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Indian Outsourcing:
When 'Yes' is not 'Yes'

Have you ever asked a question, got an answer that sounded like 'YES' and then later discovered it wasn't? Most people working with an Indian outsourcing company can relate to this. Why does this happen? The root cause is most likely cultural differences. These differences impact time orientation, response to authority and ultimately decision making, productivity and deadlines.

By Ed Cohen

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THE WESTERN VIEW

Say "No" or say "Yes", whatever it is, your word is your bond. This message is reinforced throughout a westerner's life and career. In fact, the book, "Getting To Yes: Negotiating An Agreement Without Giving In", based on the Harvard Negotiation Project, remains a best seller since 1984. 'Yes', or anything that sounds like 'yes' is a commitment. Unless you clearly tell me 'no' then you have committed. Commitments kept enhance reliability and that builds trust.

THE EASTERN VIEW

'Yes' means 'YES' only when the person says "YES" without hesitation. Anything other than "YES" without hesitation is most likely 'no'. However, saying "no" directly to someone is considered disrespectful. It's an easy bet that right now those of you from a Western culture are scratching your heads because 'no' is one of the first words you learned to speak. Here's the bottom line in Asian culture, face-saving is important so you don't make someone look bad by telling them 'no' to a request. It's especially disrespectful to directly say "no" to someone more senior than you. So people all over Asia have developed indirect ways of saying 'no' that can actually sound like 'yes' (especially to Westerners). Some of these include:

• No response. Silence does not equal agreement.

• Postponing the answer by telling you they will get back to you without setting a specific time. This usually means 'no'. The person is buying time because they are not comfortable saying no and you may or may not hear back.

• *"I'll do my best."* When someone from the U.S. says, *"I'll do my best to get that to you by Tuesday,"* the person has told you it is their highest priority and they are going to make it happen. When the same statement is heard from someone from India, it's most likely not going to happen.

• *"I'll try."* Means no

• *"I'll try my level best."* Nope.

• *"Let me see what I can do to make that happen."* Most likely not going to happen.

• *"I'll get it to you in a day or two."* Without an exact date and time commitment, this still means no.

• *"It might be possible later."* Don't count on it.

- *"I understand."* Means just that. The person understands but has not committed to anything.

- *"Everything's fine."* Ask for a meeting to review deliverables that afternoon or the next morning.

THE CONUNDRUM

CUSTOMER'S PERSPECTIVE:
You got what you came to the meeting for, a commitment and a deadline. Trusting your outsourcing partner will deliver a complete product on time, you go about your business doing the ten thousand other tasks on your list. The deadline passes with no word from the team. You email and phone them with no reply. Finally you hear from them. They tell you they have done their best and are still working on it. You're angry, feel let down, and deceived.

OUTSOURCING TEAM'S PERSPECTIVE:
The customer has given us a very difficult task and deadline. More time was needed to get it done but the team will try to get it done even if it means having to work nights and weekends. When the deadline is near, the team works up to the last minute. Everyone is extremely anxious. No one wants to let the customer down, but the task is not quite coming together. The deadline passes. Hoping the customer is too busy to notice, the team continues working as hard as they can hoping to complete it quickly. When the customer gets in touch, the team does not reply because they are too nervous to convey the bad news. They are still hoping to get it done, any minute now.

RESOLVING THE CONUNDRUM
Start by realizing these issues are not about trust or lack of commitment or accountability. They are about communication differences, many of which are influenced culturally. Customers from North America and Europe may ask, *"Why can't the Indian IT workers adapt to our culture when working with us?"* The answer is, they do try very hard, but undoing a lifetime of habits formed by cultural influence is not an easy thing to do. It would be the similar to you going to visit many parts of Asia and having to learn to use a Southeast Asian Squat Toilet. An Asian toilet has no seat. It is basically a hole in the floor that you have to squat over to use. I can tell you from first-hand experience, after a lifetime of sitting on Western toilets, learning to squat and go was a complicated task, especially if you do not want to get yourself soiled. See the point?

The most common communication mistake, and not just between varying cultures, is the use of closed questions. Closed questions require a 'yes' or 'no' or binary response. Your projects are far too important to rely on a head nod or short reply. Instead of asking, *"Are we on target for Friday?"* where your answer will probably be 'yes' or 'uh huh' ask, *"What's left to complete between now and Friday?"* or better yet *"Let's meet to walk through the tasks that are left to be done by Friday. What time are you available* (pull out your calendar and schedule)?"

CREATE A JOINT MICRO-CULTURE

Customers and outsourcing companies come from varying cultures, this is obvious. Customers most likely have broad diversity in their organizations making assimilation to corporate culture much easier. The outsourcing company will be more influenced by its primary culture. Rather than assuming one will adapt to the other, consider creating a new micro-culture.

Start with the most common pain point—gaps in communication. Build communication protocols that state clearly the what, when, and how to communicate and most importantly who should receive each communication. The best approach for developing protocols is to apply an established framework in a facilitated workshop setting. Using an outside facilitator who is familiar with cultural nuances and team development, the workshop is attended by both teams (if small teams, or representatives if large). Using an outside facilitator provides an impartial view and that allows the process to move much faster. The facilitator guides participants through the framework to rapidly build trust as everyone works toward common protocols. Either during or prior to the workshop, I like to conduct a session on "Transitioning to a Global Mindset" that includes open discussion around the similarities and differences of the cultures represented. Then, we set about co-creating. Co-created protocols have the greatest chance of being understood, proliferated and followed. It's a highly motivating way to begin a project because it creates a quick win for the joint team. Even if the team is well into the project, it's never too late to step back and establish protocols.

Decision making and problem solving are the two other primary areas where protocols need to be co-created. If the team is large, parallel workshops maximize time. Even with protocols in place, it cannot be over-emphasized, frequent checkpoints and clear communication greatly increase the opportunity for success on both sides of the equation.

When someone commits to a timeline, after getting it in writing, ask:

- Is the timeline reasonable? (here you must get a 'YES' without hesitation or continue discussing).

- What obstacles will interfere with your ability to get this done?

- Who else will you need to speak with before committing?

- What resources will you need?

Don't ask, *"How's the project coming along?"* ask to see the deliverables and how they match up to the timeline. If you get even a hint that the task is falling behind then meet to discuss, offer to renegotiate the timeline, or make difficult decisions prior to the project blowing up in your face.

From the outsourcing team's perspective:

- Anything that sounds like 'yes' to your customer is going to be heard as 'YES'.

- It may be disrespectful to say 'no' back home but here, if you do not say 'NO' then you are being disrespectful to the process and to your customer.

- If you cannot bring yourself to say 'no' then say something like, "We can't commit to this yet. We need more time to review the task." Then to show you are serious, you must indicate exactly when you will respond (not in a day or two rather by Friday at noon).

- Once you commit, you must communicate immediately if issues arise.

- Schedule multiple checkpoints even if the customer does not suggest or require this to ensure all is progressing without confusion.

- Do not let the deadline go by silently. Too many times, I have seen the deadline pass and the team goes silent hoping the customer will not notice. The customer **ALWAYS** notices!

The root cause to most communication issues start out to be from cultural differences and then it quickly transitions to the history of experiences that accumulate over time between the customer and outsourcing teams. These differences impact time orientation, response to authority and ultimately decision making, productivity and deadlines.

Establishing a micro-culture by co-creating communication, decision making, and problem solving protocols brings both teams together with a common language and ways of working. A small upfront investment of time will result in significant time savings throughout projects. Team members will be more motivated, their confidence will be higher, trust will grow, and relationships will be enhanced. Best of all, projects have the greatest chance to be on time and right the first time.

About the Author

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