Three Views Paper: Workplace Interactions in the Cultures of the United States of America, the People’s Republic of China and the Republic of Ireland

Katherine R. Catton
Speech 128, TTH
May 2, 2002
Three Views Paper: Workplace Interactions in the Cultures of the United States of America, the People’s Republic of China and the Republic of Ireland

Introduction

Every year the global community continues to develop, increasing the flow across national and cultural boundaries of people not just as tourists, but to live and work in different countries. It is imperative for the biological survival of members of our species that each of us succeed economically in our environment in order to meet our basic needs of food, water, shelter and safety. The definition of economic success can of course vary from culture to culture, from society to society, and from person to person. Economic needs are met differently in the nomadic Masaai and Australian Aboriginal cultures, in the agrarian Thai and Colombian cultures, and in the industrial German and Taiwanese cultures.

Even though these cultures can be paired using a generalized view of their basis of economic production, there is a wide variance between and within each culture. When operating within each economic system, there are rules of interaction for the participants that help determine the economic success or failure of individuals. When beginning work in a new culture, it is imperative to understand the rules in each culture for interacting with peers, subordinates, superiors, clients and suppliers regardless of which type of economic system you are participating in. Roles and labels differ, the fact that competent communication of some kind is required in most types of economic systems, whether it is nomadic, agrarian, industrial, or another type, does not.
I chose to explore communication within economic systems and specifically communication in the workplace. I self-identify as a U.S. American. One underlying aspect, of success in U.S. American workplace communication that I have found in my personal experience and in my research, is directness in both verbal and nonverbal communication. I chose this aspect as the focus of my paper. I chose two other cultures to explore, the People’s Republic of China and the Republic of Ireland, each a culture on the other side of an ocean from mine, and the other side of a continent from each other.

Different cultures have different levels of acceptability for directness, both verbal and nonverbal. These levels of acceptability are expressed in verbal communication through how performance feedback is given and how participants communicate to accomplish work. Levels are expressed nonverbally in the role of eye contact and physical spacing and interaction among workplace participants. I define eye contact as high when participants look directly into each other’s eyes or at each other for more than one second or two heartbeats, and low when participants do not look directly at each other. In order to understand these cultural norms it isn’t enough to define the rules, it is necessary to understand the aspects of the culture that create and reinforce them.
“Direct eye contact in both social and business situations is very important. Not doing so implies boredom or disinterest.” (Axtell p. 228)

In U.S. American culture direct eye contact is expected. Staring or uninterrupted eye contact longer than ten seconds is considered rude or an attempt at intimidation. If a supervisor is speaking with an employee, lack of eye contact is perceived as an indicator that the listener isn’t listening and does not respect the speaker. When answering a question, lack of eye contact is considered an indication of dishonesty or deceptiveness. Physical spacing is usually an arm’s length away when speaking. Moving closer when individuals are side by side is considered an indicator of more personal contact. Moving closer when individuals are face to face is considered more aggressive or intimidating. Gesticulating with hands is used to emphasize message points, some physical contact from speaker’s hand to listener’s shoulder or arm is also often used.

Performance feedback is direct, specific and often documented. Feedback is based on an individual’s performance and is usually given in private, but can be given in public. An individual’s network of connections can provide opportunities but success and reputation is based mostly on work performance and achievement. Some emotional expression is acceptable and often expected. Feedback usually begins with the description of a performance problem followed by instructions describing an alternative outcome using terms such as “if you had” or “you should have”. This is considered face-saving by shifting the initial focus on the failed performance to a frame of reference that potentially decreases future uncertainty and separates the issue from the individual.

It is common for someone to have two opinions of an individual, one opinion of him/her as “a person” and another as “a worker”. Two U. S. Americans could have an
adversarial relationship at work and have a friendly relationship outside of work. Job terminations can cause awkwardness in personal relationships and difficulty finding a new job, however they are obstacles usually overcome by an individual and only reflect on the individual not his/her family or employer.

In the U. S. American work place although some small talk (discussion about personal life including family, activities and health) is expected, communication is focused on task and goal accomplishment. Specific details are discussed, and clear and concise yes and no answers are both expected and used. Precise times, dates and contract details are mutually agreed upon with the expectation of meeting these deadlines and agreements. Emotional displays are common when expectations are not met. However, repeated or extreme outbursts decrease the reputation of the individual due to a perception of lack of personal control or ability. Verbal communication is the primary means for interpreting messages-- the words uttered are the primary message. Nonverbal messages such as facial expressions, body movements and tone of voice are used but are secondary, and usually override the verbal message only when extreme emphasis is used.

“Direct eye contact is considered rude by many Chinese, especially when addressing a superior. Don’t be surprised if someone seems to be avoiding your gaze; it’s a gesture of respect.” (Phillips p. 175)

Unlike the U.S. American culture in the Chinese culture direct eye contact, just like forcing specific “yes” and “no” answers, is considered disrespectful especially to someone considered senior in rank or age, usually synonymous words in Chinese culture. Physical spacing is usually less than half an arm’s length away. Also, somewhat different from U.S. American behavior, close proximity without touching is not unusual or
personal as long direct eye contact is not made. Also, different from nonverbal behavior in many U.S. American workplaces, gesticulating or touching to emphasize points is considered both rude and an expression of lack of personal harmony and control. Emotional outbursts or expressions are considered embarrassing for the same reason.

Very different from the U.S. performance feedback in China is usually indirect, nonspecific and very rarely documented. Feedback is based on group performance. Criticism, when given, is given in private. Praise when given is done so in moderation, especially in public, and directed at the group or senior member of the group rather than an individual. Reputation is based on an individual’s life relationships/networks and the perception of his/her personal balance and harmony, not individual work performance. Different from many instances in the U.S., in Chinese culture, if an individual is not acceptable in social life, he/she is not acceptable in the work life and vice versa, there is no separation. A lost job results in great shame not just on the individual, but also on the employer and the individual’s family. Job terminations are unlikely and devastating.

In the Chinese workplace small talk is expected and considered much more important than what U.S. Americans would call “the work at hand”. In fact, it isn’t small talk, there doesn’t appear to be the separation between home and work life that one might find common in U.S. American conversations and the exclusion or division between them would be considered very unusual. Often business is conducted as an interwoven part of social episodes. When discussing family and health, specific details are used, however work directives are couched in terms of “maybe, perhaps and would you please” (Chen p. 130). Clear verbal “yes” and “no” are rarely used. Verbal maybes, coupled with nonverbal indicators such as frowns, pursed lips or sighs, are more common
than “yes” or “no”. If a “yes”, “no” or “maybe” is used, it is also often accompanied by verbal qualifiers such as requests to delay consideration of the issue, and this is very different from verbal patterns in the U.S. workplace. Times, dates and detailed contract agreements are not emphasized; this prevents the possibility of these types of failed expectations to cause a loss of face or strife in relationships.

“If he isn’t looking you in the eye, you wonder what the lad’s hiding or where his mind’s got to.” (O’Donaghue)

In Irish Culture direct eye contact is expected. Failure to make eye contact, especially with someone older than you, is considered disrespectful or dishonest. Staring or uninterrupted eye contact longer than a five seconds is considered rude or an attempt at intimidation. Physical spacing is usually an arm’s length away. Moving closer when individuals are side by side is considered an indicator of more personal contact. Moving closer when individuals are face to face is considered more aggressive or intimidating. Gesticulating or touching to emphasize points while not considered offensive is uncommon. Emphasis is made with tone of voice and facial expression. Extended emotional outbursts are also not offensive but are perceived as a lack of personal control.

Performance feedback is usually direct coupled with humor, and rarely documented. Performance-based mocking humor of self and others is both accepted and expected. Most performance feedback is criticism not praise. Positive feedback is usually directed at an individual based on personal characteristics such as friendliness rather than based on performance. Criticism can be given in private, or in public when accompanied with humor. Emotional outbursts such as angered raised voices are not considered appropriate but neither are they considered offensive. Work reputation is
based on an individual’s personality and social connections not performance. In Irish culture, an individual’s work performance has no relation to his social reputation. Losing a job provides another talk topic at the pub, not a loss of face. Job terminations are common and do not usually affect the ability to get another job.

In the Irish work place small talk is expected and, similar to Chinese culture, is considered much more important than work details. Work life is scheduled around social life not vice versa. Unlike in Chinese culture it is considered poor manners to talk business at a social engagement, but it is completely appropriate to cover social topics at business occasions. Also distinct from the Chinese culture, but similar to the U.S. American culture, direct and clear verbal “yes” and “no” are rarely used. They are usually accompanied or substituted for with background or explanatory stories that express relationships between the participants or describe experiences of the speaker or his/her family and friends. Tone variation is usually used to emphasize points or convey sincerity or humor. Times, dates and detailed contract agreements are not considered appropriate and when used are not considered mutual expectations to be met.

“A typical Chinese business pattern is to seek out a local need and fill it. People from Fuzhou, mainland China, where my parents are from, like to say that all they need to survive anywhere in the world is one of three knives: a razor, to start a barber shop; a kitchen knife, to start a restaurant; or a pair of scissors, to start a tailor shop!” (Chen p. 10)

In both Chinese and Irish culture, it isn’t considered very important “what you do”. In Chinese culture, as long as the individual is supporting the family business and social networks, including maintaining face, the actual type of work in the long-term view isn’t important. In the Irish culture it also isn’t as important what you do. It is
important who you know and what you are like as an individual. It is common for Irish
individuals to try many occupations and travel both nationally and internationally.

Chinese life is centered on the family and relationships. Upon meeting someone,
Chinese culture would suggest the first question should be “Where are you from?” The
next question would be an attempt to discover common acquaintances or experiences.
This search is an effort to find a connection for the new person in the interlocking social
web of Chinese existence. This web is composed of strands bound together with shared
experiences, trust, long term commitment, ties to the past, and mutual obligation-- a term
called Guanxi. Similarly, in Irish culture the initial question and the search for
commonality is the same. Irish culture also emphasizes family, friends and shared
experiences, but places less emphasis on long term commitment and the past, and more
on the present. In both the Chinese and Irish Cultures, who you know will get you
further than your ability. In Irish culture there is more flexibility with widening the circle
of who you know and can call upon for favors.

In U. S. American culture finding common background is important but secondary to
finding out “what the person does”. U.S. American culture is centered on the individual
and current performance and connections have the greatest impact on the work and social
life. In contrast, in the Chinese culture, the individual isn’t anyone without his/her
relationships. Different from the Chinese culture, in U.S. American and Irish culture,
relationships come and go, but the individual stays who he/she is regardless and new
relationships can easily be built.
Conclusion

I think Chinese cultural norms of limited performance feedback, sociable workplace communication, low eye contact and limited physical interaction directly reflect the value placed on preserving the past and focusing on long-term relationships, by not getting caught up in the present moment. In the Chinese culture, relationships are built over a long period of time to last for even longer, as they are inherited from one generation to the next.

To me, the Irish cultural norms reflect the emphasis on relationships through the focus on social life and the work process not the work end product. It also expresses the value placed on the present with more direct and flexible communication with less concern on the immediate or long-term affects on cultural participants.

I feel my culture’s emphasis on the present and the individual are clearly expressed with the more varied options of communication—direct and indirect, verbal and nonverbal. This focus on the present does make us less sensitive to the affects of our actions on long-term relationships.

“To know the road ahead, ask those coming back—Chinese Proverb”
“Experience is a hard school but a fool will learn in no other—Irish Proverb”
(Gleason p. 41)

To be successful as a transplant to another work culture, it is important to emphasize your commonalities with the adopted culture and work on the incompatibilities. An Irish person working in China needs to emphasize his/her cultural value of social relationships,
but downplay directness and understand face needs. A Chinese person working in Ireland needs to emphasize his/her cultural value of social relationships and work on directness and humor. An Irish person working in the United States of America needs to use their directness and work on fulfilling time, date and contract agreements, while downplaying sociability at work. A Chinese person working in the U.S. should focus on the mutual value for accomplishment and work on directness in communication. If I worked in China, I would emphasize group accomplishment, downplay directness and work on building long-term relationships. If I worked in Ireland, I would maintain my directness, but downplay my focus on specific dates, times and details and instead focus on creating and maintaining social relationships.
Works Cited Page


Self-identified native of Kerry County, Republic of Ireland. Work experience includes positions as employee and manager in many businesses within Ireland, as well as Australia, South Africa and the United States of America.

Self-identified U. S. American. Work experience includes positions as employee and manager in many businesses within the states of Texas and California, United States of America.

