

THE IMPACT OF DIRECT AND INDIRECT COMMUNICATION

By Cynthia Joyce, The University of Iowa

Published in the November, 2012, edition of the Independent Voice, the newsletter of the International Ombudsman Association.

Some of the conflicts we see as ombuds are rooted in different communication styles. At The University of Iowa, we have found that differentiating between direct and indirect communication has been especially useful to our visitors. In our organization, we draw faculty, staff and students from across the country and around the world to a small city in the Midwestern region of the United States. No one informs people that they are coming to a place dominated by indirect communication. Indirect communicators from elsewhere, nationally or internationally, are adept at picking up nuances in communication, even if the underlying culture isn't familiar to them. But direct communicators may not understand the expectations for communication, and they may not realize that their style can be seen as abrasive and sometimes even threatening. Providing visitors with this frame for seeing their situations can be very helpful.

Indirectness

The well-known linguist Deborah Tannen states that "indirectness is a fundamental element in human communication" (p. 79). We all use indirect communication strategies at times and in certain circumstances – we mean more than we say, and we gather meaning from others beyond the words they use (Tannen, p. 89). Tannen points out that indirectness is "...one of the elements that varies the most from one culture to another, and one that can cause confusion and misunderstanding..." (p. 79). In many parts of the world, indirect communication is the norm, although the degree and type of indirectness vary with cultures and geographic regions. One of the best resources we have found on the topic is a workbook to help Peace Corps volunteers think about their own communication strategies and those typical for the country where they are placed (see Peace Corps, below).

Understanding the differences between direct and indirect communication is also important for people within the United States. Although many people assume that all Americans are naturally direct communicators, there is considerable variation in styles associated with regional as well as cultural and family of origin differences. For example, and stereotypically, people from the East and West coasts tend to be direct, and those from the Midwest and South tend to be indirect (although in different ways).

Typical differences between direct and indirect communication

Direct communicators tend to say what they think. Their message is conveyed primarily by the words they use, and they depend on the literal interpretation of these words. The overall goal of communication is "getting or giving information" (Peace Corps, p. 78). Direct communication is common in low-context cultures, which are usually more culturally heterogeneous and tend to emphasize individualism, independence, and self-reliance. Because of this heterogeneity, there aren't widely held assumptions about the context within which communication takes place. In direct communication, the speaker is responsible for clear communication.

In indirect communication, common in high-context cultures, the meaning is conveyed not just by the words used but by nonverbal behaviors ("pauses, silence, tone of voice" [Ting-Toomey, p. 100]), implication, understatement, and a widely shared understanding of the context of the communication. "The overriding goal of the communication exchange is maintaining harmony and saving face" (Peace Corps, p. 78). Indirect communicators seek to avoid conflict, tension and uncomfortable situations. In a high-context culture, which may be relatively homogeneous and tends to emphasize interdependence and social relationships, people develop deep and often unconscious understandings of what is expected in that culture. Because of shared expectations about behavior, the context can be altered by the speaker to convey information.

Such issues as the identity of the speaker, elements of communication that are left out, and behaviors out of the norm, all convey information. In indirect communication, the listener has to understand the culture to understand the meaning of the communication. The listener is responsible for interpreting the message; the listener's "sensitivity and ability to capture the under-the-surface meaning and to discern implicit meaning becomes critical" (Yum, p. 385). Common sayings and other phrases gleaned from the sources cited below can help illuminate stereotypes about the two communication styles.

Direct Communication	Indirect Communication
Tell it like it is. The facts speak for themselves.	If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything. Tell someone what you think they want to hear.
The squeaky wheel gets the grease.	The nail that sticks out gets hammered back in.
Honesty is the best policy.	Being polite is more important than being honest.
It's okay to say no.	Avoid saying no; say "maybe" or "possibly," even if you mean "no."
The truth is more important than sparing someone's feelings. Don't beat around the bush.	If the truth might hurt, soften it.
Say what you mean and mean what you say.	Read between the lines.
Take communication at face value.	Handle communication to save face.
Time is money. Get to the point.	Small talk before business is important.
It's okay to disagree with your boss at a meeting.	Criticism of others, especially people with more authority, should be unspoken or careful and veiled.

Especially in the United States, criticism of indirect communication is common. Tannen points out a pervasive "distrust of indirectness" (p. 102), saying that "many Americans find it self-evident that directness is logical and aligned with power whereas indirectness is akin to dishonesty and reflects subservience" (Tannen, p. 85). Direct communicators "expect and respect honesty and bluntness" and can experience indirect speakers as passive aggressive, manipulative, "weak, deceptive and vague" (Griffith), "insincere and untrustworthy" (Ting-Toomey, p. 104). In addition, in the U.S., "the burden [of effective communication] seems to rest on those who are indirect" (Tannen, p. 102); it is seen as the responsibility of the indirect communicator to convey information, rather than the responsibility of the listener to understand it.

Just as direct communicators have issues with indirect communicators, "...those who expect indirectness will be offended by talk in any other mode" (Tannen, pp. 99-100). Direct communicators may be perceived as inappropriate and rude, which can lead to interpersonal tension, damaged reputations, perceptions of poor performance, and other problems. Fundamentally, direct communicators don't understand how indirectness works and don't understand what they're missing. "...It is virtually impossible for a direct person to fully understand the complexity of indirectness until

we've been immersed in it" (Anamaria). Direct communicators often miss "nuances and subtleties" (Ting-Toomey, p. 101), such as how criticism is expressed. As a result, direct communicators can be frustrated and confused in an indirect environment: they may know that something isn't working, but they don't know what they're doing that might be wrong, and, because they're surrounded by indirect communicators, no one will tell them directly what they're doing wrong.

Despite these negative views of each communication strategy, Tannen states that nothing is wrong with being direct or indirect. Both strategies have advantages. The problem occurs when there are differences in strategies or different expectations about the use of a strategy in a particular situation.

Suggestions for direct and indirect communicators

Tannen points out that flexibility and mutual respect are key to dealing with differences in communication styles. Griffith and Ting-Toomey go further and offer some specific suggestions for direct communicators when communicating with indirect communicators:

- Avoid blunt comments.
- Remember that avoiding insults may be seen as more important than providing honest feedback.
- Pay attention to nonverbal behaviors. In particular, a discrepancy between nonverbal behaviors and the words used by an indirect speaker can indicate that the words aren't accurate.
- Recognize that, for indirect communicators, it's "always easier to agree than to disagree" (Ting-Toomey, p. 106).
- Use open-ended, non-leading questions.
- Avoid phrasing a question so that the answer may be perceived as insulting to someone (for example, may be seen as criticizing someone).

Tips for indirect speakers when communicating with direct speakers include:

- Recognize that your subtle messages may not be perceived in the way you expect or may not be perceived at all.
- Accept that direct communicators respect direct speech.

Why does this matter to ombuds?

Understanding direct and indirect communication is one more tool for ombuds to use as we interact with visitors. In our office, when we believe that different communication strategies might be part of the problem, we explain direct and indirect communication to our visitors. Usually, but not always, the problem is that a direct communicator doesn't recognize the indirect nature of our environment and doesn't see the impact of his/her communication style on others. Visitors in this situation often experience a sense of relief when given a way to think about their situation. Sometimes visitors realize that this environment isn't going to work for them, and they decide to leave; sometimes visitors can adapt their styles when given this feedback and become effective within an indirect communication environment.

Do you have new ways of working with visitors that you would be willing to share? Please contact me at Cynthia-joyce@uiowa.edu with any and all ideas.

References

Anamaria, "Indirect-direct communication styles." <http://culturallyteaching.com/2010/02/17/indirect-direct-communication-styles/> Accessed 9/5/12.

Griffith, Sarah. "Intercultural business communication: Direct and indirect communication." <http://sarahgriffith.hubpages.com/hub/Intercultural-Communication-The-difference-between-Direct-and-Indirect-Communication> Accessed 9/5/12.

Hammer, Mitchell R. Intercultural Conflict Style Inventory <http://culturallyteaching.com/2010/02/17/indirect-direct-communication-styles/>. www.hammerconsulting.org.

Peace Corps, Culture Matters: The Peace Corps Cross-Cultural Workshop. <http://www.peacecorps.gov/www/publications/culture/pdf/workbook.pdf> Accessed 9/5/12.

Tannen, Deborah. Talking from 9 to 5. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1994.

Ting-Toomey, Stella. Communicating Across Cultures. New York: The Guilford Press, 1999.

Yum, June Ock. "The impact of Confucianism on interpersonal relationships and communication patterns in East Asia," *Communication Monographs*, 55: 374-388, December 1988.