

Expatriate Managers Find it Difficult to Communicate with Their Indian Counterparts

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This article tries to understand why an American or a British Expatriate finds it difficult to work with an Indian counterpart. The main reasons for this difficulty are identified that are mostly around communication. While the expatriates are more speaking driven, more expressive and believe the words, Indians are often found to be very guarded in their expression and cannot be completely relied on their verbal commitments as there are many implicit meanings in their verbal communication. The problem is discussed in the light of a relevant case study by a consulting organization i.e. Hay Group.

Till recently, Thomas Jackson was working with a large organization in the hospitality sector. He was working as a Director in this organization. I had the opportunity to conduct a training program for the top management of this organization. Thomas was a participant in this training that was on Communication and Team Building.

Thomas was born, brought up and educated in the United States and therefore an 'expatriate' by definition. One day Thomas came to my office and told me that he wanted to do something for improving the workplace communication in the organization he worked for. He explained to me certain communication related issues at work for which he required certain interventions.

Some of the problems that were highlighted by Thomas were (i) Unawareness on the part of many managers regarding who all to be addressed while sending a communication piece via email, (ii) Not closing the loop on any issue communicated either verbally or via email, (iii) People not having much respect for timeliness regarding meetings, and (iv) Recordings of the meetings not recorded and circulated properly.

Thomas further explained that his greatest problem in dealing with the people in this organization in particular and with Indian managers in general is the inability to understand them. At times he felt frustrated because he found people to conceal their true feelings brilliantly and say something that was rather organizationally desired than something coming truly felt. Many managers would not come out with their true opinion on most of the matters. Moreover, they found it very easy to backtrack or deny something they may have said earlier. The other concern is related to not care too much about the words used while communicating orally. Lots of remarks were made casually

without giving much thought and later on downplayed as “one off remarks”. Thomas finds this very different from the U.S. or Western culture.

Thomas acknowledges that one great aspect about Indian managers is their domain knowledge and job skills. Indians are quite competent when it comes to functional or domain knowledge in a job. However, at times it makes them somewhat arrogant and closed. At different forums they project an “I know it all” attitude. But those who don’t, are very well received by the expats.

Let us look at a research report that can shed some light into the above phenomena. According to a Hay Group/ Bharat Petroleum study conducted a couple of years ago, outstanding Indian CEOs have a powerful set of specific competencies. Their strengths lie in the areas of socially responsible business acumen, team leadership, inner strength and the ability to manage a complex web of external stakeholders. At the same time their research also reveals that the ‘interpersonal understanding’ of Indian CEOs – especially the ability to ‘tune in’ to others – is markedly lower in outstanding Indian CEOs as compared to other international leaders (2007, Hay Group).

‘Tuning in’ (a part of the competency called as ‘interpersonal understanding’) to others is seen as a foundational competency for the contemporary business leader. This competency is consistently displayed in 75 per cent of behavioral interviews with ‘outstanding’ CEOs worldwide whereas only 12 per cent of outstanding Indian business leaders demonstrated such ability.

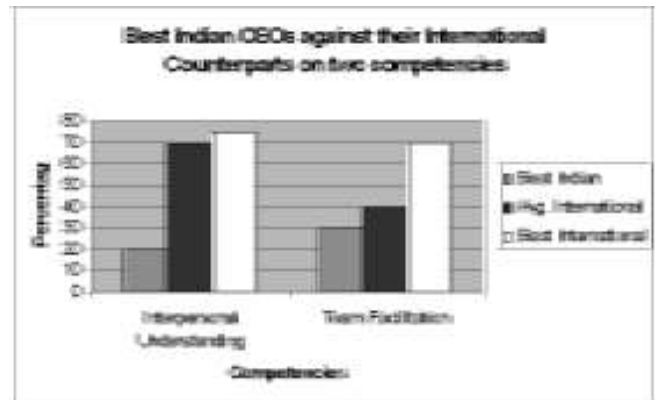


Figure I: Benchmarking best Indian CEOs against against average and best international CEOs on ‘interpersonal understanding’ and ‘team facilitation’ competencies

Only 20% of the best Indian CEOs displayed the overall competency called ‘interpersonal understanding’ as compared to 70% displayed by average international leaders and 75% displayed by best international leaders as presented in Figure I. The same is true for the ‘team facilitation’ competency. Thus we can safely conclude that though Indian corporate leaders display high levels of competencies like socially responsible business acumen, team leadership, inner strength, and the ability to manage a complex web of external stakeholders there is a long way to go as far as the competency ‘interpersonal understanding’ is concerned. It makes one wonder, “is that the reason why an American expat finds it difficult to understand and work with his Indian counterpart?”

References

‘The Indian CEO; A portrait of excellence’. Hay Group, 2007.
 ‘Indian CEOs are great at concepts, poor in execution’. Hindustan Times, Nov. 2007.