

Chapter 21: Culture and Communication

Even with the best partner firm, the best people and the highest possible standards of quality measurement, outsourcing projects can still suffer because of poor communication. Charles L. Gay, managing director of Shreeveport Management Consultancy believes that: "The human resources issue is one of the greatest challenges to the success of an outsourcing initiative."¹

It is easy to find examples of people with outsourcing communication problems. After all, outsourcing is a major change in the way many businesses work. If you combine the move to outsourcing with a move to India then you need to not only understand how to communicate with a partner firm, but with a partner firm used to a different personal and management culture. It can be a challenge to rise above this and to achieve maximum efficiency, but it has been done and several cultural experts have produced some excellent observations on India that can help you prepare for the transition.

In a Computer Weekly article that analysed the problems associated with outsourcing, Mark Ballard commented: "Most criticisms of Indian providers stem from cultural differences of the sort that confuse British managers operating in countries such as France, which can cause problems between customer and supplier."² Getting the management culture right is clearly a key part of making outsourcing work for your business.

All too often, attempts at mimicking a foreign culture fall flat. An appreciation of the style and culture of a foreign land cannot be learned through a process of television osmosis. Many journalists have reported that call centre operators in India are prepared for contact with the American public by viewing endless episodes of *Friends*, or in the case of the British, *Eastenders*. Any contact centre manager will dispel this myth. Cultural awareness is taken more seriously by companies that realise their operators need to flawlessly engage a stranger in conversation, even though the stranger is many thousands of miles away and may not share a single cultural reference point.

Mary Clarkson, author of *Developing IT Staff*, confirms that it is not so easy to teach cultural awareness: "It is relatively easy to learn a new skill based on background knowledge and new activities. It is much harder to realign one's attitudes and approach to life in order to build one's ability in a particular competency. Behavioural competence stems from our own individual attitudes and experiences, which shape our reactions to the world around us."³

Elke Anderson of Blue Sky Consulting demonstrated how assumptions of cultural affinity can go wrong in an article for *Call Centre Focus*. Anderson said: "I called a customer service department the other day and during the course of the

call, the agent asked me if I'd seen the previous night's football match. 'No,' I replied. 'I'm not into football.' Imagine my surprise - not to mention irritation - when he then asked if I wanted to know what the score was."⁴ Anderson goes on to make the point that many consumers will find the cultural stereotype approach to be annoying. Not every British person is interested in football, obsessed with the ever-changing weather or addicted to gritty soap operas. Well, maybe there is a gentle obsession with the weather.

Making these sweeping cultural assumptions can damage your business. It is important for the Indian partner to understand you and your business model, but to achieve the most from your experience with India it is important to understand their own culture and methods of communication. In many outsourcing arrangements this will be essential as it may be required for you to pass detailed information and instructions to the Indian team. Knowing how best to communicate and work with your partner's team is essential for a smooth relationship.

Cultural Awareness

Many consultants with a history of working with India are offering specialised cultural training to help managers prepare for business in India.⁵ There are also several specialised cultural and linguistic experts that can help to smooth the path.

Indian business leaders openly acknowledge that visiting managers need to improve their cultural awareness. Venkat Narayanan is founder and CEO of Knowledge Dynamics in Singapore. Narayanan advises that western managers should attend "culture acclimatisation" training sessions to prepare them for working with an Indian team. He finds that the offshore team can be strengthened by including people with experience of working in the US or Europe. He said: "People from the US and UK share a similar Western culture and when these managers are confronted with an Indian team the culture divide is the first major issue." To illustrate this, he said: "During a meeting, a Western manager will want to pursue a discussion to its logical conclusion and then create team action points; however it is common for an Indian team member to change the subject once they personally understand the point being discussed."⁶

Richard D. Lewis, chairman of Richard Lewis Communications, is a long established leader in the area of cultural training, with experience of advising royalty and national leaders. He spent 5 years in Japan as tutor to Empress Michiko and was knighted by President Ahtisaari of Finland in 1997. Lewis speaks at least twelve languages and has been employed by a similar number of national governments, eager to improve their understanding of other cultures.

Lewis believes that it is important to have an appreciation of the cultural values of India, in order to understand what drives and interests Indian people. He states: "Values revolve around a strong family orientation as well as loyalty to a 'group', which often has to do with their profession. Examples are the diamond trade community or textile merchants. The honour of both family and group is strongly defended and arranged marriages are common within the trade."⁷ He makes an in-