Communication in Chinese Offices

politeness is more important than clarity

China fascinates the West. Not just different and more than merely exotic, Westerners see Chinese as "mysterious," a people somehow unlike any other, a puzzle we-can't-seem-to-solve … or understand.

Chinese people are **not** mysterious. Different yes, very much so, but they can be understood. The Chinese puzzle can be solved. All you need is patience, a willingness to do some hard work and enough common sense to treat the Chinese as people, not mysteries.

This booklet is in no way a criticism of Chinese culture! It simply looks at the source of Chinese attitudes towards communication and how Chinese culture affects business communication.

The booklet and the accompanying workshop, *Wearing Chinese Glasses: How (not) to Go Broke in Chinese Asia*, won't guarantee success in Chinese Asia, sorry, but will give you a necessary tool for success; ability to *see* things like Chinese do. You need Chinese glasses. It took me many mistakes to get mine, and I hope you can learn from my mistakes instead of from your own. It's a lot cheaper way get your glasses!

After 20+ years in Asia I know that nothing comes easy. How you start determines where you end; your willingness to change and attitude towards living & working with the Chinese will decide your success … or failure. As Confucius put it, *It is only the wisest and the most foolish who can not change.* Be neither. Good luck.

Greg Bissky

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looking at business through Chinese glasses

What is Communication?

Communication has only one goal—transmitting messages. Body language, business presentations and smiles to strangers on the street all have the same basic goal, that the audience (the one receiving the message) clearly understands the message the speaker (or writer or "smiler") intended.

Everything is a message. Facts, opinions, questions, requests or suggestions are different, but also the same. Different on the level of content or purpose, they are identical in how communication success is measured. Facts, opinions *et al* are "messages" (with different purposes) and we measure success for each in the same way—only when a speaker (or writer: 'speaker' herein means "person initiating the communication") transfers what's in his head *100% accurately* into the audience's head is the communication (of the message) considered "successful."

There is nothing mysterious about communication. The same principles apply to everyone, everywhere, every time.

There is nothing mysterious about communication. The same principles apply to everyone, everywhere, every time. Chinese and Western, adults and children, intellectuals and idiots all do the same things to try to achieve the same goals. All speakers follow the same sequence of steps: 1) decide what message (type and content) to transfer; 2) select a method of transferring it (maybe writing a letter, using a loud voice or relying on body language); and 3) use the method . . . and hope it works.

If the audience receives the exact content sent by the speaker, the message was successful. Please note a crucial distinction here though: communication success is *not* measured by whether the audience agrees or accepts the speaker's message. That is another issue: communication effectiveness let's call it, or perhaps rhetoric. For example, I may want my partner to do a specific task. Until I succeed in communicating the message, "this is what I want you to do" (i.e., until the audience knows *exactly* what the task is) he or she can not begin to decide whether to agree to do it. Understanding message content 100% clearly, accurately and completely—communication success—*has* to happen before the audience can decide whether or not to accept or agree with the message.

Understanding Misunderstanding

Before moving to communication in Chinese offices, a common misunderstanding about communication must be dealt with first. The problem? People misunderstand the difference between misunderstanding and confusion. There are only three things that can happen when an audience receives a message. One, the audience understands the message exactly as intended by the speaker (communication success). Two, the audience is unsure what the speaker's message is (confusion). Three, the audience thinks they understand the message perfectly, but actually understand something different than what the speaker intended (misunderstanding). Of the three possible outcomes, the third is by far the most dangerous. Unaware that he has the wrong message, the audience makes a decision or chooses a response based on the wrong message; unaware that the audience has an in-

correct understanding (because they act like they do understand) the speaker assumes he has been successful. *Nothing* causes more problems in relationships than misunderstandings. Confusion is far better: if the audience isn't sure what the message really is they can ask the speaker to repeat it. Not so with misunderstanding: not confused at all—just mistaken—the audience not only won't ask for clarification, they may do something totally opposite to what the speaker wished. The result is almost always bad: the wrong goods go into the wrong container delivered to the wrong port, staff spend time, money and resources doing the wrong job in the wrong order, the list is endless.

Lots of things can hurt a business relationship. Not trusting a person's word is about the worst. Where there is no trust there is no relationship.

Misunderstanding is the largest hidden cost in international business.

Does misunderstanding happen in your office? You probably will say, "Yes. Too often, too." And that is Western-to-Western communication (i.e., between people from the same culture). How about Western-to-Chinese communication (i.e., between people from totally different cultures)? The effects are far more serious: misunderstandings are more frequent, harder to solve and *far* more damaging to relationship building.

Lots of things can hurt a business relationship. Not trusting another person's word is perhaps the worst. If there is no trust there is no relationship (or at least no relationship anyone would want if there was a choice). The bad news is, misunderstandings between Chinese and, well, Westerners of all nations, are much more common than either communication success or, second best, confusion between speaker and audience. The good news is that the frequency of misunderstandings between you and Chinese can be dramatically reduced, and, even better news, you already know how. Your only real problem is you don't know you know how.

My goal is simple. I hope to open your eyes to the fact that the concepts of communication and relationship-building you use every day are in fact the same ones you should use when dealing with the Chinese. Of course it is not quite that simple, but it is nowhere as difficult as you might (and probably do) think. My most important advice to people working with the Chinese is, *if you know how to make a friend at home you know how to do business with the Chinese*. There is no "mystery" to it. All you need is some background about how Chinese think, why they think that way, and how this must affect the way you think and act. As much as the products or services you sell for what price, you will succeed or fail based on the actions you take. Your choice of actions depends on your assumptions of which actions are appropriate, and which are not. In a very real sense, success with the Chinese depends upon what and how you think, not on how or when you act.

If you know how to make a friend at home you know how to do business with Chinese. There is no "mystery" to it.

Language, Culture & Communication

A company is just a big team, (team defined as "two or more people working together in a common way for a common goal"). Critical for success are reasoned discussions towards mutually-acceptable

solutions and frank exchanges of opinions and disagreements. All types of teams, sports, business or marriage, are only as strong as the ability of team members to cooperate and work together. Teams fail without good communication.

People with experience in alien cultures, through travel or work, know that different cultures do things in different ways. Common examples are giving gifts, who sits where at dinner, and the way cultures use language to communicate.

"Use language" does not mean grammar, pronunciation or vocabulary. These are just language skills. Of course a certain level of language skills-in-common are necessary for cross-cultural communication, but language skills are just a beginning, not an end.

Maybe the best way to explain is to use a situation most people are familiar with: husband-wife communication. In my case though, it's not just a male-female but also Chinese-Western. Some background: my (Chinese) wife and I have been married five years (now 14), have Master's Degrees, good second-language skills and far-more-than-average experience dealing with people from different cultures. In other words, we should have few problems communicating with each other. How I wish that was true. It's not: we argue more about communication than any five other things.

How could that be? We understand (and love) each other, understand each other's culture and speak each other's language. Women first: her common complaints are, "You use Chinese like a Westerner: you are too direct, especially when you ask questions and analyze situations; you use too much logic and not enough feelings; you embarrass people by discussing the good and bad points of their proposal in front of others; you are just too rude and not polite enough." To put that in perspective, my family and long-time Canadian friends continually remark on how much more patient, reserved and less aggressive I've become since living in Asia. Most would not call me *rude* (I hope). In my opinion what my wife calls rude is in fact *efficiency*, getting straight to the point and focusing on result, not process.

A certain level of language skills-in-common are needed for cross-culture communication, but language skills are a start, not the end.

My turn. My wife's English is better than my Chinese but I still go crazy asking her direct, yes/no questions (like "Do you think I should do this?"). While she **does** answer me, only *very rarely* does she use the words *yes* or *no*. Instead she tells me a story (of sorts), and from what she says, how she says it, body language etc. I must *guess* her answer. Explained in detail in the class, one reason why is because *there is no one word for yes* and *no* in Chinese. Of course Chinese can communicate no and yes; how though depends on context. Context is crucial.

Classified a high context language (see page X), Chinese (all dialects) is designed to maintain stability and harmony at all costs, not to question or be clear. A common way this is done is by communicating negatives without actually saying "no." It works for Chinese, but, as it is based on the ability to

guess meaning, it is tough for Westerners to master. Most Westerners don't practice making people guess … and have little problem saying a clear "no" when necessary.

Rules Of Communication

Western Rules	*Chinese Rules*
• offer as much information as you can	• try not to disagree openly
• be as truthful as possible	• don't ask people above you difficult questions
• make what you say important (relevant)	• don't show you don't understand something
• don't make people guess your meaning	• communicate negatives in an indirect way
• be brief, orderly and logical	• keep the conversation smooth
• get to, and keep on, the point	• don't embarrass a person in front of a group
• state your opinion (even if you disagree)	• if what you say will cause problems don't say it
• ask questions if you don't understand	• don't disturb the harmony of the situation
• *being clear is most important*	• *being polite is most important*

Each culture *expects* language to be used in a specific way. We all grow up learning the *right* way to use language. Often called "leaning how to be polite," it goes far deeper than just politeness. We learn *rules*—rules that determine our **belief** in the *right* and *wrong* way to use language. Called the **Rules of Communication,** they determine how we feel language *should* be used. Language is but a tool used in culturally-specific and unique ways.

Learned from childhood, the Rules guide our attitude towards communication and our belief in what's correct and what's not. These hidden beliefs determines *how* a person communicates, and how he or she *expects communication to be offered.* We all learn to expect messages to be given in certain ways. Expectations are crucial in cross-cultural communication. Not only do they govern our unthinking reactions and beliefs of what is/is not polite, they determine what things *mean.*

Westerners expect disagreement to be clearly stated. If they receive a negative-sounding message that doesn't include a clear statement of disagreement, Westerners tend to think it expresses some form of *misgiving* or *concern*; something milder than "disagreement." This leads to perhaps the most common problem Westerners have in a Chinese office—as Chinese believe disagreement should be indirect and polite, Westerners often don't realize when someone is disagreeing.

Note the problem here: the Westerner is not "confused," he "misunderstands" . . . as does the Chinese. Both are certain the other understands though. The result? At some time in the future, say when the Westerner discovers the Chinese doing something different than *he agreed to do*, the Westerner will not-be-happy (at minimum). He will probably tell his Chinese partner that he's not doing what *he agreed* to do. Even if the Westerner is patient and polite (which, considering he feels he is right and the Chinese said one thing then did another, is not really likely), how do you think the Chinese will react? Remember, as far as the Chinese is concerned, he's right and the Westerner is wrong. While Chinese manners may mean he'd not argue openly, inside he'd be thinking bad thoughts. Both of them would actually, something like, "Can I trust this person?"

Communication success is never easy, even when communicating with someone of your native culture. We may try to be clear, but many things can go wrong. Communication is rarely perfect, even with best friends or family members. Different cultural expectations makes cross-cultural communication far harder. To be successful a sender must be aware of the expectations of the audience. What works with a member of your native culture won't necessarily work with a member of the host culture.

The overall effect has been to limit individuality and the desire to argue about the "rightness" of opinions, and to instill a group identity and a desire for harmony.

Overcoming cultural expectations is difficult, but possible. First is needed an awareness of the foundations of the other person's culture, i.e., not just *what* the expectations are but *why* they are. To communicate with people from another culture you must think about communication the way *they* do and understand why it is important *and proper* for them to think that way. Once *why* is understood, the *what* (the principles or Rules of Communication) and the *how* (language skills) naturally follow (or become easier to learn and accept).

Chinese culture and communication

Chinese attitudes towards communication have been shaped by many influences. Two of the most important are Chinese social history and the thought of Chinese social philosophers, especially Confucius (and Confucianism) and Lao Tzu (the *Tao Te Ching*). The overall effect of these influences has been to limit individuality and the desire to argue, and to instill a group identity and a desire for harmony. Each influence is briefly examined below.

To communicate with people from another cultures you must think about communication the way they do and understand why it is important and proper for them to think that way.

From ancient times China was densely-populated, and depended for survival upon labor-intensive rice cultivation. Cooperation was crucial, especially for the creation and maintenance of a very complex system of dikes and irrigation canals. For political and geographic reasons people did not travel, and remained tied to their village, a pattern repeated for countless generations. The cycle of planting then harvesting remained constant, leaving very little opportunity (or desire) for experimentation: a failed experiment would mean starvation.

Such an unchanging existence meant wisdom came through experience, and experience through age. A hierarchical society emerged, with age becoming the source of authority. Totally absent was any idea of equality, with even twins addressing (and obeying) each other as "older brother, younger brother." Authority came thus not from reason but from superior status: age.

From this idea that "older is better" or "older is right" came a lack of questioning: on what basis could a young person question an elder? Why would an elder question a youth? Individuality became less and less important—even village elders were constrained by writings and sayings of ancestors. As the body of written work accumulated over the years Chinese society and communication within

the society became standardized. What was right yesterday had to be right today, and would still be right tomorrow.

This rigid hierarchy based upon respect for age was already well in place by the time of Confucius. China's greatest sage, and the greatest influence on all aspects of Chinese society, Confucius gathered all the influences of popular culture and codified them into a series of well-structured rules and laws. Beginning in the Han Dynasty (206 BC) the writings of Confucius became the state-approved philosophy, and, though endlessly interpreted and added to, remained the official philosophy at least until the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911.

Confucius taught the importance of following rules and of maintaining relationships, and explained the hierarchy that all fit into, explained how one should act towards others above and below in the hierarchy, and made the goal of all human behavior the maintenance of harmony. The "goodness" of an individual could not be measured by the individual but only by the group, and was decided by how the individual acted towards the group. Proper behavior towards others became the only way to achieve "goodness," thus making harmony with others more important than individual expression or desires.

In contrast to Confucianism and its emphasis on proper behavior towards others was the *Tao Te Ching (Taoism)* of Lao Tzu and its emphasis on man's finding peace with himself and within nature. A philosophy perfectly suited for hermits, Taoism taught that man can never really know anything, and should therefore not strive to understand but to accept, not try to change nature but to live in harmony with it. Indeed, the entire concept of proactive change was viewed with suspicion—change happened only by not trying to make change happen.

The "goodness" of an individual could not be measured by the individual but only by the group, by how the individual acted towards the group.

Both philosophical orientations shunned clear speech and (especially) argumentation. Argumentation—the asking of difficult questions in order to find the true nature of a thing or idea—is necessary for discovery, but *discovery* was not necessary for either of the great Chinese philosophers: for Confucius because truth depended upon age, and was thus already known; for Lao Tzu because it was impossible to really know anything. In fact, both philosophies argued against what we now call eloquence, persuasiveness or precision. As said in the *Tao Te Ching:* "He who knows does not talk; he who talks does not know. Keep your mouth shut." The final chapter sums it up:

> *True words are not beautiful; beautiful words are not true. A good man does not argue; he who argues is not a good man . . . The Way of the Sage is to act but not to compete.*

Yet the Chinese still had to communicate: messages still had to be transmitted. What developed was one of the most sophisticated and complicated ways of communicating in the world. Understanding messages involved far more than the meaning of words. Chinese communication became like highly-structured poetry: understanding messages meant considering *how* something was said, then

the meaning of the words, then *who* said it, then *when* it was said (and many other factors). The style was very indirect, with real skill being the ability to communicate something without ever saying it, and understanding something without ever hearing it. Such indirectness made the ultimate goal of Confucian thought—maintaining harmony in human relations—easier. Understanding Chinese attitudes towards communication depends upon understanding that the goal of all communication was (and is) the desire to maintain harmony in human relations. No matter what the message, it should be given in a way that would not upset the relationship between sender and receiver.

Chinese normally speak a potentially "disturbing" message in an indirect way in order to preserve harmony and good relations.

Emphasis was on "being polite," something we now call the desire not to lose, or cause one to lose, *face*. Over the years this created a deep-set fear in most Chinese of *going too far* or *saying too much* when communicating. Other people's feelings became very important, and negative messages such as disagreement or disappointment were communicated in an indirect, *save face* way. Further emphasis was placed upon accepting the world around you, on obedience and a lack of questioning. No need to discover the new meant no need for precision or clarity. Over centuries a body of ritual phrases developed, and communication skill came from repeating them at the appropriate time.

Effects on Business Communication

Confucius is still alive in Chinese Asia (as well as in Japan, Korea and Vietnam). Proving far stronger than the (European) ideas of Marx or Lenin, his moral and societal philosophy easily overcame the concerted efforts of the Chinese Communist Party in China to "rid the nation of [his] feudal teachings." From Shanghai to Taipei to Hong Kong to Singapore, his influence can be seen in all aspects of Chinese society, especially Chinese business communication.

Chinese reports are often filled with polite but meaningless words; business letters and faxes take one, and often two or three, paragraphs to get to the point. Chinese meetings are characterized by general and/or superficial discussion: ensuring that no one *loses face* is more important than clearly examining the entire range of opinions. What's missing from Chinese communication are well-reasoned arguments, strong conclusions, clear recommendations, tough questions, candid opinions and frank disagreements. All require a person to be definite, to clearly say *This is what I think*, and thus all risk hurting a relationship with those who disagree (especially in hierarchical relationships).

Missing from Chinese communication are well-reasoned arguments, strong conclusions, clear recommendations, tough questions, candid opinions and frank disagreements.

Successful business communication depends upon people taking risks. For example, if Mr. A. believes there are some serious problems with parts of Mr. B.'s plan he must make Mr. B. *clearly* understand this, even if it means risking hurting Mr. B.'s feelings. Anything less than total understanding by Mr. B. is unacceptable in business. Yet if Mr. A. were Chinese he would likely consider *being clear* about his disagreement as *being impolite*, and would nor-

mally speak the message in an indirect way in order to preserve harmony and good relations. *Face* or *politeness*—no risk—would be more important to Mr. A. than *clear communication.*

It all comes down to attitude. A Chinese may work in an office, wear a business suit and have advanced degrees but he will still communicate in the way his mother taught him. He will worry more about being *polite* than being *clear,* more about not hurting his relations with others than arguing to find the right answer. No matter what his education or experience, he will tend to follow the Rules of Communication laid down by Confucius. Why? He *believes* in these Rules, *believes* that being polite ***is more important*** than being clear.

Your challenge with Chinese partners is to stop insisting on Western rules.

Beliefs are among the most powerful influences on human behavior. Stronger than ideas from the brain, beliefs just *are*. Few Chinese can explain why politeness is most important: they just *know it is*. Very few Westerners can explain why clarity is the most important either. Changing *how* people communicate begins by and depends on changing the *why*. Your challenge in developing relations with Chinese partners or coworkers is to stop insisting on following Western rules, and, as much and as often as possible, finding a compromise between two very different ways of looking at reality.

Workshop Description and Objectives

The last page of this booklet is a detailed description of the *Wearing Chinese Glasses: How (**not**) to Go Broke in Chinese Asia* workshop. The description is of the 1-day class, so if you attended only a half-day version I apologize if not all topics are covered (or not all overhead transparencies were used).

Case Studies

On the next four pages are two case studies based on actual West-meets-East business. Both situations happened almost exactly as written. To maintain the confidentiality of friends and companies I've worked for all names and details have been disguised.

> The Chinese character for listening, (ting 聽) implies listening with your ears, eyes and heart.
>
> Dr. Stella Ting-Toomey

Case Study 1: That's Gross Negligence: *What Do We Do?*

With 21 million people living on a small, mountainous island, Taiwan's farms and factories must co-exist. Rice paddies butt up to chain-link fences. Until the end of Martial Law in the late 1980s farmers and rural residents were more-or-less powerless to stop factories from polluting. Once armed with their newly-legal ability to protest and demonstrate, however, farmers began to organize, and to blockade polluting factories.

When the police did little to stop the blockades, the factory owners took the law into their own hands ... and began paying farmers huge sums of money to call off blockades. Power shifted to the farmers; the factories, scared of "blockade-and-blackmail," began to pay very close attention to maintaining good relations with farmers.

In 1989 the ABC Co.'s (a Western Multinational) newest petrochemical factory came on line. Beginning during construction and continuing afterwards, the company worked hard to build and maintain good relations with local farmers, holding farmer meetings and training all factory staff in the necessity of strictly following safety and operating procedures in order to preventing pollution. The factory became a model of farmer harmony and the benefits of training—the farmers were happy and factory personnel motivated and proud of their perfect pollution record.

Factory-farmer harmony disappeared one evening late in 1991* when a large volume of non-toxic but quite irritating chemical was accidentally discharged, blanketing the surrounding farms and villages in minutes. Factory personnel immediately went to surrounding farmers' homes to explain there was no real danger. They also apologized and promised it would never happen again. The apologies fell on deaf ears—after a night spent coughing and rubbing eyes, the farmers *saw a chance to make some money*. They blockaded the factory that afternoon.

ABC's Western boss met personally with the farmers (giving the farmers great *face*), and quickly agreed to pay a huge sum of money, to limit operations to two instead of three shifts per day, and to stop producing the offending chemical. The damage to the factory-farmer relationship couldn't be repaired so easily however, nor would the farmers give up this easy source of revenue. They soon blockaded twice more over minor issues, each time demanding money. It was only when the ABC Co. threatened to close the factory that the blockades stopped. Everyone knew, though, that another accident would mean the end of the factory.

ABC Co.'s internal safety investigation pointed towards two employees. One was a long-term (23-years) employee only three years from retirement, the senior shift manager in charge of production of the offending chemical. He said he made the error because he was trying to regain the shift production record (lost 2 weeks earlier to another shift). He said, "Yes, I know we should have shut down, but losing the record made us "lose face." His last words were: "It's our record, not theirs: the only way to get it back was keep the line running; we couldn't shut down."

* *Yes, I know that Taiwan has changed much since 1991, and that Taiwan is not China. But I believe the principles involved in the example are hardly affected at all these factors. My Chinese friends agree.*

The other guilty employee was under 30, recently married and with the company for only two years. He was the Safety Officer responsible for system integrity. He explained to the investigators that he'd been asleep when the accident happened, and not watching the safety board as was his job. He said that while he knew sleeping on the job was wrong (he'd been reprimanded the night before the accident for sleeping on the job), "I was very tired and the job is very boring. My wife just had twin girls, and they keep me awake when I try to sleep at home." His final words to the investigators were, "I shouldn't be punished: I didn't cause the problem, the shift manager did. And do you know how expensive twin girls are?"

The investigation examined all possible causes of the discharge, and decided the existing policies and procedures were fine and no mechanical fault had occurred. The cause of the discharge was determined to be *absolute and total gross negligence* by the shift manager and the safety officer. When the findings were communicated to all ABC Co. employees, no one, neither friends of the two nor their union, challenged or disagreed with the findings. Everyone knew the employees were guilty.

DISCUSSION POINTS

1. If this happened in your home country, what would ABC do to the two guilty employees?
   - what would the minimum punishment be?
   - what would the maximum punishment be?
   - can you imagine a situation where neither were punished at all? If not, why not? Does that show anything important about differences between your and Chinese ideas of law and the concept of assuming individual responsibility?

2. If your company wanted to fire the two employees what would the rest of the staff think? How would the staff feel towards the two employees? (By the end of the investigation the staff knew the factory might be closed down, putting everyone out of work.)
   - would the staff think that firing the two was, or was not, appropriate?
   - would the staff be angry at, or feel sorry for, the two fired employees?
   - would the staff agree or disagree with the punishment?

3. The Western boss of ABC Co. wanted to fire both employees (it was legal to fire them), but the senior Chinese managers convinced him that doing so would be a serious mistake, and would cause a lot of future problems.
   - any ideas how the Chinese convinced the Western boss not to fire the employees?
   - would future problems happen if they were fired? Where would they appear?
   - what would cause more problems in your country, firing them or not firing them?

4. The first impulse of most Western bosses would be to fire (at least) them, yet the Western boss in this case was convinced by his Chinese staff that he couldn't fire them. What does this suggest about:
   - Western vs. Chinese assumptions about personal responsibility?
   - the need for Westerners not to act by impulse in Chinese Asia or when dealing with Chinese, even when they *know* they are *right*?
   - "being right" having anything to do with succeeding in Chinese Asia?
   - the need for Western business people to try to see things through Chinese glasses?

Case Study 2: **Didn't We Decide That?**

Dave is in China meeting Yen-ping, manager of the Joint Venture between their two companies.. Below is part of their discussion whether to import parts or buy them in China.

Dave: I think part #212 should be imported. Taki Co. in Japan makes a very high quality one, and #212 *must* be of the highest quality. Everything else depends on it.

Yen-ping: I don't know if buying from Taki is a good idea. The duty on it will be very high.

Dave: Yeah I know, but good quality is more important than low price for part #212. And besides, we've got enough margin to pay a premium for it if needed. You agree?

Yen-ping: Dave, Taki Co. it is very difficult to deal with.

Dave: Aren't all Japanese companies though. Yen-ping, I'm sure you'll have no trouble. Solving tough problems is what you are good at, right? Don't you agree?

Yen-ping: (looks away and says nothing)

Dave: Good. That's settled. Now, about Part #213 . . .

Six months later Dave discovers that Part #212 is *not* being imported from Taki Co., and instead is being sourced from a Chinese company. Dave phones Yen-ping to ask why.

Dave: Yen-ping, about Part #212. I'm pleased and puzzled. It's good quality and cheap, but I thought we decided to import it from Japan. Why the change?

Yen-ping: Well Dave, the high duty made buying it from Taki in Japan very expensive.

Dave: But I remember we talked about that, and agreed we could afford to pay more for it. Part #212 is crucial, and had to be top quality. Didn't we decide that meant it should come from Taki? I'll admit you've surprised me by finding it cheaper and good quality locally, but I'm still puzzled why you didn't buy from Taki as agreed.

Yen-ping: Dave, Taki Co. is very hard to deal with.

Dave: I can't believe it was too hard though. That's what you are good at, dealing with tough companies. What's the real reason Yen-ping?

Yen-ping: Taki was just too tough to deal with.

Dave: I can't accept that Yen-ping. It's a company just like ours. It also wants to make money. What is the real reason? I'm not angry—I just want to know why.

Yen-ping: Dave, Taki Co. owns one of our big competitors; they won't sell to us.

Dave: Since when?

Yen-ping: For at least six years now.

Dave: But if you knew that when we talked months ago why didn't you say something? I only suggested we buy the part from Taki. You should have said something.

Yen-ping: I tried to, but you kept insisting, even after I told you we couldn't get it from Taki.

Dave: I can't remember you insisting, or disagreeing. I really can't.

DISCUSSION POINTS

1. Dave and Yen-ping contradict each other.

   - did Dave *insist,* and if so, where and how?
   - did Yen-ping *tell* Dave they couldn't get the part from Taki? If so, where and how did he tell him?

2. Could **both** Dave and Yen-ping be right? Is it possible that Dave did *insist* and Yen-ping did *disagree,* as they both claim to have done?

   - If so, how and why could such a thing happen?
   - If not, why couldn't such a thing happen?

3. If it is true that Yen-ping *told* Dave they couldn't get part #212 from Taki Co., why didn't Dave understand what Yen-ping told him?

   - Dave used a common Western "I'm not wrong till someone stops me" conversation method. Is that why he misunderstood Yen-ping?
   - what (if any) lessons should Dave learn from this experience? (A clue is, "did Dave *listen* closely to what Yen-ping said or did he just concentrate on trying to *convince* him?)

4. Did Yen-ping "raise objections" or did he "disagree?"

   - is there a real difference between "raising an objection" and "disagreeing?" If so, what is the difference?
   - if there is a difference, is it something important to remember when communicating with Chinese? If so, why?

Common Western Complaints About Chinese Communication and Work Style

- staff don't tell me enough, especially mistakes or bad news
- staff don't tell me when they don't understand something
- staff don't ask enough questions
- staff don't answer "yes" or "no," but instead "tell me a story"
- staff are not systematic in how they discuss or deal with things
  - *don't take a "step-by-step" approach*
  - *don't deal with subjects one at a time, but include many subjects at the same time*
- staff wait to be told instead of making decisions for themselves
  - *I want them to show initiative: that is the key to promotion and management*
- staff don't speak up in meetings; instead decisions and discussions seem to happen either before or after the meeting

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Common Chinese Complaints About Western Communication and Management Style

- Westerners don't tell me all I need to know: they expect me to already know everything
- Western bosses are not consistent: each new boss has new ideas about what to do/what is important/how to do it
- Westerners see things only in "black" and "white," but the case is more complicated than that
- Westerners have no patience: things must be done now!
- Westerners care only care about performance, not people

Wearing Chinese Glasses:
How (NOT) to Go Broke in Chinese Asia workshop description

Overall Objective

Help Westerners to communicate and to develop productive and lasting business relations with Chinese individuals, companies and organizations.

Detailed Objectives

- to prepare people psychologically for the challenge of business in Chinese Asia
- to give people a realistic picture of what it will take, how long they must work at it, and what changes they must make, in order to succeed
- to show that while on one level there are dramatic qualitative differences in how Chinese and Westerners do business, there are more similarities than differences
- to replace the "romantic" view of China many have with a "practical" view
- to stop people worrying about the "mystery" of all-things-Chinese and to realize they already have the most important skills needed to succeed in Chinese Asia
- to understand why and how Chinese and Western thinking differs, and how thinking affects how people communicate, negotiate and develop relationships
- to give a framework/structure for you to fit your own experiences into and to speed up the learning curve for those with little (or no) experience

While the workshop includes a good many tips and how-to suggestions and will help in negotiations and JVs, emphasis is on principles and theories illustrated by humorous (I hope) anecdotes and real-life case studies. The key to your success is changing how you think about dealing with the Chinese and learning how they *see* things. Chinese glasses help more than a list of tips and strategies, as not wearing them means doing business ***blind***. That's always bad.

> If you wish to be happy for an hour, get drunk.
> If you wish to be happy for three days, get married.
> If you wish to be happy for eight days, kill your pig and eat it.
> If you wish to be happy forever … **learn to fish**.
>
> *Chinese proverb*

It is easier to catch Chinese fish if you wear Chinese glasses. I hope the pair you get at the workshop help you land the "big one."

Greg Bissky

I t is only the wisest and
the most stupid
who can not change.

Confucius

Sound intelligence
promises victory in
every battle.

Sunzi (The Art of War)

Desire to have things done
quickly prevents their being done
thoroughly.

Confucius

Business is like fishing;
you have to have patience.

Leopold D. Silverstein

Seek truth from facts.

Deng Xiaoping

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looking at business through Chinese glasses

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