

The problem with “no problem”

How to get along in a foreign culture

Many Germans working in India are facing this question every day: How do you get along in a culture that is so different to ours? When it comes to everyday life and business the differences in working methods and communication quickly become obvious. To a great deal this depends on the individual person and his or her understanding of what might cause interpersonal problems. Still there are some specific intercultural aspects that come up when Germans and Indians work together.

The German Centre Delhi.Gurgaon in collaboration with Change.project, a German intercultural consultation company, interviewed two of the German Centre tenants about their impressions working in India. The German Centre supports German companies doing business in India with an infrastructure of offices and services, quick access to networks as well as business and social events. When asking Daniel Juric about living and working in India you get a clear answer: “I really enjoy working here. Every day something new happens and people seem to be more relaxed than in Germany.” The 37-year old Juric works for the brand retail company Liganova which has its headquarter in Stuttgart. Since July 2011 he is design director of Liganova’s Indian office in the German Centre Delhi.Gurgaon.

Explaining and delegating: the problem with “no problem”

One of these intercultural aspects is the question of delegating a job. “In this context I had to learn that it takes a certain amount of time to explain to an employee what you really want” says Daniel Juric. “It has often occurred to me that when I was explaining something I really quickly got the reply: ‘no problem’. But then it turned out that my instructions had not been understood at all.” For Kathalingam Subbarayan Venkatesan this experience is no surprise. He is director of Petkus India Private Limited, a leading



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German supplier of a comprehensive range of seed and grain handling and processing technologies. “The explanation why we tend to say ‘yes’ very quickly is that we want to be kind and polite”, he explains. Sujata Banerjee agrees to that. Being an Indian who grew up in Germany, she works as a trainer in cross-cultural management for Change.project. In her eyes Indians tend to follow the motto “atitih devobhava”. “Basically this means that you should treat your guests like gods. But not in terms of feeling inferior but rather as a plea to tolerance. As a consequence, people often think that it is polite to say “yes” even if they didn’t get enough information in order to really get into action.” According to Banerjee there are certain points to consider when asking a person to do something: “Be sure that you give enough context, e.g. ‘I really need this because...’ or ‘I need this to be done exactly until...’. Moreover always stress the importance of your problem or your expectation. Only then you can be sure that it is seen as prior to other things.”

Taking over responsibility

Another thing that might cause misunderstanding is the aspect of responsibility. “In general I would say that Indians only take over responsibility when they are really told to do so”,

Daniel Juric says. Venkatesan affirms: “There still exists a strongly defined hierarchy in Indian companies.” In order to come to a more self-reflective and autonomous way of work, intercultural trainer Sujata Banerjee recommends the following: “When planning a project be sure to always integrate the level that is authorized to give instructions. Don’t demand collaboration – invite to collaborate.”

Different but equal?

From the issue of hierarchy it is only a small step to gender questions and the role of men and women in India’s business world. Ann Kristin Herth works as assistant to the Managing Director of the German Centre in Gurgaon. “To my experience women in India are often treated with less respect than men. I remember that I once accompanied my partner to a business greeting. We stood at the cocktail-bar with a bunch of people and I was the only female. When an Indian business partner of my spouse came over to join us, he greeted everybody by handshake – except of me. Being used to interact with business men at eye-level, I found that very impolite”. “Indian men do not generally shake hands with women out of respect.” explains Sujata Banerjee. On one hand India is still far from gender equality. On the other hand an

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Intercultural dos and don'ts

Explaining and delegating:

- Be sure to give enough context. Always prefer presentations to express plan, strategy, status report etc.
- The word 'no' is often avoided and instead replaced by other non-verbal cues and indirect communication.
- If you really want to be sure of a commitment, transform it into written form.

Responsibility:

- Don't demand collaboration – invite to collaborate.
- Be sure to always integrate the management level that is authorized to give instructions.
- It is important to maintain strong relationships with senior figures in Indian business.

Men and women in business:

- Indian men do not generally shake hands with women out of respect. In the absence of a handshake, the custom all over India is the greeting of peace known as „Namaste“.

- When dealing with women you have to be careful as any overt signs of friendship or affection could be misconstrued.

- Business women are recommended to dress conservatively.

Business relationships:

- Business appointments should ideally be made for late morning or early afternoon, between the hours of 11:00 and 16:00 hrs.
- Making decisions is often a slow and thoughtful process in Indian culture. Deadlines should not be rushed as impatience is seen as rude and disrespectful.
- Never point a single finger or two fingers (used only with inferiors). Point with your chin, whole hand or thumb. The chin is not used to point at superiors. The Western side-to-side hand wave for „hello“ is frequently interpreted by Indians as „no“ or „go away“.

increasing number of companies campaign for more diversity in the working environment.

Doing business: it's not only what you are, but who you are

No matter whether male or female: in contrast to German business-relationships personal interests and private life are quite important. The Indian business world is based on good relations – you make business with people you know and trust. As a consequence Indian business-partners are not only interested in numbers, facts and figures but in the person behind the company. “For Indian business-partners it is important to get to know your family”, says Ann Kristin Herth. “When you are invited to a dinner or a party your spouse should come along. People want to know if you are married, if you have kids and so on.” Sujata Banerjee adds: “When you tell something about your private life you show a certain amount of trust – Indians really appreciate this because for them it is a sign that you are interested in a long-term relationship.” Since family plays a central role in the

life of most Indians it is a common topic for small-talk. “But don't worry”, says Sujata Banerjee. “If a question seems to be too personal for you, this is no problem: explain it to your conversational partner in a polite way.”

Forget about the pokerface

Last but not least it is not only important what we communicate but how we communicate. And here lies a great difference between Germans and Indians: Whereas Germans are generally looked upon as not being very outgoing Indians tend to be the opposite. “Indians are very emotional”, says Venkatesan. “They use a lot of body language and they always shake their head – even when saying “yes” they might shake it sideways. Also Indian people tend to be loud – they laugh loud and they shout when they are angry.” Susan Banerjee recommends to also pick up the Indian point of view: “Don't forget that for an Indian person it might also be irritating when they cannot read anything out of your gestures or mimics. Therefore always be careful to verbally clearly signalize agreement or refusal.” But

even though there are certainly more cultural differences between Indians and Germans as the ones listed above one should never forget that intercultural communication is not pure mathematics. Traditions and values of a society have a great influence of how people act and communicate – but in the end it depends on the individual persons how communication takes place. And there is no better place for intercultural communication than the German Centre in Gurgaon. “Be it in your daily business life or at the many events we organise – working in or visiting the German Centre is a good way to exchange views and learn more about the people behind the businesses, be it Indian or German”, says Martin Fuchs, Managing Director of the German Centre.

This article was written by German Centre Delhi.Gurgaon with Change project. For more information go to www.gurgaon.germancentre.com and www.change-project.de.

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