

Key Culture Concepts: Communication Styles

Reading Between the Lines: Effective American-Chinese Intercultural Communication in the Workplace

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Have you ever felt that when communicating with your Chinese colleagues, they were speaking in code or expecting you to read their minds? That they would say one thing but then do another?

In my first blog post, I briefly described low-context American culture as being more individualistic and action-oriented when compared to high-context Chinese culture, which is more collective and intuitive in nature. Another very important differentiating factor between low-context and high-context cultures is the degree to which the cultures rely on background information or context and implied meaning (some Americans would say “mind-reading”) when communicating.

Direct vs. Indirect Communication

Coming from a low-context culture, Americans generally say what they mean directly without expecting the listener to detect and interpret implied meaning. In high-context Chinese culture, however, the speaker (and listener) take into account a variety of background circumstances (such as face, hierarchy, and relationships) when communicating. This often results in communication being more indirect, particularly with regard to sensitive topics or expressions of opinion, so that the speaker can avoid directly causing loss of face or disruption of hierarchy among conversation participants. When communicating in a high-context culture, the listener must not only listen to what is said, but also must read between the lines for implied, yet unstated meaning.

High-Context Code Words

Trying to read between the lines of communication can be particularly difficult for Americans working in China, seeing as we're not as familiar with the cultural context that our Chinese colleagues draw on when communicating.

The most obvious example of indirect, high-context communication is the all-purpose phrase “It's not convenient,” (不方便 *bù fāngbiàn*). The first time I received this response after having asked for a small favor from a colleague, I was quite confused. From my perspective, the favor was quite simple and would only take a couple of minutes, so I couldn't understand why it was seen as inconvenient. What I didn't realize at the time was that convenience had nothing to do with it. Rather, Chinese colleagues often say “It's not convenient” as a way to politely imply “I can't/don't want to do it for some unstated reason.”

There are many other typical phrases or high-context code words that Chinese use to politely indicate disinclination to follow through on something. For example, as intercultural communication expert, Jason Patent, explained at an event at the American Chamber of Commerce in China last year, “Let's talk about it tomorrow” often implies “Let's forget it.” Or as Linda W. L. Young points out

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in her book *Crosstalk and Culture in Sino-American Communication*, “We’ll study the matter” (研究研究 yánjiū yánjiū) or “We’ll think it over” (考虑考虑 kǎolù kǎolù,) often mean the lower ranking person will refer the matter to their superiors. If you want to get an answer, you will have to ask again later, otherwise the answer is essentially “no.”

Polite Neglect

The common thread between these typical indirect responses is the intention of the speaker to reject the issue at hand through polite neglect. To untrained, low-context, American ears, each above phrases promises future action of some kind on the part of the Chinese speaker; however, that action likely will never happen. Chinese understand – and expect their listener to understand – that those phrases, combined with subsequent neglect of the matter, are a way to say “no” that avoids embarrassing the person being rejected or coming across as rude.

Polite neglect can take a variety of forms. The person might postpone the follow-up discussion or meeting multiple times. Or they might give repeated vague excuses that are obviously not true. For example, in certain circumstances saying “I have something else to do” (我有点别的事 wǒ yǒu diǎn biéde shì) is basically the Chinese equivalent of the infamous American excuse for getting out of a date: “I have to wash my hair.” Other times you might just never hear back from the person on the matter.

(As compared to work, Americans tend to use much more indirect communication and polite neglect when it comes to dating. But intercultural dating is a topic for a whole different blog...)

Opposite Land and Everything Else But the Words

Sometimes high-context communication can come in the form of saying the opposite of what you really mean. Often, in order to soften the blow of negative feedback and save face for the parties involved, Chinese colleagues might couch negative feedback in an overly positive light, basically saying the direct opposite of what they mean and expecting you to figure out the real intent through non-verbal, indirect communication signals.

Entrepreneur and consultant Sam Goodman includes an example of such a situation in his book *Where East Eats West: The Street-Smarts Guide to Business in China*. He describes the experience of a Western advertising executive that did several projects for a Chinese organization.

At the completion of each of the first two [projects], he received a warm, simple thank you. After he finished the third, a slogan, the thanks were effusive, to say the least. “Oh, we love it! It’s wonderful! You work so hard for us! We are very happy! It’s very creative!” The advertising executive was thrilled and flattered by their response. However, at the end of the conversation right before they were to part, the Chinese client asked if the advertising executive could take a look at something the client wrote to make sure there were no errors. It turned out that what they wrote was a slogan intended to replace the one the client had just praised so highly. After that,

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the advertising executive was happy to receive a simple thank you upon turning in projects to that client.

Sam Goodman goes on to explain that the Chinese client allowing the advertising executive to “save face” is only part of the story.

In a “high-context” culture, the least important communication tool is words. What really matters is everything that happens around the words: the place where you are when they’re spoken, the particulars of the situation, the person who’s talking, and all their body language. It’s even more about what someone doesn’t say than what they do say.

“Direct” Indirect Communication

Typically Chinese tend to be more indirect communicators than Americans, but what about when they seemingly aren’t?

It’s quite common for Chinese to frankly point out others’ personal flaws when Americans would consider doing so rude – for example, on more than one occasion, my Chinese work colleagues have commented on my facial blemishes. It is also acceptable in a Chinese context to inquire as to others’ age, marital status, or salary, while such questions in an American context are often off-limits.

While these examples of seemingly direct communication appear to be inconsistent with the traditionally indirect Chinese communication style, in fact they are just reflections of other cultural dynamics at play within the overall high-context Chinese communication framework.

As mentioned in my post on building trust, the workplace in China can be like a second family, and Chinese colleagues tend to bond more and maintain less personal space. In such a context, pointing out a colleague’s personal flaws is a way to indirectly show the other person that you care. By pointing out my blemishes, my colleague was actually trying to express concern over my health and stress level, not insult my appearance. Likewise, asking “Are you married?” or “Do you have a boyfriend?” isn’t necessarily a come-on in China, but rather a typical conversation icebreaker in order to get to know someone better.

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Discussion Questions

1. In the U.S. we have a well-known axiom: "Say what you mean, mean what you say." What are some of the cultural values behind this statement?
2. China is a homogenous society which has developed largely outside of the influence of western philosophy and values. How might these facts make it more difficult for us as Westerners to understand our Chinese friends / colleagues?
3. The author mentions that "no's" are often communicated through "polite neglect." Have you ever used or been the recipient of this tactic before? If you have been the recipient of this tactic, how did you respond?
4. How can you tell the difference between a Chinese friend or colleague saying "no" by using polite neglect and he/she genuinely being unsure?
5. "In a 'high-context' culture, the least important communication tool is words." How will this fact affect our communication (both speaking and listening) with Chinese friends and colleagues?
6. Joann Pittman has explained Chinese communication this way: "...where we are indirect, they tend to be direct; and where we are direct, they tend to be indirect." What are some areas where we tend to communicate indirectly? Directly?
7. The Chinese often express their care and concern for someone in ways we Westerners would consider quite rude, e.g., pointing out someone's flaws or asking personal questions. What do you think is the best way to respond in these types of situations?