Communicating Across Cultures
by Barlow Soper, C. W. Von Bergen, and Joseph L. Balloun

Abstract

Exploding globalization of business means the increasing likelihood that American business personnel will travel abroad and encounter significant differences among cultures. One pervasive cultural difference arises from societal values that stress either individual control and achievement (individualistic industrialized western cultures) or the bonds of social solidarity (collectivistic Asian and Third World eastern cultures). When people from different cultures interact, sensitivity to their differences helps minimize misunderstandings and awkward situations. Suggestions are offered that will enhance communication when West meets East.

Communicating Effectively When West Meets East

Write 20 different statements in response to the simple question: Who am I? Begin each statement with "I am..." Respond as if you are giving answers to yourself, not to someone else. Write your answers in the order that they occur to you. Do not worry about importance or logic. Go quickly. Please begin.

Now count the number of answers that are linked to social identity (e.g., "I am the third daughter in my family" or "I am a Roman Catholic" or "I am a Texan."). Then count the number of answers associated with personal traits (e.g., "I am honest" or "I am confident" or "I am overweight"). If you are like most of us in our western culture you probably listed a preponderance of personal traits. We are individualists in the west and as such give priority to personal goals and define our identity mostly in terms of our personal attributes, not our social groups. Euro-Americans can cultures teach individualism: You are responsible for yourself. Follow your own conscience. Be true to yourself. Define your unique gifts. Meet your own needs. Respect one another's privacy.

Collectivists, typically from eastern cultures, emphasize group goals including extended family, work group, clan, or clan and define their identity accordingly. Asian and nonwestern cultures are more likely to teach collectivism: Your family or clan is responsible for its individual members whose actions therefore reflect shame or honor upon it. So minimize your group. Be true to your traditions. Show respect for elders and superiors. Cultivate harmony, and do not criticize another publicly. Be loyal to family, company, nation. Live communally, without assuming that you have a private self separate from your social context. Thus Americans are more likely than Japanese or Chinese to complete the sentence "I am..." with personal traits and much less likely to declare their social identities.

As businesses expand overseas to increase their markets, western adages we take for granted frequently no longer apply. In America, "the squeaky wheel gets the grease." In Japan, "the nail that stands out gets pounded down." American parents who are trying to encourage their children to eat their dinner might say "think of the starving kids in Ethiopia, and appreciate how lucky you are to be different from them." Japanese parents are likely to say "think about the farmer who works so hard to produce this rice for you; if you don't eat it, he will feel bad, for his efforts have been in vain" (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). A small Texas corporation seeking to increase productivity via increases in self-esteem asked its employees to look in the mirror and say "I am beautiful" 100 times before coming to work each day. Employees of a Japanese supermarket that was recently opened in New Jersey were instructed to begin the day by holding hands and telling others that "they are beautiful" ("A Japanese Supermarket," 1999).

Such anecdotes suggest that Japanese and Americans hold significantly different world views. The American examples stress attending to self, ap-

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precision of one's uniqueness, and the importance of asserting the self. These chronicles highlight the normative imperativeness of our western culture to become independent from others and to discover and express one's uniqueness (Johnstone, 1985; Miller, 1988). The Japanese examples, on the other hand, emphasize attending to and fitting in with others and the importance of harmonious interdependence. These instances underscore what many non-western cultures insist is the fundamental connectedness of human beings to each other. A normative imperative of these cultures is to maintain this interdependence among members.

Experiencing interdependence entails seeing oneself as part of an encompassing social relationship and recognizing that one's behavior is determined by, and to a large extent, organized by the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others in the relationship. The Japanese narrative is exclusion, meaning that one is failing at the normative goal of connecting to others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). This is in stark contrast to the American narrative, which is to fail at separating from others, as can occur when one is unduly influenced by others, or does not stand up for what one believes, or when one goes unnoticed or undistinguished. For Japanese, nonconformity is a privilege afforded only to selected, talented individuals whose deviance from the norm of interdependence is tolerated by the rest of society. For Americans, nonconformity is regarded as every individual's birthright.

An interdependent view of the world is common to many of the otherwise highly diverse cultures of the world. Studies of the mainland Chinese, for example, summarized by Bond (1986), show that even among the most rapidly modernizing segments of the Chinese population, there is a tendency for people to act primarily in accordance with anticipated expectations of others and social norms rather than with internal wishes or personal attributes (Tang, 1981). A premium is placed on emphasizing collective welfare and on showing a sympathetic concern for others. Throughout the studies of the Chinese reported by Bond, one can see the clear imprint of Confucianism on interdependence and kindness. According to Hsu (1985), the supreme Chinese virtue, jen, entails the person's capability to interact with fellow humans in a sincere, polite, and decent fashion.

Numerous other examples of interdependence steering cultures can be identified. For example, Triandis, Martin, Launaysky, and Betancourt (1984) have described the importance of "simpatia" among Hispanics. This quality refers to the ability to both respect and share philosophy of Filipinos, Church (1987) described the importance attributed to smooth interpersonal relations and being "agreable even under difficult circumstances, sensitive to what others are feeling and willing to adjust one's behavior accordingly." Similarly, Weisz (1989) reported that Thai place a premium on self-efficiency, humility, deference, and avoiding disturbing others.

Industrialized western cultures typically give more priority to self-reliance and personal well-being than to social identity. Western literature, from the Illiad and Odyssey to The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, celebrates rugged individuals who, rather than fulfilling others' expectations, seek their own fulfillment. Individualists stand up for their rights, knowing that "the squeaky wheel gets the grease."

Asian and third world cultures, placing greater value on collectivism (Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai, & Lucca, 1993), give more priority to the goals and welfare of their families, their class, and their companies. They are like athletes who place greater value on their team's performance than personal achievements. Eastern literature often celebrates those who, despite temptations to self-indulgence, do their social duty. Collectivists avoid confrontation and blunt honesty, knowing that "the nail that stands out gets pounded down."

Without discounting individual differences within cultures, psychologists (e.g., Hui, 1988) have shown how a culture's individualism or collectivism affects peoples ability to communicate.

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When people from cultures that differ on the individualism-collectivism continuum work together, cooperation and a more productive work relationship may be facilitated by acknowledging these distinctions and acting accordingly (Triandis, Brislin, & Hui, 1988). Specifically, when working together, cultural differences in communication may be addressed by:

- Avoid confrontation. Criticize sparingly. Emphasize harmony and cooperation. Recognize that the person will be uncomfortable in competitive situations.

- Cultivate long-term relationships without expecting instant intimacy. No patton. Spend time chatting. These people value doing business with old friends. If resources are to be distributed among equals, expect the other to use merit in the early phases of a relationship, and quality or need in later stages.

- Present oneself modestly. Expect extraordinary and unspecified modesty, particularly if the person is from much Asia. If you give presentations, begin more modestly than you would in your own country. This means do not open a speech with a joke that typically calls attention to oneself and how clever one is, but with an apology. This tactic presents the individual as imperfect, a small cog in a large machine and brings on a sympathetic understanding that promotes a closer connection between the audience and the speaker (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

- Attend to people's positions in their group hierarchies. Group memberships define attitudes and behaviors. A person's social position based on age, sex, and family name is more important than what he or she has personally accomplished.
Informing the person of your status will ease the acquaintance-ship process. In eastern cultures, it helps to know people's group identities: "Tell me a person's family, schooling, and employment and you tell me a lot about the person" (Myers, 1994, p. 119). Individualists were against stereotyping and prefer not to judge people by their backgrounds and affiliations: "Everyone's an indi-vidual, so you shouldn't make assumptions just from knowing a person's sex, race, or background" (Myers, 1994, p. 119).

- Recognize that the person is more comfortable in verti-cal than in horizontal relationships. Persuade collectivists by get-ting their superiors to show approval and by demonstrating how a new behavior will benefit the other's ingroup.

- Initially expect social behavior to be formal. It will be polite, correct, but not especially friendly. Gift giving is import-ant. One must be generous and not expect immediate repayment. However, if you are helpful, the other person is likely to repay much more than you anticipate.

- Expect the person to spend a great deal of time with you, even accompanying you to such places as the doctor's office. Only in this way can a long-term relationship be established. In fact, a collectivist may find it unimaginable and painful to be with-out company.

Each cultural tradition offers benefits, for a price. In com-petitive, individualistic, predominately western cultures, people enjoy more personal freedom, take greater pride in their own achievements, enjoy more privacy, live with more spontaneity, and feel free to move about and choose their own lifestyles. The price for this autonomy is more frequent depression and loneliness, more divorce, more homicide and more vulnerability to stress-related disease (Seligman, 1988; Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Azad, & Lucca, 1988). In collectivistic, predominately eastern cultures, people enjoy greater social support, have groups and tradi-tions to identify with, enjoy more intimate, longer term friend-ship, live with greater stability, and are guided to choose a secure lifestyle. The cost is greater social control by others, and less free-dom and autonomy.

The circle of businesses drawn into the global economy is ever widening. More firms will be interacting with a broader array of cultures, philosophies, and social norms than ever before. Sensitivity to cultural differences like those outlined in this paper will be increasingly critical to business success as west meets east.

Authors
Barlow Sope, Ph.D. (University of Georgia) is a Professor in the Department of Behavioral Sciences at Louisiana Tech University. He is a frequent consultant to management in the area of work motiva-tion and counseling and has published extensively in numerous areas of business, psychology, and counseling.

C. W. Von Bergen, Ph.D. (Dartmouth University) is an industrial psy-chologist and Assistant Professor in the Department of Behavioral worked in business and management in diverse human resource and ownership capacities applying psychological principles to in-dustrial situations.

Dr. Joseph L. Balloun is Associate Professor of Management at Louisiana Tech University. His Ph.D. in Industrial Psychology was awarded by the University of California at Berkeley. His research interests include statistics and research design and part-time em-ployee job satisfaction, motivation, and organizational commitment.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to C. W. Von Bergen, Department of Behavioral Sciences, Louisiana Tech University, P.O. Box 10048 TS, Ruston, LA 71272.

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ates.
If you solicit your employment applicants through the print media, you will be wise to choose your words carefully. The improvidently chosen word may land you in deep trouble! You may have opened yourself up to a discrimination claim even before your prospective employee sets foot in the door. Language that commonly appeared in employment ads just a few years ago is now unacceptable.

The business who placed the above ad has unwittingly exposed itself to four different claims of discrimination. First, by advertising for a "young and energetic" person, the employer implies that age will be a factor in its hiring decision, a violation of the age discrimination laws. Second, the reference to "family person" implies that the employer does not wish to hire single, childless, or gay people, all of which are impermissible forms of discrimination. Third, by using the word "salesman," instead of the gender-neutral "salesperson," the employer raises the issue of sex discrimination. Finally, the statement that "superior English skills are required" may be construed as discriminatory towards persons of foreign nationalities who may speak with accents.

Making hiring decisions on the basis of an applicant's race, ancestry, national origin, color, sex, religion, disability, marital status, age, or medical condition is prohibited by both state and federal law. As an employer, you must not only be aware of the many prohibited forms of discrimination, but you must also be wary of language that suggests discriminatory intent. A poorly-worded advertisement alone will not subject you to a lawsuit. However, you can bet that it will be presented as evidence against you by the 42 year old clerk you fired because he or she could never manage to get to work on time, could not get along with your other employees, and never quite completed any assigned tasks, but nonetheless decide to sue you for age discrimination.

To avoid unwittingly supplying the fodder for discrimination suits, the wise employer will carefully phrase his or her employment advertisements. Be sure that your ad states only those elements that are requirements for the job, and express them as objectively as possible. Avoid all words or phrases that even indirectly refer to a characteristic protected by the discrimination laws. The bottom line is: "If it is not a legitimate job requirement, leave it out."

About the Author
Kathy Tichenor is of counsel to the San Francisco law firm of St. Peter & Cooper. She specializes in employment law.