

Bridging the culture gap : a practical guide to international business communication

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2nd ed. London : Kogan Page 2008

Case 1: Project management in Japan (Collectivism/Communitarianism versus Individualism)

When Pieter, a South African businessman, secured a major infrastructural contract in Japan, he put together a team of locals from his firm's Japanese subsidiary to run the project. One night he had dinner with the team leader, Yoshinori, a man in his late forties. The conversation was rather flat, so Pieter started talking about the performance of their respective teams in the recent rugby World Cup. 'Your team was absolute rubbish', he said jokingly, and then waited for Yoshinori to make some similar comment about the South Africans. But Yoshinori just nodded and smiled. So Pieter tried again: 'But I guess that's normal. I mean, you don't exactly top the league in any sport, do you?' Again Yoshinori nodded and smiled. Pieter was very frustrated: all red-blooded males enjoy making fun of other people's sporting ability; so why didn't this guy start mocking the South African team? As he left the restaurant, Pieter was beginning to wonder whether Yoshinori was the right kind of person to run such an important project.

The next morning, he decided to replace Yoshinori with Takashi - an MBA graduate (in his late twenties) from a top American university - who was working in a junior position on the project. Pieter spoke first to Yoshinori and then to Takashi. The former reacted to the news that he was to be moved sideways with extremely good grace. But, when Takashi was told about his promotion, he seemed both dejected and terrified.

DISCUSS:

Why did Yoshinori not make a similar negative comment about the South African team?

Why was Takashi not pleased with the promotion?

What can Pieter do to rescue the situation?

Case 1 solution:

Over dinner that evening, a puzzled Pieter discussed Takashi's reaction with a close Japanese friend. His friend nodded wisely and said: 'The nail that sticks up will be hammered down.' Pieter frowned: 'What does that mean?' he asked. 'It's a well-known Japanese proverb', his friend replied. He then went on to explain that moving someone of Takashi's age so quickly and so publicly up the hierarchy was rather unusual. Takashi was probably embarrassed to be pushed forward in this way. And he would find it hard to earn the respect of his team members. Next day, much to Takashi's relief, Pieter reinstated Yoshinori as team leader.

If you come from an individualist culture like Pieter, you probably think it is perfectly normal to reward an individual's effort with public praise or rapid promotion. But, as his experience with Takashi shows, people from group-oriented cultures will often feel embarrassed to be treated differently from their peers.

Adapted from: Bridging the culture gap: a practical guide international business communication
2nd ed. London : Kogan Page 2008

Case 3: Introducing a new appraisal system in Spain (achievement versus ascribed status; specific versus diffuse)

Sarah worked at the London HQ of an American investment bank. As HR manager, it was her job to ensure the smooth introduction of a new 360-degree appraisal system in all of the bank's offices in Europe.

A 360-degree appraisal means that your performance is assessed not only by people above you in the hierarchy, but also by your peers and subordinates. In some cases, the company's clients are also invited to submit their comments.

But the Spanish were refusing to cooperate. While their managing director and HR manager both claimed to be in favour of the system, the other senior managers were not. Sarah had sent numerous e-mails to the two men suggesting ways in which the system could be implemented, and had also spoken to each of them several times on the phone. But their message was always the same: 'We agree that the system should be introduced. But our senior managers are resisting it strongly. They say it simply isn't right for Spain.'

So why did the Spanish find this idea so hard to accept?

The idea that businesses should be run along meritocratic lines is becoming more and more common. However, in many cultures how fast you work your way up the hierarchy doesn't just depend on how well you perform. For the Spanish bankers in the situation above, age and gender were also important factors. In Spain, and other given status cultures, managers often treat their subordinates in a paternalistic way. They look after them much as a father looks after his son. Not only will they champion them for promotion or the best jobs, and protect them from intra-company disputes, but they will also advise them on personal matters.

How could a subordinate possibly be asked to anonymously appraise such a father figure's performance? The idea was completely incompatible with the Spanish managers' cultural values. Their attitude was quite clear: 'I look after my employees and if they're not happy they will find some way to tell me' - just as a son would tell his father.

In Spain - and Italy, too - it's not unusual for a senior manager who has retired to retain considerable influence over the staff in the company he used to work for. Many Northern Europeans are surprised when they discover this. Sarah was no exception. But when, during an informal chat, the Spanish bank's HR manager suggested that their retired CEO might be able to help her, she was perfectly willing to try playing the game the Spanish way. She called the influential 65-year-old and arranged to have dinner with him. Naturally, she let him choose the restaurant and pay the bill. And, even though it went against her feminist principles, she dressed and behaved to charm. During the meal, they discussed a wide range of different topics, but none of

them related directly to business. It wasn't until the coffee and liqueurs arrived that the retired CEO briefly mentioned the 360-degree appraisal system. He knew all about the problems Sarah had been having. But he was sure the managers would accept the idea once he had spoken to them. A few months later, Sarah was able to report that the Madrid office had agreed to implement the system provided it was modified to suit local conditions.

DISCUSS

How would you feel about a 360 appraisal system? So, for example if you were a man in your fifties, for example, how happy would you be to report to a woman in her early thirties? If you're from a fairly mono-cultural society, how would you feel if your company appointed a foreigner as CEO? If you and most of your colleagues went to one of the top universities, how would you all react if the company recruited someone with no academic qualifications as your new boss?

Is a similar situation likely in your own country?

Sequential and synchronic cultures

Read through the list ask and yourself what you agree with the most. Then think about how someone with the opposite approach may perceive you.

SEQUENTIAL CULTURES	COULD BE PERCEIVED AS:	SYNCHRONIC CULTURES	COULD BE PERCEIVED AS:
People tend to do one thing at a time		People tend to do multiple things at a time	
Times are precise and punctuality is valued		Times and deadlines are guidelines that people may intend to meet but won't always	
Time is limited – time is a resource that needs to be efficiently used		Time is a tool, a subjective, a mouldable concept	

SEQUENTIAL CULTURES	COULD BE PERCEIVED AS:	SYNCHRONIC CULTURES	COULD BE PERCEIVED AS:
Logic, efficiency and speed are the focus of business		Relationships are the focus of business and will improve efficiency	
Tasks are sometimes secondary to time		Sticking to time is secondary to building relationships	
Meeting deadlines is demanded		Sticking to time is secondary to building relationships	
The future is a continuation of the present		The future is interconnected with the past and present	