

7 Lessons on Working with Asia

Understanding cultural differences can help engineers adapt behavior to optimize communication across cultures.

Working with your Asian colleagues presents greater challenges than working with Western colleagues. This is to be expected, as cultural and language issues complicate and slow things down. But your willingness to adapt words and actions to the following seven key differences will increase effectiveness with Asians.

1. Chinese often define themselves in terms of their web of relationships.

In the West, even when we work in teams, we maintain a strong sense of self. But, for thousands of years, Chinese were taught that the self was not important; they could only fulfill themselves by fulfilling the needs of others in their group. Social status derived, not from one's own accomplishments, but from one's group. One's inner circle defined Chinese existence. You got things done through other people, not by yourself.

Even today, interactions rarely deal with just one person. Asian managers rely heavily on input from subordinates. The entire group has to be taken into account. If you forget this and start to treat your Asian colleague one-on-one, as an individual who will make unilateral decisions, you will put yourself and your colleague at a disadvantage.

Work with the group. Develop relationships at all levels, from division manager to people on the factory floor, in all departments. Schedule conference calls. Include the group in your email correspondence. Allow time for them to get back to you with the group's consensus.

2. The cycle of trust is always being built up or torn down.

It helps to realize that Asian trust is different and deeper than Western trust: Chinese trust from the heart. (And that is a whole other conversation.) The cycle of trust repeats with each project and every interaction. Always assume you are starting at the first stage in the cycle, respectfully presenting yourself into the relationship again after any absence, acknowledging past business, always quietly reinforcing the bond. Take nothing for granted.

Apart from observing the proper protocols, one way to build trust is to demonstrate that you are willing to shoulder some of their risk. Adopt the mindset that you will be mutually responsible to one another for successes and failures. Always keep a long-term perspective. Focus constantly on building the relationship. If you are in sales or management, strive to rebuild the relationship at least once every quarter.

'There was a nation-wide discussion in many of the major [Chinese] newspapers in the early eighties asking if [personal success] is morally correct. And believe it or not, the conclusion [by government-owned newspapers] was negative.'

—Calvin Wang, product engineer, Power Train Group, Siemens VDO Automotive Inc.



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BUSINESS TIPS

3. Chinese prefer face-to-face interaction.

Many Asians will not do business by phone until face-to-face contact has been made and a basis for a substantial degree of trust has been established. Face-to-face is the standard means of communication. Asian suppliers show loyalty by visiting their Asian customers almost every day. And that is what you have to compete with. They visit in the good times, and not just when there are problems (as we tend to do).

Being available to your customer [or business partner] is extremely important because it builds a sense of comfort. American suppliers need to visit Asian customers on a consistent basis. The investment will pay off handsomely. Schedule regular visits. Although your Asian contact can call on your customers on your behalf, it is not the same. Let your major customers know if you will be away from your office for any period of time.

4. Face rules.

Respect "Face." Help each person to win face. Never argue to make a point. Never voice a difference of opinion with anyone, even a member of your own team. Never do or say or imply anything that makes the other person wrong. Don't push for a decision too soon. Don't expect a person to make a decision when it is in fact a decision that involves the group. Never say "no" directly as that is considered rude and arrogant. Find ways to say no without saying no: Say, "That will be difficult," or "It might be a problem, leave it with me. I'll take it to my director." Show respect by keeping some distance. This way, you give face. They win face. And no one loses face.

5. Chinese comprehension of spoken English may not be what you think it is.

Don't make the common mistake of thinking that your Chinese colleagues

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understand everything you say. JinSeung Lee, a Korean-born engineer with Siemens VDO Automotive, explains: "When the Westerner doesn't understand, he will say: 'I'm sorry. I don't understand. Could you explain it again?' Most [Asians] won't ask you to explain it again. They just stay quiet and expressionless. If you see a lack of expression, it means you have not been understood." Even the smiles and nods have more to do with respect and protocol and saving face than they do with getting your meaning.

Chinese communication style is quite visual. So use graphics, charts, diagrams and sketches to put your ideas across. Send material ahead of time for them to read. (This takes additional planning on your part, but consider it well worth the effort.) Speak and write in positives. Avoid negatives, as they are always harder to comprehend. Use short sentences, without slang, without humor, and without references to sports.

There is no need to raise your voice, because hearing is not the problem. But slow down, and allow space between your sentences for your words to sink in.

6. If you make a mistake, you are not to be trusted.

Make no mistakes. If you do make a mistake, the worst thing you can do is ignore it or try to soften it with humor.

A Chinese engineer told me, "From the first mistake, they will become paranoid. If you can fix the situation quickly and show sincerity, the trust can be reestablished. Tell them the reasons the mistake happened. The reasons are important. A large part of the seriousness in Asian business is the fear of making a mistake, of being wrong."

This explains the Asian passion for planning, for being prepared. Prepare.

Prepare. Prepare the details. Prepare for every interaction. Make sure your facts are 100% accurate in every detail. Never give or expect to receive partial answers, as Chinese are offended by partial answers. And resist the urge to speak off the top of your head. Think through exactly what you want to say before every interaction.

7. Promises are sacred.

We make promises easily. And we tend to break them easily, which is why we have signed contracts.

In our culture, it's acceptable to say, "I know I was going to get to you at the end of the month, but the dog got out of the yard, and the wheels came off, and it's going to be two weeks before I can get to it." Asian dependency on others in their web of relationships explains their deep need to trust that you will

carry through. Your failure to do so causes shame within the group. Watch the promises you make and keep the promises you make.

As an engineer, you know too well the penchant that sales and marketing people have for making promises to the customer that you are then called upon to transact. You may need to make them aware of the negative impact on profits when trust is lost due to excuses, delays, and lack of follow through.

It is a mistake to treat your Chinese colleagues as casually as you do your colleagues in the West. Once you can wrap your head around the fundamental differences in culture, and start to make small changes in the way you work and communicate with Asians, productivity will improve—as will your enjoyment.

Mia Doucet consults with companies involved in business negotiations in the Pacific Rim. Learn more at www.chinainmotion.com

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