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## International Meetings

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This month, we discuss the skills required for effective multi-cultural meetings. If we are hosting a meeting *in our own culture*, there are rules to follow. Some of these rules are even more important when we work *across* cultures; some of them are modified.

An example of this is the preference of Germans, Scandinavians and Americans to get on with it. They see no point in delay. In England, France, Italy and Spain it would be considered rude to broach the issues immediately. It is more civilised to ease into the subject after exchanging pleasantries.

### **Posture & Proximity**

How close or distant should you stand or sit with your colleagues? Is it appropriate to touch them? Will they touch you as a sign of friendliness? How should you sit? How reserved or informal should you be? What should you do with your hands?

Oriental, Nordic, Anglo-Saxon and Germanic people mostly regard space within 1.2 metres of the self as their 'territory' with strangers, with a smaller bubble of 0.5 metres in radius for close friends and relatives. Mexicans and Arabs happily close within half a metre of strangers for business discussions. Observe your colleagues' posture and body language and match what is appropriate.

### **Clear statement of good intentions**

After a short period of small-talk, the common term in the West is "let's get down to business". By contrast, other cultures see meetings as the forum for building personal relationships and strengthening business links. Getting down to the task comes later on. Therefore, as your colleagues might not read your signals; it is useful to *tell them* that you hope for a positive outcome/you need to obtain a decision on a project/you are glad to be working with them.

### **Eye Contact**

Be aware that your eye contact may make your colleagues uncomfortable. Eyes are among the more expressive parts of the body. In some cultures, speakers will maintain close eye contact all the time as they deliver their message. This is particularly noticeable in Spain, Greece and Arab countries. Such close eye contact (others may call it 'staring') implies dominance and reinforces one's position and message. In Japan this is considered improper and rude. Japanese avoid eye contact 90 per cent of the time, looking at a speaker's neck while listening and at their own feet or knees when they speak themselves.

In other societies, it is easy to detect 'status' amongst delegates by observing people's eye behaviour. Lower-ranking people tend to look at superiors, who ignore them unless they are in direct conversation with them. When anyone makes a joke or says something controversial, all the subordinates' eyes will switch immediately to the most senior individual to assess their reaction.

### **Intonation, emphasis and sshhh...**

*Don't* deliver the important information or idea in a throwaway manner; *do* use vocal colour and stress to make it clear and drive it home. *Don't* keep on talking after you make your point; *do* pause to let it sink in.

Finns and Japanese consider they make an important contribution to the discussion with their culture-oriented silence. 'Those who know do not speak; those who speak do not know' is a second-century Chinese proverb with which the Finns, like the Japanese, agree. Silence means that you listen and learn; talking a lot merely expresses your cleverness, perhaps egoism and arrogance. Silence protects your individualism and privacy; it also shows respect for the individualism of others.

Elsewhere, the American habit of 'thinking aloud', the French desire for debate and performance, the Italian preference for intimate discussion, the rhetoric of the Arabs – all these are communicative styles designed to gain the confidence of the listener, to share ideas which can then be discussed and modified.

### **Structure**

Make sure you structure your message carefully and clearly. Signpost it: *"There are three questions I would like to discuss today"*. Remember, your colleagues may well be operating in a second language. Make it easy for them.

State or agree, in advance, what ground the conversation is to cover. Give frequent indications of how the journey is going - especially when changing direction. Be alert to the level of politeness/formality/intimacy being applied by your partner. Choose your words and behaviour to fit. Look for opportunities to share humour – but be careful.

### **Asking Questions**

You may have different viewpoints and assumptions from your international colleagues. Check and test continually. *"Let me give that back to you in my own words to see if I've got it straight..." OR "Why don't you rephrase that for me - see how it sounds in your words..."*

### **Visuals**

When presenting, find out your audience's preference for visuals. Do they subscribe to the less is more principle, or do they need more visuals to help them follow your presentation (particularly if they are not native speakers of the language of the presentation). Don't depend on getting your message across only through hearing. Use wipe-boards, or even flip-charts taped to the wall.

### **Technicalities and Numbers in Writing**

Is 1<sup>st</sup> April 01/04/2012(UK) or 04/01/2012(USA)? Is it \$2,500(USA, UK) or \$2.500 (Continental Europe)?

### **Alternative Communication Methods**

If you have participants who are normally very quiet or non-participatory, you may wish to consider alternative methods of communication. Prior to the meeting, email colleagues questions regarding the forthcoming topic. Give them open-ended questions as to their opinions. Ask them to email back their replies which you can then use to instigate their contribution to the meeting. Equally, if the language skills of your colleagues are not particularly high and they are uncomfortable contributing, ask them to write down their opinions. Either use a white board or offer to take suggestions and opinions on paper.

An alternative way to respect cultural preferences and obtain the information you need is to break people up into small groups where they can *collectively* offer their opinion. Then no-one individual has to be responsible for making a negative analysis and not everyone has to speak to the entire group.

### **Be yourself**

Finally, you might find yourself tempted to copy your opponent's mannerisms and speech patterns. Don't!