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DISCOURSE APPROACH TO COORDINATION OF INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS PROJECTS
(based on industrial construction project between Chinese private company XY Group and Belarusian state-run concern Bellesbumprom)

Since the beginning of 2007 we have been engaged in the implementation of a large-scale international construction project carried out by the Chinese-American industrial commercial company Xuan Yuan Industrial Development Co., Ltd (XY Group) and the Belarusian state-run Concern of Woodworking Enterprises Bellesbumprom. The project was initiated by XY Group and the Embassy of the Republic of Belarus in the People's Republic of China. Its initial objective was to construct five wood-processing plants by the Chinese company for the woodworking enterprises united by the concern in Belarus. Within the scope of the project XY Group was planning to act as a general contractor while the Concern Bellesbumprom was the owner of the project. The financing was to be obtained from one of Chinese banks by Bellesbumprom with Belarusian state guarantee and with the support of intergovernmental agreements.

Notwithstanding the mutual interest, the depository consent to provide the loan for the construction works, the agreements achieved during the preliminary meetings in Minsk and Beijing as well as the active role of representatives of the Embassies of the two countries and officials the negotiation process slowed down and finally stopped.

Issue

Due to the lack of experience of XY Group in large-scale cooperation with post-Soviet countries, the company (mainly the Beijing office that started the negotiations) was not fully prepared for multi-level projects. Inexperience led to the slowdown of negotiations, exponential growth of inefficient correspondence and expensive meetings both in Belarus and China that brought no sufficient results. On the other hand, due to the fact that the new Belarusian economic system largely inherited the methods and approaches of that of the Soviet Union (where all large-scale industrial construction projects were organized by central government in Moscow) the management of the enterprises in Bellesbumprom adapted the similar attitude shifting the responsibility to the officials of the Concern who lacked the necessary competence in the sphere of international cooperation. The further attempts to overcome the complete standstill led to more inquiries, requests of information, growth of expenses for translation of the voluminous documentation etc.

Besides, as it became evident later, the Belarusian governmental institutions had little experience of non-linear cooperation within strict time limits. However, the high rank of the chairman of Bellesbumprom (equal to the rank of a Minister in the Belarusian government) provided hope for the possible achievement of progress.

After a number of consultations between the San Francisco Headquarters, central Chinese office in Harbin and Beijing office the top management of the company decided to support the proposal of the vice-president Xue Hailong to establish a new department aimed at developing cooperation between XY Group and former republics of the Soviet Union. The new department consisted of Chinese, Belarusian, Russian, Tajik and Uzbek managers experienced in different areas of international business (international trade and business, international relations (diplomacy), interpreting, social science (cross-cultural communication). For a start the staff of the new department was given the task to study the Belarusian project situation, to prepare the plan of actions basing on practical solutions for its problems aimed at "reloading" the project, accelerating the processes of the initial stage in order to create all the necessary conditions for signing the preliminary agreements not later than in the third quarter of 2007. The head of the department was granted the right to convene meetings and form working commissions including members of other departments of the organization.

Objectives

The goal was set to carry out the necessary research both among the Chinese and Belarusian departments that participate in the project in order to define the main problems on the way to implementation of the project, draw and present the plan of their solution, in such a way accelerating the stage of signing the documents.

Within the goals scope the following tasks were defined by us:

1. To research the communication within the project and define its structure and elements in terms of business, intercultural and institutional discourses of the participants.

2. To define the key problematic points (communicative, cultural, institutional, other), their aspects and characteristics.

3. On the basis of the facts obtained during the research to elaborate the block of practical solutions aimed at solving the major problems and launching the documentary stage.

The elaborated solution had to be adequate to the conditions of the project: its informational multicultural environment, communicative challenges as well as complex character of its major problems (Nodoushani, 1996).

Research method

After the groundwork research we put forward a hypothesis that changed the character of the further investigations and led us to the choice of adequate methods and theories on the way to solution. The hypothesis was that due to the scale of the project, the involvement of different institutions and organizations (trade, industrial, technical, financial, legal etc) in two countries, the major problem that faced the project was the problem of organization of effective long-term communication

between the parts. Thus, from commercial and technical areas the problems of the project were transferred mainly to such spheres as cross-cultural business communication, management communication, organizational communication and corporate communication. From the theoretical point of view the business problem became relevant to the field of cross-cultural interaction, cultural interdiscourse processes and institutional communication in international environment. In order to create a realistic, factual-based solution that could challenge the negative outcomes of the previous project activities, we had to build an interdisciplinary bridge connecting the theories that concern the problems of organization and management within business or institutional structures and the complex scientific area that puts the ideas of cross-cultural international communication in the center of its research.

Theoretical frameworks

At the first stages of its development, the area of communication knowledge was referred to as largely irrelevant to the problems of modern knowledge on business, management and organizational theory. However, later research in the field showed that managers of companies spent totally more than 60% of their time engaged in various types of communication (Stewart, 1967, 1976). On the later stage of development of interest towards communication as a resource for managerial and organizational knowledge more researchers of management turned to the problem of communication (Kotter, 1982, Luthans and Larsen 1986, Yates 1989). The role of communication and its various technological types was discussed in early works of H. Minzberg (1973, 1975).

The development of approaches to organization and management as complex multidimensional (communicative) systems is largely connected with works of P. Druker (1973). From the conceptual point of view Druker provides new central ideas in the form of management by objectives and managerial elite that became central points for many of his works (Vihansky and Naumov, 2003).

The complex nature of organization has become the main topic of so-called "contingency theories" (Woodward, 1981; Fiedler, 1987; Scott 2002). The concept of communication context (analysis of situation, situation-based approach, estimation of potential to change and will to create the necessary changes depending on context) was introduced, however in many cases leaving the basic visions of organization and management intact.

However with the development of international business the new forms of collaboration have emerged that challenge the fundamental visions of organization either from the point of view of structure or inner and outer factors of determination. In order to develop a managerial vision that would correlate with the developments in the present-day globalizing economy (changing of organizational structures, organizational hierarchies, emergence of new cross-cultural regimes of business and organizational communication, etc. (Hardy and Phillips, 2002)) we decided to turn to the new area of business studies connected with the modern discourse theory.

The common point for the variety of approaches of discourse analysts towards organization was, according to J. Law (1994) "the key element of these perspectives is that organization is not a stable and static social order but an ongoing process of

ordering". Summarizing the relations between discourse analysis and organizational studies, one of the leading scholars in the field of CDA (Critical Discourse Analysis) N. Fairclough mentioned: "studies of organization need to include analysis of discourse" (2005). The complex methods of organizational research by means of discourse theory were discussed in works by Doolin (2003), Bergstrom and Knights (2006), Vaara and Tienari (2002), Taylor and Robichaud (2004), Philips and Hardy (2000), etc.

In the sphere of management the influence of communicative turn and the postmodern theories describing the social reality (e.g. Baudrilliard, 1981) contributed to the development of the set of ideas concerning the problems of communicative nature of management process (Nodushani, 1996) as well as role of discourses in formation of managerial identity (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003).

Nowadays the actual trends towards interdisciplinary approach both within social sciences and between "hard" and "soft" scientific theories show that scientific instruments of social sciences may be relevantly applied for diagnostics, understanding and solving of problems within such spheres as management, organizational studies (by this term we also mean the relevant spheres of organizational, managerial and business communication), strategic management and marketing, theories of leadership etc. It is also obvious that the classic approaches to cross-cultural communication in the sphere of international business may also bring benefits to the above mentioned areas. The discourse theory that serves as a common ground for the development of this interdisciplinary domain may as well provide new opportunities for the managerial and organizational science to overcome the mechanistic understanding of organization as a system that has input, processing and output and to form the effective interdisciplinary domain of knowledge where organization is seen as a process of "organizing" and where the actors may be analyzed from the point of view of both their individual goals and the complex rotation of power\knowledge (Rouse, 2005) in the social field (Bourdieu, 1998).

Investigation

Grounding the method

During the first stages of discussing the strategy, the critical analysis of the preliminary information including the correspondence, meeting transcripts, drafts of financial documents, showed that the main pitfalls on the way to project were hidden in the system of organizations and subjects that took part in the project. It was decentralization of power, lack of experience in multinational cooperation, lack of language and communication skills as well as lack of cultural knowledge that led to the delays in preparations. On this basis it was suggested that a strategy based on changing the patterns of communication between the parts may be the solution to the problem. As R. Eccles and N. Nohria (1993) put it: "the effective use of strategic language can galvanize organizations into action and, thereby guarantee financial success". However, the problem of the way in which an organization can create transformations on the platform of a new strategy has been largely unsolved both in theory and in practice (Minzberg, 1994). In this regard we had to make a further step into theory and the question of connection between the talk and the action (Hardy et

al, 2000) and thus came to the notion of discourse in organization, management and cross-cultural communication as a unifying platform for largely uncoordinated set of theories and applied methods in social sciences and humanities. Based on interdisciplinary knowledge of the members of the department as well as the academic resources provided by some of the colleagues we came to the conclusion that communicative discourse theory may be the creative platform for elaboration of the new approach to international business project development. As Hardy et al (2000) put it: "it is possible for individuals to engage in discursive activity and to access different discourses to generate new meanings that help – or hinder – the enactment of particular strategies".

There were also two important reasons that determined the choice of communicative discourse-analytical interdisciplinary approach instead of one of the "classical" applied theories we considered above.

First, when the department was formed it turned out that its members possessed the unique combination of business, managerial, organizational, communicative and intercultural skills that made it possible to overcome the isolation of separate theoretical approach and create the really creative, interdisciplinary environment. The communicative discursive approach did not reject some of the useful skills of the "classical" theoretical viewpoint. Instead it provided the most effective intellectual platform to combine the classical approaches to organization and management with the new conditions (globalization, informational society, intercultural environment).

Secondly, the profound positivist theories of management widely spread within modern business schools had been elaborated and tested mostly in American and Western European business environment. In order to face the challenges of mutual cooperation between two developing countries (Lieberthal, 2004) we needed the flexible set of theories corresponding to the optimal combination of the team skills and adequately responding to the postmodernist (Lyotard, 1984) vision of economic and cultural conditions in modern society. In this regard the special meaning is attached to the cultural element of international business cooperation. The discursive method helped not to focus on the attached "meanings" of communicative cultures and helped to look at both their flexible nature and functioning in the system of intercultural relations.

Plan of action

We had a chance to study the previous work done in order to develop the project. Among the other reasons for the failure of the previous work there were named the following:

1. Inconsistent approach of the managers of XY Group to the unknown cultural and communicative environment. Much of the documentation was presented in Chinese or poorly translated into English. The telephone calls were conducted in English that virtually excluded the Russian-speaking Belarusian managers from the direct communicative process.
2. Institutional coordination problem. Although the project was initiated on the level of Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the head of "Bellesbumprom"

had the rank equal to that of a minister, the implementation of the project needed coordination between several power institutions, such as Central Bank of Republic of Belarus, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Industry and Energy, Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Chinese company lacking experience and knowledge of Belarusian administration had no influence that could help to achieve effective cooperation between the above-mentioned institutions.

3. Documentary problem. From the very beginning the parts faced the problem of unification of the complex set of documentation including licenses and certificates for both materials and the industrial equipment that was produced under different standards. The Belarusian standards for quality and safety of industrial materials and equipment corresponded to those of Russia and former USSR and often did not mach to either European or Chinese standards. Thus it was vital to provide conditions for establishing the dialogue that would guarantee that every stage of construction would be done in full conformity with the existing legislation.

4. Technical problem. The parts that initiated the project and started the discussion had comprehensive knowledge of legal and financial regulations; however the conditions of usage of equipment from the thickness of the walls to the functioning of electricity supply differed in both countries. It was necessary to provide conditions for dialogue between the technical specialists both in Belarusian plants of "Bellesbumprom" and Chinese equipment manufacturers. Instead the Chinese managers supplied overwhelming quantity of technical materials in Chinese and English language that caused delays. The proposal to use Microsoft Project software for organizing the work was rejected by Belarusian counterparts on the ground that the majority of managers did not have the necessary skills for using the software.

Work done and data collected

It was suggested that the analytical work should be divided into three complimentary sections:

1. Analytical research of corpus of communicative documentation by means of content analysis and discourse analysis
2. Interviews with the key leaders and managers of the project, analysis of the interview transcripts by methods of conversational analysis and discourse analysis.
3. Anonymous survey of the members of divisions in organizations participating in the project, analysis of results by means of quantitative sociology with application of critical discursive and culturological discourse analysis.

The first part of the analytical work was aimed at the research of communicative texts (correspondence, memos, draft agreements etc) by means of content analysis and discourse analysis. Among the other findings we came to conclusion that:

1. Around as much as 7% of information in correspondence was understood improperly, reduced or otherwise omitted due to its linguistic, cultural, institutional or other forms or incomprehensibility (both Belarusian and Chinese part often used the reduced communicative forms of English language that lacked proper grammar and vocabulary). Besides as the majority of the generation of elder experienced managers and technicians lacked the necessary English skills, the communication was supported

by inexperienced young managers many of whom (though could speak English) had little if any expertise in their professional field (Piller, 2009). However the attempts to use natural languages led to even more delays caused by slow translation of correspondence.

2. During the communication the parts kept using their specialized institutional language (including styles, genres, tropes, etc.) both for the correspondence with the foreign counterparts and other institutional organizations. In the multi-organizational, multi-level environment of the project this situation showed the necessity for more unified reporting documentation.

During the second part of the research, the members of the group conducted 9 interviews with key managers of the project from both Chinese and Belarusian parts. It was shown that:

1. Some key managers from Belarusian part express several widely-shared stereotypes concerning the quality of Chinese production. Among the Belarusian colleagues there was a shared opinion that despite the relatively low price, the Chinese equipment has a relatively low quality that will result in inevitable malfunctions and failures in the long run.

2. Some managers complained about the latent, concealed ways of Chinese business conduct. In spite of all the agreements and support of the Belarusian embassy, Belarusian leading managers were concerned about several aspects including price policies and quality control. The analysis also showed the relatively large amount of culturally-controlled shared meanings, stereotypes and attitudes in the judgments of the interviewed.

3. In their turn the analysis of the interviews of the Chinese managers showed the growing concern about the "excessively active", "pushy" and even "aggressive" attitude of Belarusian colleagues as well as their sometimes biased attitude and lack of desire to establish the highly valued in Chinese business culture personal contacts *guanxi*. The analysis showed that the Chinese counterparts traditionally valued personal attitudes and relations as well as the involvement of high-ranking officials in the project (Graham and Lam, 2003).

The results of the anonymous questions provided the facts, supporting the hypothesis of communicative, cultural and linguistic nature of the problem of project development. The lack of previous experience of cooperation between the multiple divisions of organizations involved, as well as the specificity of their power relations led to the slowdown of the cooperative process and threatened its future. Among the key aspects of the analytical picture there were the following:

1. Relative isolation of the structural divisions of organizations involved in the project (the members of such divisions lacked the possibility to see the entire picture and did not feel committed to the project). Besides in such situation to many of participants the Chinese partners were seen through the filter of cultural prejudices, biased attitudes and other forms of exclusion leading to mutual misunderstanding, negation and contradiction.

2. The institutional incomprehension and misunderstanding. In the complex environment of simultaneous interaction between different institutions both within the boundaries of one nation state and beyond them the members of different

institutions that lacked the experience of mutual work, especially in cross-cultural conditions showed reluctance for cooperation and understanding. Thus technical departments of the factories had to go all the way up to the directors of the institutional departments to obtain the necessary information on certificates and licenses for Chinese machinery and equipment. This resulted in delays in supply of data for the preparation of the administrative part of the project. Besides the anonymous questioning showed negative attitudes between technical and administrative divisions.

3. Cultural and linguistic problems of comprehension leading to perception of Chinese ways of communication and culture as culturally alienated, semantically latent and Chinese partners as slow, lacking initiative and creativity.

The Table 1.1. shows the major problematic points that were revealed by research:

Table 1.1. Communication problems within the project

Documentary analysis	**Interviews with managers**	**Anonymous questioning**
Lost of information due to miscomprehension	Cultural alienation	Institutional miscomprehension
Institutional miscomprehension	Biased attitudes	Cultural alienation
Isolation from the "big picture"		Language problems

Conclusion

Both researchers in business communication and analysts of discursive processes in cross-cultural sphere acknowledge the fact, that it is typical for humans that some peculiar sets of coherent speech act may form more or less semantically, culturally, temporary stable systems of meanings (discourses). Within the special cultural, temporal and contextual frameworks, these systems may be used to create symbolic objects including identities, organizations and social institutions. Thus discourses serve as construction material for the building of culture and society and understanding of their nature and functions become a powerful tool for bringing in change in every domain of social life, including such spheres as management, organizations, business strategy and many others. On the other hand the notion of discourse provides opportunity to approach to the problems of cross-cultural business communication not from the point of view of researcher that seeks for "one and only true" meaning of cultures, but aims at understanding the dynamic and flexible nature of processes in which some meanings emerge into being and obtain the high status of shared opinions, universal truths, interiorized beliefs. It is this understanding that provides the new ways to create change not by forcing it, but by providing conditions for its natural free emergence. It is this approach that we attempted to realize in our work.

Implication of findings

On the basis of the research, including analysis of documents, interviewing and questioning the analytic group has come to several important conclusions.

Firstly we succeeded in proving the hypothesis that the major reason for the project delays lied in domains of culture and communication. We did not put the

responsibility on ill-organized management of the previous people that dealt with the problem (though that could also have been the case) as we later saw that they sometimes simply had not known where to start from or how to approach the problem. In this case we believe that the moderate social constructionist vision, empowered with the skills of discourse analysis provided us with an effective tool for analyzing and solving the complex organizational and managerial environment of an international business project. It was also important that during the process of problem-solving we were not in any sense limited or restricted by our approach. On the contrary, we could abstract away from efforts to understand the problem in terms of structures or some "genuine" true meaning of problem, and concentrate on analysis of live communication, people's identities, major discourses, constructing behavior as well as relations of domination, bias, cultural alienation etc.

Secondly we succeeded in creating the team of managers of different cultural and academic backgrounds that was able to provide special solutions to organizational and managerial problems. The managers of the new department are currently working together as the company engaged in several international projects with Russia, Mongolia and Republic of Tajikistan.

We were also surprised to learn that it had not been the language that caused most of misunderstanding. The questioning showed that local isolation from the whole picture made people reluctant to look for new solutions of the emerging problems (as in case with the different standards for certification). Also in the complex environment with no defined center, cultural alienation, biased attitudes and institutional miscomprehension sometimes meant more than simple problem of understanding the complicated foreign language.

Recommendations of action

As the globalization processes are sweeping around the world, the new multicultural business projects are pushing the modern theories of organization and management to their limits. With the changes in organizational hierarchies and emergence of new forms of managerial and organizational communication in cross-cultural environment everything becomes important: culture, languages, time and domains of knowledge that provide for the situation. It may be the time when the new bridge between managerial and organizational knowledge and the wide interdisciplinary field of post-modern communicative theories will help to create effective models for both common business and common existence. The notion of discourse and discourse analysis as a base for such an interdisciplinary communication may help to build this bridge. However much more theoretical and practical work is needed to put this bridge on a solid base of effective scientifically grounded knowledge. We need to understand the complex interconnections between the discourses of culture and mechanisms of their interactions with subject's identity. It is also important to understand the interplay between the discourses of organization and discourses of culture and how they interact on the cross-cultural level. Sometimes people from same institutions across the culture understand each other better than people from different institutions of the same culture. This provides new challenges and also new opportunities for those who will work in this new and exciting sphere.

Further work which may be indicated

The corpus of the academic work aimed at elaborating effective models combining social constructionist approach to managerial and organizational problems is growing. Simultaneously both discourse analysts and researchers in management and organization are moving towards each other, creating more and more interdisciplinary, cross-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary platforms for mutual understanding. In our project we made an attempt to combine two approaches and we have to admit that from both academic and practical points the work is far from completion. Though discourse analysis in management and organization theory is aimed at breaching the gap between positivistic constructivism and the real-life business practices, the following directions seem to challenge both researchers and practitioners:

1. Elaboration of flexible discourse models of organizational change based on real organizational and managerial experience and critical realistic scientific perspective
2. The problem of involvement of researcher into the play between discourses of culture and power that she\he has to analyze. How we may provide conditions for effective cross-cultural communication on the grounds of previous cultural experience, shared meanings, prejudice and bias?
3. Problem of managerial identity within the communication process of multinational projects and multinational organizations. How discourses change managerial identities, can we actively influence the process of formation and change of identities, what are the ways to do that?
4. Further research on mediation between discourse and organizational change. How a language put into special context may participate in the process of creation of symbolic objects that influence human behavior both in organizations and in the large frameworks of a culture.

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