

Language Barrier as a Hindrance to Communication: Lessons and Implications from the Tower of Babel Biblical Story

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Abstract

The tower of Babel story is a Biblical story found in the book of Genesis 11: 1-9. It is a story that narrates the descendants of Noah in the area of Mesopotami in Babylon who wanted to build a tower to reach the heavens. However, God knows their intentions and confuses their language so that they could not speak to each other. After confusing their language, they all abandon the tower of Babel project because communication fails as a result of language barrier.

1.0 Introduction and Background

The tower of Babel story is a Biblical story found in the book of Genesis 11: 1-9. It is a story that narrates the descendants of Noah in the area of Mesopotami in Babylon. After the flood, the descendants settled in a place known as Shinar. They communicate and make a decision to build a city and tower using baked bricks and mortar. The main goal of building the tower was to reach the heavens because of being proud and avoid being scattered abroad the earth. However, the Lord came down and saw their intentions and what follows is the Lord's plan to stop the tower of Babel project.

The Lord affirms that the descendants of Noah are able to unite and build the tower because of speaking one language. The Lord decides that the only solution to this is to confuse the communication aspect of the descendants. He therefore comes down and confuses their language and from here henceforth the building of the city and the tower stops because the project builders cannot understand each other. Therefore, language barrier becomes a hindrance to communication among the project builders.

“Come let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.” Genesis 11: 7.

1.1 Language and Communication; an overview

Language is a system of words or signs that a group of people use to express thoughts, feelings, and ideas to each other. The role of language is for the particular group of people to understand each other therefore being able to communicate (Merriam Webster online Dictionary). Language and communication are part of culture. Language gives cultural identities and boundaries of a particular group of people (Lee, 2003).

For communication to take place, the sender forms a message using a language and then sends that message to the receiver. The receiver, then, converts the message in the same language in order to comprehend what is being sent and consequently forms a response back to the sender in the same language (Altwies, 2004). According to several studies, interpretations and decoding of messages send in a particular language can create misunderstanding when communicating. The receiver ought to share the sender's views about what aspects of the intended message need to be communicated. The receiver on the other hand must share the sender's beliefs about the meanings attached to the communication for it to be meaningful. This shared approach between the sender and receiver is achieved through language. Therefore, communication relies upon a shared language and if there is language-barrier that is when the problems start (Wil Harzing & Feely, 2007).

1.2 Project Management and Communication

Project Management Information Systems (PMIS) refer to the tools and techniques used to collect, incorporate, and distribute the outputs of project management processes. It is used to maintain all aspects of the project from beginning to the end, and can include both manual and automated systems (Oyugi, Kidombo and Omware (2014). PMIS facilitates communication between the administration, workers, middle managers, associate organizations as well as other stakeholders. It combines project management and technology to create a global collaborative system because of paying attention to communications. Akram (2011) stated that without PMIS software, engineers and project managers will be unable to communicate project status sufficiently with all involved.

As noted above, it can be concluded that communication is essential during project implementation. If communication is hindered by any form of barrier including language then the project is likely to fail as was the case for the tower of Babel.

2.0 Empirical Literature Review

According to a study by Forbes Insights (2011) the impacts of language barriers to communication were significant. This is because when asked about consequences of language barrier, nearly two-thirds of respondents (67%) reported that miscommunications were leading to inefficiency. The study also found out that more than 40% of the respondents noted that miscommunication made collaboration difficult, and a similar percentage (40%) reported that productivity was lower than it should be due to language barriers. More than 20% of the respondents felt that language barriers made it difficult for managers to get the necessary respect from their workers.

Therefore the study concluded that while lack of communication could compromise productivity and management skills, the flip side is also true, communicating in a native language can increase productivity. More than 80% of respondents agreed that workers were more productive when their managers communicated with them in their native language (Forbes Insights, 2011).

According to Lee (2003) language differences become barriers to health care by making communication between patients and health care providers difficult at various points of contact with the health care system, including scheduling appointments and understanding instructions for follow-up care.

In a study carried out by Kim and Mattila (n.d) respondents reported that language barrier was the main cause of stress. The respondents reported that the difficulties in expressing themselves or understanding what the waiters were saying were the major problems. Owing to such language hindrances, the respondents blamed themselves for the problems they encountered unless the service failure was severe and obvious.

In study by Ranf (2010) on *cultural differences in project management*, it was found out that communication is very important when it comes to project management. Apart from other cultural differences, language plays a huge role in the success of projects.

A study by Kivrak, Ross and Arslan (2008) found out that there was a problem of communication with people from different cultural backgrounds. Language differences were noted as the biggest problem in efficient communication. It was noted that these problems can badly effect business processes and therefore reduce productivity. The study concluded that communication is the foundation for successful projects.

3.0 Lessons and Implications from the Tower of Babel Biblical story

The first lesson that is picked from the tower of Babel story is the role of communication in society. The descendants of Noah communicate and make decisions on building the tower. Therefore, communication is essential in society because it allows for decision making, communicates project goals and unites a community towards achieving a desired goal. This lesson can be applied in any organization or institution by paying attention to the channels of communication as well as language used during communication to ensure that they are effective in passing across appropriate messages to the team employees.

When God comes down, He clearly knows that communication in one language enabled the descendants of Noah to unite. Hence, it important to note that language creates a sense of unity among people or employees. The key lesson learnt is the fact that language allows for communication to be effective and implies that without a common language; communication won't be effective or it fails.

Therefore, through commonality of language in an institution, organizational culture is formed and nurtured. Language barrier creates a hindrance towards this organizational culture as the employees are unable to unite and focus on vision and mission of the organization. As noted in the tower of Babel Biblical recount, the descendants of Noah are unable to complete the tower because they could not communicate with each other as a result of language barrier.

It is argued that the absence of effective communications results in loss of interest, confusion, and hence, decline in quality work due to lack of guidance and stimulus (Oakland, 1995). In addition, achievement of a mission requires highly informed and motivated employees. Therefore, effective communication only takes place when the listener clearly understands the message that the speaker intends to send. It follows that communication systems and practices must be carefully designed, implemented and evaluated (Barker, 2010).

Thus, communication systems of any organization must be effectively be designed for smooth coordination. Without suitable information and understanding, it would mean that different groups of members of the same organization would be pursuing different goals. Systems must therefore be put in place to chart the organization's communicative functioning.

4.0 Conclusion

The tower of Babel biblical story looks or seems simplistic in narration but it has lessons that inform the cultural aspect of language and how it breeds communication. The story focuses on the crucial role of language and communication in society. Language and communication are essential in all facets of life as it allows for unity, decision making and team work spirit among other many merits of communication. Therefore, all organizations or institution should ensure commonality in communication and avoid language barriers for effective

communication that leads to completion of projects and achievement of goals or objectives set.

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