

Communication in International Business Negotiations

The following is an excerpt from the book "Negotiating International Business - The Negotiator's Reference Guide to 50 Countries Around the World" by Lothar Katz.

Directness

A common cause of intercultural communication problems is how directly or indirectly people express themselves. Here are a few typical statements illustrating different styles:

Direct Communication

- 'We cannot do this.'
- 'Your proposal is unacceptable.'
- 'This is not correct.'
- 'This cannot be done today.'
- 'I'm just calling things what they are.'
- 'Yes' means 'I agree.'
- 'We will consider it' signals interest.
- 'No' indicates rejection.

Indirect Communication

- 'This may be difficult.'
- 'We need time to think about it.'
- 'This is an interesting perspective.'
- 'We will see.'
- 'We must be respectful of others.'
- 'Yes' means 'I heard what you said.'
- 'We will consider it' signals skepticism or rejection.
- 'No' is rarely used.

It is a popular misconception to believe that *indirect* represents the equivalent of *vague*. The contrary is true: it is possible to communicate very clear messages in a highly indirect fashion. However, most Westerners require extensive practice to learn this skill.

In addition to subtle verbal clues such as in the above examples, people in indirect cultures often use other ways to communicate their real message, making it important to 'read between the lines.' What is *not* being said often becomes more important than what *is*. For instance, if a person praises an insubstantial aspect of a proposal that has just been made, the real message may be that he or she dislikes essential parts of it. Silence is another, non-verbal way to communicate displeasure and rejection.

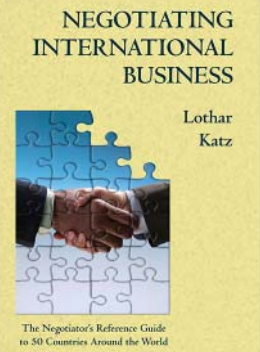
Several factors influence how directly people communicate, such as whether a culture is generally more individualistic or group-oriented, egalitarian or authoritarian, comfortable or uncomfortable with uncertainty. Typical levels of directness vary widely across cultures. The Dutch, Israelis, or people from the northeastern United States tend to be very direct, leaving little uncertainty in their statements. The British, Canadians, the French, or Americans from other parts of the country are usually fairly direct, though less so than the first group. Koreans, Mexicans, and most Latin Americans use more indirect communication and generally prefer subtlety over frankness and candor. The Chinese, Indonesians, Thais, and above all others, the Japanese tend to communicate in a very indirect manner that can be difficult for Westerners to interpret correctly.

It is characteristic of most societies that their members tend to view their own culturally preferred style as superior to others. People from direct cultures can get very frustrated with those communicating more indirectly, sometimes accusing them of being indecisive, evasive, or even sneaky. Similarly, members of cultural groups who value indirect communication may be shocked, feeling insulted or attacked

by foreigners who communicate much more directly. As a general rule, it is usually easier for people from direct cultures, among them most Westerners, to adjust to more indirect ways of communication than the other way around. This is because they are generally familiar with the concept of diplomacy. In contrast, most Asians find it very difficult to be even nearly as blunt and outspoken as people in the West can be.

Levels of directness influence many aspects of international negotiations. Here are a few suggestions for Westerners preparing to interact with members of highly indirect cultures:

- **Do not force disagreement.** Always phrase offers and proposals in ways that will allow the other side to reject them without having to give a straight 'no' answer. Ask open questions and be prepared to propose alternatives rather than making take-it-or-leave-it statements.
- **Reject tactfully.** Respond with non-committal phrases if you dislike an offer or proposal. This is usually more effective than if you rejected it right away, since you will avoid offending your counterpart and also retain the option to change your mind later. Alternatively, make a counterproposal without commenting on the one you received, or simply ignore it altogether.
- **Be sensitive.** Listen carefully for subtle messages and watch your counterparts' body language for small clues.
- **Refrain from making assumptions.** Never assume that there is agreement because nobody said 'no.' Confirm agreement by asking the other side what they are willing to do.
- **Do not worry too much about the clarity of your message.** Westerners dealing with Asians, most of whom prefer indirect communication, often experience discomfort if things are 'left up in the air,' as they may see it. Fearing that subtle messages they previously conveyed may not have been properly understood, they often prefer to provide summaries at the end of meetings that clearly list issues and concerns. In reality, it is much likelier for Westerners' communication to lack the required subtlety than to be too indirect when dealing with Asians.
- **Avoid confrontation.** If the bargaining exchange becomes heated or when the negotiating parties get tied up in a dispute, it will be even more important to match your counterparts' communication style. Realize that in the heat of the argument you may be more inclined to communicate in a straightforward style while your counterparts will likely take this more negatively than they might do at other times.

	<p><i>Negotiating International Business</i> was released by Booksurge Publishing in 2006 and is available from Amazon.com for \$29.99. A reference guide covering 50 countries around the world, the 472-page book includes an extensive discussion of negotiation principles and tactics commonly used around the world.</p> <p>Please recommend the book to colleagues and others who might find it useful. Country Sections are available individually for a small fee at</p> <p style="text-align: center;">www.NegIntBiz.com</p> <p>For feedback, please email the author at lotharkatz@NegIntBiz.com</p>
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