
LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 13:12 December 2013
ISSN 1930-2940

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Contextualization and Business Communication

Steven Eliason

What is Contextualization?

Contextualization generally refers to seeing and doing things appropriately given the context of a conversation, action, etc. Dictionaries often state that it means placing an object or performing an action that is viewed favorably in that environment, conversation, etc. This concept is discussed in great detail in discourses on how to communicate our religious belief in a convincing manner to those who do not share our belief. It is also discussed in detail to help missionaries or visitors to a culture or geographical area other than their own to live appropriately in the new environment. In other words, we may broadly say that understanding the concept of contextualization will help us adjust to a new environment or context.

Confluence and Conflict of Several Cultures and Environments

Contextualization - A Theology of Gospel and Culture by Bruce J. Nicholls (Regent Publishing, 2003) identifies four different cultures involved in the process of contextualization when it is applied to the communication of Christian belief: the Culture presented in the Bible, the Culture of the early Western missionary (or any “foreign”/”international” missionary) through whom the belief was originally communicated, the Culture of the person who presently communicates the message, and the Culture of the people to whom the beliefs are taken. But this listing is not adequate and so Nicholls observes that the process of contextualizing “is further complicated since many people today are the product of several cultures – traditional and modern, religious and secular” (p. 9).

Complexity of Modern Business Communication

When it comes to business communication and global business, the matter is further complicated – modern educational systems are available to many around the world, but the process of interpretation depends on local as well as global business conventions.

There is a growing community of cross-cultural workers from the non-Western world. Even as the business leaders in non-Western countries are highly talented and are masters of the practices of modern and global business, there are also talented leaders of business from ethnic minority groups in the United States. Many of these leaders are second generation immigrants from other nations. They also need to master the process of contextualizing since they were brought up in an American context. Even though they may retain knowledge, understanding and even the practices of their first generation values, they are torn between their American expressions of values and the traditional wisdom of their parents.

In other words, the process of contextualizing continues to be significant even now.

Effective Communication

Nicholls identifies several important elements of contextualization. His focus is on effective communication so that the purpose of communication may be achieved with ease and speed. In a

business transaction, the way the leaders of transactions communicate with their counterparts around the world contributes to the successful conclusion of any deal or transaction.

Natural Conflict

Nicholls suggests that there are natural barriers between the supra-cultural and the cultural. We can translate this theological approach to the business world this way: One barrier arises because of the fact that there is some perception of threat or defeat or loss if the product is accepted and introduced in the business world of the recipient. What product will this replace? Another barrier is the possibility of misunderstanding the value of the product if the product is presented using alien cultural forms or terms of description, etc. Business leaders around the world may be acquainted with the use of English and may be well-versed in both day-to-day language and business language. But there are many who are only partially trained to do business-appropriate contextualizing.

Global Trade and Communication

Nicholls emphasizes true indigenization and contextualization. For business transactions, this means if a product is to be promoted in another country, producers should identify the usefulness of their product in that country. Their product, as well as the language used to promote the product, should be indigenized in the sense that the product is adopted easily in that country because of its relevance to their lifestyle, culture, and belief system. I saw an interesting example of this applied in many Singapore stores. If you ask for a humidifier, these are not available because in a tropical climate like Singapore additional moisture in the air is unnecessary. However, coolers/air conditioners to bring in cool air are readily available.

True and sincere understanding of worldview, values, institutions and customs are important for every business leader involved in global trade. Business leaders should recognize that changing worldviews instantly is not possible. But if their product is believed to be a positive contribution to society, and communicated in way that is understandable, people are likely to accept and purchase the product.

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 13:12 December 2013

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