

Business communication skills of Bulgarians within a multi-cultural environment

Maya Yaneva

Abstract: Communication is one of the most powerful tools in our private and business lives. A lot of researchers list [1] open and clear communication among the top priorities of business organizations. It takes months or even years to recover the damages of inappropriate communication within organizational functions and business partners. This paper aims to present a study in the field of interpersonal and intergroup relations. The study has been conducted within an international company, covering the EMEA (Europe, Middle East, and Africa) region. The multinational company is one of the global leaders in the business field it operates in, with 146 offices across 22 countries and territories, and over 75,000 employees speaking 48 languages. The primary focus of the research is on interpersonal communication in management. More specifically, how the multi-cultural, multi-lingual and multi-level communication is impacting the business environment. The reason executive business leaders of EMEA took a decision of the EMEA management to conduct anonymous survey for the whole region among 11 countries and more than 30 locations, was to find a better interoperability and alignment between the sales, account management and operational leaders. The survey was completed within one month and included all heads of departments and their teams. The responses were anonymous and were summarized in a broken down by department/office short presentation with a summary of the survey findings, and was then provided to the heads of departments/offices for review and action planning. The paper analyses the results related to the Bulgarian office of the researched company and provides further recommendations as to how to address the issues resulting from the survey.

Key words: multi-lingual communication, multi-cultural relations, business communication, multi-cultural business environment.

Introduction

Communication has been a field of researchers' interests for years now. It is one of the most powerful tools in our private and business lives. According to the British business dictionary it is a: "Two-way process of reaching mutual understanding, in which participants not only exchange (encode-decode) information, news, ideas and feelings but also create and share meaning. In general, communication is a means of connecting people or places. In business, it is a key function of management--an organization cannot operate without communication between levels, departments and employees." [2], hence communication has become one of the top priorities in business organizations.

If a simple on-line search for company values is done, it will make it obvious that organizations are highlighting the importance of the communication in their list of values or slogans. Successful companies have a set of company values to engage their employees in achieving their goals as well as the company's and also to connect to their partners. Values are the essence of a company's identity and summarizes the purpose of their existence. Company values are a guide on how the business organization should operate and they are normally integrated in the company's mission statements.

Sometimes open, transparent, direct, fast, frank – communication is directly listed as company value, or it could be part of other values as in the following examples:

Adidas: Integrity: We are honest, open, ethical, and fair. People trust us to adhere to our word.

Facebook: Be open.

Google: Fast is better than slow. Democracy on the web works. You don't need to be at your desk to need an answer. There's always more information out there. The need for information crosses all borders.

H&M: Straightforward and open-minded

Starbucks Coffee: Creating a culture of warmth and belonging, where everyone is welcome. Being present, connecting with transparency, dignity and respect.

The few examples of global organizations above, regardless of the industry prove that communication cannot be separated in one dedicated field of the business environment.

Over the years, the expansion of global organizations, innovation in technologies, high dynamics and speed of operations, have created the need of special focus in inter-cultural and multi-lingual communication in a business environment. Nowadays, due to time zone difference, occupancy, audience availability and tools of communication the whole process becomes more and more complex. Over time, this could lead to misunderstandings, blockages, decrease of performance, and loss of business, employees, and partners.

Communication is largely dependent on words. Living and working with others is a process of communication, and most of the people think that communicating is largely a process of saying, hearing, reading and writing words. Yet parties communicate in a number of languages and channels using words. Within one culture, be it national, organizational, or generational, etc. words are developed from common experience and used to shape a subsequent common experience. For example in one organization "SME" could be interpreted as "small and medium enterprise" while in another – as "subject matter expert". Utilizing one common language, in the vast majority of international organizations that is English, every non-native English speaker would translate into English. That could cause various confusions, misinterpretation, misunderstandings and barriers to open, frank and direct communication, hence in a multi-lingual and multi-cultural environment the parties should be aware of the specifics of the others to be able to address their own differences and desire to mirror and get aligned with others in the communication process.

The goal of this paper is to present how Bulgarians can overcome misunderstandings in an intercultural, interpersonal environment at management level, utilizing a 360° survey in EMEA region among sales, account management and operational leaders. The company (established in 1985) was rapidly expanding its operations in EMEA through mergers and setting up new locations in different countries all over the world, but the mainly in Europe. In the course of 10 years between 2004 and 2014, many new courtiers were added in the footprint of the organization, which led to a significant increase of the diversity in the management from language and cultural perspective in EMEA region.

Background

Over time the executive leadership of EMEA receives feedback about the following challenges in the region:

- Sales, account and sales support leaders perceive some operational teams/locations as more responsive, supportive and flexible than others, hence they are feeling more comfortable to sell and grow the business in the locations where they have better confidence in terms of partnership.
- Operational leaders perceive some sales, account and sales support teams as more responsive, supportive and flexible than others, therefore certain projects are suffering in terms of profitability, growth, expansions, performance and attrition.

- There is an overall opportunity to improve alignment between sales, account management and operational teams.
- However the feedback is considered as anecdotal and hard to quantify...
- ... Therefore hard to act on.

Considering that employees' development is one of the key areas of Human Resources Management, the project was assigned to the EMEA HR Partner. Analyzing what would be the smoothest process to get the feedback from the involved parties, avoiding the possibility of deepening conflicts and finger-pointing, a 360° anonymous survey was chosen as a tool. Rolling out the survey among sales, account management (AM) and operational team leaders across 11 countries and more than 30 locations, the company agreed to follow the process described below:

1. Survey is administered by HR.
2. Respondents are asked to comment only on operational team / leaders they have experience of.
3. Feedback is provided individually to each operational team leader and Sales / AM / Sales support leader by HR – main data sheet with their name / operational but other names / operational team removed and verbatim comments.
4. Operational / Sales / AM / Sales support leaders use feedback to create action plans for themselves and their team.
5. Operational / Sales / AM / Sales support leaders drive action plans, and share them with their line managers.
6. HR provide high-level survey outputs to EMEA Executive Business Leaders – main data sheet and graphs showing their people but with other names removed.
7. Common themes across most Operations or sales teams are driven by EMEA Functional Directors.
8. Survey to be administered after 6 months to track progress.

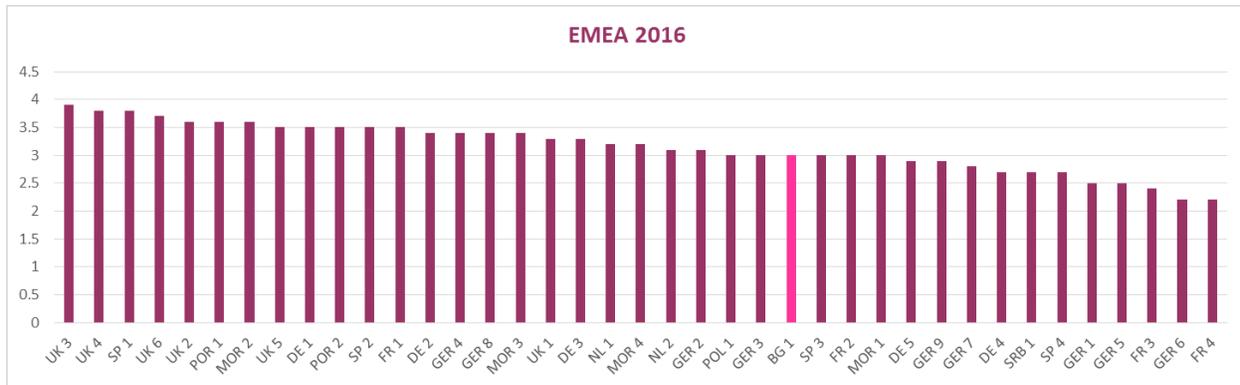
Questionnaire for Sales / Account Management / Sales support leaders:

- How responsive is each operational team per location?
- How supportive is each operational team?
- How flexible is each operational team?
- Overall, how easy is it to sell each operational team?
- How could the working relationship with each operational team be made more successful?

Questions for operational team leaders:

- How well does each Sales / AM / Sales support leader engage with operations to drive growth?
- How well does each Sales / AM / sales support leader coordinate the team to provide solutions to customers?
- How well does each Sales / AM / sales support leader balance the needs of customers & operations?
- Overall, how easy is it to work with each Sales / AM / sales support leader?
- How could the working relationship with each sales / AM / support leader be made more successful?
- Comments / examples field for each question.

Scoring system: 4 – very easy to communicate/cooperate, 3- easy, 2-difficult, 1- very difficult
 After the first round of the survey the results were presented for the whole region:



Actual evaluated 39 locations in 11 countries with more than 70 respondents.

Following the location with best rating the Bulgarian management team ranked at the 25th place with an average score of 3.0. The verbatim exported from the survey stated:

A short summary of the answers to the question of “How responsive is the Bulgarian operational team?” shows that overall, the assessment is positive with an average score of 3.5.

Comments:

- Excellent, pro-active, consultative and friendly
- Most responsive operational team of all I work with. Great example of someone who continuously seeks to grow professionally by learning from peers, organization, by observing. Teams are accountable, and held accountable. This is something which all operational teams should be, and where Sofia is an exception showing the way. Operational team always reacts very structured and professional.
- Demanding and defensive, always questioning changes.
- Always good to work with, however isn't always the quickest in responding, but when you get the answer, you know it is right.
- More depreciative and critical answers. Missing understanding of the difficulties in the market. Missing the sales approach.

The responses about “How supportive is Sofia operational team?” show that the team is not perceived very positively, however, the total score in this section is 3.4.

- Sofia is only supporting official requests. There is no trustful support to improve overall business.
- Always telling what doesn't work.
- The effort, attention and willingness to the right thing is always there.

“How flexible is each operational team?” trending to be more difficult and scored at 2.8, with the following highlights:

- With Sofia team, you can always find a common agreement & mutual way of working. Flexible, as long as details are discussed and opinions of both parties are heard and taken into consideration.
- Always telling what doesn't work.
- Listing risks over risks.
- Missing alternative solutions, considering client's requirements.

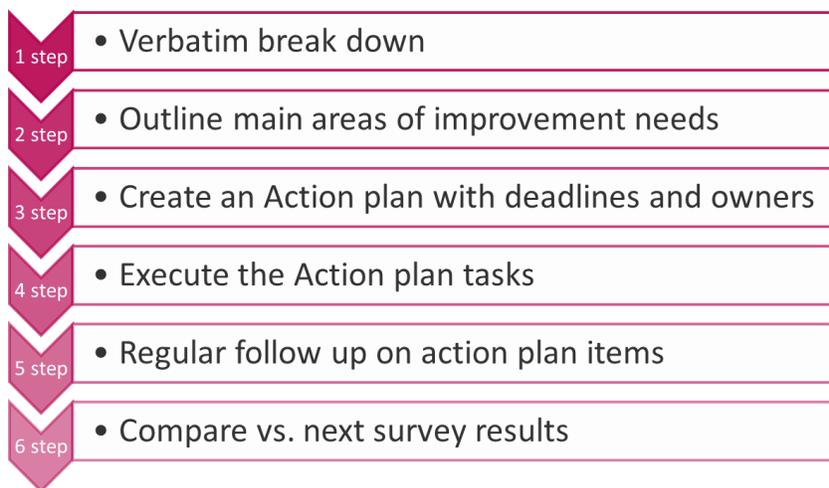
And the responses to a key question for every organization that is striving for growth: “Overall, how easy is it to sell Sofia operational team?” scored as 2.7 and an export of the comments states:

- Concerns with management abilities. Very slow reactions
- No capacities.
- Significant challenges with change management
- Bulgarian team is very knowledgeable, but very challenging

The recommendations that came from the respondents answering: “How the working relationship with Sofia operational team could be made more successful?” brought the following opportunities:

- More openness, faster turnaround times.
- More open-minded cooperation with a positive sales approach.
- Stop being negative about new ideas, opportunities, changes.
- Instead of listing all the risks and negative sides, come up with proposals how can fix, support.
- Don't reject ideas without giving it a try.

Providing the valuable information from the direct feedback in the verbatim the leader of Sofia office takes the opportunity to review the outcome of the survey and in discusses in depth with the management team. Analyzing the responses, recalling the different situations that might cause negative experience for the other party.



They outline the main actions for improvement:

First, invite respondents who are in direct contact with the team to one-to-one interviews. Schedule meetings seeking for instant feedback with transparency and desire for alignment. This action addresses the true desire of Sofia team to change the perceptions, it also helps to convince the other party that the feedback is taken seriously, no matter if it is positive or constructive there is always room for further development. These meetings give the opportunity for alignment and calibration, which provide powerful feedback to the head of the local operations in order to conduct side by side coaching sessions with his team members and subordinates.

Second, by organizing dedicated trainings: a) Enhanced cultural and communication training for site middle and high management from external specialized trainers and b) conduct practical sessions. The cultural trainings cover business protocol and multi-cultural environments dealing with the following areas:

Business communication:

Communicating through different representative systems
Synchronizing communication with others (match & mirror)
Listening and questioning skills
Body language and gestures

Business etiquette and protocol:

Introduction, leaving positive first impression
Effective image and elements of the good style
Appropriate business clothing and accessories
Usage of electronic devices during meetings / working environment

Intercultural differences

Analysis of typical cultural differences for the countries – most common business partners for our colleagues
Etiquette for business meetings, business dinners, lunches

Business etiquette and protocol during business lunch/dinner

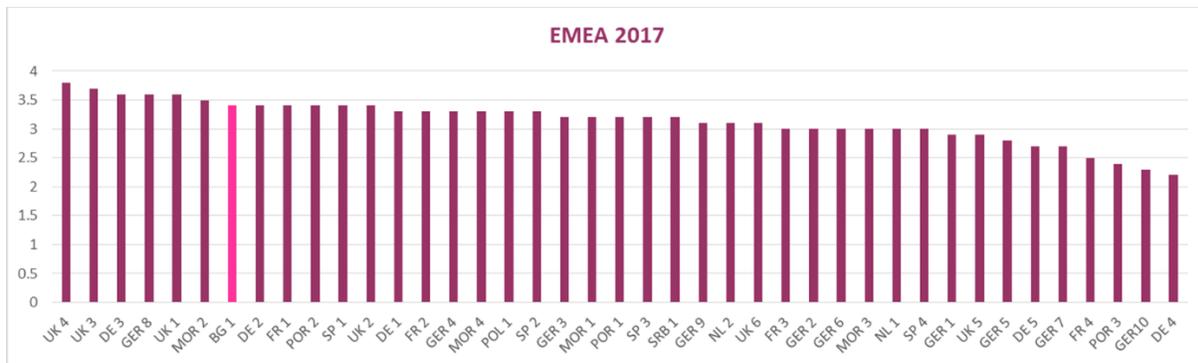
Follow up sessions are organized to validate and enhance the communication skills of the management.

The third outlined action was to conduct a pre-survey one-to-one conversation. The Head of the operational team schedules meetings again shortly before the next survey is issued with the main respondents. The purpose of the meeting is to address the feedback, to remind of the actions taken and to ask again for feedback, hence to remind the participants of the operational team's willingness to change.

The Bulgarian team treated very seriously the feedback they had received from the other colleagues. They considered this as feedback that a client could perceive while interacting with people from a culture and location that have never had exposure to in the past. Self-awareness is the key factor of successful interactions. The feedback received through the conducted survey gives them an opportunity to understand others' perceptions. In this particular case the demanding and defensive perception of the Bulgarians stems from their desire to share all the risks and obstacles that they can see in order to start thinking towards bridging the gaps and building a plan how to overcome the challenges. Without preparation about the expectations from the other party; lack of alignment; being on conference calls, which refrain to experience the body language of the counterparty person; talking in foreign language; are all factors that may lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretations. Those can easily ruin the trust in a partnership, lead to putting a tag like "demanding and defensive team", which might easily be spread in the organization and externally. On the other hand, a true desire for change and improvement, and consistent work into that direction are always recognized by the other party and considered as respectful behavior.

One of the recommendations which were outlined during this process was to set the expectations at the very beginning of a new communication interaction. There is nothing wrong, it is even appreciated when approaching new conversation no matter if it is face-to-face or via a conference call, while introducing to say: "We Bulgarians tend to ask a lot of questions in order

to understand better the details, which will help us to contribute further in our partnership, some people may consider this as demanding or defensive, but that by no means is our intention.” Six months after the first survey was issued the organization issued a second one in April 2017. The results showed that there was a significant jump in the ranking of the Bulgarian office:



Evaluated: 41 locations in 11 countries with 74 respondents

The Bulgarian team climbed from the 25th place with an average score of 3.0 in 2016 to the 7th with a score of 3.4.

Highlights from the verbatim show:

- Collaboration is excellent
- Listening and learning, and sharing best practices. That I don't see happening on other sites as efficiently.
- Experienced and engaged team.
- Great role model at the top. Always wanting to improve the service and be innovative. Shared goals.
- Focus on Client needs are at very high level, adapting to new client
- Proactively making suggestions for improvements, engaging other parties, excellent communication.
- Great engagement on operations, learning, and management level, showing a great example!
- Continue doing what you do! Others can learn from the 'can-do' and flexible approach..
- Experienced and very good, engaged team.
-

Conclusions and recommendations

Recommendations for successful communication in multi-cultural and multi-lingual environment:

- Analyze the channels of communication and their weight
- Outline main priorities in terms of cultural groups to address
- Assess yours and others' capabilities (SWOT)

Key learnings

- Cultivating our awareness of our own experience;
- Cultivating our understanding of the experience of the others with whom we are in relation;

- Learning to communicate with and respond to others in ways which increase their understanding of us and our understanding of them;
- Behaving in ways which will increase compatibility and satisfaction;

Focus on:

- Enhancement of intercultural understanding;
- Developing stronger interpersonal skills;
- Encourage associative thinking and feeling
- Develop listening skills to add a “helping” interaction

As a conclusion, a key responsibility of the business leaders is to ensure that they are equipped with the knowledge and the skills to operate in a multi-cultural business environment. There is no single recipe how to conduct successful communication, however, disciplines like management, communication skills, organizational culture, organizational behavior, interpersonal relations in management, international relations, should be part of the learning and development programs of companies. Very often, those are global programs as part of global standards in business organizations, therefore localization is a must. In this particular case, the Bulgarian office experienced shrinkage in the business until the challenges in communication and trust in partnership were overcome. As soon as the image of the local organization was recovered the business in the country expanded. There is a direct correlation between successful business and adequate communications skills at all levels in a business environment.

References:

[1] Hart Research Associates, Employer Survey on Communication Skills, January 2013.

[2] British business dictionary,

<http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/communication.html>, Retrieved on 10.02.2018.

Bibliography:

Alexieva, S. (2006). *Business communications*. Sofia: NBU.

Paunov, M. (2009). *Values of the Bulgarians. Contemporary Portrait on European Background* Sofia: Stopanstvo.

Paunov, M. (1999). *Organizational Behavior*, Sofia: Ciela.

Ilieva-Koleva, D. (2014). *Methodology of presentational skills*, Sofia UNWE.

Ilieva-Koleva, D. (2016, Mar 17). *Evaluation of presentation skills Journal of International Scientific Publication: Economy & Business, Volume 7, Part 3 from:*

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/298746121_Evaluation_of_presentation_skills

Сп. „Реторика и комуникации“, брой 33, март 2018 г., <http://rhetoric.bg/>

Rhetoric and Communications E-journal, Issue 33, March 2018, <http://journal.rhetoric.bg/>

Special Issue – “Dialogues without borders: strategies of interpersonal and inter-group communication”, 29 – 30 September 2017, Faculty of Philosophy, Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”, Sofia, Bulgaria