

WHY WESTERNERS CLASH WITH ASIANS IN VERBAL COMMUNICATION

The clash of communication styles starts with Westerners' penchant for frankness and Asians' need to preserve and protect face. North Americans use a direct, rather impersonal, and often confrontational approach when they speak with business associates, whether at home or overseas; they maintain that business discussion is not to be taken personally. Quite the opposite, Asians relate to their business associates in a very personal manner; they maintain that business relations *are* to be taken personally. Hints and hidden messages in gestures and euphemisms are meant to convey what may be offending a listener, but they often go unnoticed by the untrained Westerner, to the consternation of the face-conscious Asian.

Asians value politeness and the maintenance of respect and trust between partners. The Japanese use the term *sasshi* to describe the compassion and sensitivity one must show another person, if a good feeling or mood (called *kimochi*) is to imbue an encounter between two people. North Americans are typically less sensitive and emotionally involved than Asians, when communicating in a business setting. North Americans are typically task-oriented and time-efficient; unfortunately, Asians, throughout the Pacific Rim, have little respect for frank and aggressive people because such behavior is associated with rustic or ill-bred character. People who are too direct and assertive may be considered not only impolite but downright risky to associate with. The confrontation they often provoke can permanently mar or destroy relationships between businesspeople and corporate groups.

Westerners' frankness and pragmatic communication style might be tolerable to Asians, if we did not go a step further and make confrontational debate our favorite mode of discussing ideas with business associates. Two North Americans discussing a political conflict may lash out at each other repeatedly, before they decide to agree, disagree, or change the subject. One of the biggest conflicts in communication style between Japanese and people from Euro-American cultures is that of confrontational debate as a vehicle of discussion. Debating an issue is, for Westerners, half the fun of resolving it. Unfortu-

nately, we tend to carry over the debating style when discussing business in Asia. In the Asian style of discussion, individuals present their ideas, then allow others to do the same. All parties seek common ground on which to stake a compromise without ever having to overtly reject each other's ideas openly.

When, for example, our Japanese participant sets forth a set of ideas and is suddenly attacked by some American members of the online discussion group, he is put into a defensive position. The American members may not actually disagree with him, but may merely be taking opposing positions for the sake of discussion, engaging in an intellectual sport typical of Western communication style. However, the Japanese person may feel that his personhood is being attacked, as he is not used to separating his ideas from his personality. Why should he waste his time when the rules of the game are such that one side wins and the other loses, rather than both sides learning and moving together to some middle ground, especially when it appears that those he is talking with have already made up their minds that they are, in fact, correct and he is wrong?

When conflicts occur during a negotiation, Asians will usually grow more silent, using their posture to indicate their discomfort. They may reply in abstract terms, avoiding the issue by smiling and suggesting that another topic should be discussed. Conversely, North Americans like to get conflicts out in the open, defending themselves overtly and aggressively. Believing such frank debate crass and lacking in subtlety, Asians disclose less and less, and resist entering the argument. Thus, Westerners' transparent approach to resolving conflict results in an additional clash that may stifle communication and threaten further business relationships in Asia.

Smooth conversations between Asian and North American executives may be sabotaged by personality differences as well as differences in professional background and experience. Over half of Japan's company directors possess a background in engineering. Most American company directors know little about engineering; one-third of them are lawyers, one-third are accountants, and the rest rose through the ranks as managers. North American marketing people have trouble trying to communicate with engineers at their own companies! The marketing people typically approach problems and express themselves

creatively and informally; the engineers are typically logical and analytical in their communication style and problem solving. The divergence is multiplied when creative, extroverted managers and marketers from the West sit down to communicate with more formal and procedure-oriented engineer-types in Asia.

Most Westerners who go to Asia as expatriates can be characterized as extroverted people; they are corporate superachievers, self-motivated dealmakers, and cross-cultural adventurers. The Asians they meet tend to be more introverted and conforming. The extroverted Westerners reveal their personalities openly and informally; the Asians practice restraint, and they seem evasive and defensive to the North Americans. The loquacious Westerners may be regarded in Asia as all-talk-and-no-substance.

When Westerners meet new people, they quickly allow the new acquaintances to become informal and chummy with them. They even expect such behavior in those they meet. However, they don't permit new acquaintances to experience their innermost private self unless a longer-term relationship develops; even then, they will probably protect their private self. Overall, Westerners become informal rapidly, but are rarely willing to let down their defenses any further, after the informality is established. They prefer to maintain a «business familiarity» with their business associates, rather than permit them to see their innermost character, conflicts, hopes, dreams, and desires.

Most Asians maintain a heavy facade of formality during first meetings (how heavy, depends on whether the person is from more formalistic North Asia or less formalistic South Asia). However, once they deem new acquaintances appropriate and acceptable—that is, trustworthy—they take them straight through their exterior defenses to their innermost self. Westerners who are admitted beyond Asians' defenses find themselves in the most private zones of the Asians' emotional life. Confidence about intimate problems, personal struggles, kids, and family, as well as business endeavors can catch startled listeners off guard. Many of the expatriates had been surprised repeatedly at the intimate thoughts and feelings shared with them by their Asian associates. Some Westerners become uncomfortable and clam up, when conversation gets too personal and unrelated to business. North Americans, although glib and informal at the start, are often reticent about allowing Asians

(or anybody else) to share their deepest emotions and personal dilemmas. Some Asians wonder whether North Americans *have* an emotional self; more than a few Asians have decided that the personable-from-the-start Westerner is a «paper carp hanging in the May wind with its huge mouth open and nothing inside,» as intercultural expert Mitsuko Saito says. The hollowness disappoints Asians who want to forge a personal bond alongside the business bond.

It North Americans who have become privy to Asians' inner self must be extremely sensitive and careful. A glib or sarcastic comment can be devastating to the confiding person and will be considered a betrayal of trust, which can sever the business relationship and create lasting resentment.