicted around 30[8] | 61 | 30 | 16 | 25 |
| Individualism versus collectivism | 65 | 48 | 27 | 30 | 27 |

Taking into account the separate Hofstede-based research [Jackson, 2011] who points first to difficulties in classifying culture behavior in post-colonial societies such as South Africa, but importantly from this case study perspective, questions the classical view on African leadership perception arguing that it traditional leadership was more based on consensus and having more regard because of value placed on such consensus rather than direct authority; [Darley & Charles, 2008] who emphasized the team interdependence aspects of African culture and emphasis on collaboration and promotion of long-term relationship; [Purohit & Simmers, 2006] who looked in more details on India and Nigeria nationals from the perspective of conflict management which showed quite significant differences in conflict management modes between the two nations – with Nigerians having exceptionally low preference for compromise and a „win-lose" approach to conflict settlement, the above may translate to the following expected behaviors:

**Table 2** - Summary of expected communication behaviors for nationals included in the case studies [own analysis]

| Trait | White South African | Indian | Portuguese | Nigerian | South African PDI (black) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Acceptance of leader and his / her decision | Lowest in the group | Very high | High | Very high | High to Medium |

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[6] The South African score presented by Hofstede was assumed to represent white Afrikaans, as that has close resemblance to Anglo cultures

[7] The scores for black South Africans were interpreted from East Africa scores

[8] Based on scores for Australia, New Zealand and the UK, may be higher if we take into account that the Netherlands have score of 44

| Trait | White South African | Indian | Portuguese | Nigerian | South African PDI (black) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Adherence to group opinion | Low | Medium | High | High | High |
| Adherence to rules and potentially previous decisions | Medium | Lowest | Highest | Medium | Medium |
| Impatience for quick results, adherence to timeline | Medium | Low | Medium | High | High |

From Globe Research (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004), the results showed somehow more aligned scores:

**Table 3**. Summary of GLOBE research results for selected dimensions for nationals included in the case studies [House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004]

| Cultural attributes | White South African | Indian | Portuguese | Nigerian | South African PDI (black) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Uncertainty Avoidance | 4.06 | 4.02 | 3.96 | 4.11 | 4.64 |
| Performance Orientation | 4.07 | 4.11 | 3.76 | 3.79 | 4.72 |
| Assertiveness | 4.49 | 3.7 | 3.75 | 4.53 | 4.43 |
| Future Orientation | 4.08 | 3.6 | 3.77 | 3.95 | 4.66 |
| Power Distance | 5.10 | 5.29 | 5.50 | 5.53 | 4.31 |

It should be noted that comparing with Hofstede, we may expect much less regard for leader decision in South African black. At the same time the expectations to performance and immediacy of results are very different between South African blacks and Nigerian, when according to Hofstede they should be closely aligned, similar to GLOBE results for South African black.

From Lewis [Lewis, 1996]:

We may expect White South African to be close to linear-active (5 on Lewis scale), whereas Portuguese will be multi-active (14) and Indians (17) and Africans (18) the most multi-active *p.33* [Lewis, 1996]. That will make White South African to be focused on schedules, deliverables and task at hand whereas multi-active people will not leave conversation unfinished and may attempt several tasks at time.

On dialogue orientation the Portuguese will be most dialogue-oriented, similar to Africans and Indians, but White South African are expected to be data-oriented, so they like to make decision based on facts, backed by evidence *p. 50* [Lewis, 1996].

On view of time White South African are expected to follow linear view of time with time schedules being more absolute, Portuguese will look at time as being event or even personality-dependent whereas Indian and African may follow cyclical view of time, which may mean that even if they turn up for meeting on time their perception of future time commitment is much more fluid (*when God made time, he made plenty of it, p.58* [Lewis, 1996]).

From leadership approaches leadership from the perspective of White South African will be more ad-hoc, with person perceived as most suitable to task making decision, though some hierarchy is expected. Africans are tending to autocracy and Indians theoretically are driven by consensus, tough internal leader role will not be undermined. Portuguese is expected to follow informal links to enact his *decision pp. 108-109* [Lewis, 1996].

It should be noted that there is a relatively little research into PDI communication characteristics. The early (i.e. just after *Broad-based Black Economy Empowerment Act*) research paper on racial background and gender differences in decision-making and leadership qualities [Littrell & Nkomo, 2005] have found that: blacks are more people-driven whereas whites are more results-driven and the white are significantly more future-oriented than blacks. They also found more difference in behavior in colored males, especially them less inclined to follow the leader in decision.

That is quite consistent with recent general findings about Africans from survey geared for marketing research purposes [Darley & Charles, 2008], where there was a high degree of consistency among East and West African ethnical groups, and that is likely to extend to South Africa, especially given high migration into South Africa from other countries. However we should be likely aware that among educated black South Africans there may a big change in values since 1994 election, which essentially changed the balance of power in the society, probably on the biggest still successful social change and 1998 Employment Equity Act [South Africa Government Department of Labour, 1998] which transferred that to workplace. Drawing parallel to page 27 in Lewis *When Cultures Collide* [Lewis, 1996] the PDI people may be more inclined to behaviors where in the arguments they support party perceived as weaker to show their resistance to authority. Interestingly enough Kokt in his study of team in security sector in Bloemfontein area have found no significant ethnic differences in team members behavior [Kokt, 2003] and their attitude to leader – but that may come from similar attitude in White South Africans.

**Observed communication and decision-making patterns**

The workshops objectives were to: review designs already prepared by System Integrator, including some decisions already approved and formalized by the client; agree new designs or design changes, especially to influence client business to reduce requirements and make it more easy to implement, but at the same time to turn the project from technically-focused to business-benefits-focused; reach commitment by System Integrator to deliver agreed solution in specified timeframe, also some of the workshops were related to following the delivery progress and design changes needed to correct errors or faster the implementation.

The following table summarizes observed behaviors from the perspective of those stipulated in literature research and their influence on workshops conduct:

**Table 4**. Summary of communication behaviors observed in the case studies and their relation to the literature predicted ethnic communication patterns [own analysis]

| Workshop subject | Nation / observed behavior | Congruence with literature | Business consequence |
|---|---|---|---|
| Design review | Portuguese / Keen to overturn past decisions if those are deemed inappropriate to business circumstances | No | As this was a objective of the design review such attitude supported communication |
| Design review | White South African / Seeking detailed information and proof from other clients that already taken decision is incorrect | Yes | Though it required more preparatory work such attitude provided objective way of judging the design |
| Design review | White South African /Ready to challenge management for previous decisions | Yes | Made it easy to challenge decision as those are deemed by them to be based on the subject rather than internal politics and who made the decision |
| Design review | Indian / Reluctant to discuss previous decisions | Partly | The biggest challenge to overcome as all past decisions are taken as closed, even if they imply unrealistic timeline and inappropriate design |

| Workshop subject | Nation / observed behavior | Congruence with literature | Business consequence |
|---|---|---|---|
| Design review | Indian / Hiding behind the leader in discussions | Yes | The competences of relatively large team and their different experiences are not used as no-one in Indian group is ready to challenge their leader statement |
| Design review | South African PDI and Nigerian / Worried about impact on delivery if solution discussions were re-opened. What will be the time impact? | Yes | Such short-term focus on one hand provides firm reference for decisions, on the other hand it can undermine better design for the sake of „not wasting time" |
| Solution agreement | South African / Requiring to create comprehensive documentation to support decisions | Yes | Meeting preparation takes more time and discussions are more thorough than initially expected |
| Solution agreement | Indian / Hiding behind the leader leaving him to do all discussion | Yes | Similarly to design review, this stalls group members creativity and potentially good designs are not even considered |
| Solution agreement | Indian / Finding excuses for no decision in the meeting. Trying to come up with decision on their own and then present it to the group as commonly agreed | Yes | There is difficult to reach conclusion on the meeting as in fact Indian want to have a separate preparatory meeting before they voice their opinion in public. It is then difficult to change their decision taken in such offline manner. |
| Solution agreement | Nigerian / Freely exploring all possibilities and engaging in endless discussions about options | Partial | It gives on one hand opportunity to find better, previously not considered, solution, but at the same time leads to endless discussions without agreement as all views are accepted. |

| Workshop subject | Nation / observed behavior | Congruence with literature | Business consequence |
|---|---|---|---|
| Solution agreement | Portuguese / Forcing decision making when the discussion drags on | No | Keeping workshops focus and timeline, basis for discussion efficiency |
| Action plan agreement | Indian / Agreeing verbally to unrealistic timeline and undeliverable functionality when said so by the client | Yes | Probably the most risky behavior, as people may interpret their nodding and agreement as commitment to deliver, whereas it is by Indians loosely interpreted as „in the ideal world we may do it one day, but at the moment we will just deliver what we think is appropriate without telling you" |
| Action plan agreement | White South African/ Requesting detailed implementation plan | Yes | Keeping the structure at the implementation planning. The risk is that there may be lot of effort spent on preparing variants of the plan where implementation scope and plan is not yet agreed |
| Action plan agreement | South African PDI / Requesting specification of business benefits | Yes | Good for internal selling of the agreed solution and implementation timeline, though not always possible |
| Action plan agreement | South African PDI / Requesting management approval | Yes | Acting as broker of the solution in internal hierarchy facilitating decision-making |
| Action plan agreement | Portuguese / Seeking consensus and buy-in among all group members for the agreed decision | Yes | Quite necessary given Indian tendency to over commit if not asked appropriate questions |

The list above is by no means exhaustive as the article objective is not to perform a detailed research, but to use real world cases to present some of business issues arising because of cultural communication differences.

**Overcoming cultural differences**

The author and Portuguese participant objectives in business workshops were to: overturn designs which were incorrect or not according to vendor software standards; achieve design decisions that support fast and visible results for client business and at the same time reduce project risk; make sure that System Integrator delivers the designed software capabilities in agreed time. Therefore in the cases the following techniques were used to remove communication blocks arising from cultural differences:

In design review:
- Bring new facts and evidence from third parties for White South African to help them understand need for design changes.
- Use White South African to question past decisions, especially those taken at higher management levels.
- Prepare Indian off-line for potential contestation of their previous design to help them avoid losing face in public and prevent entrenching in past opinions.
- But at the same time surprise and forcing individual members of Indian team to state their opinion without consulting team leader was used to split their group coherence and to unlock more honest communication.

In solution design agreement:
- Use South African black and Nigerians position and openness, for consensus building behind the scenes and to be able to convince Indians about the desired design.
- Use arguments related to results visibility to create arguments for black African nationals to support desired design.
- Bring additional experts that would create more factual and experience-based arguments for White South African.

In action plan agreement:
- Use long-term benefits perspective for Indian System Integrator to help them agree to plans which may have temporary negative impact on their business (more work, less profit from the contract). The Indians were inclined to forfeit short term profit if that was helping them to build long-term relationship with the client.
- Let Indian arrive at timeline and commitment by themselves, rather than asking them to agree to predefined plan. In that way the plan became their group decision and is voiced by their leader. Such arrangement makes the decision and their obligations very binding in their eyes.
- Make White South African responsible for detailed plan following as that suited their analytical view.

– Use black South Africans as agents to ensure higher management support – they considered that important and put lot of effort into management agreement.

**Beyond ethnic influence**

From a limited observation in the cases the biggest cultural influencing factor was Indian attitude to time and commitment, where specific group behavior was required to actually make binding decisions in the workshop and assure that System Integrator will stand by his commitment.

Second was the African nationals and Indian drive to look for group consensus, rather than use expert opinions, which influenced time to reach agreement on design.

Third was Indian tendency to stand by their leader and his past decisions, making it difficult to overturn previous design decisions. Further White South African needed quite heavy factual and data backup for such changes.

However, beyond ethnic cultural background there may be more cultural explanations for observed behavior differences:

1. Company culture – big international companies influence people behavior at work and communication patterns (as stipulated in Renata Winkler *Zarządzanie komunikacją w organizacjach zróżnicowanych kulturowo p. 177* [Winkler, 2008]) in the cases example Indian nationals were coming from a single, large Indian System Integrator and their behaviors were also quite characteristic for System Integrator: reluctance to overturn past decision as it undermines company authority and can have negative commercial influence or reluctance to commit to delivery as it can have negative commercial influence. Similarly the Portuguese national was coming from "Big Five" company and his individualism and assertiveness were in quite stark contrast to expected Portuguese behavior, but in line with expected "Big Five" employee.

2. Role – the workshop participants played business roles, which in turn influenced their behavior and communication pattern. For example from two black South Africans one person was representing the management, second more expert IT resource (IT Architect). Quite predictably the management representative showed higher resistance to overturn already taken decisions, need to assess risk in proposed designs and much higher pressure to define deadlines and delivery commitments. Similar behavior split was observed between White South African representing management and IT experts.

3. Gender –though the sample was very small (there were only 4 females in the

groups: one black South African, two White South African and one Indian) there were significant communication traits observed: stronger opinions, need for more factual argumentation, quick decision-making and strict adherence to timeliness. It would be interesting to research the background for those behaviors separately, but it is beyond this article scope.

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