The Most Productive Ways to Disagree Across Cultures

By Erin Meyer , INSEAD Affiliate Professor of Organisational Behaviour

Should you disagree openly or find private channels for feedback? It depends on the cultural backgrounds of your team.

Li Shen, a young Chinese manager who eagerly accepted a job as a marketing manager for L'Oreal after doing her MBA in Europe found herself working at the company's Shanghai office. Her excellent command of English and acceptable French gave her confidence when dealing with her European colleagues. She didn't feel there was a cultural gap between her and her European peers, until she was invited to Paris to present her ideas about a marketing campaign in China.

"I prepared my presentation tirelessly," she recalls. "I spent all thirteen hours of the plane ride from Shanghai rehearsing each slide so my points would be convincing."

There were 12 people in the meeting and Shen was the only non-European in the room. Her ideas were prepared and meticulous but she was taken aback by the challenges thrown at her by her French colleagues. They started by questioning why she had chosen to change a specific colour in a print ad. As

she was explaining, other members of the group began to challenge her other decisions. Shen felt attacked and humiliated, mostly upset with herself. "They obviously did not feel I was the marketing expert I claimed to be," she recalled.

When the meeting was over, Shen rushed for the exit, but before she could escape, she had a surprise. Several of the participants who had challenged her came up to congratulate her and tell her how polished and interesting her presentation was. "At that moment, I realised I was more Chinese than I thought," she said.

Facing up to culture

The reason for Shen's initial feeling of shock was the concept of *mianzi* or "face". In Confucian societies like China, Korea and Japan, maintaining group harmony by saving face for all members is of the utmost importance. As Shen describes it, "In China, protecting another person's face is more important than stating what you believe is correct." Group harmony exists when everyone plays their prescribed role and reinforces the roles of others.

In contrast, as you will recall from my earlier **blog on persuasion**, the French and the Germans are taught from a young age to disagree openly. French students are taught to reason via thesis, antithesis and synthesis, building up one side of the argument, then the other, before coming to a conclusion.

I experienced a similar issue when working with a group of American and German executives from DaimlerChrysler in 2002. When I explained in a session that Americans are generally less direct with negative feedback than Germans, Dirk Firnhaber, one of the Germans, promptly disagreed and went on to cite several personal experiences as counterexamples. A second German colleague also joined in to support Firnhaber.

Afterwards, Ben Campbell, one of the American participants came up to me visibly frustrated. "I don't get it," he said. "The Germans signed up for this course. Why do they have to constantly disagree with you?" Ben turned to Dirk. "Is it cultural?" he wondered.

"I'll think about it," Dirk replied.

After lunch, Dirk was ready to share his thoughts.

"We have this word in German, *Sachlichkeit,* which is most closely translated in English as "objectivity." We can separate someone's opinions or idea from the person expressing the idea. When I say "I disagree," I am debating Erin's position, not disapproving of her."

This exchange vividly demonstrates why the Germans, along with the French, Dutch and Danish are on the confrontational side of the disagreeing scale. On the other side stand the Chinese, and even more so, the Japanese, Thai and Indonesian.

The strategy for succeeding in these cultures goes back to my **earlier post on trust**, where I recommended taking the time to build a close and trusting relationship with colleagues or clients from other cultures, which should help to reduce the level of confrontation you experience.

Getting global teams to disagree agreeably

Here are some strategies that can help facilitate constructive disagreement if you lead a global team:

If you're the boss, consider skipping the meeting. Depending on the cultures you're dealing with, both your seniority and your age may impact the willingness of others to disagree openly. In Japan for example, disagreeing with someone with white hair or rank is taboo. Even asking another's point of view can feel confrontational. Advance preparation could help your Japanese counterparts feel more comfortable sharing their opinions openly, giving them time to check with each other and prepare their responses.

Another strategy is to depersonalise disagreement by separating ideas from the people expressing them. Putting ideas on a board anonymously then debating them with the group can facilitate disagreement without risking relationships.

A third strategy is to conduct meetings before the main meeting, something especially important in East Asian cultures. You could also adjust your language, avoiding stronger-sounding opinions of ideas such as "absolutely" or "totally". In confrontation-avoiding cultures, people are more likely to use words like "sort of" or "partially".

Play Devil's advocate

On the other hand, if you're working with a culture more confrontational than your own, be careful about using stronger words than are natural to you. I would not recommend telling your French client "you are totally wrong". Disagreement is expressed more in the German or French cultures but it is easy to overshoot.

And not all Western cultures are the same. Compared to China, or even more so Thailand, Americans are confrontational. However in comparison with the French, the Americans avoid confrontation putting a stronger value on harmony and equilibrium. Americans have developed a highly complex, multi-ethnic citizenry characterised by tolerant coexistence. "United we stand, divided we fall" is the basis for many social interactions in the United States.

My French husband Eric who lived for many years in the U.S. and the U.K. inadvertently created some awkward scenes in American meetings with his straightforward, French-style disagreements, so he devised a solution:

"Before expressing disagreement, I now always explain, 'Let me play devil's advocate so we can explore both sides. Most groups seem happy to do this as long as I am clear about what I am doing and why," he says.

Sometimes, just a few words of explanation framing your behaviour can make all the difference in how your actions are perceived.

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