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Managing disagreements: suggestions to get you started

1. A suggestion for Asians, working with Westerners

Remember that your Western colleague is likely to be more comfortable than you with separating the disagreement from the relationship. In Australia, for instance, you might hear the expression, 'Play the ball, not the man.' Little by little, develop the ability to put things into different compartments in this way. Your Western colleague has likely been taught that a good professional should be able to explore a disagreement in a calm, rational way, and that this approach can benefit the task by allowing the best ideas to surface. Openly express your point of view and try to explain the reasons behind your thinking. This will help your colleague.

2. A suggestion for Westerners working with Asians

Bear in mind the complexities of face and your colleague's wish to preserve harmony. If you are too direct, you risk causing offence, such that your colleague may not be able to engage in collaborative problem solving with you. For this reason, it can be helpful to address disagreements early. Don't put things off, hoping the situation will improve. If you can succeed in managing small disagreements early, this builds skills and confidence on both sides. Actively demonstrate your commitment to and care for the relationship, and your willingness to protect face needs. This will help your colleague.

MANAGING DISAGREEMENT ACROSS CULTURES

When the honeymoon is over

UGM is currently taking a close look at the specific competencies required for success in Asia and over the next few months we'll share some of this research with you. One issue that has emerged early in our data collection is the importance of being able to *disagree* with colleagues and counterparts. This is a vital skill, if you are going to solve problems and make decisions together. In fact, if you can't disagree in skilful and culturally effective ways, collaboration tends to grind to a halt! Yet, despite the business importance of this skill, you've probably noted that programs and books tend to focus on *agreement* and simply side-step the complex but crucial territory of *disagreement*.

If you're similar to many Australians professionals, you've already mastered a few of the 'basics' when it comes to Asia. For instance, it's likely that you know about the value placed on building strong personal relationships. You've learned some things about how to show politeness and you know about the importance of 'face'.

All this is fine, as far as it goes. But over and again, when we observe real people doing real things, it is the ability to manage disagreement that distinguishes a partnership destined for success from one that will fail to deliver full value.

You might start out with good will and the best of intentions. But – as one of our clients put it – what do you do when, faced with your first difficulty, you realise the 'honeymoon is over'?

The positive role of disagreement

Our data underscores that, if you can't manage disagreements well, you're unlikely to be able to reap the rewards available from your diverse team and diverse relationships. On the one hand, differences of perspective and different 'cognitive toolkits' (as the neuroscientists put it) will deliver breakthrough thinking and innovation. But these same differences can also contribute to frustration, irritation, misunderstanding and, especially, disagreement. In fact, you can pretty much bet on it!

At the core is a simple but challenging fact: disagreement is often a critical step on the road to eventual agreement. In a well-functioning team, a wide range of ideas should be surfaced and different views explored. Most importantly, the underlying thinking behind ideas needs to be exposed for shared learning and reflection. When people experience that their point of view is given full consideration (even if that view is finally rejected), they are much more willing to wholeheartedly support the preferred solution. But different cultures have different disagreement styles, making all this more complex!

Different cultures, different disagreement styles

An important question that cultures resolve in different ways (reflecting their value systems) is 'Can we talk and should we talk?' For example, Western English-speaking societies, with their egalitarian ethos and long history of using arguments to persuade, tend to have a direct and verbal approach to resolving disagreements. In contrast, more indirect and conflict-avoidant preferences tend to be found across the Asia-Pacific region.

But recent UGM research has found there are often more factors at play than a simple direct-indirect clash. For example, in data collected in Australian-Chinese collaborations, context, power and status variations contributed to the Chinese displaying a range of strategies for managing disagreement. Chinese often employed very direct approaches when they felt they were more senior than their Western colleagues, but more face-sensitive and even avoidant styles when they saw themselves as more junior. In contrast, The Australians – whatever their rank and whatever the context – had a preference for verbal argumentation. Have a look at the following example and decide what's going on.

An example from the data

Jack and Lee are executives in an international pharma company. They're working together on an advertising campaign for a new drug about to be launched in several Asian countries.

Jack: This design works best. It leans on the visual image here and makes the point we want.

Lee: The idea is clear ... but maybe too much visual.

Jack: Too much? No, no! I disagree!

Lee: Too much, no?

Jack: No, I don't think so. The market research says this is the way to go.

Lee: Mmm. Maybe.

Jack: I reckon it works well.

When Jack returned to Melbourne, he was surprised to learn the ad had been dropped. He felt Lee was hypocritical. He had seemed to support it but then reneged. For his part, Lee felt he had communicated his disagreement clearly. Their relationship soured.

Cultures have their own disagreement 'scripts'

A script tells you what to expect and what to do in a given situation. In Lee's script, people hint and infer. It means they need to be good at decoding implications. But Jack's script demands an assertive, straight-talking approach. Ignorance of each other's norms and rules prevented them from managing their disagreement effectively, resulting in a loss of trust.