

**UNDERSTANDING WORKPLACE DYNAMICS:  
COMMUNICATION STYLES BETWEEN TURKISH MANAGERS AND INDONESIAN  
EMPLOYEES IN A LABOUR-INTENSIVE SETTING**

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**Abstract**

This study examines how four Indonesian employees navigate daily communication with Turkish managers in a labour-intensive furniture factory in Central Java. Guided by Hofstede's cultural dimensions, Hall's high-context communication, and Ting-Toomey's Face-Negotiation Theory, the research uses descriptive phenomenology to identify key communication barriers and coping strategies. Data from in-depth interviews reveal five themes, including language challenges, top-down instructions, workers' interpretation efforts, peer support, and hopes for clearer communication. Findings highlight how cultural differences, such as firm tones and implicit messages, often lead to confusion, which employees manage through silence, peer consultation, and non-confrontational adaptation. Despite these strategies, all informants express a need for more empathetic and two-way communication from managers to reduce miscommunication and workplace stress.

*Keywords: intercultural communication, power distance, face negotiation, high-context culture, labour-intensive industry*

**Abstrak**

Penelitian ini meneliti bagaimana empat karyawan Indonesia menjalani komunikasi sehari-hari dengan manajer Turki di sebuah pabrik furnitur di Jawa Tengah. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan fenomenologi deskriptif dan teori dari *Hofstede's cultural dimensions*, *Hall's high-context communication*, dan *Ting-Toomey's Face-Negotiation Theory*, studi ini mengidentifikasi hambatan komunikasi utama dan strategi adaptasi yang digunakan pekerja. Data dari wawancara mendalam menghasilkan lima tema, yaitu tantangan bahasa, komunikasi satu arah dari atasan,

upaya pekerja dalam memahami maksud pesan, dukungan dari rekan kerja, dan harapan akan komunikasi yang lebih jelas. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa perbedaan budaya, seperti nada bicara yang tegas dan pesan implisit, sering menyebabkan kesalahpahaman, yang diatasi pekerja dengan diam, bertanya pada rekan, dan menghindari konfrontasi langsung. Meskipun strategi ini membantu, semua informan menginginkan komunikasi dua arah yang lebih empatik dari manajer agar kesalahpahaman dan stres kerja dapat dikurangi.

*Kata kunci: komunikasi antarbudaya, jarak kekuasaan, face negotiation, budaya konteks tinggi, industri furnitur*

## INTRODUCTION

Indonesian employees working under Turkish managers in labour-intensive industries face challenges in navigating intercultural communication in the workplace. As foreign direct investment (FDI) increases in Indonesia, reaching 744 trillion rupiah in 2023 (Reuters, 2023). Thus, more foreign-owned companies are operating in sectors like furniture production (Lipsey & Sjöholm, 2007, pp. 2–4). Among these, Turkish firms are gaining presence, supported by government initiatives to deepen bilateral industrial cooperation (Kompas, 2024, June 9). This brings culturally diverse teams into closer contact, where communication becomes essential not just for operational success but also for preserving workplace harmony.

While both Turkey and Indonesia are considered high-context, high power-distance, and collectivist cultures (Hofstede

Insights, 2023; Saputri & Saraswati, 2017, p. 291), their expectations around communication differ. Turkish managers often give top-down, direct instructions, expecting compliance, while Indonesian employees may interpret indirectness differently or hesitate to ask clarifying questions due to social hierarchies and face-saving concerns (Hall, 1976, as cited in Martin & Nakayama, 2018, p. 231; Khatri, 2009, pp. 3–7). As a result, miscommunication may occur even when both actors speak the same language (Indonesian). However, the problem is rooted in different interpretations of politeness, urgency, and authority.

Thus, this leads Indonesian employees to adopt various coping strategies, from relying on peer interpretation, silently guessing meanings, to avoiding interaction when unsure. One informant shared how unclear instructions led to delayed tasks: “...tidak saya pesankan karena tidak tahu

*kalau itu kebutuhannya mendesak” (I didn’t order it because I didn’t know it was urgent).* These choices reflect the face negotiation process, where employees balance obedience with the risk of disrespecting authority (Dai et al., 2022, p. 2).

Previous studies have focused on Indonesian interactions with Japanese or Western managers (Febiyana & Turistiati, 2019, pp. 33–44), but research on Turkish-Indonesian communication in labour-intensive industries hasn’t been explored yet. Given the growing presence of Turkish firms and the potential for both conflict and collaboration, there is a need to understand how workers interpret, adapt to, and manage intercultural workplace dynamics.

In conclusion, intercultural communication in such settings involves awareness of cultural meaning-making, emotional self-regulation, and adaptation strategies. This study seeks to explore how Indonesian workers interpret their interactions with Turkish managers, focusing on communication barriers, response behaviours, and the cultural norms that shape organisational life.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Interpretative Paradigm**

This study is guided by the interpretative paradigm, which views reality as subjective and socially constructed through individuals’ lived experiences and interactions. This paradigm allows the researcher to explore how Indonesian employees and Turkish managers experience and make meaning of intercultural communication in the workplace. Instead of seeking a single objective truth, the interpretive paradigm assumes that multiple realities exist, shaped by cultural, historical, and organisational contexts (Neuman, 2014, p. 94; Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 72).

In this research, understanding is drawn from the descriptive phenomenological method, which emphasises participants’ lived experiences as the primary source of knowledge (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2009, pp. 249–250). The researcher applies epoché, or bracketing, to set aside prior assumptions and engage directly with how participants describe their experiences. This is important when studying intercultural interactions, where meanings may not be easily observable or universally shared.

The interpretive paradigm further acknowledges the influence of power structures, cultural values, and organisational norms on how communication is understood. For example, when an Indonesian employee

hesitates to ask for clarification from a superior, it reflects not only individual choice but also values of hierarchy and harmony. This paradigm is therefore suitable for uncovering how culture and power shape communication in labour-intensive, multi-cultural settings.

By using in-depth interviews in a descriptive phenomenological framework, this study aims to understand the meaning-making process of employees as they interpret verbal and nonverbal cues, navigate workplace rules, and manage relationships in a setting with cultural differences.

### **Geert Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory**

This study uses Geert Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory to examine how cultural values influence workplace communication between Turkish managers and Indonesian employees. Hofstede's framework has six cultural dimensions, but this research focuses on three that are most relevant to workplace interactions: Power Distance, Individualism vs. Collectivism, and Uncertainty Avoidance (Hofstede Insights, 2023).

The dimension of Power Distance refers to the extent to which less powerful members of a society accept and expect unequal power distribution. Both Turkey and

Indonesia score high in this dimension, indicating a cultural acceptance of hierarchical relationships in which authority figures are respected and rarely challenged (Khatri, 2009, pp. 3–7). In organisational settings, this can influence communication flow, where subordinates may be reluctant to question superiors or express disagreement, especially in formal or public contexts.

The Collectivism vs. Individualism dimension highlights the degree to which people in a culture prioritise group cohesion over individual goals. Both countries are considered collectivist, meaning that harmony, loyalty, and group relationships are important over confrontation or personal expression (Saputri & Saraswati, 2017, pp. 291). In collectivist cultures, communication tends to be more indirect, and maintaining face and group cohesion often shapes how messages are delivered and received.

Uncertainty Avoidance reflects a society's tolerance for ambiguity and unstructured situations. Cultures with high uncertainty avoidance typically prefer clear rules, detailed instructions, and stable structures to minimise unpredictability. This dimension can shape how managers deliver instructions and how employees respond to situations that lack clarity.

Hofstede's framework provides a valuable tool for understanding how these cultural dimensions shape workplace behaviours and expectations. It helps explain why communication that may seem routine in one culture might be interpreted differently in another. In this research, the theory supports the analysis of how deeply rooted cultural values influence perceptions of authority, clarity, and interpersonal communication in a multicultural labour-intensive setting.

### **Edward T.Hall's High Context Communication Theory**

This research also applies Edward T. Hall's High-Context and Low-Context Communication Theory to explore how culture influences the way messages are conveyed and interpreted in the workplace. Hall (1976, as cited in Martin & Nakayama, 2018, p. 231) categorizes cultures based on their communication styles. High-context cultures rely heavily on nonverbal cues, shared background knowledge, and implicit meanings, while low-context cultures tend to prioritise explicit, direct, and detailed verbal communication.

Both Indonesia and Turkey are considered high-context cultures, where communication is shaped by relational cues, situational awareness, and indirect expressions (Saputri & Saraswati, 2017, pp.

291). In such settings, messages are often understood through what is unsaid rather than what is directly stated, and mutual understanding is expected to arise from shared social and cultural frameworks.

Hall's theory is relevant for this study because it offers a lens to interpret how communication miscommunication can still happen between two high-context cultures. Despite the similarities, differences in how implicit meaning is constructed or interpreted can lead to confusion, especially in task-oriented industrial settings. The theory supports the analysis of how contextual cues, such as tone, timing, or relational roles, influence the success or failure of workplace instructions and interactions.

In the framework of this research, Hall's theory helps explain how intercultural communication challenges may not always stem from language barriers, but rather from different expectations around clarity and interpretation. It contributes to understanding how workers and managers from different cultural backgrounds approach workplace communication differently, even when both belong to high-context societies.

### **Stella Ting-Toomey's Face Negotiation Theory**

To further understand intercultural communication dynamics in the workplace,

this research uses Stella Ting-Toomey's Face Negotiation Theory, which explains how individuals from different cultures manage conflict and maintain social harmony. The concept of "face" refers to a person's projected self-image, specifically with respect, dignity, and social value. According to the theory, different cultures prioritise different face concerns, either focusing more on maintaining one's own face (self-face), preserving the other person's face (other-face), or balancing both (mutual-face) (Ting-Toomey, 2005, as cited in Martin & Nakayama, 2018, p. 231).

In collectivist and high power-distance cultures, such as Indonesia and Turkey, people tend to prioritise other-face and mutual-face strategies to avoid confrontation and maintain group harmony. This influences how employees respond to conflict, misunderstanding, or unclear communication in hierarchical environments. Instead of direct disagreement or open criticism, individuals may use indirect strategies, remain silent, or seek support from peers, all of which are seen as face-saving behaviours designed to avoid causing embarrassment or disrespect.

Face Negotiation Theory is particularly relevant in examining intercultural interactions where power

imbalances exist, such as between foreign managers and local employees in a labour-intensive setting. It helps explain why communication challenges are not only about clarity or efficiency but also about emotional regulation, social respect, and the need to maintain relational balance within the workplace.

By using this theory, the study explores how Indonesian employees manage their responses to authority and how cultural expectations around politeness, respect, and hierarchy shape their choices during interactions with Turkish managers. The framework supports a deeper understanding of how communication strategies are influenced not only by language but by cultural norms about dignity and social harmony.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This research uses a qualitative method with a descriptive phenomenological approach to explore the experiences of Indonesian employees in communicating with Turkish managers. This approach focuses on understanding participants' lived experiences as they are, without adding interpretations from the researcher. It allows the researcher to focus on how participants

describe their communication in a multicultural workplace setting.

The study uses Colaizzi's (1978) method, which involves several steps to analyse the data. These steps include reading the transcripts, extracting important statements, formulating meanings, grouping them into themes, and writing a complete description.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews with four Indonesian employees who work at a Turkish-owned furniture company in Central Java, Indonesia. All participants were selected based on the criteria that they are those who frequently communicate with the Turkish managers. The interviews were done in Bahasa Indonesia and recorded with the participants' consent.

The researcher then transcribed the interviews and analysed them by following Colaizzi's method. During the analysis process, the researcher used bracketing (*epoché*), which means setting aside personal assumptions to stay focused on the participants' point of view (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2009, pp. 249–250). This helped ensure that the analysis reflected the participants' experiences rather than the researcher's opinions.

Through this method, the research was able to find key themes that show how culture, hierarchy, and communication style affect the interaction between Turkish managers and Indonesian employees in a labour-intensive workplace.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **1. Navigating Cross-Cultural Communication in a Hierarchical Workplace**

In this workplace setting, Indonesian employees face communication challenges when working under Turkish managers, especially related to how instructions are delivered and interpreted. These challenges are shaped by cultural differences, workplace hierarchy, and indirect communication norms.

#### **a. Communication Challenges**

Employees describe the communication style of Turkish managers as brief and lacking in context, or to the point. Instructions are usually short and to the point, without additional explanation or clarification. Workers shared that they sometimes struggle to understand what is

expected, especially when urgency or task details are not clearly stated. The firm tone of voice, different communication styles, and mixed sentence structures complicate understanding.

These differences in communication style create confusion, especially when employees are expected to interpret the manager's meaning based on limited verbal cues. This can make daily instructions feel vague or open to misinterpretation.

**b. Communication Dynamic Between Managers and Workers**

The overall pattern of communication follows a top-down. Managers give orders, and employees are expected to do them out without questioning or asking for clarification. Feedback is rarely encouraged, and many employees feel uncomfortable expressing confusion or uncertainty. The power dynamic between managers

and workers reinforces a one-way communication flow, where authority is respected and rarely challenged.

This dynamic creates emotional distance between the two sides. Even when managers appear friendly, the presence of hierarchy still limits open dialogue. Workers feel that speaking up may be interpreted as disrespectful, so they often choose to remain silent.

**c. Employees' Meaning-Making and Response**

In response to unclear communication, employees rely on their own interpretation strategies. They try to guess the meaning by observing tone of voice, facial expressions, or previous habits. Over time, some workers have become better at "reading" their managers, but this learning process is informal and based on trial and error.

When in doubt, employees often turn to their



coworkers to confirm instructions rather than asking the manager directly. Emotional restraint is also common where workers suppress frustration or confusion to maintain harmony. Many expressed that this silence is a way of adapting to the workplace culture, where challenging authority is avoided.

#### **d. Outcomes**

These communication challenges and response strategies lead to mixed outcomes. In some cases, employees manage to complete tasks correctly through interpretation and teamwork. In other cases, misunderstandings occur, leading to mistakes and emotional stress. Workers sometimes feel blamed for errors they didn't fully understand, which creates frustration and feelings of being misunderstood.

## **2. Collective Coping and Cultural Adaptation in Daily Tasks**

Indonesian employees adapt to intercultural communication challenges through peer-based coping and workplace connection. When confusion arises, most workers do not approach their Turkish managers directly. Instead, they rely on informal support systems with their coworkers. These peer relationships serve as a bridge to understand tasks more clearly and reduce emotional stress. Beyond task-related help, building social connections also becomes a way to maintain a supportive working atmosphere. Over time, employees also begin to express their hopes for better communication from their superiors.

#### **a. Peer Support in Clarification**

When instructions are unclear, the first step many employees take is to seek help from a more experienced coworker. Instead of asking the manager, due to fear of appearing disrespectful or unskilled, employees choose to clarify tasks with peers who are already familiar with the manager's style. This method

feels safer and more comfortable. It also creates a sense of teamwork, where coworkers support each other to make sure the job is done correctly.

This peer support becomes important in bridging the gap between unclear instructions and task completion. It also helps employees learn informal strategies to interpret communication patterns more effectively without direct confrontation.

**b. Building Harmony Through Shared Interaction**

Besides task-related clarification, maintaining good social relationships is another important coping method. Workers engage in light, friendly conversations with each other during breaks, which helps reduce tension and create a sense of togetherness. These informal moments become opportunities to build trust and emotional safety.

Employees also express that completing tasks together makes the job easier. Shared workflow allows them to check on each other's understanding and avoid mistakes. This collaborative atmosphere strengthens group cohesion and allows employees to adapt better to the communication style of their managers.

**c. Expectations for Better Communication**

While workers find ways to cope among themselves, they still express a clear hope for improvement from their superiors. Many employees wish that managers would show more empathy and understanding, especially when giving instructions. They hope for a leadership style that is more humane and aware of workers' challenges.

Workers also express a desire for managers to provide clearer explanations when needed. While they

understand that communication styles differ, they believe that simple changes like repeating instructions when confusion is visible or checking for understanding would help reduce mistakes and improve workflow.

These expectations reflect a need for more two-way communication and emotional awareness in the workplace. While workers continue to adapt through social strategies, they also hope for long-term improvements that make the workplace more respectful across cultures.

## **CONCLUSION**

This research explored how Indonesian employees respond to intercultural communication with Turkish managers in a labour-intensive workplace setting. The findings show that communication is mostly top-down, with little opportunity for feedback. Instructions are often short, firm, and lacking in detail, which causes confusion among employees. However, instead of asking directly, workers

tend to remain silent, interpret based on nonverbal cues, or ask peers for clarification. These choices reflect cultural values such as respect for authority, emotional restraint, and the need to maintain harmony.

Over time, employees adapt by building social connections, supporting each other through shared tasks, and learning their manager's communication patterns. Despite these coping strategies, challenges still exist. Employees continue to hope for more humane leadership and clearer communication from their superiors. The study highlights the importance of understanding cultural expectations in daily workplace communication and the emotional effort employees make to maintain a functional and respectful environment.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

This study focused on the perspectives of Indonesian employees in a Turkish-owned, labour-intensive workplace. Future research may consider exploring the experiences of Turkish managers to gain a more complete understanding of intercultural communication from both sides. Including the managerial viewpoint could help identify whether misunderstandings arise from different expectations, working styles, or assumptions about workplace norms.

Further research may also explore similar dynamics in other foreign-owned companies in Indonesia or compare communication patterns across different cultural pairings in labour-intensive industries. In addition, future studies could involve a larger number of participants. Using other mixed-methods may also provide deeper insight into daily communication practices and behavioural patterns in multicultural settings.

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