
When to Speak Up, When to Shut Up



By Erin Meyer , INSEAD Affiliate Professor of Organisational Behaviour

The norms of conducting international business are increasingly becoming standardised. But the behaviour of those around you is fed by cultural backgrounds.

One chilly morning in Paris, I was getting ready for a meeting with an important client. I would be spending the day with one of the top executives of Peugeot Citroën, preparing him and his wife for the cultural adjustments they'd need to make in their upcoming move to Wuhan, China.

Prior to the meeting, I had held several preparatory meetings with Bo Chen, a Paris-based journalist from Wuhan who would be acting as a Chinese cultural expert to assist me in the session. I was confident in the ability of Chen to add value to the learning experience. Articulate, extroverted and very knowledgeable, he had prepared some concrete business examples to illustrate each cultural dimension I would be covering in the programme.

There was a lot at stake. If the day was a success, Chen and I would be hired to provide similar counsel to another 50 couples.

When Monsieur and Madame Bernard arrived, I sat them on one side of the big rectangular table in the office, with Chen and I on the other. As the morning got under way, I explained each dimension of the key issues that would help them make the best out of their time in China. I carefully kept an eye on Chen so that I could facilitate his input.

“Silent Bo”

But Chen did not seem to have any input. After finishing the first cultural dimension in my presentation, I paused briefly and looked at him for his input, but he didn’t speak up. He didn’t open his mouth or move his body forward. Apparently, he didn’t have an example to provide.

Not wanting to make things awkward, I continued with my next point, but when I had finished, Chen again remained silent and almost motionless. He had been nodding politely while I was speaking, but that was all.

Dimension after dimension, until I’d been speaking for three full hours, my initial disappointment with Chen was starting to turn into full-fledged panic. I needed his input for the programme to succeed. Finally, while I didn’t want to create an awkward moment, I decided to take a chance and asked, “Bo, did you have any examples you’d like to share?” To my utter relief, he replied “Thank you Erin, I do.” and proceeded to explain very pertinent, fascinating examples that backed up my point.

A story of culture

On reflection, it was natural to assume that something about Chen’s personality or my personality or the interaction or coordination between us might have led to the difficult situation. My previous meetings with him convinced me that he was neither inarticulate nor shy.

So what happened? Since we were in a cross-cultural training programme, I decided to ask Bo in front of the Bernards. As Chen spoke, the cultural underpinnings of our misunderstanding became vividly clear.

“Were you expecting me to jump in?” he asked with genuine surprise. “In this room, Erin is the chairman of the meeting. As she is the senior person in the room, I wait for her to call on me. And while I am waiting, I should show I am a good listener by keeping both my voice and my body quiet. In China, we often feel Westerners speak up so much in meetings that they do this to show off, or they are poor listeners. Also, Chinese people leave a few more

seconds of silence before jumping in than in the West...I kept waiting for Erin to be quiet long enough for me to jump in, but my turn never came.”

Next time...

Having a deeper awareness of cultural nuances enables us to find easy, yet powerful solutions to such misunderstandings. It is easy to let conventional notions of cultural differences lead us astray, especially those between Americans and Chinese. But the facile stereotypes about loud Americans and shy Chinese, only obscures the steps we can take to overcome such misunderstandings in future.

What I took away from this was to make sure I’m more prepared to recognise and address the differing cultural expectations in status and communication, essential pillars in American-Chinese situations. Next time I work with a Chinese cultural specialist in such a scenario, I must make sure to invite him to speak. And if there is no immediate response, allow for a few more seconds of silence before speaking myself.

On the other side, my partner might simply choose to override his natural tendency to wait for an invitation to jump in when working with an American. If this feels too aggressive, he might raise his hand or request the floor to speak.

By recognising the cultural factors that shape human behaviour and analysing the reasons for that behaviour, we can improve our effectiveness at solving thorny cross-cultural misunderstandings or better yet, avoid them altogether.

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