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edited by Siow-Heng Ong  
Katrin Hansen

Gerhard Apfelthaler  
Nirundon Tapachai



## Competencies of Mediating Person in Managing Intercultural Communication in Bicultural Work Groups

Hana Panggabean

### GROUP DIVERSITY: PROBLEMS AND STRENGTHS

The rapid growth of global business brings along cultural encounters in groups. Nowadays, the multicultural workforce, in which culturally different individuals engage in work groups and share common targets, has become reality. Our global society has emerged through the major expansion of international co-operations after the World War II. Despite the fact that the meaning of work groups transcend national boundaries since then, recognition of the role of cultural diversity in work groups has not reached managers and management scholars until 1990s (Thomas & Ely, 2001; Adler, 2002).

The new awareness on the role of culture in organizations and work groups is characterized by willingness to give weight to cultural differences in workplace. The idea is pronounced strongly by cross-national works on organizational behaviour (see Hofstede, 1997; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, and Gupta, 2004). These works suggest that culture is a significant determinant for individual work

behaviour, therefore cultural diversity in workforce plays influential role in managing groups and organizations.

Further recognition on the importance of group diversity emphasizes on its strategic role for group productivity (Thomas & Ely, 2001; Adler, 2002), which puts group diversity management as the essential factor to achieve group productivity and satisfaction. Culturally diverse teams might gain benefits from its heterogeneity nature, channelled through the wide variety of ideas, perspectives, and field experiences leading to creative group performances as well as group synergy.

Aside from advantages, Adler (2002) mentioned process losses as group deficiencies for culturally diverse teams. Within this context, cultural diversity means group members are coming from various cultural perspectives. Accordingly, they possess different pattern in perceiving ideas and communicating thoughts. Communication among group members is reasonably more difficult than that in culturally homogeneous groups and it contributes significantly to create frictions and conflicts. Previous studies commonly agree that communication is one of the main problematic areas in intercultural work groups (Smith, Hecker, Chei, Chen, Harb, Jackson, Mogaji, Srivastava, Thomason, Yanchuk, 2004). Not surprisingly, a vast amount of intercultural studies dedicate their works in search for strategies to manage intercultural communication within work groups. Results from these studies confirm that process losses could fairly regarded as the main reason why international groups rarely achieve their full potential.

There are at least four groups of ideas in managing cultural diversity. First, works focusing on intercultural communication competence (see Hammer, 1989; Hammer, Gudykunst, & Wiseman, 1978), focusing on identifying predicting variables on managing communication problems in intercultural work groups. Second, a group of studies that promote the idea of culture learning (e.g. Brislin, Landis & Brandt, 1983), based on the idea that learning efforts and techniques developed to manage cultural differences lead to adequate responses in intercultural engagements. Hence, designs and techniques of intercultural training become vital in most of these works. Third, a group of studies that suggests to give weight to negotiation strategies in multicultural situations. These strategies are developed based on balance created

between one's own and other's cultural perspectives. Adler (2002) described five basic strategies: cultural dominance (to continue the use of approaches in one's own cultures), cultural accommodation (to imitate practices of foreign colleagues), cultural compromise (to give in something in order to achieve goals), cultural avoidance (to act as if no differences nor any potential conflicts exist), and cultural synergy (to develop new solutions to problems that leverage the cultural differences among all cultures involved). Among the five strategies, cultural synergy is considered an approach which perceives cultural differences as a group advantage. Fourth, a group of studies concerned with management of cultural differences as reflected in Stephen Bochner's concept of the mediating person (1981a&b).

This study is focused on the role of mediating person, defined as individuals who facilitate communication, understanding and action between culturally different persons of a work group (Bochner, 1981a). Studies have distinguished two primary roles in work group activities: the translator and the synthesizer. The first role is indicated with faithfulness in representing one culture to another and therefore encourages mutual understanding and accurate cross-cultural knowledge. The latter is indicated with main purpose to bring cultural disparities closer (Bochner, 1981a; Taft, 1981). Both roles are equally crucial for solving communication problems among culturally different individuals.

Works on mediating person suggested that these roles are generated by socialization rather than hereditary nature. The roles are characterized primarily by a group of competencies. This brings us to an issue of learning and development. With regard to this issue, it is the aim of this study to identify these competencies, which hopefully in future can be developed into a systematic learning program.

This study is based on a previous work exploring characteristics of the mediating person in Indonesian-German work groups (Panggabean, 2004a). The bicultural work groups are selected because the two contrasting cultures engagements evidently lead to interpersonal conflicts and problems due to differing communication styles, conflicts of power and completely differing sets of working values (Tjitra, 2001), hence provide a suitable context for the topic.

## INTERCULTURAL CHALLENGES OF INDONESIAN-GERMAN WORK GROUPS

International co-operation between Indonesia and Germany covers a wide range of areas, both in public and private sectors. A major proportion of public-sector initiatives take form in developmental co-operations managed by governmental agencies as well as non-governmental institutions (NGOs). Fields of interventions of these co-operations include areas such as: education, forestry, public administration, small and medium business etc. The private sector is dominated by multinational companies, joint ventures and foreign-owned enterprises.

The nature of Indonesian-German co-operations affects the working culture of Indonesian-German work groups. Empirical studies on Indonesian-German work groups reveal both groups' working cultures (Tjitra, 2001; Panggabean, 2004a).

Development co-operation leads to a more balanced power configuration of Indonesian-German work groups. This kind of engagement requires an intensive look at human approach with a specific target to develop people. In doing their projects, groups ought to have strong networks with their stakeholders and counterparts, namely local institutions and other international agencies. Accordingly, a more equal power-sharing between the German and Indonesian sides is easier to develop. Acting as financial benefactor for the public sector, the German development organization gain more control towards the Indonesian high level of policy makers. Within this context, projects should fulfill German standardized procedures and rules. Nevertheless, as the project reaches operational level, the Indonesian side has more power to decide field practices and conducts, hence their positions are somewhat equal. Even though the members share a common work group targets, each national group has particular roles with regard to their government interests. Indonesian-German work groups are the main actors to run the projects. The German members often strongly affiliate themselves to their headquarters in Germany while the Indonesian members bridge work groups with Indonesian stakeholders, providing the latter with the role of mediating persons.

In contrast, power configuration in private sectors is more clear-cut. The sector is dominated by German companies applying German formal regulation and working style. The primary performance standard is profit target. Generally, Indonesian-German work groups are indicated by asymmetrical power configuration with differential dominating cultures and this depends on which sectors and activity levels they belong to. German members are the minority; however they rank higher in organizational hierarchy and power. Indonesian members have less control and independency in group decisions.

Indonesia and Germany are two very different cultures. Cross-cultural studies on work behaviour locate the two cultures on opposite ends in almost every cultural dimension (see Hofstede 1997). Consequently, both national cultures have their own distinct perspectives leading to different patterns in accomplishing group tasks. The differences eventually lead to communication failures and interpersonal misunderstandings. Specifically, Tjitra (2001) reveals main conflicting sources of Indonesia-German work groups, some of them are: asymmetrical power structure, communication style, problem-solving style, and working style.

Based on their work with Indonesian-German work groups in international research scheme, Fremerey & Panggabean (2004) outline common problematic areas of the work groups below:

a. Communication

Large amount of communication failures are rooted in conflicting communication styles. An indirect communication of Indonesian is incompatible with the German direct communication style. A typical example of the communication problem is the high rate of failure to keep appointments at the Indonesian side.

b. Working values

Problems in this area cover issues of work commitment and working style. The main issue is planning attitude. In this sense, both national cultures have conflicting perspective on how to manage work plans, schedules and high incidents of unpredictable factors. Eventually the incompatibility of working values creates slower work pace and unsystematic pattern in doing the task.

c. Power

The asymmetrical structure creates different levels of autonomy and, up to a certain point, gives way to possessive attitudes towards the project and its facilities.

In order to solve aforementioned problems, mediating persons are developed in Indonesian-German work groups as described by Panggabean (2004a). The emergence of mediating persons is not the only strategy, yet it is considered as the most effective one with regard to goal accomplishments while maintaining a satisfying group climate.

## THE MEDIATING PERSON

### A. The Nature of Mediating Person

The idea of mediating person is conceived in a notion on particular characteristics of the multicultural man (Adler, 1978). The notion suggests "*a human being whose identifications and loyalties transcend the boundaries of nationalism ...*" (p. 23). The multicultural man owns flexibility to switch between cultures, a basic potential for culture-bridging roles. The idea finds its behavioural structure through the definition of mediating person suggested by Taft (1981):

a cultural mediator is a person who facilitates communication, understanding and action between persons or groups who differ with respect to language and culture. (Taft, 1981, p. 53).

Looking at the definition; a cultural mediator should be, in the first place identified by his or her role rather than merely personal attributes. The reason is clear: not everyone who possesses these attributes can perform them, thus deserves to be called the mediating person.

The nature of the mediating person is summarized by Panggabean (2004a) from works of scholars as below:

#### 1. Psychoculturally adaptive

The term is applied by Adler (1978) to refer to internal process of a continuous self-definition based on context interpretation. This quality enables the person to shift 'apart of and apart from' particular

cultural context, hence engages oneself into a continuous cultural adaptation process.

## 2. Personal transitions

A mediating person has undergone personal transitions through cultural learning process. It is characterized by a continuous self redefinition while anchoring one's cultural identity as one goes through cultural learning processes. This quality resulted in growing respect to the other culture as one embraces it into self development.

## 3. Buffer position

The third characteristic refers to a marginal position, meaning that one does not belong to any cultural perspective. He or she understands other world views as an outsider and thus has a more objective view in comparison to the insiders. Based on this objectivity, the mediating person constructs an appropriate frame of references regarding these cultures and applies this frame of reference purposively.

## 4. Action-oriented

Mediating person is able to transform his/her abilities constructively into actions. This characteristic shall differentiate the mediating person from people who cognitively and emotionally mastered cultural information, but are not able to utilize them. The quality is referred as skills in intercultural communication and learning and in dealing with cultural differences comfortably.

## B. The Role of Mediating Person

As briefly mentioned before, there are two kinds of mediating functions, termed as the translator and the synthesizer (Bochner, 1981a). The translator involves acts in representing one culture to another and therefore encourage 'mutual understanding and accurate cross-cultural knowledge' (p. 3). The synthesizer correlates with purposes to bring cultural disparities closer. In this sense, a mediating person should have an objective perception to both cultures and understand the underlying factors of cultural disparities in order to find strategies to bring them closer, resulted in a more productive conduct.



In order to acquire the synthesizer role, Taft (1981) mentioned an important quality of the mediating person, that is sensitivity to the feelings, thoughts and actions of people from other cultural worlds. The quality enables the mediating person to anticipate problem areas that require intermediary actions. Moreover, the mediating person should own sufficient cultural knowledge and familiarity to cultural exposure differences.

#### Study 1: Mediating Person in Indonesian-German Work Groups

Description of a mediating person in Indonesian-German work groups is derived from a field interview with 23 practitioners in Jakarta (14 Indonesians and 9 Germans). All respondents work in both public sector and private organizations and they have been involved in Indonesian-German work groups for at least 6 months. The public sectors consist of governmental ministries and agencies, non-governmental agencies, and educational institutions. The private sector is represented by multinational companies. The data is analyzed with content-analysis technique. Result of the study is described by Panggabean (2004)

Mediating persons in Indonesian-German work groups are mostly Indonesian members. In public and private sectors, the mediating persons possess moderate power, which is comparable to a middle management level in private sectors. This power provides them with flexibility to engage themselves with lower and higher level comfortably and suits their mediating roles.

The most distinguishable variable of these mediating persons is the fact that they experienced a high exposure of cultural diversity during their life, both in intracultural and intercultural contexts. For the Indonesians, intracultural diversity exposure takes the form of mobility across various culturally different regions in Indonesia since their childhood. Intercultural exposures for Indonesian and German mediating persons came with their overseas education, short time overseas assignment, and involvement in intercultural work groups.

Mediating persons are characterized by several personal qualities such as outspoken, self-confident, critical, independent in their thinking style, yet polite. They are appraised for their readiness to exchange ideas and feedback, discuss thoroughly and act in a more equal power level

with their foreign colleagues, while maintaining their original cultural identity. The German mediating person is appraised for the social skill, specifically the empathetic and understanding behaviour towards Indonesian colleagues. These persons maintain the primary values, namely task oriented attitude, however performs it in a flexible manner as not to disturb group harmony. They also keep a warm personal contacts with the Indonesian colleagues. As much as the Indonesian mediating person shows a remarkable familiarity with the German's way of thinking; they are quite attached to their Indonesian identity in a balanced manner. This is a form of marginality (Adler, 1978), a position which gives them an advantage of objectivity as an outsider. Their flexibility to move back and forth between both cultural perspectives reveals the psychoculturally adaptive nature (Adler, 1978).

Two primary roles of mediating persons in Indonesia-German work groups were identified, namely the mediating person as cultural information sources and as cultural bridges. Each role is elaborated as follows:

*a. Cultural Information Sources*

The role is indicated by providing necessary informative cultural aspects. Using this, the mediating persons enhance broader understanding of the respective culture along with culturally appropriate suggestions for improvement. The general intention of this act is to explain the cultural background of problematic actions so they gain better understanding and tolerance. In this sense, the mediating person increases mutual understanding between different cultures. The role is comparable to Bochner's translator (1981b). In relation to this, availability of cultural knowledge as a result of willingness to learn is obvious. The aim of this role is to provide emotional support and confidence to others, as the example below illustrates:

I : Once a colleague of mine came to me. He was offended since his German boss scorned him in public. He could not accept that humiliation. He asked me: "what should I do?" I tried to encourage him, "OK your boss was wrong to treat you like that, but you can go to him and tell him all that directly. Explain your feelings to him so that he can understand his mistakes. And if you think you're innocent

and do not accept his treatment...as far as I know the Germans prefer that way..." (Panggabean, 2004a p. 175)

*b. Cultural Bridge*

The second role is termed as 'mediator', 'catalyst', inter-mediator', and 'filter' by the respondent and 'synthesizer' by Bochner (1981b). This role is highly admired and considered very crucial for the groups, because the mediating person ensures that exchange of messages between both cultures are conveyed effectively and each expectation is fulfilled. Driven by a goal-oriented attitude towards the assignment, the mediating person performs this role pragmatically in critical situations. They are willing to adjust their approach to the most effective cultural orientation without any personal preference (compare with description from Taft, 1981). The process begins by sensitively grasping the focal goal of the message conveyed, then without changing the goal of the message, they select the most culturally adequate action to convey it. In this sense, their cultural knowledge serves as guidance for the respective culture's rationality.

An Indonesian respondent who works as a researcher conducted a research trip with his German colleague in Sumatera by taxi. According to the schedule, they had to reach their city destination that night.

I: At one point, our taxi driver told me in Bahasa Indonesia (Indonesian Language) that normally people do not travel at night in this region since there are many dangerous tigers. What is he trying to tell me? ...Then I observed him and in our further conversation, he admitted that he was tired and had been taking passengers since early morning that day. Then I got the message that he was tired and did not want to continue driving. Thus, it was true, it is indeed going to be dangerous if we continue the trip with an exhausted driver. Then I told my colleague that it is a habit in this area not to drive through the night. The road slopes downward, has many curves and is slippery, especially when it is dark. Then it will be dangerous for us to continue the trip. It is better if we spend the night in the nearest hotel. My colleague agreed and we took a rest that night. I think we should understand the feelings of the driver but on the other hand I could not force my colleague if he did not agree. (Panggabean, 2004a p. 176)

By presenting a more logical reason for the same purpose (the fact is, there are almost no tigers left in Sumatra), the mediating person clearly displays how he makes use of his cultural knowledge of German's rationality.

Another example set by an Indonesian working as project officer in a German development co-operation:

I : Our Indonesian counterpart asked for an additional vehicle to be located at their office. They came to me since they were reluctant to talk about it directly with my German boss. I conveyed the request to him. And the answer was: "No way...! It is not in our budget ..Look, everything was already settled in our budget, the numbers of operational cars needed for the project. If we don't need the car anymore, only then they can have one of ours." Of course I could not tell them the message in such a manner. Then I tried to explain it to them slowly: "Mrs.. according to articles number ..bla ..bla ..in our agreement, the German government provided this and that for our project. You were right that in the previous project there was an additional car for your department, but we could do that because we had internal restructuring, so many of our German consultants have left and we had idle cars that were handed over to the Indonesian government. Of course if such things happened again, we can do the same again..." (Panggabean, 2004a p. 177)

On the example, the rejection is conveyed indirectly by pointing out the original content of the agreement. The mediating person lets the Indonesian colleague draw his own conclusion of the negative message. In this situation, the mediating persons relies on mutual understanding, in which both the message sender and receiver agree on shared-meanings without openly discussing them. Both examples of the cultural divide display how the mediating person conveys the same message in a culture-adequate manner in terms of communication style and cultural value orientation.

## METHODS

This study is using a scene from an intercultural film depicting the role of a mediating person in an Indonesian-German work group as



an instrument. The film was developed based on conflicting situations mentioned during the field interview conducted in the previous study. Afterwards, an open-ended questionnaire was delivered to 23 postgraduate psychology students, asking them to identify the competencies needed for a person to perform the particular role of the mediating person. A content-analysis technique was applied to analyze the data.

### COMPETENCIES OF THE MEDIATING PERSON

Seven competencies are resulted from the film exposure. They are described as below:

#### 1. Cultural Knowledge

A repertoire of cultural information of one's own and other's national culture is needed to perform the role of mediating person. Cultural information refers values, thinking perspectives and behaviour.

The meaning of culture is similar to what Thomas (1999) described—a mental orientation directing individual perception, framework, thinking, evaluative judgement and behaviour. The competency is strongly reflected in the role of translator from Bochner (1981a).

#### 2. Switching Perspective

This is the competency to understand cultural perspectives of national cultures involved and to develop adequate attributions for both perspectives and is comparable to Triandis' isomorphic attribution, (in Panggabean, 2004a), an ability to create attributions that match those of targeted society. Panggabean (2004b) referred to this switching perspective to a cognitive form of intercultural sensitivity due to its major focus on abstraction.

... (he/she) should be able to adjust his/her thinking pattern to the Indonesian culture so that he/she can convey inputs and arguments with regard to Indonesian customs along with problem solutions...

### 3. Cultural Empathy

This competency recognizes to cultural differences and respects them as mentioned below:

...to display empathy and consideration to work condition or problems the Indonesian dealt with...but also to understand the way of doing work from the German's point of view so that he/she can understand their problems...

### 4. Harmonious Drive

The drive to create balance amongst cultural differences is aimed to establish harmony within. This competency is characterized by the existence of goodwill in managing differences in a constructive manner to achieve goals. Indonesian culture, which strongly focused on harmony, indicated by syncretism approach to avoid conflict, is the main influence. (Panggabea, 2004b; Magnis-Suseno, 1996).

### 5. Strong Cultural Identity

A mediating person should have excellent self-knowledge; strong roots in his/her own cultural identity. The continuing process of self-definition across cultures is necessary to put the mediating person in a culturally marginal position (Adler, 1978). This situation creates tensions leading to identity confusion. Accordingly, Thomas (1999) suggested that individuals should have a deep understanding of one's own culture before intercultural interactions.

### 6. Behaviour Modification

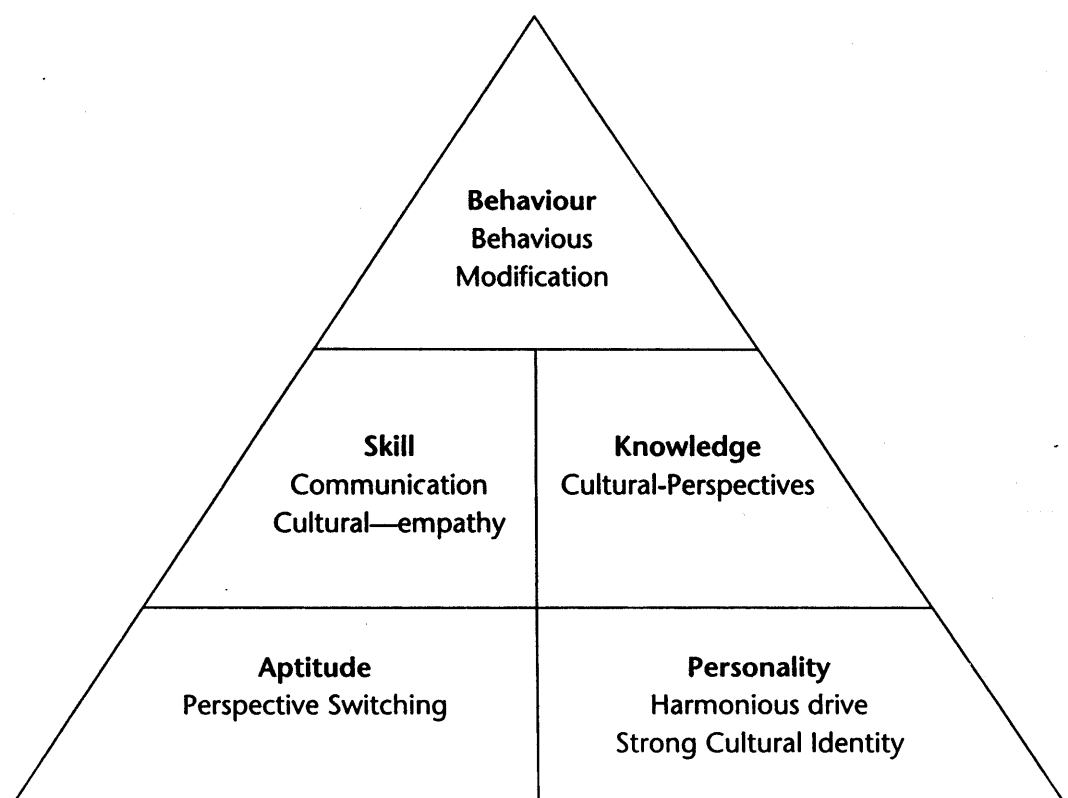
This is an ability to modify behaviour to match demands of the particular cultural context. Descriptions on this pointed out concrete behaviour such as:

The mediating person talks to the Indonesian side in a more polite and cautious manner whereas she talks to the Germans in more relaxed and egalitarian way...

## 7. Communication Skills

This competency consists of two primary skills, language proficiency and ability to understand the intended meaning. The language proficiency covers social aspects beyond vocabulary and grammatical. The mediating person should understand meanings conveyed both verbally and non-verbally. To acquire the skills the mediator should have adequate amount and quality of social interactions with members from both cultures.

The seven competencies can be presented in a competency model from HRD Consortium (2004) as presented in figure 1. The original model views competencies as a group of hidden and visible factors, covering aptitude, personal characteristics, skills, knowledge and behaviour. Based on the model, certain competencies are considered less visible than the others.



**Figure 1** Competency model of the mediating person

## SUMMARY

Demands to manage cultural differences become critical for international co-operations to achieve their work targets and at the same time maintain a satisfying work climate. The demands are quite challenging if members of the work groups come from contrasting cultures. In this context, the idea of mediating person as culture mediator offers an alternative to manage group conflicts smoothly. The mediating person delivers appropriate ideas, evaluations, and solutions in a culturally adequate manner for both national cultures, therefore creates a higher level of acceptance from group members.

This study offers a competency model of a mediating person in Indonesian-German work groups. The competencies consist of factors ranging from underlying personal characteristics (cultural identity) to concrete behavioral skills (communication skills). Based on the model, a systematic learning program can be developed to prepare competent cultural mediators.

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