



Conflict and Disputes

Direct versus indirect communication

Some cultures, like the Americans, Dutch, Scandinavians and Germans use a frank, explicit and direct style of communication. You know what they mean, even if it sounds too direct or even aggressive. Other cultures, like the Japanese, British and Arabs are indirect, diplomatic and implicit. This difference in communication style causes major misunderstandings and suspicion. Very often, explicit communicators assume that indirect cultures are confusing them on purpose, while the implicit communicators suppose the explicit cultures are rude or boorish.

The differences between direct and indirect communication can cause serious damage to relationships when team projects run into problems. An American manager discovered several flaws in her company's customer-data system that would significantly disrupt company operations. She pointed these out in an email to her American boss and her Japanese team members. Her boss appreciated the direct warnings; her Japanese colleagues were embarrassed because she had violated their norms for uncovering and discussing problems. Their reaction was to provide her with less access to the people and information she needed to monitor progress. They probably would have responded better if she had pointed out the problems indirectly – for example by asking them what would happen if a certain part of the system was not functioning properly, even though she knew full well that it was malfunctioning and also what the implications were.

So, if you are from a direct culture communicating with an indirect partner, remember to soften your style of language. Nurture the relationship, keep your language friendly, and avoid making any conflict personal. If you are from an implicit culture, don't assume the person from the explicit culture is ignorant because they want to go through the issue step by step, even if to you it seems a waste of time, or they want a clear agenda for the session with frequent summaries. Be positive, and remember to put as much effort into spending time to build the relationship as in the issues themselves.

Trouble with accents and fluency

Although the language of international business is English, misunderstandings occur because of non-native speakers' accents, lack of fluency or problems with translation. These also influence perceptions of status or competence. Non-fluent team members may well be the most expert on the team, but their difficulty communicating knowledge makes it hard for the team to recognise and utilise their expertise. Non-native speakers then become less motivated to contribute or anxious about their performance evaluations and future career prospects.

In some companies, ground rules have been set for teams. For example, at the formation stage, members are told that they are chosen for their task expertise, not their fluency in English, and that the team is going to have to work around language problems. In this example, the manager advised team members to acknowledge their accents up front. She said that they should tell colleagues "I realise I have an accent. If you don't understand what I'm saying, just stop me and ask questions".

We recommend that you consider carefully how you communicate with non-native speakers. Face to face contact is best, or if this is impossible, the telephone will probably get you better results than e-mail, even if you feel more comfortable with this medium. Look at your partners, listen carefully to what they say, and summarise frequently with your partner, or write it down.

As we mentioned last month, observe your colleague's level in English - how easily he finds his words, how natural he sounds, how hard he has to concentrate to follow you. Limit your own vocabulary. Any idea can be expressed with a toolkit of 1000 words, plus a bit of technical or specialist jargon. Avoid funny tricky little idioms. If you catch yourself using one, supplement it with a clear, orthodox version of the same idea. Speak clearly, but avoid the "watch-my-lips" syndrome.

Different attitudes towards hierarchy and authority

A challenge inherent in multi-cultural team-work is that by design, teams have a rather flat structure. But team members from some cultures, in which people are treated differently according to their status in an organisation, are uncomfortable in flat teams. If they defer to higher-status team members, their behaviour will be seen as appropriate when most of the team comes from a hierarchical culture; but they may damage their credibility if most of the team comes from an egalitarian culture. As a result of differing cultural norms, team members believe they've been treated disrespectfully and whole projects fall apart. In a Korean-US joint venture, the American members of a team were having difficulty getting information from their Korean counterparts, so they complained directly to higher-level Korean management. The higher-level managers were offended because hierarchy is strictly adhered to in Korean organisations and culture. It should have been their own lower-level people, not the US team members, who came to them with a problem. And the Korean team members were mortified that their bosses had been involved before they themselves could brief them.

Conflicting norms for decision-making

Cultures differ enormously when it comes to decision-making – particularly how quickly decisions should be made and how much analysis is required beforehand. Not surprisingly, US managers like to make decisions very quickly and with relatively little analysis by comparison with managers from other countries.

A Brazilian manager at an American company who was negotiating to buy Korean products destined for Latin America tells this story "On the first day, we agreed on three points, and on the second day, the US side wanted to start with point four. But the Korean side wanted to go back and re-discuss points one to three!". Eventually, the Americans realised that they couldn't impose their way on the other cultures. Managers from other cultures, may decline to share information until they understand the full scope of the project. The Koreans understood they couldn't simply ignore the desire of their American counterparts to make decisions quickly. The best solution was to make minor concessions on the process. For example, the American managers learned to keep their impatient bosses away from team members and give them frequent, if brief, updates. The Koreans learned to be more explicit about what they needed, for example stating "We have to see the big picture before we talk details".

Multicultural teams often generate frustrating management dilemmas. However, the good news is that cultural challenges are manageable. Managers and team members must learn to develop mutual respect for each other which can only be fostered through openness, having time for each other, developing and using cross-cultural, interpersonal and listening skills.