CHAPTER TEN:  
IDENTITY NEGOTIATION PERSPECTIVES

Learning Outcomes

LO 1: The core assumptions of Identity Negotiation Theory (INT)  
LO 2: INTs relation to Social Identity Theory

Whether in business or in private life, human beings communicate using a complicated interaction involving exchanges of both verbal and nonverbal messages. This interaction will be examined here as to how it is used in business dealings between and among two or more communicating professionals.

In a nutshell, all business communication is done to

1. CREATE AND PRESERVE A UNIQUE IDENTITY, i.e. to promote oneself in one’s role as a professional and/or also one’s business organization, and this promotion can be expanded to encompass any number of offered products and/or services  
2. SUSTAIN THAT IDENTITY, i.e. to maintain one’s position as a professional within a group, and this includes also the position of one’s business organization within a business/economic sector or niche  
3. SAFEGUARD THAT IDENTITY, i.e. to protect oneself and/or also one’s business organization from perceived or real threats and/or threaten individuals and/or those who are understood to be the sources of any threat  
4. CLARIFY THINGS, i.e. to explain, illustrate and achieve understanding of a business-related or other e.g. concept, idea, model, process  
5. TO DISCUSS and/or TO NEGOTIATE possible business dealings and bases for building the trust necessary to cooperate/do business together  
6. TO DEMONSTRATE that one is not a threat to others and/or is trustworthy

The list is not exclusive, but has been simplified to the key areas necessary in business communication. Regardless, as is evident from these six points alone, communication involves a
wide range of a complex motivations, all related to specific communication goals. Behind these motivations lies the spectre of identity. This raises several key questions:

- Who are you?
- Who do you think you are?
- Who do others think you are?
- How does your perception of yourself - and the perception of you that others have - shape communication in business?

Identity Negotiation Theory (INT)

In answer to the questions above, there are many theories and hypotheses in print used to explain identity and related issues. One such example is Identity Negotiation Theory (INT). However, the terms *identity* and *negotiation* in it need some explanation themselves.

Identity is a state that may be classified and defined on the basis of many criteria:

- culture
- ethnicity
- religion
- social class
- gender
- sexual orientation
- profession
- family role or status
- one’s personal image (which may or may not be true in the eyes of others)

Social identity theory argues that we have **social identities**, and these may include:

- ethnic membership identity
- social class membership identity
- family role identity (Ting-Toomey, 2005)
Social identity theory also argues that we have personal identities, which encompass any number of attributes unique to an individual and which are used by an individual to compare him/herself to others.

Thus, we have two main identities, a primary identity, which is influenced and shaped by our cultural identity, our ethnic identity, our gender identity and our personal identity. All four subcomponents are key facets of who we are. We can deny them, but they are always a part of us. Then, there is our situational identity, which is influenced by our role identities (as parents, teachers, coaches, colleagues), our relational identity (as relatives, friends, colleagues, lovers, spouses), and our facework identity (which includes all the communicative strategies involved in maintaining our ‘public face’ or social prestige). These three subcomponents can radically alter how we communicate with someone, depending on the situational context. Our language, choices of words, tones of voice, body language and attitudes change markedly between having a conversation as parents with young children and as parents speaking with our children’s teachers about a discipline problem at school. In both situations, we are parents, and yet, we are dissimilar in our communication in our manner, approach, style and behaviour. Both of our main identities influence each other and make up the total ‘us’. There are many other ‘identities’ we could discuss here, but we have chosen these examples, as they seem most common and relevant to business communication.

Regardless of how we view who we are, we all go through a social conditioning process which, combined with our own individual life experiences and repeated intergroup and interpersonal interaction experiences, form who we are, how we see ourselves, how we see others and shape our personalities for all interactions to come until we die.

Negotiation in INT is how we express our identities to and with others. Basically, negotiation here is the exchange of verbal and nonverbal messages to effect the minimum 6 (business) communication types introduced above vis-à-vis others, based on

- our personal-based self-identity images and/or
- the various socio-cultural group-based identity images of ourselves and others which are
- valid in a given (business) situation and
at a given (business) location. (Ting-Toomey, 1986)

**INTs relation to Social Identity Theory**

But let us first return to identity. Theories on what constitutes identity are complex and a matter of much scientific debate within and between several research disciplines. One of these, identity theory is a collection of opinions on the relationship between the mind and the body. In simplistic terms, are you your mind or your body or a combination of the two and, even more complex an issue: what is consciousness and in what states can the mind be said to be perceived as manifesting who you are? (Compare Armstrong, Lewis and Place) Then, there is Social identity Theory (SIT), which treats that part of the individual’s view of the self which is derived from belonging to a relevant social group and was used to explain intergroup behaviour. (See Tajfel & Turner) SIT is used to predict certain intergroup behaviours, based on perceived group status differences, perceived legitimacy and stability of those status differences and the perceived ability to move from one group to another. Furthermore, SIT suggests that an organisation can influence individuals in their behaviours, if the organisations are able to modify self-identity - or at least that part of self-identity that derives from the knowledge of and emotional attachment to a group (the organisation itself or a group within it). As one might guess, intergroup behaviour can raise a host of related (ethical) issues, such as prejudice, discrimination, marginalisation, mobbing, isolation and exclusion, all or any of which can cause serious problems at a business organisation and/or with one or any number of e.g. its employers/employees and/or business partners. These latter problems define identity as being what one is perceived or believed not to be. In other words, identity is used against someone and not as a means of categorising who someone is.

In other words, a clear sense of identity can become muddled by belonging to a group, as even a business organisation promotes a sense of belonging to a company culture which lends one a new kind of identity. Should an individual feel threatened in their identity and/or their position, or should an individual identify strongly with their company culture and seek to protect their organisation from perceived outsiders/threats, then we have the basis for conflict.
Conflict is the opposite of harmony; yet, harmony is not a state which is solely up to how two or more individuals treat or understand each other. Rather, harmony starts with the self and how one senses or understands how one is being treated. If:

- one has the feeling that one is being understood
- one has the feeling that one is being respected and
- one has the feeling of being affirmatively valued,

then there is an impetus for seeking harmony in communication with others. In cases where any of these three are lacking, then harmony in communication becomes less likely and most often leads to conflict. All these feelings are about perception, and perceptions can be misguided and wrong, but this is a fact of life. We do not have perfect understanding of ourselves, of others or of situations all the time. We lack facts, information, context and often speak before we think things over. We misread and misjudge others, and our moods restrict our ability to truly listen. Any number of factors can impinge on our willingness to listen with open minds to what others are trying to tell us. Fatigue, lack of sleep, a bad mood carried over from a completely different situation, job stress, money problems, love problems…any single one or any combination of these - among others - can make our committing ourselves to being fair partners in communicating with others impossible, and this inability can be compounded when faced with communication situations with others from cultures, ethnicities, belief systems and backgrounds about which we have little, no or even a false understanding.

Where does conflict in business relationships come from? There are any number of underlying reasons behind conflict, which are then expressed in various forms of communication. These causes include:

- **Personalities** or **value systems** that are incompatible, e.g. a strong versus a weak personality or a German versus a Spaniard debating a deadline issue
- **Job boundaries** that overlap or are unclearly defined, e.g. where there is a project manager and a project coordinator and neither the customer, nor the employees in those positions clearly understand the scope of their activities and their interrelationships - if any
• **Competition** over resources which are limited, including e.g. money, a company car, an iPhone, a corner office, a personal assistant

• **Department or group competition** within a company, e.g. procurement needs to consider lead times when placing orders for raw materials versus sales needing to promise potential customers faster delivery dates in order to win a contract

• **Inadequate communication**, e.g. when the wrong type of communication is chosen to explain a complicated problem. For example, WebEx audio calls are not as effective as face-to-face meetings when explaining valve corrosion and meter calibration issues.

• **Organisational complexity**, e.g. when a potential customer has no idea what your company departmental abbreviations mean and always turns to the wrong department, which produces mutual frustration and irrational anger.

• **Unreasonable or unclear policies, standards or rules**, e.g. when you demand 30 day payment due dates in order to sign the contract, when know the customer can only pay in 60 days, because of cash flow problems.

• **Collective decision-making**, e.g. whenever individuals representing various, somewhat diverging interests are forced to agree to something, in order to move business forward. For example, a British-owned company’s management demands that a Slovak Human resource manager organise a mandatory workshop for French employees in English to help them better serve English-speaking customers, to which the local French manager and employee union leadership must agree by law. They call a meeting for all involved and the shouting match begins. Will the British ever get their French employees trained properly?

• **Unmet expectations**, e.g. a product is not delivered on time.

• **Unresolved or supressed conflicts**, e.g. when production engineers are fed up with being blamed for late orders, yet sales keeps getting contracts which ignore manufacturing planning schedules, numbers of production lines and their lead times, as well as warnings on production slowdowns due to maintenance schedules. Sooner or later, the conflict will come to a head.

**Social Identity Theory** has its pros and its cons when studying how identity is affected by belonging to a group. One of its strengths is that SIT examines how conflict between groups is
not even necessary to lead to discrimination against an outsider. For example, resentment against foreign - albeit European - workers in British hospitals and the local tourism and hospitality industries has been blamed for being one of the underlying causes of the Brexit vote. Yet, studies showed that the foreign workers were not taking jobs from British subjects. (Compare Ashworth-Hayes & BBC) SIT also tries to explain “positive distinctiveness”, which occurs for in-groups. (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) One such example is again found in the United Kingdom, where especially the English used a self-reinforced attitude of English superiority dating back to at least the Victorian era to convince each other to argue themselves out of the European Union. (Randerson, 2018) SIT also explains in-group favouritism, conformity to norms and stereotypes. For example, the British and Germans have been friends again since at least the 1950s, yet British entertainment continues to poke fun at stereotypes of Germans dating back to both world wars. Where SIT falls short is that it fails to explain why in-group favouritism may result in violent behaviour towards outsiders, e.g. why would the supporter of one football club attack the supporter of another, when both are fans of football? In business, why would a general manager with a background in engineering repeatedly scream at, belittle and threaten a human resource manager from the same company for incompetence, yet only politely chastise one of the company’s engineers for the same mistake, especially if there is no history of conflict at all between them?

**Closing thoughts**

As can be read from the preceding chapter with its many examples, identity is a key factor influencing communication, as well as interpretation of how one communicates and is communicated with. One must remain mindful of all the factors that can shape identity, both as an individual and as part of a group - especially in a business setting. Many elements influence groups and individuals in how they behave towards others, whether they are aware of their behaviour or not. While identity can be thrust upon us through place of birth or ethnicity, identity can also be a choice, just as the way one expresses identity can be a choice, e.g. the decision to wear a national costume to a business meeting outside one’s country. In business, one must attempt to reduce conflict through pre- and proactivity, while respecting oneself and others.
**Recommended reading**

For more information on the topics introduced in this chapter, you may wish to read some of the following from the sources used above:


