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YOUR ASIAN TALENT: A HIDDEN DISADVANTAGE OF DIFFERENCE

See if you can sharpen your skills by decoding the misunderstanding below!

Mei-Fung, a staff member on secondment to Australia from East Asia, was working in the finance section of a multinational company.

Her Australian manager asked her if she would take on certain extra duties in relation to the implementation of the company's new payroll system.

She answered that this might be difficult as she had no training in that area, but maybe she could look into it.

A similar conversation took place a few days later, but Mei-Fung continued to do the same work, and did not undertake any of the extra duties.

Her manager felt annoyed and let down because he believed Mei-Fung had not followed through on what he regarded as an agreement between them.

What's gone wrong?

Answer

You were right if you guessed that Mei-Fung's reply was an indirect way of saying 'no'. She felt unable to say 'no' directly, so she took care to give an indirect but negative reply.

Someone from a similar cultural background would have recognised this hesitation and markedly unenthusiastic response as a polite and careful refusal. But Australians are more used to refusals being put directly with the assumption that the listener doesn't need to 'read between the lines', especially in work settings.

The challenge of talk and interaction

Talking to another person is like climbing a tree that climbs back! In this dramatic analogy, the linguist Frederick Erickson captured an important point that illuminates common challenges in today's multicultural workplace: conversation is always a joint production. For one thing, speaker and listener keep changing roles. What someone says influences how the other person responds, and so on. But it's endlessly complicated because there are multiple points where clear transmission and accurate reception of even a simple message can falter. When the message transmitted involves complex business and professional matters, the risk of things going wrong increases.

Your cultural background causes you to encode your communication (face-to-face or in writing) in the particular ways favoured by your upbringing. At the same time, the cultural background of the other person in the situation will affect how they decode what is said to them. Misunderstanding can creep in at every stage. A colleague born overseas, operating in English as their second (or third, or fourth) language, may not interpret what someone says in the way intended. The fact that miscommunication has occurred could even pass unnoticed by either party, with serious consequences. Even in low-key situations, where no serious harm is done, trust, rapport and good relations are jeopardised, when misunderstanding and miscommunication occur.

Complex demographic profile of today's workforce

The reality for many Australian professions is that the number of well-qualified graduates from an Asian background is growing significantly each year. In some sectors, the graduate intake is becoming predominantly Asian. This shouldn't be surprising: while 15% of Australians with an Anglo-Celt background currently go to university, the figure for young people with an Asian background is 30%.

Other factors increase this effect. New Australians with an Asian background are the fastest growing immigrant group in the country. In addition, the country's skill shortage means that Australia will need to access skilled professionals from our region in order to keep pace with growth projections. Taken together, all this paints a picture of an Australian workforce where well-educated Asian employees will be a significant economic resource, working alongside their Anglo colleagues.

But this can lead to difficulties as UGM research is showing. Professionals not born in Australia can face multiple problems as they adjust to quite different, culture-based, expectations and assumptions about their role, as well as different ways of structuring ideas and managing disagreement when tensions emerge. Too often the result is their careers stall.

The source of the problem is that each person has been profoundly shaped by their cultural identity and by the ways of thinking prioritised by their first language. These deep aspects of identity cannot be conveniently set aside when a person comes to work, as if your culture was like a coat that could simply be hung up on a peg and collected later on the way home. Studies on acculturation confirm that it's unrealistic to expect a newcomer to fit in perfectly. It's too hard because fitting in perfectly involves becoming bilingual and bicultural – goals way beyond the realistic expectation of most professional migrants, coming as part of what is called a 'first generation' group.

The challenge of accessing diverse talent

UGM's research into what's been termed the 'Bamboo Ceiling' has shown that there are many ways people from different cultures think and behave at work. So it's inevitable that examples of misunderstanding are common in the data we've collected. The design of our popular programs on managing diversity in Australia's multicultural workplace reflects this evidence. You can learn more about these programs on our website.

Miscommunication can happen at various levels and have more than one cause. If you can diagnose the cause, it will be easier to apply the most suitable remedy. For instance, taken-for-granted ways of conveying a point may produce unintended results.

An Indian professional was filmed during an interview for a good job in his field. The panel members were all native speakers of English. The candidate's use of English was characterised by chunking his talk into small units with frequent shifts in the pitch of his voice to emphasise his points, a style he transferred from his first language on to his way of using English. The footage of the interview was then shown to both Indians and native speakers of English, asking them to rate the suitability of the candidate. The Indian viewers felt the man came across as heartfelt, tentative, respectful and polite. But the viewers with English as their first language interpreted exactly the same style as pedantic, over-confident, suggesting the candidate was too concerned with detail and perhaps had a difficult personality. The panel agreed with the latter view and the man was not offered the position.

Removing bias from systems isn't enough

Well-designed, equitable systems are certainly an asset. But they won't compensate for low levels of cultural intelligence. In the end, good relations are about people - and they extend to which they can work well together. As our data shows, when people lack cultural insight, the unfortunate truth is that they can draw further and further apart as they talk, despite goodwill and good intentions on all sides.