Intercultural Adaptation – Learning Opportunity to Everyone

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Abstract

Workplaces and societies all over the world are becoming more and more culturally diverse. People are constantly in contact with individuals who have different cultural background and are facing new challenges in their everyday communication. Adapting to a new culture is a complex and dynamic process. Very often people of the hosting country assume that it is the newcomer’s responsibility to adapt. However, it has been proved that intercultural adaptation and learning process is most effective when both parties are involved.

Intercultural adaptation is everywhere

Many people all over the world go through the process of adapting to new circumstances. They face new challenges because of work, studies or travelling. For example, students participating in various exchange or degree programmes have to adapt to new cultural environments.

Similarly, multicultural workplaces are becoming more and more common. When people work in multicultural environments they face challenges. They have to learn new ways of communicating and, most probably, have to change their behavioural practices. Hence, people have to become aware of the differences and eventually start to accept and respect them.

In new environments our own “communication filters” are most probably different from those of the host country. This may cause misunderstandings and delay the adaptation process. However, a very important factor predicting adaptation to a new culture is the amount of participation in a new cultural milieu. (Pietilä, 2010.)

Intercultural adaptation is a long-term process, which varies with each individual. It is similar to all other transition processes in our lives, for example starting a new job, moving to a new place to live or studying at the university. Communication is at the heart of intercultural adaptation process. When people communicate with someone from another culture their behavioural practices affect each other. (Kim 2001.)

Learn together – Learn from each other

Intercultural learning is a dynamic, developmental, and on-going process. When people meet and interact with each other the intercultural learning process begins. However, learning and adaptation is not a one-way process but a shared learning process.

The process of adaptation can be seen from different viewpoints. There is a long tradition of perceiving adaptation as a problematic process and as a newcomer’s responsibility. This problem-based view of cross-cultural adaptation is most apparent in the culture shock models. These models show intercultural adaptation as a process starting with very
positive feelings in the beginning, followed by a drop in satisfaction and ending with recovery.

In sharp contrast to culture shock models are the models that emphasise the learning and growth-facilitating nature of the adaptation process. These models also stress a shared responsibility in the process. The dialectical model of intercultural adaptation explains intercultural adaptation as a cyclical and recursive process. People try to solve problems and overcome obstacles in their interaction with the host culture. This model describes a two-way learning process where both parties are involved and both parties will learn from each other during the adaptation process. (Andersson, 1994.)

The mutual learning models are based on cooperation and respect. People want to know what the other person thinks. They believe that they can achieve better outcomes if they work together and learn from each other. When people apply the mutual learning model, they follow the principles of curiosity, commitment and transparency. In a mutual learning process both parties accept that the other’s views may be as valid as their own and can help to solve the problem. Every problem or error is an opportunity to learn.

The mutual learning process has consequences for both behaviour and learning. People start to behave without fear, interpersonal relationships become more facilitative, and people feel free to explore and search for new information and new alternatives. Such an approach is needed in the intercultural communication situation. Through intercultural interactions we can analyse our behaviour and at the same time understand the other person better. (Kofman, 2003.)

Intercultural learning takes place most effectively when people act in the real world. Experiences, however, cannot automatically be equated with learning. For example, prejudices and stereotypes may be the results of experiences, which have been misinterpreted. Contact between people does not lead to understanding if people see the other partner’s behaviour through their own cultural lenses.

Levels of cross-cultural awareness

A model of cross-cultural awareness emphasises intercultural contact as a leading factor in intercultural understanding and adaptation. The model proposes four levels of cross-cultural awareness. (Hanvey, 2004.)

- **On the first level** a person is aware of superficial and very obvious cultural traits. This kind of awareness is gained, for example, through tourist trips or from textbooks. Intercultural interactions are very limited on this level. The interpretation of the different behaviour is, for example, exotic, strange, interesting or bizarre.
- **On the second level** people become aware of significant and subtle cultural traits. They contrast markedly with their own cultural practices. Such cross-cultural awareness is gained in culture conflict situations and are interpreted as unbelievable, frustrating or irrational.
- **On the third level** people are aware of significant and subtle cultural traits. They accept these differences intellectually – analysing them in the context. They are believable and make sense to them.
• **On the fourth level** people become aware of how another culture feels from the standpoint of an insider. This is plausible because of subjective familiarity – living the culture.

The process of adapting to a new culture requires “learners” to become flexible in responding to the challenges and frustrations. To achieve positive outcomes of intercultural adaptation, people should use mutual learning strategies and participation. Through shared experiences people can increase cross-cultural awareness and sensitivity and feel more comfortable in multicultural contexts.

References:


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