

### **WHY EAST AND WEST CLASH WHEN COMMUNICATING NONVERBALLY**

Asians communicate less directly and less explicitly than Westerners. Intercultural communication pundits say that Asians' manner of communication is conducive to a **high-context** social environment. People who communicate with each other in this kind of environment assume that each of them possesses a complete knowledge of the contextual background information regarding the subject matter they are discussing. In high-context groups, much communication can be implied; it need not be stated explicitly. In high-context (as opposed to low-context) societies, communication between people can rely more on body movements (called *kinesics*), facial expressions, eye contact, and other nonverbal signals, to get a message across. Few words are needed to express an opinion. A slight change in an expected gesture can send a clear message, because the context for the message is universally understood. High-context communication environments place

a premium on the personal relationship among communicators (to communicate at all, the communicators need to know each other extremely well). People from other cultures are recognized immediately as outsiders, because they are not trained to respond to the hidden cues being expressed.

North Americans learn to communicate in a melting-pot environment; explicit verbal communication is necessary, to exchange messages with people from widely varying cultural backgrounds. The context of the information has to be communicated before the information itself can be exchanged.

Nonverbal signals and unspoken assumptions continue to figure prominently in Asians' personal and business relationships. The best known Asian words that refer to communicating without words are *haragei* or «belly language», in Japan, and *nunchi* or face reading», in Korea. *Nunchi* refers to the intuitive power to know what another person is thinking, by reading nonverbal cues. Koreans believe deeply in the powers of extrasensory perception and intuitive knowledge or insight; they use the term *tongchal yok* to describe «the visceral feeling by which Korean businessmen often make decisions—as opposed to using intellectual reasoning or logic».

The problem for Westerners in Asia is that East and West often don't agree on the meaning of nonverbal cues and signals. In the Philippines, for example, a jerk of the head and chin downward means «No» and a jerk upward means «Yes». When Filipinos raise their eyebrows in response to a request, the gesture means «No». Indians (and Bulgarians, incidentally), when they mean «Yes», use a head gesture that is the same as Westerners' for saying «No». A smile or a laugh in Asia may mean embarrassment or disapproval, as well as happiness and approval, as in the West. Direct eye contact may be considered an intimidation tactic by Asians, when actually Westerners are only trying to give the Asians undivided attention.

«Nonverbals» are hard to control, because they are mostly automatic and spontaneous; sometimes, people simply cannot avoid «communicating.» Any action if noticed and interpreted by another, 'communicates'—whether or not it communicates what was intended, and even whether or not the person was aware of having communicated anything at all.» When anger begins, the posture stiffens, the eyes wid-

en and the stare becomes intense, the volume of the voice rises, and the head movements become jerky. Without knowing it, people are communicating that they have grown impatient and irritated. Asian counterparts, being sensitive to nonverbal signals, read the reactions as if they are lettered on a billboard: «I am impatient. I am irritated».

American conversational style does not allow silent periods. They have idioms to express our distaste for silence: «dead air» and «pregnant pause.» They learn in sales training seminars that silence on the part of a customer is a death-knell to a potential sale. «Never stop talking» is a key component of Western sales practice, and the best salespeople often possess a so-called gift for gab. Although we sometimes say silence is golden, it makes us uncomfortable when it occurs during conversation, especially when discussing business.

Asians feel much more at ease with silence than Westerners do. Throughout Asia, businesspeople use silence as a persuasive tactic toward their Asian business associates—a «polite» reaction to an unacceptable offer. Asians, in general, feel more comfortable than Westerners do, in taking their time to collect their thoughts and formulate a clear reply. Asian negotiators may have to ponder for a moment whether they are allowed to answer a question, given that they may only be the mouthpiece for a cast of players not present at the meeting.

During negotiations in Asia, North Americans generally feel so uncomfortable with silence that they make unneeded concessions. Fear of silence costs Westerners millions of dollars! One Westerner negotiating in Japan repeatedly dropped his prices, because he took silence to mean a rejection of an offer. On one deal, he dropped his price \$750,000 because he couldn't wait out 30 seconds of silence. His Japanese counterpart had thought his first price was fine.

Western discomfort with silence also breeds mistrust. When the Westerner's original price is so quickly lowered, without the Asian's even asking that it be lowered, isn't it probable that it was padded? ✓ The key is to present an offer and wait out the ensuing silence, without interrupting. Interruption indicates weak resolve, flexibility in the offer, and a flawed proposal. The quiet wait, while maintaining proper manners, may be the longest wait of one's business life, but breaking the silence will mean the proposed terms won't be accepted.