
Saving Face

By Lothar Katz

Jim Lazar was becoming increasingly agitated. "Your product quality is simply unacceptable! None of my other suppliers ever shipped me anything like this. For crying out loud, I can buy better products in Africa than what you're making here!" He knew he was exaggerating. Nevertheless, Lazar wanted to make sure his supplier got the message loud and clear. He had not come all the way to Malaysia to exchange niceties and pretend that everything was fine. Product quality had been a problem of late, and he was not going to take that.

The room fell silent. The Malaysians were all looking down, seemingly too embarrassed to talk. Their leader was blushing. "Ok," Lazar said, "We need a break. Let's meet again in the morning to discuss how you will fix this."

The next morning, Jim Lazar learned that his supplier had cancelled the meeting, quoting "urgent other matters." He called their office but was unable to reach any of his usual contacts. Back at his own desk a few days later, he was in for an even bigger surprise: the Malaysian supplier had cancelled the contract and returned all open orders. While volumes were moderate, his company urgently needed these products to meet its own customer commitments. This was a major problem.

We all heard of the concept of *face*. Unfortunately, Western businesspeople frequently underestimate how important this concept and the underlying values can be when working across cultures. Causing counterparts to lose face, as Jim Lazar did, does not necessarily end business relationships. However, stepping over this line, even when done inadvertently, inevitably leads to hurt feelings, loss of trust, weakened relationships, and greater risks for your business success.

Harmony and Face

Many cultures, especially in Southeastern Asia or in the Middle East, share a strong preference for preserving group harmony, a desire to continually maintain positive relations across all members of a group or organization. In such cultures, causing individual embarrassment means disturbing the harmony of the group or groups to which the individual belongs. Whether the unpleasant situation centers around a single individual or the whole group makes little difference; in both cases, the group is likely to perceive a collective *loss of face* and react with feelings of shame.

Face is the external representation of a positive and harmonious self as viewed by others. The term is not limited to individuals. Families, groups, organizations, even whole nations have *face* in this sense. If a group views actions or behaviors that cause *loss of face* as inappropriate, as in Jim Lazar's case, it is likely to turn against the person causing it. This may affect that person's organization as well. For instance, an Asian company perceiving *face* issues caused by a representative of a Western partner company may hold that against the company as a whole, not just the individual.

Many actions carry the risk of causing *loss of face*. Examples are openly turning down someone's request, singling out an individual for public critique or praise(!), failing to

show respect, or losing one's temper. The indirect communication approach often employed by members of such cultures reflects this: rather than saying 'no', they use phrases such as 'maybe', 'we will see', or 'this will need further analysis' to express disagreement in more face-saving ways. They rarely confront problems openly and may sometimes not even acknowledge their existence, which again serves as a way to preserve harmony.

What Can You Do If You Stepped Over the Line?

People often ask "How can I recover if I inadvertently caused *loss of face*?" The answer is that since relationships are affected, it is vital to make active efforts to regain your counterparts' trust by apologizing, expressing respect for the individual and/or group, and trying hard to build new bridges. In Lazar's case, an apology in the form of "I regret what might have been an unfortunate choice of words and would like to assure you that I have great trust in your ability to solve the quality problems. Let us please continue to work together towards our mutual business success." might help get the communication going again. However, he would have to continually demonstrate his respect for the Malaysian vendors through words as well as actions to win back their trust.

In some cases, your only hope may be to find a third party willing to act as a mediator. Assuming this person has the trust of the group you offended, he or she may be able to get the communication between the parties going again.

The Bottom Line

Seemingly small infractions of cultural rules can jeopardize and even disrupt business ties. Avoiding *face* issues by adjusting behaviors is much more effective than trying to repair the damage later. Especially when doing business in Asia, it is vital to control your emotions and treat others with respect at all times, even when confronting problems. When it comes to conducting international business, keep in mind that the best guideline is not "Treat others as you want to be treated", it is "Treat others as they want to be treated"!

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A seasoned former executive of Texas Instruments, a Fortune 500 company, Lothar regularly interacted with employees, customers, outsourcing partners, and third parties in more than 25 countries around the world. He teaches International Project Management at the University of Texas at Dallas' School of Management and is a Business Leadership Center instructor at the Southern Methodist University's Cox School of Business.

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