

When yes means maybe and maybe means no

When most of us first arrive in the Philippines, we are struck by how familiar it seems. Whether we're from another Asian country or the other side of the world, the universal brands, global logos, the malls and the restaurants give us emotional landmarks that make us feel it's not so much a foreign posting, but more a shift in reference.

Marilyn Duncan-Webb



If English is your first or second language, it's not hard to achieve what you need, both in business and domestically, and, of course, if you are on any kind of "package" you have the support and cultural interpretation of your staff to guide you through the initial set up.

But pretty soon there comes an uneasy feeling that we're not quite "getting it". There are undercurrents that flow beneath language that we sense, but can't identify. We go into a shop to ask for an item which we know is on sale, but we're told "not in stock, mam". At work, we give an instruction that we think has been understood, but the outcome isn't quite what we expect. You think you've reached a consensus with your team, but somehow it's not quite cohesive. We put it down to misunderstandings, being obstructive, even racism and the frustration grows. What we are missing, particularly if we're from a more direct Western culture, is that

there's a whole vocabulary of indirect communication we're not tuned in to.

High context communication

Filipinos are highly sensitive to non-verbal communication. They are what anthropologists and cross-cultural experts call "high context" communicators, valuing inference over statement. Filipinos pay close and intuitive attention to non-verbal cues, so that what is implied is as, if not more, important than what is said. If you like, they listen for the echo, not the boom. Beyond body language, they are keenly aware of the context of what may be said. By contrast Westerners are "high-content" communicators: more of what we mean is expressed in words. Being forthright, telling it "like it is" are characteristics most Westerners value, but which in a high context culture can appear abrasive or rude. What Westerners might see as being evasive, Filipinos regard as

appropriately respectful or sensitive. Most people, whatever their culture, will acknowledge that body language is an important component of communication. There are plenty of training exercises and parlour games designed to demonstrate or develop our non-verbal

variously by my Filipino colleagues it means yes, or I can hear you, or I agree, or simply I'm standing here in front of you. It may even mean no, depending on our relationship! How frustrating is this for us direct communicators who take things at face value? Who hasn't



skills. What complicates this is that different cultures use different non-verbal lexicons, just as we use different languages. For example, in some cultures looking down when listening to someone is seen as appropriate and respectful, in others it gives the impression that the listener has tuned out or is hiding something. Filipinos have their unique body language, expressing, for example, insincerity, disagreement, honesty that only they can interpret accurately. The best we can do as outsiders is to be alert to changes in body language or tone, which will tell us “something’s up”, rather than trying to interpret exactly what each nuance means.

Yes, no and maybe

So what does this mean for us “foreigners” in our everyday lives? Perhaps the situation we most often find ourselves in is interpreting, yes, no and maybe. What does “yes” mean? I’ve been told

given an instruction, had it acknowledged with a “yes, mam or sir”, only to find that the expected results simply don’t materialize? It’s hard for us foreigners to understand the meaning of the yes, without understanding its context. To make things even more complicated, the word you’ll most seldom hear is “no”. In fact it’s pretty safe to say that a “maybe” is a polite way of saying “no”.

Authority and face

The origins of the “no” aversion are complex. Respect for authority and the need to maintain good “face” are powerful in Filipino culture, as they are in many other parts of South East Asia. Filipinos go to great lengths to avoid situations that might embarrass you (so you don’t lose face) or themselves (maintaining their own face). *Hiya* (loosely translated as shame), *amor propio* (self respect) and *dangal*

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(wanting to be seen to be honorable or doing the right thing) are important characteristics of Filipino interaction. Hence saying “no” in the sense of refusing someone in authority could be considered disrespectful (loss of face for the boss) or could cause the speaker to

caught in a vise of indecision between two power figures, the doctor (her boss and as a specialist, a senior person in the hospital hierarchy) and me (a customer and a pushy Westerner, at that).

Sensitivity

Yes, this is a stereotypical and some-



lose face (because he can't do what is expected of him).

Here is an example: I recently phoned a doctor's office to make an appointment. "Can I have an appointment at 9am?" I asked the receptionist. The reply was immediate, "Yes, mam." Duly, I got to the office at 9am, where I waited an hour for the doctor's arrival. Somewhat surprisingly, neither the doctor nor the receptionist offered apologies for the delay. It didn't appear she had been held up in surgery, or was dealing with an emergency. A bit of sleuthing on my part revealed that the clinic actually wasn't due to start until 10am. Why then, had the receptionist made an appointment for 9am? There is more than one possible answer: the receptionist didn't want me to lose face by being denied an appointment for the time I desired; she didn't want to admit she wasn't sure of the clinic hours; she was

what simplified example, but, on reflection, I could have avoided frustration with a little more sensitivity on my own part. Simply asking, "When would be a good time for an appointment?" rather than "demanding" a time slot would have resulted in a suggestion from the receptionist that would have suited both me and the doctor.

So, in spite of the advertising billboards, the global brands, the high level of English, we must not forget that we're in a foreign country; that what works in Manila is entirely appropriate for Manila and may not work in Manchester, Montana or Melbourne; that it is we, as foreigners who have to adapt. Of course, we can collaborate better with our colleagues, friends and staff if we understand and acknowledge each other's perspectives.

If you are working for an international organization, it's highly likely that your company will provide cross-cultural

training, hopefully for you as well as your Filipino associates. Many Filipinos working in an international environment understand why Westerners do need to hear the word “no” and that positive disagreement (not an oxymoron, but what some call “push back”) is valued, not disrespectful. Yet, in spite of all this, we’ll still find ourselves asking, “Why do they do that?” Don’t worry; your friends from here will be asking themselves the same question about your behavior!