

DIRECT AND INDIRECT LANGUAGE - PATTERNS OF MULTICULTURAL BUSINESS BEHAVIOUR

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If a man be gracious and courteous to strangers, it shows he is a citizen of the world, and that his heart is no island cut off from other lands, but a continent that joins them. - Sir Francis Bacon

This paper aims at discussing some Iron Rules in International Business, rules expressed both directly by means of spoken language and indirectly by gestures and mimics. Cultural awareness is essential when meeting foreigners and, moreover when doing business abroad and trying to make the best deal.

Do we expect other cultures to adopt our customs or are we willing to adopt theirs? This might translate to how business or even foreign relations are to be conducted. Do we compromise or force other people to deal only on our terms? We may not have time to hear a language, but taking time to learn the "signals" is a powerful communicator.

As the global village continues to shrink and cultures collide, it is essential for all of us to become more sensitive, more aware, and more observant to the multiple motions, gestures, and body language that surround us each day. And as many of us cross over cultural borders, it would be fitting for us to respect, learn, and understand more about the effective, yet powerful "silent language" of gestures.

The Body Language of Business-Indirect Language

People all over the world use their hands, heads, and bodies to communicate expressively. Without gestures, our world would be static and colourless. The social anthropologist Edward T. Hall claims 60 percent of all our communication is nonverbal. In that case, how can we possibly communicate with one another without gestures?

Gestures and body language communicate as effectively as words- maybe even more effectively. We use gestures daily, almost instinctively, from beckoning to a waiter, or punctuating a business presentation with visual signals to airport ground attendants guiding an airline pilot into the jetway or a parent using a whole dictionary of gestures to teach (or preach to) a child.

According to Roger G. Axtell, there is a gesture called the "ultimate gesture" that carries certain characteristics unlike any other single gestures. First, this "ultimate gestures" is known everywhere in the world. It is absolutely universal; second, it is rarely, if ever, misunderstood. Primitive tribes and world leaders alike know and use this gesture. Third, scientists believe this particular gesture actually releases chemicals called endorphins into the system creating a feeling of euphoria. Fourth, as you travel around the world, this gesture may help you slip out of difficult situations. But what is this singular signal, this miracle of all gestures? It is quite simply, the smile. And Roger G. Axtell advises us to use it freely, use it often in all sort of circumstances - that of business included.

If you always begin with a smile, part of the work has already been done. In addition, if you master the managerial skills that are needed by the year 2000 as Brent R. Rubens mention them, your success is almost guaranteed.

1. RESPECT: This means the capability of demonstrating respect in whichever way a specific culture requires: respect for age, respect in manner of speech, respect with eye contact, respect with hand or body gestures, respect for personal privacy, and so on.

2. TOLERATING AMBIGUITY: This refers to the skill of reacting positively to new, different, and at times, unpredictable situations.

3. RELATING TO PEOPLE: This means placing the management of people on an equal level with "getting the job done." Too often, American managers are totally result-oriented without sensitivity to the "people ingredient."

4. BEING NON JUDGEMENTAL: This is the ability to withhold judgment until all information is accumulated.

5. PERSONALISING ONE'S OBSERVATION: This is the skill of recognising that each person sees the world from his or her own platform of observations.

6. EMPATHY: This skill, the ability to place yourself in another person's shoes, is one of the higher level skills in intercultural relationships.

7. PERSISTENCE: This is the companion word to "patience." Both are firm requirements in dealing with people from other societies around the world.

In International Business there are two Iron Rules. The first one: the Seller Is Expected to Adapt to the Buyer. The buyer in an international transaction is in the fortunate position of being able to largely ignore cultural differences. (Unless of course he or she wants to negotiate the best deal possible!)

What if you are not involved in exports. Suppose you are traveling abroad to negotiate a joint-venture agreement, an acquisition or a perhaps a strategic alliance? Now who is expected to do the adapting? That is where the second Iron Rule comes into play: In International Business the Visitor Is Expected to Observe Local Customs.

Is this just another way of saying, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do?" No. Actually, the idea is not to mimic or copy local behavior. Instead, just be yourself. But of course 'being yourself' should include being aware of local sensitivities and generally honouring local customs, habits and traditions. In order to be able to follow the two Iron Rules one should know some things about the patterns of cross-cultural business behaviour.

Deal-Focus vs. Relationship-Focus

This is the 'Great Divide' between business cultures. Deal-focused people are fundamentally task-oriented while relationship-focused folks are more people-oriented.

Conflicts arise when deal-focused marketers try to do business with prospects from relationship-focused markets. Many relationship focus people find deal focus types pushy, aggressive and offensively blunt. In return deal focus types often consider their relationship focus counterparts vague and inscrutable. Relationship-focused cultures make up the vast majority of the world's markets. The Arab world, Africa, Latin America and most countries of the Asia/Pacific region are strongly relationship-focused cultures. That is, they are markets where business people get things done through intricate networks of personal contacts.

Relationship focus people prefer to deal with family, friends and persons or groups well known to them - people who can be trusted. They are uncomfortable doing business with strangers, especially strangers who also happen to be foreigners.

In contrast, the deal-focused approach is common in only a small part of the world. Strongly deal focus cultures are found mainly in northern Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand, where people are relatively open to doing business with strangers.

A third group of cultures falls somewhere in between. Most southern and eastern Europeans tend to take a moderately deal-focused approach, as do increasing numbers of Hong Kongers and Singaporeans.

Informal vs. Formal Cultures

Problems occur when informal business travelers from relatively egalitarian cultures meet more formal counterparts from hierarchical societies. Breezy informality offends high-status people from hierarchical cultures just as the status-consciousness of formal people may offend the egalitarian sensibilities of informal ones.

Rigid- Time vs. Fluid- Time Cultures

One group of the world's societies worships the clock. The other group is more relaxed about time and scheduling, focusing instead on the people around them.

Conflict arises because some rigid-time visitors regard their fluid-time brothers and sisters as lazy, undisciplined and rude while the latter often regard the former as arrogant people enslaved by arbitrary deadlines.

Expressive vs. Reserved Cultures

Expressive people communicate in radically different ways from their more reserved counterparts. This is true whether they are communicating verbally, paraverbally or nonverbally. The confusion that results from these differences repeatedly spoils our best efforts to market, sell, source, negotiate or manage people across cultures.

Why? Because of course business communication is simply a specialized form of communicating. And the expressive/reserved split creates a communication gap that can be difficult to close.

Language Encodes Cultural Activity

Implicit in words is the culture of those who use them. The various cultures of the L2 speakers are potentially different sets of frames of reference for many of those words. When people from different cultures use an English word both recognize, the English word often carries different assumptions underlying the meaning and sometimes an entirely different meaning. This can be the case even with the most common words. Take, for example, the word "guest," which is used in the hospitality industry to mean a paying customer. This sense of the word is not old, and its more widely understood meaning definitely does not include payment.

To illustrate further, try to imagine the stereotypes that interfere with Americans' and Russians' efforts to communicate internationally focusing on the different meanings and values given to, and assumptions underlying, such words as "competition," "the state," "plan," "individual rights," and "economic priority." If an American and a Russian speaker each do not probe in order to learn how the other understands these terms, wrong assumptions are likely to cause problems. Then too the two cultures have different styles and expectations for a discussion requiring problem-solving, the Russian style being much more aggressive than the American. The words chosen by Americans might seem weak to the Russians. Words chosen on each side to express politeness, or humor, or doubt, might not translate at all well, either.

We know that "the map is not the territory"(Hayakawa, 1948, pp. 15-18). We are not so conscious that the territory of one user of English might not be the territory of another, and our students might be even less aware than we are. Consider a few more examples of this sometime or approximate or nonexistent commonality:

* What does "should" mean, in a sentence like "You should arrive by 6 p.m."? Obligation? Moral pressure? Or just likelihood? Our modal auxiliaries can be baffling.

* Another example is saying "We apologize" when one is not necessarily at fault but the other is displeased. In Japan, the sender apologizes to a displeased receiver. Period. Not to apologize would be perceived as shirking one's responsibility. In the U.S., if a sender is not at fault but apologizes, a U.S. receiver tends to infer that the sender has admitted fault and that something is therefore owed.

* Honourifics are essential in the Korean language, and sometimes the fluent English-speaking Korean people and students a frustration that English is so blunt, so lacking in means of showing courtesy.

* Different languages - and different Englishes - might not share Americans' conversation conventions. The topics and styles for small talk in the U.S. might give offense in France or Japan. To Arabs, U. S. conversation can seem tepid and unenthusiastic. To Americans, German Swiss sometimes seem brusquely inconsiderate of "face." To Dutch listeners, Americans can seem too prone to self-promotion, while to Germans, Americans often sound absurdly optimistic.

* Different Englishes have different ways of hedging, qualifying, softening, joking, insulting. They have different expectations for when indirection is appropriate - and for what is perceived as indirect - for what is perceived as friendly/personal/overfamiliar - and for what is perceived as polite/distant/hostile.

One source wrote, "You can't use a new language unless you change the consciousness that is tied to the old one, unless you stretch beyond the circle of grammar and dictionary, out of the old world and into a new one. And Americans are famous for thinking they've got the best consciousness around" (Agar, 1994, p. 22). International English is a powerful tool for obtaining the best business outcomes for ourselves and our trading partners and counterparts - if we are able to understand, acknowledge and transcend our assumptions.

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