When the East Meets the West: A Comparative Study of Belize's and Taiwan's Business Culture for Effective and Successful Business Communication and Opportunities in Belize

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Abstract: In global business, cultural differences influence effective communication and any misunderstanding may directly affect business relationships. Therefore, countries of different cultural backgrounds should aim to understand each other. This thesis is a guide for Belizean and Taiwanese corporations and individuals who intend to work or do business in Belize. Qualitative research, interviews, is used to gather information to support or disprove theoretical research from Hofstede and Lewis mentioned in this study. The findings show the explanations of cultural differences and similarities between Belize and Taiwan, as well as suggestions for breaking cultural barriers between them. The results collected can inform readers on Belizean and Taiwanese culture, and therefore, be applied to the Belizean and Taiwanese business community.

1 INTRODUCTION

Belize, almost the size of Taiwan, is a Caribbean country located on the north-eastern coast of Central America with English as its official language. Belize has a population of 387,879 compared to Taiwan's 23,550,077. With a $3 billion gross domestic product (GDP) (The World Factbook, 2018) and the second-highest per capita income in Central America, Belize may offer tremendous business opportunities in the near future with its "hungry" business culture. This market aims to service and high technology, so collaboration between Belize and Taiwan must be reinforced in the future to improve Belize's economy. Also, with more and more Taiwanese migrating to Belize to live and work, a gap exists between Taiwanese and Belizeans; different race, habits, customs, business styles. Thus, the concept of culture helps to explain all of these phenomena and to normalize them. If we understand the dynamics of culture, we will be less likely puzzled, irritated, and anxious when we encounter the unfamiliar and seemingly irrational behavior of people in organizations. Identifying and understanding the cultural differences in the national

and business cultures of Belize and Taiwan can build and foster business relationships between them for mutual benefit. This research aims to build that bridge and serve as a guide mainly for Taiwanese working and living in Belize so that they are able to communicate and collaborate with Belizeans more effectively in business.

2 LITERATURE

In order to come up with the research framework presented in the following chapter, this study looks into previous scholars' research.

2.1 Culture and Business Culture

When a group of people share more or less homogenous thinking patterns that is different from other groups, these people form a culture (Hofstede et al., 2010, pp. 6). The effect culture has on thinking is often not consciously recognized by the people doing the thinking, and is more comprised of "less conscious conventions and taboos" (Jacques, 1952, pp. 251). Every group of people creates a set

of rules of appropriate behavior within the group and is in fact a precondition for it to exist (Hofstede et al., 2010, pp. 12). Every level of association has a cultural dimension. Furthermore, culture is a key component in business and has an impact on the strategic direction of business. A business culture will encompass as organization's values, visions, working style, beliefs and habits (Vaughn, 2010). This thesis will focus on the national and business cultures of Belize and Taiwan.

2.2 Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions

"The world is full of confrontations between people, groups, and nations who think, feel, and act differently." (Hofstede et al., 2010, pp. 23). With this being mentioned, Hofstede describes the way people think, feel, and act as mental programs built and created through a lifetime, made and sometimes changed. If we want to understand international colleagues, we need to understand their societies first. There are some common features that resemble due to living in the same society; and from this, we understand their behavior (Hofstede et al., 2010, pp. 42).

Because Belize has not been studied with the cultural dimensions, Dr. Vega-Rosado (2006) suggests making an inference assuming Caribbean countries have a heritage from European countries and the United States; so Belize's Hofstede's inference is drawn from Jamaica, representing the Caribbean, United Kingdom, representing the ruling over Belize, and the United States, representing the modern lifestyle Belizeans take on. Belize's and Taiwan's Hofstede's dimensions are depicted as follows:
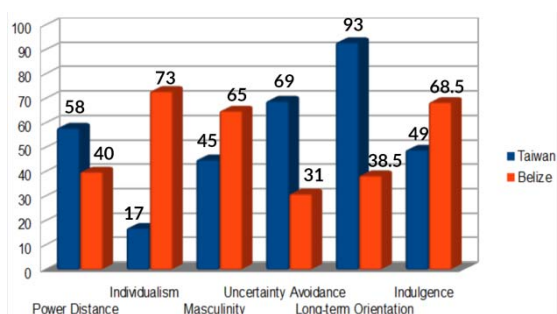

Figure 1: Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions for Taiwan and Belize.

From this, we gather that Taiwan (58) has a higher *power index* than Belize (40), which means Taiwan has a more clearly defined hierarchical system that is accepting superiors having privileges and a huge salary gap without challenging or questioning compared to Belizeans. For *individualism*, Taiwan (17) shows that it is a collective society compared to Belize's (73) high individualistic society. Therefore, Taiwanese are more obedient and can be good followers to finish what superiors have ordered, whereas Belizeans are more assertive and challenging, and personal gain is of interest. Moreover, Taiwan (45) leans towards a more feminine culture suggesting they prefer peace compared to Belize's (65) *masculine* culture being more competitive. For uncertainty *avoidance*, Taiwan (69) prefers to take things in their control and easily feel nervous with the unexpected things. Belize (31) suggests it is a fairly practical culture that means there might be a focus on planning but it can also change in short notice, which means Belizeans are more likely to tackle problems more easily, are fairly relaxed and are not opposed to taking risks. Furthermore, Taiwan (93) suggests them being extremely *long-term oriented* so they work hard and save for the future. Belize (38.5) suggests they like immediate benefits and influences their consensus in business making them short-term oriented. Finally, the *indulgence* dimension suggests that Taiwan (49) enjoys life but there is no dominant preference on this dimension compared to Belize (68.5), which suggests Belizeans show more willingness to realize their impulses and desires to enjoying life and having fun.

2.3 Richard D. Lewis's Theory of Communication Profile

According to Lewis (2006), culture is *"what parents and teachers teach children the social regulations which normal and abnormal, good and bad, to successfully blend into their own society."* Lewis came to the conclusion that humans can be divided into three categories which are based not on nationality or religion but on behavior, which are the *linear-active, multi-active,* and *reactive* cultures. The regulations mentioned gradually become a person's values and core beliefs, which are difficult to abandon or even change. Each society, however, inherits different concepts and applies it to the children, which in turn bring cultural differences, referred to culture shock (Lewis, 2006, pp. 17–19).

Based on Lewis's model, Belizeans are categorized with a multi-active culture, which is considered the dialogue-oriented culture. They do many things at once without order and think schedules restrict their work so time is flexible and easily manipulated (Lewis, 2006, pp. 55 – 57). Due

to the multicultural aspect of Belize, it is more of a mix of linear and multi-active characteristics since no culture is the same. On the other hand, Taiwan, like most of Asia countries, is characterized as a reactive culture, which is a listening culture. For Taiwanese, time is cyclical and not linear and event related. Time is precious which makes the people punctual and usually thank their business partners or colleagues to join their valuable time at the end of a meeting by going to dinner or going to a karaoke room (Lewis, 2006, pp. 57–59).

2.4 Cross-cultural and Intercultural Communication

Today we live in a world with a globalized workforce where organizations have teams that span over different offices, time zones and continents, which mean cultural diversity is becoming a normal aspect of the workplace. Success and high-performance is due to accepting cultural diversity and having an inclusive outlook. Cross-cultural communication is defined by Gotland University as "a process of exchanging, negotiating, and mediating one's cultural differences through language, non-verbal gestures, and space relationships." According to Karlfried Knapp (1987), "Intercultural communication can be defined as the interpersonal interaction between members of different groups, which differ from each other in respect of the knowledge shared by their members and in respect of their linguistic forms of symbolic behaviour." Although cross-cultural and intercultural communication is similar, this thesis links cross-cultural communication to the initial encounter of business partners or employees from different cultures to see if collaboration can be established. Intercultural communication is connected to an established ongoing business relationship between business partners and employees with different cultures. Some of the barriers to cross-cultural communication include language, culture, and company culture. Thus, in order to overcome such barriers we must consider having cross-cultural and intercultural competence. According to the models from Abbe and Halpin (2009) and Deardorff (2006), the fundamental elements for cross-cultural and intercultural competence are *communication skills, cultural knowledge and awareness*, and *attitudes and behaviors*.

2.5 Business Culture of Belize and Taiwan

According to Christian Burn (2014), Belize has a free market, capitalist economic system. Moreover, the government does not get involved with an entrepreneur who comes to Belize to establish a business as long as the entrepreneur works hard and involves local people. Ultimately because Belize has a small market, there are no big box stores or chains, meaning more monopolies; thus, Belize is import-driven (Wrobel, 2015). Burn (2014) explains that doing business in Belize tends to be done at a lower and more personal level. Knowing your competitors and customers is probable. The management style is situational so roles tend to change and when they do what's needed in teams. When meeting, a handshake and small talk are usually held at the beginning; also, dress code is typically casual due to hot and humid weather. Personal entertainment is done in privacy of Belizean homes and business occurs otherwise; and gift-giving is not typical and expected. Furthermore, Belize's communication style is in English, and sometimes, Spanish and Kriol (dialect). Belizeans say what they mean but try to avoid confrontation in business. Lastly, Belizean businesses are still male dominated but women efforts in business continue to rise.

Taiwan is a highly successful value-add economy dependent on foreign trade for survival. Taiwan's success can be attributed to its people's attitudes influenced from the Confucian philosophies of obedience, hard work and respect for education. Taiwan does not have a relaxed approach to business for their will to succeed is all-consuming and loyalties to the group (mainly family) produce a high level of inter-group competition (Warburton, 2017). Furthermore, Taiwanese are known to be friendly due to "Ren Qing Wei" which translates into English as "the flavor of human emotions". It is the mix of enthusiasm, friendliness and amiability (Bates and Wu, 2008, pp. 43 – 44). Taiwan is a high text country so one must notice subtle cues in order to understand them (Bates & Wu, 2008, pp. 63 – 64). Moreover, "Face" is an important Taiwanese cultural element. It refers to a type of self-esteem closely related to shame. Taiwanese act proper and accordingly in order to "save face" and not "lose face" (Bates and Wu, 2008, pp. 38 – 39). Also, "Guanxi" (關係) (networking) is a general Chinese term used to describe relationships that may result in the exchanges of favors or "connections" that are beneficial for the parties involved. Thus, in business, if there is good "Guanxi" then doors and

opportunities are opened, otherwise closed ("World Learner Chinese", 2018). Taiwanese management style is authoritarian, so they are expected to obey superiors without question; also, they make effective group members since Taiwanese are group-oriented. When meeting, business cards are very important as well as the ritual giving and receiving them. Meetings are very formal and communication patterns may be vague or coded due to the inability of foreign language skills (Warburton, 2017). Their dress code varies by sector but standard, smart business attire is safe. Gift giving is common, as well as the ritual of giving and receiving. Gifts to never give include, a white package unless it's a funeral, a clock as it sounds like "put someone to the end" in Chinese, knives or scissors as it portrays an image of cutting communication (Bates and Wu, 2008, pp. 44 – 46). Furthermore, Taiwanese communication style is Mandarin or Taiwanese, with few levels or no English at all in small to medium-sized businesses (Warburton, 2017). Lastly, Taiwan is heavily male-dominated in business and women play little part in business life. Foreign businesswomen will be treated with respect and courtesy but Taiwanese will think the male colleague will have the final decision or say (Warburton, 2017).

3 RESEARCH FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

From the literature, some variables that can directly affect effective business communication, firstly, are cultural awareness, attitudes, and values. Through this, Belizeans and Taiwanese can have a greater understanding of each other's culture. A lack of cultural awareness can cost a business a contract or create stress in the workplace. Secondly, good communication skills including language ensure better job performance and relationship building strategies. Poor communication affects bottom-line so it is needed to have better business. Lastly, businesses that succeed in the global economy are willing to learn about foreign cultures and prepared to view cross-cultural and intercultural communication as a necessary skill. The cultural dimensions that affect our values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviours are what ultimately set cultures apart. Therefore, people need to develop a deep understanding of these culture dimensions to be able to develop cultural sensitivity and adaptability to communicate effectively in a cross-cultural and

intercultural setting. With these variables, effective business communication can be reached and ultimately ensuring successful business opportunities and collaboration between Taiwanese and Belizeans in Belize.

Furthermore, networking and technology are moderating variables that may influence business opportunities and collaborations in Belize. Grosse (2002) considers that use of technology gives companies a competitive advantage in the international environment. Moreover, one of the most common means of communication is *email*, which removes formality and language barrier that often leading to misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication. Therefore, through networking and technology, business opportunities and collaboration between Belizeans and Taiwanese can either be improved or limited for successful business in Belize.

This study uses the qualitative research method in the form of interviews. A total of 9 interviewees (3 Belizeans and 6 Taiwanese) were interviewed. Interviewees 1 and 4 were interviewed in Taiwan by the researcher and interviewees 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9 were interviewed in Belize City by Dr. Rosella Cuellar, on behalf of the researcher of this study. Furthermore, this thesis contains multiple sources of data showing reliability; *literature review* containing facts taken from official government almanacs and directories, *participant observations* from researcher's personal experience living and working in Taiwan, and *in-depth interviews* containing *official documents* and *observations* from diplomats, such as official agendas and embassy poll records.

4 EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

According to the interviews, one of the major findings this study takes into consideration is the idea of "small talk" between the two cultures. As stated in the literature, Taiwanese tend to put an importance on building and maintaining relationships, so small talk in business is considered important. Taiwanese interviewee 1 stated that small talk and social interaction plays a big role in her business as a restaurant owner, which proves the literature review. However, Taiwanese interviewees 2 and 3 thought of it as not common among Taiwanese in business but more common in personal relationships, possibly due to lack of verbal skills and "face", they are taught to listen more. Another interesting finding was "family" in small talk. Taiwanese interviewee 3 stated that Taiwanese considered family to be a *"private issue so*

Taiwanese usually don't talk that much unless they are asked and won't share too much.". Interviewee 2 agrees that most Asian families *"will try to protect their family more so they will keep private."* In addition, Belizean interviewee 5 feels small talk is not based entirely on one's culture but more about one's self. She expresses, *"I don't do small talk. I have to be at a familiar level to do that. It really depends on the scenario."* Small talk is considered a communication skill in "breaking the ice" as the Belizean interviewees see it.

Another finding that can add to the business culture of Belize is the "lack of body language" professionally. From the literature, it can be assumed that Belizeans are very good in expressing body language, since they are a multi active culture, but interviewees 5 and 6 state Belizeans are very informal in business. *Some people are well educated verbally, but nonverbally they have zero tactics, they are unprofessional and they do not represent Belize well."* says interviewee 5. Furthermore, the normal procedure in Belizean meetings is a handshake but according to interviewee 6, *"Sometimes, they don't even do a handshake. With my colleagues they come and just sit down and 'let's start'. I think we have a very informal way of interaction."* With this finding, it can be seen that Belize has an informal business setting. For Belizeans, to effectively build business relationships, they have to improve nonverbal communication.

In addition, Taiwan's *Indulgence* score was lower than Belize. The interviews disprove this. Taiwanese are more indulgent than Belizeans, who welcome the idea, though. From the Belizean interviewees, Belizeans indulge only on personal relationships but not business relationships, whereas Taiwanese indulge on both business and personal relationships. Having more social interaction promotes a better understanding of each other's culture. Thus, it ensures an effective business relationship and communication between the two.

Furthermore, education was not mentioned previously. According to all Belizean interviewees, education is not the focus of the people, and it is expensive, so poverty in Belize plays a big role in business. *"A lot of people that may have intellectual capacity don't get education because they are being forced to help the family and be an economic generator for the family."* says interviewee 6.

Also, new findings related to "Ren Qing Wei" and "Guanxi" for Belizeans were found. Belizean interviewees think Belizeans are placing more importance on business, and interviewee 3 considers Belizeans *"very friendly"* so it is *"very natural and*

easygoing to communicate with them." Furthermore, for the people (networking) variable, interviewee 4 thought of Belize to be going through a "bureaucracy of processing" for hiring, which was not mentioned in the literature. Also, it was found that Belizeans are now using "Guanxi" for employee recruitment. Interviewee 5 explains, *"Our first strategy is to ask if you know someone that has that skill set and if we don't find somebody from our pool then we go through the normal process of advertising and seeing who applies."* Therefore, it can be said Belize is adapting to Taiwan's form of networking for business. Furthermore, the literature only states that Taiwanese use "Guanxi" for hiring but interviewees 2 and 3 mentions an *"online recruitment process for private sector"* and *"oral and training examinations for the government sector"*; so, this is a new finding for Taiwanese networking culture.

When asked how to ensure effective communication for business, all Belizean interviewees stated that it's important to be diplomatic, professional and be able to learn how to respect Taiwanese cultural differences. It should be kept in mind that Taiwanese are *"sensitive"* and *"do not like conflicts."* As for the Taiwanese interviewees, interviewee 3 said the *"secret"* is to talk about family to *"break the ice"* and to *"relax"* when doing business with Belizeans. Also, interviewee 3 recommends adjusting to *"Belize time",* when they show up half an hour or an hour late.

5 CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of the research findings, the major communication bottlenecks were connected to: *(1)Difference in verbal communication- insufficient knowledge of English, (2)Difference in nonverbal communication- body distance and body language, (3)Difference in cultural values- insufficient or no knowledge of "Face", and (4)Difference in cultural attitudes- punctuality ("Belize Time").*

In conclusion, in the globalized business world, it is important to note that international business partners and managers must not only acknowledge the differences in communication ways and styles, but also to learn how to communicate with multicultural partners. Understanding, respecting and embracing these cultural differences between Belize and Taiwan paves the way for effective business communication, which opens up plenty

successful opportunities for mutual benefit for Belizeans and Taiwanese in Belize.

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