UGM | CONSULTING

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Encouraging collaborative talk across borders

UGM 5 Step Process

Step 1
Provide customised briefings to each group represented on the project, bringing their own culturally-determined norms to their conscious attention, and showing them where these might fit OR clash with the preferences of other groups.

Step2
Now bring all groups together to map their overlaps and differences, establishing an agreed framework that will equip them to design a synthetic or hybrid culture for the duration of the project.

Step 3
Capture the implications of this agreement (behaviours and communication) in a culturally dynamic and comprehensive charter.

Step 4
Establish suitable metrics and performance measures that will now 'hold everyone's feet to the fire.'

Step 5
Everyone signs! Champagne! Photos!

Please contact us if you would like to learn more about the UGM 5 Step Process

COLLABORATING ACROSS BORDERS

Some UGM clients are hurting

In the last month, UGM has received many requests from clients struggling to make collaboration and cooperation happen in a business-critical project that involves counterparts overseas. Some clients have outsourced a key function to an entity in India. Others are trying to manage the complex fallout from having been acquired by a Chinese company. Others again are involved in an international project which seemed reasonably straightforward at the outset. But now deadlines, budgets, trust and rapport are fast being eroded. The common complaint is, 'Why is it proving so hard to collaborate when we thought we had a shared goal?' The aim of this briefing is to share UGM research that illuminates the problem and points the way to practical solutions.

Why is this so hard?

Linguists have long known that people draw on underlying principles of cooperation to make any conversation work. When people share the same cooperative principles, they don't need to spell out every facet of their communication. Quite a lot can be implied or inferred. All communication is 'intentional', in that understanding another person is a matter of working out their intentions. In this process, we draw on information beyond what is explicitly stated. We do this all the time without even realising it!

Four principles underpin the way native speakers of English talk together to show they are being collaborative. First, *Quantity:* Be as informative as required. Second, *Quality*: Try to make your contribution one that's true. Third, *Relevance*: Be relevant. Fourth, *Manner*: Avoid obscurity and ambiguity.

These four cooperative principles set the stage for collaborative talk amongst native speakers of English. We assume the other person is engaging with us in a meaningful way. Then if something seems inconsistent with one of these principles, we search for an interpretation, drawing on our shared socio-cultural knowledge. Here's an example:

A. Carol voted for the Greens, you know.

B. Yeah, Jim's an idiot too!

Why is this dialogue *not* incoherent? Essentially, we first assume cooperation and then infer the meaning or intention. Here's where things get challenging! UGM research on international project teams shows that it's the *violation* of these cooperative principles that causes problems among team members. People from the same cultural background share the same conversational principles. But people from different backgrounds frequently have other ways of achieving the goal of showing, 'I wish to

demonstrate my willingness to collaborate with you'. They can't assume the same ways of judging what's relevant and what needs to be said or left unsaid.

A case study from our research

We filmed a video conference that took place in the Melbourne office of a multinational IT company. The sales and marketing team was devising a new approach to data recovery. They needed to work on this major innovation with counterparts across the region. This particular video conference involved Australians, Chinese and Indian colleagues. It was led by Mike, head of the Asia-Pacific team and located in Melbourne. Before the video conference, he anticipated that there might be awkward moments of silence, as he had learned his Asian colleagues were not as quick to jump in and seize a speaking turn. He was correct. The pauses and silences during the video conference did cause some tension. But it was actually another kind of mismatch which proved to be more of a threat to their collaboration.

Violating the principles of cooperation

Mike put various quite complex and lengthy questions to his counterparts – but got back only the briefest of replies. There was no doubt these lengthy complex questions merited more than just a 'yes' or 'no'. Remember the first cooperative principle of *Quantity.* To show we want to collaborate, we need to be "as informative as required". But the trouble is "as required" varies across cultures! In some cultures (for instance in Eastern Europe) saying a lot shows involvement and a willingness to cooperate. But across Asia, being cooperative often means saying just the smallest amount because maintaining harmony is more important than being informative. In the video conference, Mike clearly showed how disconcerted he was. He felt taken aback and didn't know what to say. Afterwards he described how the "uncooperative behaviour and unhelpful attitude" of his Asian colleagues were jeopardising success.

The principles can work together in many situations

For instance, a person's extremely brief, non-informative response (violating *Quantity*) may hide the desire not to reveal some problem in the project. Also, the Anglo idea of 'truth' as an absolute is not seen in the same way across our region. So the maxim of *Quality* can have little meaning. Harmony may be seen as more important than truth. For English speakers the maxim of *Relevance* is linked to our linear argument style. Things that don't follow this pattern come across as irrelevant. Finally the maxim of *Manner* advocates clarity but in cultures where face is a concern, ambiguity can be the preferred option. Obscurity can feel quite appropriate and be judged as more cooperative than stating an unpleasant fact outright. Insights from linguistics are helping our clients make collaboration work!