Don't Take 'Yes' For An Answer

By Lothar Katz

You're asking your local sales representative in Taiwan whether the business is growing as projected? Inquiring from the leader of your Indian IT team whether the project is on track? Trying to find out from your Japanese partners whether they like your latest proposal? If you ask them directly, the answer you'll probably receive is 'yes.'

Unfortunately, the reality of the situation may be less clear-cut. Is the business in Taiwan indeed growing? Did the Indian project progress as planned? Will the Japanese accept your proposal? As countless others before you had to find out, the word 'yes' does not necessarily tell you much. Strangely, it seems to carry a different meaning in certain cultures.

Make no mistake: even when you feel that they are hiding something from you, your Taiwanese, Indian, or Japanese counterparts may have the best of intentions when saying 'yes' in uncertain situations. Assuming that they are trying to deceive you likely misses the point. Instead, realize that you may be a victim of your own assumptions: a common mistake when communicating with non-native English speakers is to take 'yes' as a confirmation of agreement. In reality, it may not even signal understanding. All the word might be telling you is that your counterparts noticed that you said something. In some cultures, people may nod and say 'yes' when they have no clue what is being said, trying to prevent a loss of face that could make either you or them look bad. Saying 'no' or "I didn't get that" may be considered blunt, disrespectful, incompetent, or all of the above. Communicating across cultural boundaries requires staying away from such pitfalls. Here are a few strategies that may help you find out what's really going on:

Refrain from asking questions that allow 'yes' or 'no' answers

Members of many cultures around the world find it difficult to say 'no' when asked a direct question. Indeed, such a word does not even exist in some cultures. It is wise to avoid inquiring in ways that might leave your counterparts no alternative but to respond with 'yes.'

Ask open-ended questions that encourage your counterparts to "tell you more"

You want your counterparts to tell you the true story. Questions such as "What needs to happen for us to achieve our plan?" allow them to bring up issues and problems without "hitting you in the face" with them. Following up with further open-ended inquiries, you will quickly get a grasp of the real picture. However, make sure that the questioning remains positive and constructive. "What can we do to ensure our success?" is far less intimidating, and more likely to trigger an honest reply, than "What is the problem here?"

Ask your counterparts to discuss alternatives

Members of indirect cultures commonly find it hard to bring up problems. It gets even harder if the problem actually has something to do with *you*. For instance, you might have asked for the impossible without realizing it. Or maybe you're requesting something that conflicts with a local superior's directives. Pointing out such issues to you openly is rarely an option, since many counterparts view doing so as disrespectful. Your best bet in order to find out is to ask open-ended questions that address multiple issues and viewpoints, for instance "Please list the top three challenges for us to focus on" or

"Please compare the advantages and challenges of our proposed approach with how you did things in the past." Next, listen carefully. Issues like those described will be brought up subtly and may sound less worrisome than they really are.

Watch for subtle messages

Indirect communication requires negative messages to be conveyed in less overt ways than most Westerners are used to. Hesitation before responding, small gestures that indicate discomfort, and subtle verbal clues such as "We will see" or "This may be a bit difficult" often indicate problems or conflicts. In addition, search for messages "between the lines," paying particular attention to what is *not* being said. For instance, if your counterparts praise an insubstantial aspect of a proposal you just made, the real message may be that they dislike some of its key elements.

Summarize what you heard

When you think you got the message, make statements like "Since our success is so important, allow me to summarize my understanding. Please add anything I might have missed." Then, sum up your conclusions in a few simple statements. Your counterparts may not tell you outright in case you're off, but they will give you enough clues for you to dig deeper if necessary.

Many cultures, especially those where relationships are very important and rank or status enjoy great respect, prefer indirect communication. Examples are Mexicans, most Latin Americans, the Chinese, the Taiwanese, Indians, Indonesians, Koreans, Thais, and above all, the Japanese. That may make it harder to get the point, but it does not mean that messages will necessarily be lost. It is a popular misconception to believe that 'indirect' represents the equivalent of 'vague.' It is entirely possible to communicate clear messages in a highly indirect fashion, although most Westerners require extensive practice to learn this skill. In any case, you will greatly improve the odds of making the communication effective by asking the right kinds of questions. Just make sure not to take 'yes' for an answer.

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