

The Impact of U.S. American and English Communication Differences in the Workplace: Enablers For Successful Interactions

The relationships between the people of the United States of America and the people of England intertwine on many intercultural levels. Both nations share significant history, speak a common language, have enormous influence on global politics, and contribute significantly to the economies of the world. In addition, U.S. companies in Britain employ about one million British citizens and British organizations in the U.S. employ approximately one million U.S. Americans.

From a cross-cultural perspective it is thus important to examine the working dynamics between the English and Americans in order to maximize team productivity and to ensure successful relocation assignments. This topic is addressed by sharing some important MA thesis research findings on similarities and differences between Americans and the English in business communication. Through interviewing 32 English nationals about their work experiences with Americans, a summary of recommendations for building strong individual and team relationships follows.

Because both cultures speak the English language and share westernized business practices, there tends to be the expectation that the English and American modes of communicating are more similar than in actuality. Significant differences in approaches to business communication between the two cultural groups include: direct and indirect styles, use of humor, decision-making approaches, and handling conflict.

The English in this study perceive Americans as more direct in the following ways: 1) openly stating how they feel in many instances, 2) stating messages concisely, 3) moving quickly to discuss main points of conversation, 4) lack of concern for face-saving, and 5) displaying an assertive tone of voice. The English perceive themselves as more direct in the following ways: 1) openly stating how they feel in many instances, 2) not restraining their comments in order to be “politically correct,” 3) stating messages clearly, and 4) preferring to speak with practicality rather than with exaggeration or hyperbole. Interestingly, both cultural groups are perceived as direct or indirect, depending on the context.

Differences between the type of humor and frequency used in business communication also exist between the English and Americans; often leading to a break down in communication. The primary reason appears to be that English humor involves irony, a play-on-words, and understatement, which Americans fail to understand.

The English respondents notice some differences in how decisions are approached between themselves and Americans. Some suggest that Americans show more flexibility compared to the English in order to get to a solution rather than being confined by a set process. Others reveal the impression that Americans seem to overanalyze figures and data, which can actually slow down the decision-making process. It was noted that this tendency with Americans is increasing in certain industries because of growing regulation and compliance issues. The English also tend to favor a consensus-style approach to making decisions, rather than a competitive one.

The English think Americans generally prefer to handle conflict when it arises, and are not afraid to express their feelings about it. Some of the reasons cited include the Americans' aim to win at any cost, and their ability to separate business and relationships. However, other participants reveal that Americans seem to ignore conflict or minimize it. Some of the English in this study observed Americans "tip-toeing" around an issue, and then seeking legal means to deal with the other party. Sarcasm is also noted as a way Americans deal with conflict, similar to a method the English may use. This shows the variety of existing English perspectives on the topic.

The data about how the English subjects perceive their own approach to conflict management reveal some cultural tendencies. Several English respondents commented that they are concerned that they come across cooperatively, and tend to focus on win-win solutions. They also prefer to manage conflict with a more informal approach.

The results from the study showed that modifying behavior in order to accommodate the others' preferred work approaches leads to the most successful business interaction. Cultural and individual influences need to be considered when evaluating preferred communication approaches.

Employees in multicultural situations should:

1. Understand an individual's style and temperament and make adjustments—for example, become more direct and to the point for those that prefer this approach.
2. Communicate with concrete outcomes for the task-focused audience, and blend business with social interests for those that want to engage at a more personal level.
3. Reduce use of humor or explain humor that is not understood cross-culturally.
4. Incorporate local terminology into conversations and presentations, and eliminate words, expressions, and jargon that do not translate.
5. Blend decision-making and conflict management approaches.

Other important factors to consider include:

1. Build relationships and trust with colleagues.
2. Engage in face-to-face meetings when possible.
3. Communicate openly and freely.
4. Avoid making assumptions.

In summary, the recommendations bring forth the theme of understanding the cultural influences and preferences of individuals, and creating synergy in teams by adapting certain behaviors. These adaptations include: modifying communication and language, fusing decision-making, and blending conflict management processes. Building solid relationships and trust through regular contact, including face-to-face meetings, also leads to productive working partnerships.

Dianne Nersesian-McGuire

info@transculturalcommunications.com

<http://www.transculturalcommunications.com>