

the **HRDIRECTOR**

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the **HRDIRECTOR INTERVIEW:**

Kevin Brady – HR director, BT Wholesale

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HEALTHCARE

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Sanjaya Sharma – CEO, Tata Interactive

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DLA Piper

GOWI

Richmond Ice Cream

Rolls-Royce

Wolseley UK



Pictured: Kevin Brady
HR director, BT Wholesale

DON'T MISS NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE WHERE WE LOOK AT: MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT; PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT; REWARD & COMPENSATION; HR – DRIVING VALUE OR COST CENTRE?... AND MUCH, MUCH MORE



COMMUNICATING SUCCESSFULLY ACROSS CULTURES

“IF A LION COULD SPEAK, WE WOULD NOT UNDERSTAND WHAT IT HAD TO SAY” – LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN

COMMUNICATING WELL ACROSS CULTURES CAN GIVE US A COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE WHEN GOOD INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION IS INCREASINGLY THE DECISIVE FACTOR FOR SUCCESS. MICHAEL GATES, FROM RICHARD LEWIS COMMUNICATIONS, LOOKS AT THE CHALLENGE AND SOME POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS.

Communication is almost always at or near the top of company surveys on what can be improved. It is as much about what is behind the words, as the words themselves. This is true for people from the same culture, but things become even more of a challenge when the whole mindset is different.

JUAN'S DILEMMA

I was once coaching the new Latin sales director of a large and successful company who felt he wasn't getting anywhere with his exclusively Nordic team. Juan was disconsolate. A new approach had been agreed at senior level, but as he tried to explain it he was met by stony silence. The more he talked, the stonier the team's silence. And the stonier the silence, the more he talked.

For Nordics, this is confusing – communication that is too wordy, too emotional and so ultimately they don't trust it. But the same is true the other way round: Latins can place little faith in reserved, cold and factual Nordic communication, with limited eye-contact.

They tend to paint an idealistic picture of the future. Listen to Hugo Chavez, President of Venezuela, on the desperately ill Fidel Castro: “*I hope he lives 80 more years. I hope he lives 100 more years.*”

Communicating successfully with another culture means understanding their values and what they trust. Nordics, German and Anglo-Saxon cultures tend to trust facts, figures and proven competence. Latin cultures tend to trust charisma, vision and persuasive skills.

Competent cross-cultural communication – a key skill for business

It doesn't have to be a national culture. There are many different layers of culture, such as regional, professional, educational, gender, generational, class, corporate etc. Culture is all the ways of thinking, behaving and communicating we, a) have learned or acquired, b) share with a group.

So, it could equally be the R&D manager trying to persuade the Business Development department, or HR attempting to convince Finance.

John Locke, the 17th century political philosopher, believed the vast majority of human disagreements are verbal, not real. And clarity in communication is a key issue as we become more global. Without it you get misunderstanding, a break-down in trust, and business failure. When more than 80% of mergers and acquisitions bring no value to the shareholders, and the majority of senior managers blame ‘cultural differences’, (KPMG study, 1999), it makes sense to look at the communication issues behind this.

Business tends to be good at process, and finding the ‘compelling logic’ behind the changes which bring people who are different together. But human beings defy logic. As one American manager put it: “*Culture eats processes for lunch!*”

HR can have a role in managing the process of communication within the organisation. Communication across cultures certainly does need to be managed. It is too risky to leave it to chance.

Areas where communication can be managed and improved:

- Communicate organisational values so everyone understands them in the same way. Not like the Chinese manager in a Western company who thought 'respect for the individual' meant that he should show deference to the CEO.
- Ensure that messages from the top are consistent, but tailored for people who trust different styles of communication. Do you announce a major organisational change by text message for example? (As one company did...).
- Encourage multicultural teams to put time into the *process* of communication rather than jumping headlong into the task
- Educate staff on the difference between the *intent* of what you say or write and its *impact*.
- Improve the emotional intelligence of staff.
- Localisation of internal newsletters, marketing collateral etc. does not only mean translation. A wordy text with lots of detail may be fine in German, but translate it directly into English for American employees or customers, and the effect will be negative. Germans put their trust in complexity. Americans trust simplicity.
- Re-think your approach to communicating your marketing messages – email-shots may work well in the USA, but people still prefer hard-copy in the more traditional UK.
- Understand that stress, in times of change, can make people retreat further into their cultural shell, into what they know best. The 'cultural noise' between the sender and receiver of the message increases.
- Coach managers from different departments to communicate more effectively with each other. For instance, HR may need to make its arguments more linear in order to persuade Finance. R&D, presenting the case to Business Development, could simplify its presentation to focus on the innovation's benefits to customers, rather than its detailed technical features.
- Remember that people are individuals and their communication challenges will be unique: a warm and charismatic CEO who appears like a cold technocrat on camera. A priest – recruited to HR for his persuasive and ethical qualities – nervously approaching his first presentation armed with too much data and logic – forgetting he was hired to be different, to be himself.
- Agree on norms of communication within the organisation and within teams, and ensure people stick to them.

WHERE TO START?

In HR we know how difficult it can be to get investment for what may be seen as soft issues. As with most important decisions, the key is getting senior executive management behind the initiative.

Communicating successfully across cultures is an absolutely key skill for them and their teams. Juan and his new sales team are a case in point.

Communication is at the heart of getting the right people doing the right things. It is also the key to promoting the outward face of the company to global investors and the international press in the best possible light.

HR has an important role in convincing senior managers to improve their own communication style. Not always easy, but a success story with one manager and his team can be the catalyst for wider change. >

STRAIGHT TALKING**THE ROLE OF THE BUSINESS LEADER AS COMMUNICATOR**

Leadership specialists have long advised that communication is a critical role for leaders but, in a society that celebrates the cult of the individual, the advice is too narrowly interpreted. Too much value is placed on charismatic leadership; Boards select leaders for their dazzle and the biggest plaudits are saved for those whose profile is often bigger than that of their organisation.

A recent report, "*Straight Talking*", by CHA, the workplace communications consultancy, looks at the role of the business leader as communicator.

The survey of 1,003 workers reveals four distinct styles of leadership communication in the UK:

THE CONSIDERATE COMMUNICATOR – GREG DYKE

Their employee communication style is:

- Warm
- Respectful
- Sincere
- Jargon-free

THE CONTROLLING COMMUNICATOR – RUPERT MURDOCH

Their employee communication can be:

- Confusing and full of jargon
- Arrogant
- Cold

THE UNDERSTATED COMMUNICATOR – SVEN-GORAN ERIKSSON

Their communication style is likely to be:

- Reserved, restrained
- Informal
- Lacklustre

THE CHARISMATIC COMMUNICATOR – RICHARD BRANSON

Their style could be described as:

- Interesting and persuasive
- Assertive and confident
- Full of conviction and polished

The good news is that more than a third of employees are led by Considerate Communicators and more than half of leaders in this group are rated 'good communicators'. The disappointing news is Controlling Communicators come a close second, 60% of whom are rated poor or dreadful by those unlucky enough to work under them.

In total, only 40% of employees report that their leaders are effective employee communicators. In the largest organisations with more than 1,000 staff the number dips further to just 36%. Unsurprisingly perhaps, employees view straight talking leaders who are true to themselves and value their relationship with their people – rather than the media – as the most effective.

The message is clear. Leaders must communicate more frequently and directly with employees, in a way that is open and frank, to strengthen their respect and loyalty.

For further information:

www.chapr.co.uk



IS WORKPLACE JARGON ON THE WAY OUT?

A recent YouGov poll of some 2,900 workers in the UK and Ireland – conducted to mark the 15th anniversary of Investors in People – has found that management jargon gets a resounding thumbs down from employees. It suggests that although more than half of senior managers think jargon is a harmless device, employees believe it can create misunderstandings about roles and responsibilities.

The survey also found that:

- 39% think colleagues who use management jargon are lacking in confidence
- 18% believe jargon users are untrustworthy or trying to cover something up
- 60% would prefer no jargon at all to be used in their workplace.

But with 52% of people in large organisations (1,000-plus employees) saying the use of jargon is increasing, it may be some time before phrases such as 'think outside the box', 'blue sky thinking' and 'the helicopter view' become as outmoded as telex machines.

The YouGov findings are backed up by a snapshot report by finance recruiter Nigel Lynn, in which 78 recruits to large organisations cited deciphering 'management speak' as the biggest obstacle to integrating into a new company.

Those polled believed that:

- Coping with jargon is more difficult for a new recruit than learning about new systems or understanding office politics.
- Replacing jargon with plain English ensures staff fully understand their bosses' requirements.
- The widespread use of buzzwords causes embarrassment and disdain between bosses and reporting staff – workers are cynical about bosses who use jargon, believing that they use it to 'mask' their own shortcomings.



As Steve Carter, managing director of Nigel Lynn, concludes: *"There is a place for specialised language, but when it gets in the way of communicating ideas or information, then it constrains, it limits and it fails."*

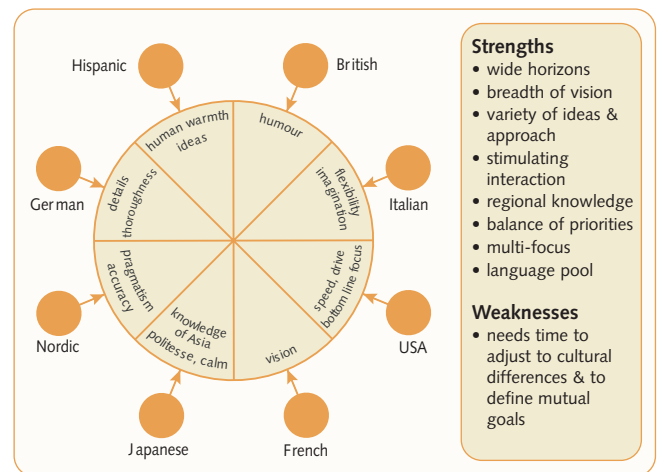
For further information:

www.nigellynn.com
www.yougov.com



> WHAT JUAN DID NEXT

Talking about his dilemma began to help Juan understand himself better. In his culture, winning hearts comes first. Winning minds follows later. But for the people in his team, the opposite seemed to be true. He began to understand that they were confused as he sped from one point to another, thought aloud, changed his mind, and relied on personal charisma rather than the facts to convince them. Modifying his style did not mean changing his personality or his values and beliefs. It was simply a small practical step. After some Asian and Latin members joined the team they formulated some ground rules, not least of which was to put one member in charge of monitoring the process of communication during each meeting. The new strategies and approach are starting to be implemented more thoroughly and show some successes. The team is even beginning to enjoy the process.



MULTICULTURAL TEAMS CAN BE THE MOST EFFECTIVE OF ALL, BUT PATIENCE AND TIME ARE NEEDED

Many different strengths are brought to the table in multicultural teams, as shown in the diagram above. But time needs to be spent on the process of communication, otherwise misunderstanding and mistrust can build up, and some of the greatest assets can be steam-rolled by the more eloquent assertive cultures. There needs to be a conscious effort to agree what the diverse strengths are, and how the team is going to use them. A good way is by assigning roles connected to process, not just substance.

Some rules for successful communication in multicultural teams:

1. Understand your own style and the impact it may have
2. Define team objectives and roles very clearly (bearing the first rule in mind)
3. Interpret them in ways which mean something to everyone
4. Use diversity as an asset – but remember that communication issues may obscure some of your greatest assets if not dealt with
5. Have fun!

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