


Convergence and Divergence at Work: Cross-Cultural Interactions With a Difficult Co-Worker

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Communication at work often occurs among people from different power, culture, or language groups. Communicating with a difficult co-worker can become a major source of job dissatisfaction. This chapter introduces communication accommodation theory and the exit, voice, loyalty, and neglect model as theoretical lenses for exploring the case of a recent immigrant healthcare worker experiencing job dissatisfaction because of unsatisfying interactions with a co-worker. This chapter then applies these theoretical frameworks to discuss how tensions between co-workers can arise in communicative forms such as convergence, divergence, and overaccommodation and how an employee responds to a deteriorating work condition stemming from difficult interpersonal communication.

INTRODUCTION

The workplace is often a site of communication among people who are from different generations, power groups, and/or cultural or linguistic backgrounds. In this context, work demands and varying interests may escalate tensions that already exist among colleagues from differing backgrounds. Thus, communication at work in general, and communicating with a difficult co-worker more specifically, can become a source of job dissatisfaction (e.g., Ducharme & Martin, 2000). These challenges may give rise to some questions for those interested in organizational communication. For example, how do tensions arise from communication between two organizational members from very different backgrounds? How can an employee respond to a difficult interpersonal issue and address the resulting job dissatisfaction? By considering the case of an immigrant healthcare worker in the intensive healthcare setting, this chapter describes these communicative tensions, the motives behind them, and one employee's response(s) to adverse situations in the workplace.¹ This chapter starts with an overview of immigrants' experiences in the U.S. nursing workforce. Then, Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT; Giles et al., 1987) and the Exit, Voice, Loyalty, and Neglect (EVLN) model (Farrell, 1983; Hirschman, 1970) will be introduced as theoretical lenses for analyzing the case study. Next, the case of a Korean immigrant registered nurse (RN) having difficulties communicating with a co-worker will be presented. In the last section, the theoretical lenses will be applied to the case and the key concepts will be explained with specific examples.

Immigrants in the U.S. Nursing Workforce

Immigrants in the U.S. are overrepresented in healthcare occupations. As of 2018, over 1.5 million immigrants were employed as physicians, RNs, and pharmacists (Batalova, 2020). Nursing, in particular, is one of the fields that has seen an influx of foreign-born healthcare workers. The U.S. has “imported” foreign-born nurses to fill the labor shortage. As a result, foreign-born RNs represent a growing proportion of the nursing workforce. According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2020), foreign-born nurses account for 16.4% of the total nurses in the U.S. In fact, some states in the U.S. have twice as many foreign-born nurses compared to the national average: Nevada (36%), California (35%), Maryland (30%), and New York (29%). Over 20% of foreign-born nurses are either permanent residents or temporary visa holders. Although their English proficiency is higher than the total foreign-born population, 16% of foreign-born nurses in the U.S. reported speaking English ‘less than very well’ (Batalova, 2020).

Research on the experiences of foreign-born nurses has pointed out that they struggle with communication barriers, different expectations for nursing roles,

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