

Understanding each other-What messages are you sending? Are you aware that you may be sending unintended messages? What is your communication style?

This booklet was written by Dr Steven Bollipo and Ms. Robin Ikin (medical education advisor) as a collaborative effort to assist hospital staff to understand cultural differences in communication and interpersonal style.

The need for such a "little book" metamorphosed from Robin and Steven's informal chats while working at the Launceston General Hospital, Tasmania.

A favourite topic was recognition of the importance of effective communication and their concerns about problems arising because of interpersonal misunderstandings. Steven had many stories to tell about his experiences and perceptions some funny, some not! Robin had heard of many instances of misinterpretations.

There was misery for those unnecessarily offended and less than optimal patient care at the end of the day when team work was affected by interpersonal conflict, lack of co-operation and the wrong messages being sent.

Opinions expressed are theirs alone and you are free to disagree. Steven was born and raised in India, Robin in Australia.

SUMMARY CHAPTERS

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1. PLEASE, SORRY, THANK YOU

What these verbal salutations may mean to people in different cultures and sub cultures and how they are used.

Steven's experience of use of please, sorry, thank you, in India in the region where he grew up. Usually only used in the more profound situations, not used for everyday niceties. Seen as unnecessary much of the time.

When one says please, one means it in a heartfelt, earnest and very serious way. The same goes for sorry. In other words this is a situation where saying sorry is of the utmost importance. Thank you really means thank you in a big way, indicating extreme gratitude.

The above three greetings are not used in normal day-to-day situations at home or at work unless this is really serious business and an emphasis is needed.

If someone has just gone to a lot of trouble to organize a job for you, for example, Thanks would be given.

Australia, Robin's experience. It is an expected part of the system of manners to say please, sorry and thank you on many occasions both at home and during our working day.

'Pass the salt Please, Thankyou."

"Sorry I bumped against you just now."

We may perceive that people have bad manners or are rude if they do not use Please Sorry and Thankyou in normal daily interactions. In fact we will assume that someone has no manners and knows no better and can be quite judgmental.

We will even go so far as to respond to an e-mail, sending a quick reply just to say thanks. Robin does it as a matter of course.

2. YES, NO

Steve: Saying yes or no to a request is quite a complicated business. A nod does not necessarily mean Yes, which leads to many misunderstandings with non Indians.

Yes may mean, "I hear what you are asking me" but does not necessarily mean Yes, I agree with you, or Yes I will undertake the task.

Yes may mean, Yes I will do it later, not necessarily Yes I have already done it.

If someone is in an awkward situation with a request, they may indicate the request has been complied with, has been carried out, when no action has yet been taken without any intention of dishonesty. They may actually mean it will be complied with as soon as I have time but that is not spelled out.

It is quite customary in some instances to say Yes as a face-saving strategy and this is quite acceptable. It is also acceptable to say No, meaning I have not yet made up my mind.

Robin: Yes means absolutely Yes, although sometimes the tone or facial expression may indicate there is another underlying message. However, in a business/ organizational context, we can take it that yes does mean yes. Many people would interpret Yes as, that task is complete, as a definite. If it was later found that the task had not indeed been completed, there would probably be an assumption or accusation of dishonesty, (a moral judgment about the character of the person.

Although there are subtle differences in interpretation of Yes or No according to tone of voice and the social/business context, we generally expect that Yes means Yes and No means No. In personal and intimate relationships there can be subtle differences in implication and the loudness of voice or tone is important. However, in a court of law, the interpretation is usually, No means No, especially about sexual matters.

2. GREETINGS/ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Steve: Saying Hi and smiling at people when you pass them in the street or in the corridor at work is not normal behavior. "Small Talk" about neutral things such as the weather particularly to strangers or even colleagues in passing, is not considered normal. It is not the norm to chat to strangers on lifts or in the cafeteria line at work.

To say Hi to a person means they really want to talk to you for a purpose.

Robin: It is considered normal good manners to say Hi, Hello or for example "Good Morning" to someone who is a work colleague once you have been introduced to them. Even if you haven't been introduced to someone you see on a regular basis on the street or at work, it's considered "friendly" and acceptable to nod, smile and/or say Hi.

People will probably think you do not like them or that you have bad manners if you do not greet them when you are work.

3. BODY LANGUAGE, EYE CONTACT

Steve: It is not considered necessary to look up and acknowledge people by giving eye contact when they are speaking to you. If somebody does not meet your eye when you are speaking to them, it does not mean they are not listening. If somebody looks away or looks down when you are speaking to them, it does not mean they are shy or that they are averting their gaze because they are not being honest with you. It does not mean they do not like you. In some cultures, it is considered very disrespectful to look someone in the eye if they are in a superior social position to you. Or it may be that a son should not look his father in the eye at the dinner table as a mark of respect.

Robin: It's usually considered bad manners to look away when someone is speaking to you. It is associated with a number of negative messages such as, "I'm not interested in what you are saying", "I don't like you" or "I don't want to hear this" Children are taught to look someone in the eye when they are speaking to you as a mark of respect. It is however not appropriate to stare in a prolonged way so that the eye-contact is threatening or unnerving.

4. NAMES, TITLES, ROLE

How do we refer to people or address them?

Steve: People don't give particular importance to names in the business place but give more importance to the person's title. Names are considered very personal and asking someone's name is like asking for their telephone number. An example of this would be,---- when you introduce yourself to somebody you would never ask them for their telephone number if you didn't know them. Roles are important, status and position titles, rather than a person's name. Nouns (names, either formal or informal) are to be avoided with preference for using pronouns (he, she) in addressing people. **Names are personal and private.**

Robin: **Names are very important**, in fact many consider it rude not to address people by their name and we are taught to avoid referring to people in their presence as He or She. In particular older people or people of a higher professional status expect to be addressed formally by their surname, including their title. A recent newspaper article stated that a survey revealed most older Australians disliked doctors using their first name when addressing them but expected the more formal use of their surname and title. If a person wants you to call them by their first name they will usually tell you.

5. PERSONAL SPACE AND PRIVACY

Steve: This can be very different in Eastern countries from Western countries. In India for example, there is often no concept of the notion of privacy and personal space. There may however, be differences is to do with social position. What we see as space invasion is not an issue for most Indians in Steve's experience. For example, it is quite OK to look over someone's shoulder at what they are reading or touch papers on their desk. Touching in various casual ways is quite normal *except* with gender differences e.g. males don't shake hands with females. We might think an Indian's body language is inappropriate at times, be it very inhibited or conversely what seems to us very overdone.

Robin: The concept of privacy and personal space is very important. We think people are socially and professionally inappropriate or even rude if they are too physically close to us (especially if they are so close that you can feel their breath) or too familiar if we don't know them well. We become quite put out if people touch or read our personal or work papers or notes without permission. It is considered really rude to open another's mail or even read their correspondence without permission.

6. SENSE OF HUMOR (at work)

Steve: It is not normal to have fun at work with people tending to walk around with serious facial expressions "what Australians call

poker faced". People don't usually laugh at little things and especially not make fun of serious matters. In India a hospital is a serious place where laughing and humor is generally not expected. It is not normally appropriate to show a sense of humor with patients.

Robin: In Australia, nothing is sacred and it is normal for professionals and workers to share a joke. People often diffuse serious situations with humor. It is true to say however that some people will be offended if the humor is too inappropriate in some situations. Sexual humor is not usually acceptable at work unless among a group of close colleagues.

7. SYSTEM OF QUEUING (standing in line)

Steve: People do not usually stand in orderly systematic queues. They are not taught to stand back or take a place depending on who arrived first. The concept of "one at a time" does not exist as it does in the West. In India people do things simultaneously. They gather round and get their needs met as best they can. In India the business of making appointments and waiting your turn is different from in many other countries. It is quite acceptable to interrupt someone and speak to them while they are doing something else. A shop keeper might serve multiple customers at once, multi-tasking simultaneously! In India people can't wait around for you to look up when it suits.

Robin: People are expected to wait their turn, e.g. usually one customer is served at a time and in business, people often have to make appointments. In Australia a receptionist will normally finish a task before attending to the next person, even for a brief enquiry. We are taught it is rude to interrupt (although some people do so). Jumping the queue is seen as bad manners and people can become very upset about it telling others to wait their turn. Verbal abuse and shouting may be the result. "Customer rage"!!

8. CRITICISM

Steve: People can be constantly on edge about negative feedback. Even helpful suggestions can be taken very badly. In work settings, people are worried about their job security. Because of this they will sometimes try to bluff their way through a situation, defending themselves in a way that makes the situation worse because they don't seem to be taking responsibility for their behaviour.

People can get defensive and sometimes evade the truth thinking this is the best way to save face. They may have good intentions in trying to find a way around their situation but this can be interpreted as dishonesty. If people say they will do better next time, they really mean it, even if they don't know how they are going to achieve it.

Robin: Australians generally take criticism at face value although obviously there are different temperament types (as in all societies) who have various levels of sensitivity. In the business world it's part of the "objective culture" to identify weaknesses and strengths in work performance and address them logically. For example, performance evaluation and management processes. We don't expect people to become defensive if constructive criticism is given as feedback. We expect them to accept it as a professional tool to assist them to do a better job. It is not normally meant as an insult. The intention can be very positive.

<p>9. DISCRIMINATION, ALL OF THE ABOVE</p>

If people get the first nine points wrong, misunderstanding the different concepts and behaviours, then discriminatory behaviour can result.

Sometimes people believe they are being discriminated against when they are not because of misunderstandings about any, some or all of the above points.

They then complain of racism by individuals or institutional racism by a business, hospital etc. This is cultural misunderstanding not racism. It happens in all countries and cultures.

Misunderstandings can lead to negative stereotyping where untrue generalizations are made about people. This can then lead to racism and discrimination on both sides.

In hospitals it can lead to unnecessary conflict which inhibits effective team work and ultimately patients do not get the best outcomes.

People will avoid asking questions because they feel they will be treated rudely and lose face for needing to ask the questions. They will not pass on information that is critical because they feel discriminated against by the person who needs the information. or a doctor will "not bother" to discuss a case with another doctor if it is felt that he or she perceives things differently. Sometimes a doctor will not respect the medical training of another doctor because it is not familiar so ignore his/ her opinion. This could cost a patient dearly.

Ethnocentrism (assuming that one's own culture is superior to all others) is common to most peoples of the earth. In a mobile multicultural world however, and especially in a professional context such as health care, communication needs to be clear.

