



## Culture Corner: What Words Really Mean

Craig is a nationally known figure in the field of intercultural communications and an author of several books including "Figuring Foreigners Out", "The Art of Crossing Cultures", "The Art of Coming Home", and "Cross-Cultural Dialogues". Mr. Storti is also a well-known speaker and has written for a number of national magazines and major newspapers, including The Washington Post, The Los Angeles Times, and the Chicago Tribune.

Offshore outsourcing has a number of distinct advantages—and a few distinct disadvantages (which typically get a lot less attention). Of the latter, cultural differences are one of the most common and most bothersome.

It's a no-brainer that if you're going to have a partner from another culture, then you're going to have cultural differences and the problems they lead to. This isn't anyone's fault, incidentally; it's not like each partner is trying to be different from the other partner. They just are different. And you can't make them undifferent.

But you can help each side, Indians and Americans, understand these differences and thereby minimize and even eliminate cross-cultural confusion and misunderstanding. And doing just that is the premise of this column.

In the months ahead, we'll describe some of the most common and most serious cultural misunderstandings, demonstrating how they occur, the consequences they typically lead to, and how to work around them. The examples we cite will be taken from the author's experience working with the IT divisions of numerous US and Indian companies, including Nike, Target, Ernst & Young, TCS, and many others. These are stories from the trenches, in other words, from the heart of the US-Indian interface, where culture raises its head on a daily basis.

Let's take an example. Read the following conversation and see if you can identify any misunderstandings.

ROB: Hey Ram. I had an idea about that application.

RAM: An idea?

ROB: It's kind of crazy, but I wanted to run it by you just to see what you think.

RAM: Sure.

ROB: What if we did...instead of...? Do you think that would work?

RAM: I'll speak to my team.

ROB: Good. Let me know what they think.

The American here (Rob) is tossing out an idea to see what Ram thinks of it. Or, rather, that's what Rob thinks he's doing, how another American would interpret Rob's statements. But Rob

isn't talking to another American here, and if the person he is talking to doesn't interpret these statements the same way Rob does, then this is not what Rob is saying so far as that person is concerned.

As a matter of fact, Ram does not think Rob is tossing out an idea to get a reaction. He thinks Rob is politely asking him (Ram) to change what he and his team are doing vis a vis a certain application. And Ram will now go back to his team and have them adopt this new approach. This is exactly what happened in this particular case, and Rob was quite surprised a few days later when Ram proudly reported that he and his team were "completely on board" with Rob's new approach. Rob wasn't at all sure his idea was any good, of course, but it was too late.

How did this happen? Simply put, Rob's initial statements were misinterpreted. OK. But how did that happen? It happened because contrary to what we assume the things people say don't have any inherent meaning, any built-in, foolproof meaning. Rather, the things people say mean whatever the person who hears them thinks they mean. Now if the person who hears you say something is from your own culture or is otherwise a lot like you, then he/she probably "hears" the same thing you mean—a phenomenon we call communication. But if this person is from another culture, then he/she may hear something else, namely, whatever those particular words mean to someone in that society.

Going back to our example, in Indian culture, when someone in an authority position (like Rob) makes a "suggestion," it will often be interpreted as a request. Or, to put it differently, a common way Indians have of making a request is to offer a suggestion.

Naturally, if you come from a culture where a suggestion is just a suggestion, and you suggest something to someone from a culture where a suggestion is a request, then without knowing it you've just made a request so far as that person is concerned. (The reverse would also be true, incidentally; if that person should "suggest" something to you, you have probably just been asked to do something whether you realize it or not!)

This is just one of numerous cultural differences (in this instance, in how people make requests) that color Indian-US interactions. It's not hard to see what innocent misunderstandings like these can lead to: all manner of inaccurate assumptions, unmet expectations, and, ultimately, bad faith between partners.

These things can and do happen in any partnership, of course, but they are more likely to happen in cross-cultural partnerships. In the months ahead, The Culture Corner will explore key US-Indian differences and describe ways to successfully bridge the culture gap.

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