

Chapter 6.9

Strategising Impression Management in Corporations: Cultural Knowledge as Capital

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ABSTRACT

Impression management is a powerful psychological phenomenon with much unexplored potential in corporate settings. Employees or corporations can deploy impression management strategies in order to manipulate others' perceptions of them. Cultural knowledge is powerful capital in impression management, yet this has not been sufficiently explored in previous literature. This chapter argues that impression-motivated employees or corporations need to perform a three-step knowledge

audit: (i) knowing what their impression deficits are; (ii) knowing what impression management strategy is needed to address that deficit, based on the taxonomy of impression management strategies tabulated here; (iii) knowing what societal (e.g. collectivist culture or individualist culture) or organization-specific cultural adjustments are needed. A cultural knowledge base can thus be created through cross-cultural training of and knowledge transfer by expatriates. Multinational corporations can also benefit from utilising the knowledge presented in this chapter in their international public relations efforts.

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INTRODUCTION

The success of knowledge transfer often depends on incidental or subsidiary information accompanying the knowledge itself. Communication between humans usually involves nonverbal cues such as facial expressions, gestures, body posture, tone of voice, gaze, clothing style and use of props. Nonverbal cues therefore have an important communicative function (DePaulo, 1992), such as in terms of conveying information on emotional states (Ekman & Friesen, 1971). An individual can strategically manipulate the nonverbal signals that they transmit through a process known as impression management or self presentation (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Impression management is the strategic attempt to control how one is perceived by others in order to fulfil a deeper aim (Rosenfeld, Giacalone & Riordan, 1995), such as exuding competence in a particular knowledge field or being taken seriously as an expert. There is considerable evidence in organizational settings that impression management by employees can influence supervisors' ratings of them (Wayne & Liden, 1995; Vilela et al, 2007), increase chances of promotion (Westphal & Stern, 2007) and increase others' perceptions of ones credibility (Leigh & Summers, 2002). Individuals with knowledge on impression management strategies may therefore successfully utilise this knowledge to, for example, maximise their capacity to influence their organization's policies and practices. The success of impression management strategies depends on both societal cultural norms on appropriate social behaviour (DePaulo, 1992) and on organization-specific culture (Drory & Zaidman, 2007), as well as individual characteristics (Snyder, 1974).

Impression management in corporate settings has a lot of unexplored potential. This chapter begins by discussing nonverbal communication and compiling a taxonomy of impression management strategies typically used in corporate settings. Cultural knowledge relevant to impres-

sion management is an invaluable resource to individuals in corporate settings. This chapter explores the impact of societal cultural norms on workers' choices of impression management strategies, focussing on the contrast between collectivist cultures (e.g. the Far East) and individualist cultures (e.g. Western Europe and North America). The impact of organization-specific culture on employees' impression management strategies is then discussed. This chapter therefore argues that employees need to acquire a tacit or explicit knowledge base on impression management, and to perform an audit of their impression deficits, the impression management strategies required to resolve these deficits, and the adjustment in strategy needed to accommodate society or organizational cultural norms or individual difference variables. The benefits of cross-cultural adaptation by expatriates, based on fact-finding and the accumulation of knowledge through interactions, and cross-cultural training of expatriate employees, will then be discussed. Having explored impression management from the perspective of employees as individuals, this chapter then goes on to argue that multinational corporations should utilise the kind of knowledge presented in this chapter in their international public relations efforts. Ethical considerations for employees or corporations (concerning their choice of impression management strategy) are then discussed, after which further research questions will be outlined.

Theoretical Background: What is Impression Management?

Imagine that Gary, a new systems analyst at an IT department, wants to suggest a major restructuring of a large database. However, his seniors have a reputation for being resistant to change and they are usually hostile towards ideas generated by newcomers. Gary therefore needs to find a way of making his seniors more receptive towards him

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