



## COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY WITH CHINESE COUNTERPARTS

### Seven skills worth practising

1. Notice *how* something is said, not just the content.
2. Keep in mind that the purpose behind something said may be face or relationship concerns. These needs may outweigh any literal meaning.
3. Learn to pay attention to and decode small non-verbal clues, cues and signals, including pauses and short silences.
4. Be willing to accept that words can, at times, be experienced as inadequate and even inappropriate.
5. Appreciate the multiple and complex reasons why indirectness might be preferred, and experiment with this style yourself.
6. Recognise that not all cultures prioritise being definite and that even 'yes' can mean several different things.
7. Notice how part of a message can be conveyed via the overall context, including how a situation has been set up and managed. Pay attention to what you and your colleagues may unwittingly communicate through your own arrangements, protocols and behaviour.

### *All communication is unreliable and ambiguous*

We can never be completely certain what someone else means, in speaking or writing, even if they have been brought up much like ourselves. In this respect, communication research does no more than confirm the point that philosophers and poets have made for thousands of years. The poet TS Eliot, for example, wrote frequently about what he called "the intolerable wrestle with words and meaning" and how our words can strain with imprecision in situations where mutual understanding matters to us.

Much of what we might call 'communication skills' is about developing strategies for dealing with everyday ambiguity, given it can't entirely be avoided. You may have noticed that when a friend or a colleague says something, you immediately reach some conclusions about what they truly mean. Often this process of inferencing happens quite unconsciously. To help you infer with some degree of certainty, you draw on two main sources: your knowledge of the language you share with the other person and your knowledge of the socio-cultural world you both inhabit.

Most of the time, all this works reasonably well. But it's never perfect and it's likely that, even in the last twenty-four hours, there have been some misunderstandings between you and others, including with people you know really well and care about a lot, such as your family members.

### *The challenge of communicating across a cultural divide*

But now consider a typical situation in international business these days. You have to communicate with others who don't share your assumptions and expectations about the situation. They grew up in a very different cultural world which equipped them with a very different language system from yours, with quite different strengths and weaknesses from your own. When West meets East this is exactly what happens, even with good will and good intentions on both sides, and even when English as an international language for business is being used with reasonable fluency by all present.

The greater the cultural gaps between you and your counterparts, the greater the risk that your typical inferencing processes will break down. This problem is compounded when English speakers, with their preference for directness, find themselves interacting with Chinese counterparts who've generally grown up with a mode of communication characterised by restraint and indirectness in public settings.

This style is often termed 'han xu' or 'implicit communication'. To be 'han xu' you don't try to spell everything out in words. Some things are deliberately left for listeners to work out for themselves. This enables meaning to be negotiated

by the parties in a collaborative way, such that views can be sounded out and there is always the option of retreating, if rapport is unduly threatened.

The Chinese see 'han xu' as a way of compensating for the inadequacy of words. In fact, there are numerous sayings that capture the point that speaking can carry negative consequences. 'Misfortune comes from the mouth.' 'He who talks errs much'. 'What has been said cannot be unsaid.'

This preference for indirectness in many situations means that the role of the listener (or reader) is elevated in importance, in comparison with the common Western style. Among Chinese, the other person is actively involved in deciphering meaning so that the conversation is much more a joint production. Hesitations and indirectness invite collaboration, as the listener has to work out the full significance, including taking into account what is not being said.

This value placed on 'han xu' helps to explain the importance of non-verbal signals. Subtle meaning can be conveyed in unspoken ways, such as a small hand movement, a smile, a pause or a quick frown.

'Han xu' is also associated with a lack of expressiveness, especially where strong negative emotions and disagreement are concerned. Even in close interpersonal relationships, researchers have noted that Chinese rarely verbalise love, for example, preferring instead to demonstrate love through helping and caring for each other. Unspoken actions rather than words are emphasised. As one Chinese commented in a large study, "Growing up we learned, you don't need to say it (your feeling) because people will know it by your actions."

The Chinese preference is to let things speak for themselves but, when speaking is unavoidable, it should be indirect and invite others to complete what is left unsaid. In our filmed data of international meetings, Chinese frequently imagined (wrongly) that Westerners shared this ability to decode indirectness and build shared understanding in subtle ways. They believed they had been sufficiently clear when Western counterparts experienced the reverse.

### *What helps?*

Given the ambiguous nature of all communication, we shouldn't be surprised that communicating across an East-West divide can feel hard at times. It helps if you're able to draw on what you know about Chinese communication preferences to help you anticipate typical problems and plan accordingly. The individual who thinks they know all there is to know about communicating with the Chinese is doomed to failure. Instead, successful communicators strive to learn as much as they can about others' preferences, while accepting their own limitations with some grace!