

Mia Doucet is author of China in Motion, a book on doing business in the biggest, fastest-developing nation in the world (www.chinainmotion.com).

When in China: Take responsibility for poor communication

In an excerpt from China in Motion, author Mia Doucet explains how to communicate in China—and why it's crucial to get it right. (Hint: If you screwed it up, you won't know until it's too late.)

The best definition of communication I have ever come across is this: *Communication is what the other person understood.* Not what you meant, but what the other person understood. If the other person did not get your meaning, then you have miscommunicated. Period.

Sometimes, in cross-cultural training sessions, I get asked, “Why should we take all the responsibility for communication? Doesn't it go both ways?” I respond, “Because when we fail to do so we cause confusion, indecision, and costly production delays. We compromise trust and hurt the relationship. We have so much to lose. And we're really only ever in control of ourselves.”

Brent Moorcroft is General Manager of the Power Train Management Business Unit for Johnson Electric's Hong Kong operations. He says, “I have customers calling me with very minor issues that my staff in North America used to

deal with at their level, so that I would never hear about them: technical issues, quality issues, delivery issues, pricing issues. All because of poor communication.”

Spoken english offends the pride

It helps to understand that most of your Asian colleagues are not fluent in spoken English. Although they may have spent close to 1,000 hours in the classroom learning English, the emphasis was on grammar, the written word, and passing the college entrance exams. They’ve had few opportunities to practice speaking the living language. Until recently, even their teachers were not fluent English speakers. So don’t be fooled by their understanding of words on paper. With the possible exception of those under 30, the command of the *spoken* word is minimal.

For the highly motivated and otherwise accomplished Asian, this is a source of embarrassment. It offends their pride. The potential for failure causes them to avoid speaking English and looking foolish.

My Korean friend, JinSeung Lee, advises Westerners to be ever vigilant to ensure that real understanding is achieved. He 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.”

Then again, the expressionless face is a sign of sophistication. How are you to know the difference? Watch for the subtle clues of puzzlement: the questioning look in the eye, the slight inclination of the head. Above all, be sympathetic to the additional distress that the language barrier creates and take steps to alleviate it.

Quick tips for better communication:

- Use an interpreter from the start, even when it appears that your Asian counterparts speak and understand English. To avoid offending their pride, point the responsibility back to you. Say, “Please allow me to have an interpreter here to assist me in making sure that I understand your needs.”
- Avoid all slang, idioms, puns, sports language, and expressions that cannot

be translated, such as “at the end of the day,” “bite the bullet,” and “doing an end run.”

- Let your customer take time to think before answering. Do not interrupt the thought process. Allow long pauses. Do not feel that you have to jump in and fill the void. In turn, consider a matter for a while before giving your answer. Remember that speaking without thinking first is suspect. It is important to choose your words carefully and not think out loud with Asians.
- Find ways to save face. Plan to promote understanding in advance of the meeting. For example, provide written copies of your presentations, including charts, graphs, and other visuals to support your communication.
- Meet face-to-face whenever possible. In the West, communication by telephone and email is standard, but face-to-face communication and physical contact are preferred in the East. Note also that leaving a message with someone other than the person you are calling is not recommended, as colleagues may not wish to take responsibility for transmitting the message.

Common Faux Pas

• *Wrong Person*

It is human nature to direct our conversation to the person who has the best English-language skills. This is an error because the person who speaks the best English may not necessarily be the most important or highest ranking person in the room. You could undercut the person’s authority and cause loss of face.

• *Patronizing Attitude*

Some people have the tendency to raise their voice, speak extra slowly, repeat themselves, use broken English, or talk more than they need to when communicating with someone who has not mastered the English language. This will be seen as condescension and is to be avoided.

• *Lost in Translation*

When speaking through an interpreter, it is important to speak to the individual you are communicating with and not the interpreter. It is also important to think

through exactly what you want to say. Find ways of saying it simply and clearly in three or four different ways, from different points of view. Spell things out. Pause after one or two sentences to allow the interpreter to absorb and process your words.

Structural differences

Language shapes our thinking. It shapes our perceptions. It affects how we process information. Through language we filter all of life's experiences and develop different worldviews. So it may not be possible for Westerners to ever learn exactly how Asians think. But we can get insights into how they organize their thinking and process information through looking at the structure of the language.

For example, Asian sentence structure and word order differ from English. "I go to work" translates to "I work go." "They didn't meet with us" translates to "They not with us meet." Because they have to unscramble the word sequence to make sense of things, it's important to use simple sentences and speak at a slower pace. Another way to communicate better and avoid confusion is to use flag words to signal your meaning. Before asking a question, say: "I have a question."

Most Chinese languages have no verb tenses. This creates potential for misunderstanding about time frames. Therefore, do not simply rely on the use of verb tenses. Start and end your responses to questions with words that identify a specific point of time: "now," "later today," "tomorrow," "one week from now."

Formal vs. informal

It helps to understand from the outset that Asian languages are much more formal, polite, and indirect than the English language. Watch your tone and avoid casual terms, such as "you guys." This level of familiarity is considered disrespectful. And do not interrupt. We have a high tolerance in the West for this inconsiderate habit. But in Asia it is strictly bad manners.

7 quick communication tips:

1. Spend very little time talking. Listen and take notes. Even more important than listening for the words is listening for hesitation, which provides clues as to meaning. If you can capture the subtleties, it will pay you back later.

2. Make your needs and requirements (and the reasons behind them) known—clearly, quietly, consistently, and insistently.
3. Watch that your volume, tone, and quality of voice are not offensive. You can do that by matching and mirroring your Asian colleague's manner.
4. Use short, simple sentences and uncomplicated language. Speak slowly and clearly, pausing often to allow your words to be processed and understood. Pause before responding.
5. Answer questions specifically and one at a time.
6. Ask for clarification and ask a lot of questions. Before asking a question say, "I have a question." This will avoid confusion and misunderstanding.
7. Ask if they have any questions about what you are discussing. If you have been talking and there are no questions, it means you have not been understood. This gets complicated because of the need to save face. Even if you are quite sure that your Asian counterpart has not understood you, you may have to pretend she or he has, in order to maintain the relationship.

Improve the communication,
improve the relationship

"Most Westerners think that most Asians speak English well. That is a big misunderstanding. The person who works in overseas marketing does, but the engineers and quality control people don't. Westerners make their presentations, unaware they are not being understood 100%. Asians have a lot of ideas, but it's hard to explain over the language barrier."

—Jin Seung Lee, Applications Engineer, Motor Division, Siemens VDO Automotive Inc.

Quick tip:

If you see that you were not understood, say, "I am sorry that I was not clear. Let me say it a better way."

Quick tip:

When you are making a presentation for simultaneous translation, cut 30-35% of your material when you have to stick to a timed agenda. For the speak/stop/repeat method, cut 50-60% of your material.

Quick tip:

Send an outline of your material and PowerPoint slides to the translator or interpreter ahead of time.

Quick tip:

After you have presented your report, ask, “Do you have any questions?”

Quick tip:

Don’t raise your voice in an attempt to be understood.

Quick tip:

Direct your conversation to the person you are communicating with, and not the translator or interpreter.

Reprinted by permission of Mia Doucet Training, Inc.