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## Does Silence Mean Agreement?

European and American managers grow up in different social environments and business cultures, and therefore have different perceptions on things, including how best to respond to a challenging situation. This in turn frequently leads to distinctive interpretations of ‘reality’ itself. These divergent views and perceptions cover of course the whole range of life, not just business. Contact and discussion with people from different parts of the world allows for both sides to expand their horizons, but also contain the seeds of major misunderstanding and sometimes conflict. For example, those who have watched a ‘discussion’ about religion or politics between people from two different cultures quickly learned that it’s best to avoid such perilous topics.

So it’s certainly not a question of whether we’re different, or that we may have problems understanding and interpreting each other’s reactions. Rather the point is to make sure to keep this in mind while interacting, especially in the heat of negotiations, reviews, and important meetings.

This means that caution and care are always advisable, from beginning to end. For example, after long-winded arguments and discussions, when everything seems to be clear and understood, and each side feels good about having reached common ground, that’s probably the moment when the worst misunderstandings can arise. Joining along with these discrepancies is often the illusion of the ‘mutual understanding’ on what should or will be done next.

A German executive may be wondering why, six months after an agreement seemingly had been reached that certain changes need to be made and actions to be taken, that nothing has really changed. It is quite possible that he or she, after lengthy (and probably very much one-sided and stern) talks (lectures?) may just have misunderstood the polite silence of the American counterpart as ‘agreement’.

This type of misperception stems from differences in communication culture. In Germany, for example, it’s not uncommon that a junior manager will speak up and express disagreement with something the boss is proposing. In fact, this is generally expected. In Japan, for another angle on this, an agreement is considered reached after lengthy comments from everyone and a slow move towards a fully mutual understanding to which everyone indicates their acceptance. Silence then in both areas likely means “we’re all set”.

How should ‘silence’ be interpreted in the U.S.? It could mean ‘agreement’ here, too, but it could more likely signal the opposite, accompanying the polite intent to avoid confrontation with the ‘leader’ of the company (team) – especially in an open forum.

In the U.S. actually ‘agreeing’ would probably have been stated out loud and with the proper energy: “Isn’t it great that we’re a well-functioning team and

able to find this common denominator!”, followed by a ‘high-five’.

So, you can’t always be sure what silence means, as expectations and the resulting influence on interpretations may simply be a mistake based on our own bias.

Keeping differences in mind, and keeping an open mind, are vital, along with a few adjustments on both sides. If the European can present more team spirit and less of a ‘know it all’ attitude, and the American manager can give up the ‘can-do’ show for the leader of the business – in other words, if both start acting more like partners – then the mutual search for common goals and realistic solutions will become much easier! ■

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