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## COLUMNS

# Negotiate a 'yes' that means 'yes' in China

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Monday June 6, 2005

When Westerners do business in China, confusion often arises over the word "yes" in response to our questions. We tend to assume that "yes" means "I agree." This can have serious consequences when negotiating agreements.

The Asian "yes" is a habitual response. Consider it a neutral constant. Train yourself to not hear "yes" as meaning agreement. It means nothing unless you confirm what it means in the specific context of your conversation. Context is important because yes in Chinese can mean a number of things. Often it means "I'm listening" and not necessarily "I understand. "

By saying yes there is a good chance you'll keep talking and they will be able to understand your meaning. So hear it as acknowledgment that you have asked a question, and not as a response to your question.

In the Chinese culture it is considered an honor to be asked to do something. They are happy to help, and eager to prove that they are the best person to assist. Eagerly saying yes will deepen the trust you have placed in them. Where there is a risk of losing face (yours or theirs), the Chinese will often pretend to understand your meaning.

Beware that when anyone says "no" the conversation is over. Negotiations will end. When you are uncertain whether you have got your point across, it is a mistake to ask the question "Do you understand?" It's condescending.

And no Chinese will ever confess to not understanding. It's an embarrassment.

Similarly, the question "Do you have the authority to make a decision?" begs a yes response. They are aware that Westerners want a quick decision and don't want to waste time with someone who can't make that decision. Chances are, they'll say yes so that you will not look down on them for not having the ability to decide. So be careful not to put your colleagues in that impossible situation.

A large part of learning how to negotiate for Asian business is getting to a yes that means a definite yes. Small changes in the way we ask questions

will have a huge impact on reducing friction and increasing productivity.

So here are 10 ways to assure that yes means yes:

Ask how to communicate. "How do you want me to communicate with you? Do you want me to send e-mails? Or do you prefer that we talk over the phone?" (If the person says yes, you may need to start the dialogue over again.)

Plan your message. What words will most easily put your point across?

Warm up the brains. Before the call, send an e-mail outlining your key points.

Prepare questions. Frame your questions so that they that cannot be answered by a simple yes.

Give permission to ask you to repeat. At the start of every conversation, ask them to stop you and ask you to repeat if they are not exactly sure what you said.

Slow down. Leave space between your sentences to allow your words to sink in.

Simplify and clarify. Use easy words. Avoid slang, sports metaphors and humor because they don't translate well.

Signal your intent. Start your sentence with words that let the other person know what to expect next: "The main point is . . ." "In other words . . ." "I have three questions to ask: The first question is . . ."

Check for comprehension. Make sure you were understood. If a commitment was made, politely ask how they plan to accomplish the task. If appropriate, you may want to ask what steps they will take to assure a quality process.

Follow up in writing. Prepare a written copy of your essential points. Where it's important, ask for a written confirmation of agreement.

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