is key differences in workplace values, attitudes, and behaviors between people from India and people from the United States and northern Europe.

When you finish this book, then, if you’re from a Western country, you still won’t know the color of mourning, the capital of Rajasthan, or why Sikh men wear turbans,* but you should understand your Indian colleagues much better. And if you’re Indian, then you will understand better how you are seen by your Western colleagues.

But enough context. Let’s go to the workplace, meet some real Indians and real Westerners, and see what all the fuss is about.

CHAPTER TWO

Communication East and Communication West

No institution in India is more important than the family. [It is] more important than the individual at one end of society’s spectrum or the nation at the other.

Stanley Wolpert
India

The Eastern emphasis on self-regulation of emotion, empathy, and avoiding hurting others’ feelings requires [the] development of a style that places more value on indirect, hypothetical, and metaphorical communication, turning it into an art form.

Kedar Dwivedi

A client once told me the following story.

An American (let’s call him Bill) who works in the IT division of a major retail chain was overseeing the creation of a new software application being developed by a team of Indian programmers. One month into the project, the original completion date for the application was moved forward by six weeks, as Bill explained to the onshore Indian team lead (Deepak) at their next weekly update meeting. Bill asked Deepak if this would cause any problems, and Deepak said it “probably wouldn’t.”

*Though you will if you read footnotes. The color of mourning is white; Jaipur is the capital of Rajasthan; and traditional Sikh men wear turbans because they never cut their hair.
Communication East: For the Good of the Group

Like all other human behavior, communication—how people send and receive messages—is greatly influenced by culture, that is, by the deep-seated values and beliefs that are the ultimate source of all our actions. And the one aspect of culture that accounts for more miscommunication between Indians and Westerners than any other is what is usually called the concept of identity. Simply stated, Indians are more group-oriented (collectivist), and Westerners, especially Americans, are more individual-oriented (individualist). And this is not a match made in heaven.

What does it mean to be group-oriented and exactly how does this affect the way Indians communicate? People who are group-oriented identify first and foremost with their group—their family, extended family, a team at work—and only secondarily with their “self.” They are raised to put the desires and needs of the group (also known as their “ingroup”) ahead of their own personal needs. This doesn’t mean Indians don’t have individual aspirations or desires—although traditional religion did teach that the self or ego was considered “either unreal or displeasing to God”—but rather that they have been conditioned to identify their own good as inseparably linked with the good of others—so much so, in fact, that many Indians would not make a meaningful distinction between the two (Lannoy, 112). In such a scheme, the survival and well-being of the individual are effectively synonymous with the survival and well-being of the group.

An American told me the story of a group of 18 young Indians who were brought to Minneapolis for some training at the home office of their company. The Indians actually belonged to three different teams of six programmers, each reporting to a different American team leader for the duration of their training. They all trained together in the morning, and then in the afternoon they reported to their respective team leaders to work on different projects. Early one evening the American leader of one of the teams bought pizza for her six programmers, as they were going to have to work through the dinner hour, but they became visibly uncomfortable and
politely declined to eat it. When the American inquired why, she discovered that her six Indians were embarrassed to eat the pizza in front of the 12 other Indians—their group—for whom no food was being provided.

**The Extended Family**

Until very recently, most Indians grew up in an extended family, a multigenerational environment where they were surrounded—and to a large extent raised—by an extensive network of adults: parents, aunts and uncles, grandparents, older brothers, sisters, and cousins. And this is still true for a majority of Indians today. Among other things, the extended family system is a practical necessity for many Indians because of widespread unemployment and the absence of any kind of government welfare or safety net; when Indians are in need, they have to depend on family members for survival.

In extended families, members out of necessity learn how to please and get along with all manner of people with whom they live in very close quarters with virtually no privacy. While young children, especially boys, are often quite indulged in their early years (at least by North American and European standards), after age six or so Indians are expected to listen to, obey, wait upon, and generally defer to anyone who is older. A well-known Indian saying describing the father-son relationship declares that a “son should be treated as a prince for five years, as a slave for ten years, but from his sixteenth birthday, as a friend” (Lannoy 101). After which time, it might be added, he begins to acquire slaves of his own. The extended family may not be quite as ubiquitous as it once was in India, but its influence on Indian behavior, both vestigial and real, is still pervasive.

From an early age, Indians learn how to function within an extensive network of relatives and how to negotiate a web of interdependent relationships replete with duties, obligations, and responsibilities. Among other survival skills, this kind of upbringing teaches Indians to quickly sense and instantly adjust to the moods and feelings of all the significant people they must interact with. Because the extended family system tends to be extremely hierarchical in nature, based mainly on age and to a lesser extent on gender, Indians also learn how to adjust their behavior according to the status of the person they’re dealing with. They learn early on, for example, to whom they must defer and who must defer to them, from whom they must seek sufferance and who must seek theirs, to whom they must make appeals and who must appeal to them, whose support they depend on and who depends on theirs. “The hierarchical framework is so pervasive,” Jai Sinha has written, “the Indian child internalizes the process . . . and tends to develop a relative superiority to some and subordination to others. He must protect and take care of those who are inferior to him and maintain deference and respectful compliance with his superiors” (1990, 35).

Indians learn their place in the pecking order, the place of others, and the proper way to treat those above and below their station. They learn how to be patient, obedient, and above all self-effacing. “If all clamored at once,” Stanley Wolpert has written:

none could be heard nor could the more pressing demands ever be met. Indians learn early in life to wait their turn, to be patient. Living in and being raised among large families endows Indians with a great sense of security and group identity but relatively little initiative or what we [Americans] would call rugged individuality. There is, indeed, more passivity in Indian personalities than we generally find among Americans of comparable age and status, a product in great measure of lifelong accommodation to the many competing voices, needs, demands, and aspirations of the large extended family. (2005, 135)

We might note in passing that the deeply interdependent nature of Indian society accounts in part for the practice of arranged marriages, which happens to be one of the most curious and inexplicable aspects of Indian culture to the Western sensibility. If an individual’s survival and well-being are inseparable from that of the group (the family and extended family)—if the individual cannot survive emotionally and psychologically outside the group—then one’s chief concern in searching
or a suitable spouse must naturally be whether or not the prospective pride or groom fits into the group. And what better way to guarantee that than to have the senior members of the group, parents and other elders, comprise the search committee? Once a candidate suitable to this key constituency has been found, surely the two individuals involved can work out the interpersonal details.

**Reserving Harmony and Saving Face**

Now that we understand the central place the group occupies in Indian culture, we can complete our short survey of the collectivist mentality by examining the closely related concepts of harmony and face, which, along with loyalty, are arguably the foremost Indian cultural values. Whatever else a group has to do, it has to stay together—all the members have to get along, at least in public—or it is no longer a group. And more than anything else it is harmony, the appearance of agreement and mutual respect, which keeps a group intact.

Because harmony is the glue that holds the group together, preserving harmony becomes the overriding concern in most Indian social and workplace interactions. The need to preserve harmony prescribes a certain code of conduct for all members of the group, namely: being humble and self-effacing, deferring to seniors, avoiding public disagreements and all other kinds of confrontation, never causing offense, and being careful ever to embarrass anyone in front of the group. Common to all five of these ideal group behaviors is the underlying necessity to be tuned in and extremely sensitive to the feelings of others—what is usually referred to as the concept of “face.”

Most of what is done and not done in Indian society—and especially what is said and not said—comes down to the need to save face.

Most of what is done and not done in Indian society—and especially what is said and not said—comes down to the need to save face, one's own and, even more important, the face of others, in particular one's seniors and elders. Saving face is the driving force behind and the single greatest influence on the Indian style of communication.

What exactly is face? Face is what makes it possible for people to keep their honor and dignity, what saves them from embarrassment, and what preserves their self-respect. Face is perhaps best understood in terms of what causes people in face-saving cultures to lose face. If done in front of other people (such as at a meeting), all of the following have the potential of causing someone else to lose face, the speaker to lose face, or both:

- Openly disagreeing with what someone else says, especially if he or she is senior.
- Correcting what someone else, especially a senior, has said.
- Criticizing someone else who is present.
- Challenging something another person says.
- Making an overtly negative comment about what someone else has said.
- Giving negative feedback.
- Not being able to answer a question one should know the answer to.
- Not being prepared in circumstances where one should be.
- Saying something is not possible.
- Admitting a mistake.
- Admitting one does not know something that one should know.
- Admitting that one does not or did not understand something.
- Admitting that one is not on schedule, is falling behind, is not going to make a deadline.
- Asking for help or for more time.

All these things can be done in Indian society, of course; indeed, they are essential for efficient operations in any workplace. But as far as possible they must be done consistent with the requirements of face, which means they have to be done discreetly, politely, and very carefully, which is not a bad three-word summary of the Indian style of communication.
Impact on Communication Style

The collectivist mentality described above, with its core elements of the need to preserve harmony and respect face—to never give offense—explains why Indians talk the way they do. The foremost feature of this style and the defining quality of most conversations between Indians is the overarching necessity to intuit and then say what other people want to hear, thereby preserving good feelings, guaranteeing that no one is embarrassed, and nurturing the all-important group. “Indians like to tell you what you want to hear,” Gitanjali Kolanad has observed, “or, rather, what they think you want to hear. The tailor who says it will be ready by Friday and the person who assures you that the place you are looking for is just ahead are obeying a proverb that says ‘it is better to say something pleasant than something true’” (2005, 251).

The defining quality of most conversations between Indians is the overarching necessity to say what other people want to hear.

The primary purpose of communication among Indians, in other words, is not to exchange information but rather to preserve harmony and avoid giving offense, thereby safeguarding and strengthening the personal relationship between the speakers. Any information that can be exchanged while respecting this fundamental principle is, of course, most welcome and entirely appropriate in Indian conversation; any information that would violate this principle—for example, anything the other person does not want to hear—is unwelcome and inappropriate. Needless to say, this dynamic confines a great deal of critical information to the “not appropriate” category, including all 14 of the items listed above. But while these are indeed things that cannot be said among Indians, that does not mean these messages cannot be communicated; it just means they can’t be put into words.

So how do Indians communicate all the unpleasant messages people have to express from time to time—all those messages that threaten harmony and undermine face—the messages, in short, that their collectivist society doesn’t allow Indians to put into words? In general, Indians express difficult messages in two ways: by what they do not say and by what they don’t quite say, for example, by implying, hinting, or suggesting rather than by being explicit.

What Is Not Said

For the reasons we have already examined, the expectation that people will say what other people want to hear—that they will agree with you, for example, that they are going to meet a deadline, that they are able to do something that has been asked of them, that they will give positive feedback on a suggestion or idea, that they don’t need any help—this expectation is so deep in Indian culture, so automatic and instinctive, that it is sufficient for an Indian merely to refrain from saying something positive for another Indian to actually hear something negative. It is not necessary, in other words, to actually say something that is not pleasing but merely to stop short of saying anything pleasing. This is what is meant by communicating through what is not said (also known as high-context communication), and Indians are very good at it.

Consider the following exchange:

BRIGHTITE: I was wondering, Sumitra, if your team can come in on Saturday?
SUMITTRA: Saturday?
BRIGHTITE: Yes. Just for a couple of hours.
SUMITTRA: I see.
BRIGHTITE: Just to finish up that application test.
SUMITTRA: Right.
BRIGHTITE: I think Ram’s team is coming in also, so it should go pretty fast.
SUMITTRA: Yes. They work quite fast.
BRIGHTITE: So what do you think, Sumitra?
SUMITRA: Let me ask my team and get back to you.
BRIGITTE: No problem.

From the Indian perspective, what stands out quite clearly in this exchange is that Sumitra has been given several opportunities to say that she will come in on Saturday, and she does not. Since Indians assume Sumitra would say “yes” to this request if there was any way she could, thereby giving Brigitte the answer she wants, the fact that Sumitra cannot bring herself to say “yes” is in fact a clear “no.” Westerners, who rely mainly on words for their messages, would reach exactly the opposite conclusion: since Sumitra does not actually say anywhere that she can’t come in, then she must be coming in (after she checks with her team).

Implying and Suggesting

The other way Indians have of delivering difficult messages, of saying things other people may not want to hear, is through indirectness, through not quite saying what they really mean. Indians are so attuned to nuance, to reading between the lines, that when other people merely suggest or imply something, the real message comes through loud and clear—to other Indians, that is, although not usually to Westerners.

Indians are so attuned to nuance, to reading between the lines, that when other people merely suggest or imply something, the real message comes through loud and clear.

Let’s look at another example.

JOANN: How’s everything going, Kartik?
KARTIK: Fine, fine.
JOANN: Are we still on schedule?
KARTIK: Oh yes. We’re working extra hard on this.
JOANN: Great. My people are anxious to see the new application.

KARTIK: I’m sure. When are they expecting to see it?
JOANN: By the end of the week, like we agreed.
KARTIK: I see. It turned out to be quite a big job, didn’t it?
JOANN: That’s for sure. Thanks for all your help, Kartik.

If you can see them, there are several hints in this exchange that Kartik is not on schedule, hints to Westerners, anyway, but closer to outright declarations to Indians. “We’re working extra hard on this” is one. “It turned out to be quite a big job” is another. “When are they expecting to see it?” is yet another (in the sense that since Kartik clearly knows the schedule, then he also knows when Joann’s people “are expecting to see” the new application, meaning that this statement is not really a question but a subtle way of saying he’s falling behind).

These two principles—communicating by what is not said and by what is only implied—pervade Indian-style communication and show up in numerous techniques Indians regularly use in the workplace. We will examine these techniques in detail in the next chapter.

Young Indians

Before we give a brief overview of Western-style communication, we should probably make a few observations about the younger generation of Indians, a demographic that many Westerners assume to be less traditional, hence more like them, than older Indians. It’s true that today’s young Indian urban professionals, who are the most likely to be working with Westerners in offshore ventures, are just as likely to have grown up in a nuclear family as in an extended one. And it is, accordingly, tempting to conclude that they are not as collectivist and therefore not as typically Indian in their communication as previous generations.

This is no doubt true to a certain extent, but there are a few caveats that make it less true than Westerners naturally assume. For one, even the nuclear family in India often includes one or more decidedly non-nuclear members, typically an aged parent, grandparent, aunt, or uncle. In urban areas, cousins, nieces, or nephews from the countryside or from other
In the West, the central function of the family is to prepare its members to be able to live on their own, whereas in India the central function of the family is to guarantee that no one ever has to live on his or her own (which would be unthinkable and, in many cases, a practical impossibility). Families in the West guide and encourage their members to become independent and self-reliant, to assume responsibility for and increasingly to look after themselves. Individuals are raised to be able “to stand on their own two feet” or “become their own person,” as two common expressions have it.

In “Western culture,” Kedar Dwivedi has observed,

independence is viewed as the cherished ideal and dependence . . . is seen as a stigma. The parents are therefore often at pains to make their children independent as soon as possible . . . Children are expected to have their own voices, preferably different from that of their parents. For adolescents, leaving home is considered to be a very important developmental task.

In contrast the Eastern cultures place more emphasis on “dependability.” The parents are usually at pains to ensure that their children grow up in an atmosphere where parents are a model of dependability. Such a goal leads to . . . indulgence, immediate gratification of physical and emotional needs, and a rather prolonged babyhood. From the Western point of view this could be seen as a culture of spoilt children. However, it leads to the creation of very strong bonds and provides an inner sense of security and strength. (2002, 47, 48)

Speaking of Americans, this writer has noted elsewhere that they don’t like to depend on other people. They don’t like to owe them, need them, or be beholden to them. They are generally quite wary of entanglements, of being encumbered, of anything that limits their ability to be true to themselves. In a word, they want to be free—and freedom in the United States boils down to not having to worry about what other people think or what they will say; it means having to answer to no one but
yourself. If that sounds like a prescription for loneliness, which it does to many people, Americans would shrug their shoulders and say it’s simply the price you have to pay to be independent.

Americans and northern Europeans are not taught to neglect family, of course, but rather to simultaneously develop their own personal, individual identity and autonomy. Whereas an Indian’s identity is subsumed within and expressed via the group—indeed, for many Indians it is indistinguishable from that of the group—a Westerner’s identity is split. There is, in fact, a great deal of tension in the West between the two halves, between fulfilling the responsibilities to one’s family and society at large and the responsibilities to one’s self.

Americans are no doubt pre-eminent in the self-reliance sweepstakes, but if northern European cultures do not emphasize personal freedom and independence quite as much, they are still considerably more self-han than they are group-oriented, still closer to Americans, in other words, however far apart they may actually be, than they are to Indians.

**Individualists**

In what is still the best-known and most extensive study of culture in the workplace, the Dutch sociologist Geert Hofstede surveyed people in 66 countries on their attitudes toward certain topics, including this notion of personal identity. Based on participant responses to a number of survey questions, Hofstede ranked countries as “individualist” or “collectivist” according to the following definitions:

- **Individualism** pertains to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose; everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family.
- **Collectivism** pertains to societies in which people from birth onward are integrated into strong, cohesive groups, which throughout people’s lifetimes continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty. (1988, 51)

Here are the survey results for India, the United States, the Anglophone countries, and the northern European countries. The higher the number, the more individualist the country; the lower, the more collectivist. The range is from the highest of 91 (USA) to the lowest of 6 (Guatemala), with a mean of 42.

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<th>Country</th>
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<td>India</td>
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<td>Great Britain</td>
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<td>Sweden</td>
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<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>68</td>
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*Source: Hofstede, 1991, p. 53*

Hofstede noted that a difference of as little as 10 points between any two countries would likely show up as significant differences in workplace attitudes and behaviors. All the Western countries on our list are on the other side of the mean from India; all but two (Finland and Germany) are separated from India by more than 20 points; and the United States and most of the Anglophone countries are separated from India by 30 points or more (and by 43 and 41 points, respectively, for the United States and Great Britain).

By and large, Westerners have not been raised in extended families and do not grow up learning how to maneuver and manipulate within an extensive family hierarchy. Individual survival and well-being do not depend as much on the sufferance and goodwill of others and, therefore, on being so closely attuned and responsive to the feelings, moods, and wishes of others. Whatever cultural conditioning Westerners get in learning how to survive inside a group, it is minimal compared with what Indians experience. Moreover, where the survival of the group is not paramount, considerations such as group harmony and the related necessity for saving face do not loom large. Indeed, for all intents and purposes,
the notion of saving face does not operate in the West, at least not as it is generally understood in Asia.

**Impact on Communication Style**

If the overriding goal of Indian-style communication is to preserve and strengthen personal relationships, the overriding goal in the West is to exchange information.

If the overriding goal of Indian-style communication is to preserve and strengthen personal relationships, the overriding goal in Western-style communication is to exchange information. What the other person does or does not want to hear is largely irrelevant to Westerners since they don’t depend on the goodwill of others for their own well-being. Hence, Westerners are free to say what they’re thinking. Indeed, when one Westerner talks to another that is precisely the goal: to convey what is in the mind of the speaker—his or her ideas, opinions, knowledge, wishes—to the mind of the listener. Accordingly, Westerners are taught to “say what you mean” and to “mean what you say,” and generally they adhere to this advice whenever possible. “The value orientation of individualism,” two cultural analysts have noted, “propels North Americans to speak their minds freely through direct verbal expression. Individualistic values foster the norms of honesty and openness. Honesty and openness are achieved through the use of precise, straightforward language” (Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey 1988, 102).

But even Westerners know that you can’t always say what you’re thinking or mean everything you say. Westerners are not completely oblivious to the feelings of others, after all, and are, in fact, quite capable of being diplomatic and tactful when the occasion calls for it. But that’s just the point: the occasion calls for it far less often in the West than in India.

Needless to say, there isn’t much room in such a scheme for hearing what people don’t say or what they don’t quite say, for reading between the lines, or for otherwise sensing or somehow intuiting the message. For Westerners the words are the message, and messages that come in other forms usually don’t get delivered.

Clearly, then, Indians and Westerners are on something of a collision course when it comes to communication style; even as Westerners are busy trying to “speak their mind,” Indians are busy trying to read and speak the other person’s mind. In the next chapter, we will examine the most common problems caused by this cultural mismatch and offer advice on how to minimize the damage.

But before we go: Some readers may still be scratching their heads over the Bill-Deepak story at the beginning of this chapter. What was Deepak trying to tell Bill? It’s really not all that obscure once one starts reading between the lines: Deepak has no doubt been planning his wedding for some time; so, to begin with, one has to wonder why he has picked this particular day to inform Bill about it, the same day, it should be noted, Bill announces that the schedule for the new application is being moved forward. Coincidence? Probably not. One also has to wonder why Deepak insists on bringing the wedding up at each weekly update, since Bill told him at the outset that he and his wife will not be attending. Finally, one has to wonder why the date on the announcements was wrong. Could it be the date had to be changed because Deepak had to postpone the wedding? Could it be, in short, that every time Deepak meets with Bill he is politely “asking” him for more time to complete the application so he doesn’t have to further delay his wedding? And if that’s true (which it was), and if it is also true that Deepak assumes Bill has understood all this (which he did), then is it any wonder Deepak concludes that Bill is a pretty rigid guy?
Yes, No, and Other Problems

Every country has its own way of saying things. The important point is that which lies behind people's words.

Freya Stark
The Journey's Echo

In the last chapter we looked at the big picture, the cultural origins of the Indian and Western styles of communication. In this chapter we look at the details, at what actually happens in the workplace when people with such different styles try to talk to each other.

The Indian “Yes”

A good place to start our discussion is with one of the earliest and most common problems Westerners typically encounter when they begin working with Indians: the word “yes.” “Yes” is the indispensable word in Indian culture, as it is in all collectivist cultures where preserving harmony and maintaining good interpersonal relations are two of the greatest goods. Simply stated, how can you ever disappoint, upset, embarrass, or offend other people, especially those above you in the hierarchy, if you always respond with “yes,” regardless (one hastens to add) of what you really think or of what the truth might be? “India has a hierarchical society.” Paul Davies observes, “[and] hierarchies depend on not giving offense. If you can’t give offense up or down the hierarchy, you can’t possibly say no to anything. ‘Yes’ therefore has to stand for all sorts of words
and can mean anything" (Davies 2004, 130). Indian culture would be unthinkable—and completely unworkable—without “yes.” The fact that it doesn’t mean anything is beside the point.

That’s probably too strong. Of course “yes” means something; it means several things, in fact, but none of them, unfortunately, are what Westerners mean by “yes.” For Americans and Europeans “yes” is a positive answer to a question or inquiry, as in I understand, I agree, I accept, I approve. When Westerners say “yes,” it is usually an answer to a question, and when they hear “yes,” they assume it’s the answer to their question.

This is where the trouble starts, because for Indians the word “yes” by itself is really the equivalent of the Western “Uh huh.” It only means I’m listening, I’m taking in what you’re saying, I’m hearing you, I’m enjoying the sound of your voice. In other words, it’s not a positive answer but merely a polite response, a routine acknowledgement. Indeed, just as the Western “uh huh” can be followed by any kind of answer—a positive answer, a negative answer, or something in between—the same is true for the Indian “yes.” And just as Westerners know not to take “uh huh” for an answer and wait to hear what the person says next, they should likewise not take the Indian “yes” for an answer and wait to hear what the Indian says next.

The origin of the “yes” problem, incidentally, probably has something to do with the Hindi word Accha, which is almost the exact equivalent of “uh huh” but which Indians mistakenly think can be translated as “yes.” The bottom line is when Indians say “yes,” they’re actually thinking Accha—I hear you. They do not consider it an answer to a question—and they assume Westerners don’t, either.

We should mention that we’re using the word “yes” here merely as one example of a whole category of expressions Indians use to communicate “I hear you” and nothing else. Some of the other expressions, used instead of or along with “yes,” are: sure, fine, OK, I see, and no problem. When used as the initial response to something a Westerner says, each of these words should be seen for what it is: pure politeness and nothing more.

When used as the initial response to something a Westerner says, [the word “yes”] should be seen for what it is: pure politeness and nothing more.

So how does one know, the reader may be wondering, when you’re getting a real “yes” and when you’re just getting “I hear you?” That’s easy; since “yes” merely means “uh huh,” just disregard the “yes” (in the same way you would disregard “uh huh”) and listen to what the Indian says next. If that contains the usual indicators of a positive response, which are the same for Indians as for Americans, then it is a positive response. If it does not contain such indicators, then beware (see below).

The Indian “Yes” Head Gesture

We should briefly note the common problem Westerners have with the Indian head gesture for “yes.” For many Indians, especially in the southern half of the country, this gesture is a kind of head wobble or bobbing motion, tilting but not turning the head to one side and then tilting it to the other, that looks very much like the way Westerners shake their head to indicate “no.” If one looks closely, the difference between the two gestures is apparent, but if a person is not looking closely, it’s very easy to confuse the Indian head wobble with the Western “no” and get the wrong idea. For the record, the Indian and the Western head gesture for “no” are the same: the unilateral head sweep, a distinctive turning of the head to one side, turning it back to face forward, and then turning it to the other side.

The head tilt is not the “yes” gesture for all Indians, of course, and many will, in fact, vigorously deny that people in India make this gesture. Other Indians, when asked about the gesture, will laugh uproariously and own up to it. (An Indian reader once e-mailed me about a “great mistake” I had made in an earlier book where I described this gesture, and he asked that the reference be removed in subsequent printings because “no one in India ever does this.”)
The Indian “No”
Believe it or not, the Indian “no” causes infinitely more communication problems for Westerners than the Indian “yes.” Once you know that ‘yes’ just means “uh huh,” the “yes” problem usually goes away. The “no” problem, alas, is much more complicated and intractable.

In group-oriented Indian culture, having to tell other people what they don’t want to hear—in a word, having to tell them “no”—poses a conspicuous problem.

Indians are culturally conditioned not to cause offense and to tell other people what they want to hear, especially superiors and one’s elders. What safer way to guarantee harmony and save face, after all, than never to disagree, never to confront? Not surprisingly, then, in the hierarchical, group-oriented Indian culture, having to tell other people what they don’t want to hear—in a word, having to tell them “no” in any of its various forms—poses a conspicuous problem. “Indians will have extreme difficulty using the word ‘no,’” Paul Davies has written, “even when they might mean it. I’m not sure an Indian can even mean ‘no’ without some threat to his or her sleeping patterns” (italics added) (Davies, 129). An American told me a story of a young Indian man at a meeting who was apparently so shocked at something another participant asked him that he immediately responded with a very strong “no” and was so embarrassed that he apologized for the rest of the meeting and sent a follow-up e-mail to the “offended” party (who didn’t see what the fuss was all about).

Actually, Indians have solved the “no” problem quite neatly: they just never say “no.” That is, they never resort to the word “no” or to any other blatantly negative formulation. Indians manage to communicate all the negative messages the rest of us do using words like “no” or “not”—disagreeing, refusing, saying something is not possible, expressing dislike, turning someone down, and generally delivering bad news—they’re just less obvious and much more discreet about it (to Westerners, that is).

For people who need to hear the word “no” in order to grasp that they’ve gotten a negative response, a category that would include most Americans and Europeans, the fact that Indians almost never use this word is the source of a great deal of serious confusion.

We’ll examine that confusion more closely in a moment, but first we should probably mention one circumstance under which Indians actually do use the word “no,” quite readily, in fact, and that is when a superior is talking to a subordinate. The highly hierarchical nature of Indian society permits superiors to be very blunt, almost rude, to their underlings, which, because it is entirely expected, does not actually disturb the harmony of the group. So when we say Indians never use the word “no,” we really mean that superordinates, underlings, younger people, and anyone else deemed as being in a lesser role doesn’t use the word “no” with those people they regard as being of a superior rank or station. In this context, we would point out that Indian vendors working for an American or European company would consider themselves in a subordinate position in this relationship and typically would not be comfortable saying “no” to the Western client.

The Absence of “Yes”
So how do Indians say “no” then? The short answer is: by not saying “yes.” By and large the Indian “no” is not a negative statement, but rather the conspicuous absence of a positive statement in a context where “yes” is clearly desired and/or expected. As noted earlier, “Yes” in its various forms—yes, fine, sure, OK, no problem—is so culturally mandated and so deeply anticipated in Indian culture that it is enough for one Indian simply not to say “yes” for another Indian to understand “no.” Nothing negative has actually been said, but much more important something positive has very obviously not been said. And that is in fact the message.

This isn’t logical to many Americans and northern Europeans, of course, who have trouble understanding how something that has not been said can be a message, to say nothing of how it can be obvious. But logic, alas, is one of the earliest casualties when West meets East.
This will all be clearer if we look at some examples. Consider the following exchange between Marian and her Indian colleague Kumar.

KUMAR: Marian! How are you?
MARIAN: I'm fine, thanks. I was wondering, Kumar, what you would think if we decided to move up the date for the systems test?

KUMAR: Move it up?
MARIAN: Just by a week, at the most.
KUMAR: I see. Do you think it's possible?
MARIAN: Should be. But what do you think?
KUMAR: Me? I guess you don't see any problems?
MARIAN: Not really. My people can be ready at this end if your people can be up to speed by then.

KUMAR: I see.

It's clear from the beginning of this exchange that Marian would like to move up the date for the systems test if possible. Why else would she raise the subject? This is what we meant in the previous paragraph when we talked about "a context where 'yes' is clearly desired." This is the point where Kumar would say "yes" if he could, and the fact that he does not, even when given several more opportunities, is very meaningful in Indian culture—and what it means is "It's not possible." But it doesn't mean "not possible" to Marian, of course, who needs to get an actual negative answer—and not simply not get a positive one—to understand that Kumar is turning her down.

Here's another example:

BILL: We need to schedule our tour of your facility.
ANU: Of course.
BILL: How about next Tuesday morning?
ANU: Tuesday?
BILL: Yes, would 10:30 be OK?
ANU: 10:30? Is it good for you?
BILL: Yes, it's fine.

Here again it seems obvious Bill would like to schedule a tour for next Tuesday, and Anu would certainly agree to this if there was any way she could. When Bill proposes "next Tuesday morning," then, and Anu merely repeats the suggestion ("Tuesday?") instead of agreeing to it, then she is in fact saying that Tuesday is not convenient. Bill doesn't pick up on this, of course, and moves ahead to set the time; Anu again fails to agree ("Is it good for you?"); and once again Bill doesn't understand. Bill walks away assuming Tuesday is fine, and Anu leaves thinking Bill will eventually propose a new time for the tour.

Unintended Consequences

This is the moment where most communication problems between Indians and Westerners begin: the point where the Indian says "no," or, more accurately, where the Indian communicates "no" (since the Indian never actually uses the word), the Westerner does not hear "no," the Indian believes the Westerner has understood, and the Westerner likewise believes he or she has understood. Marian, for example, may go ahead and move up the date for the systems test because she thinks Kumar has not objected, and Bill may go ahead and schedule the tour for Tuesday because Anu never said it wouldn't suit her. When Marian later discovers Kumar is not ready for the systems test on the new date and when Bill can't find Anu on Tuesday, Marian will be upset with Kumar (for misleading her into thinking the new date was fine), and Bill will be irritated with Anu (who agreed to be available on Tuesday when clearly she was not). Kumar and Anu, meanwhile, will be quite surprised when these two Westerners get upset with them because both Indians genuinely believe they have been quite clear that they cannot do what has been asked of them.

The real problem with such incidents, the reason both parties need to avoid or at least try to minimize them, is not so much the actual misunderstanding that takes place here but the unfortunate consequences it leads to. When Indians and Westerners both mistakenly believe communication has been successful, as in these two examples, this dynamic
immediately sets up inaccurate expectations that can only result down the road in surprise, at best, but more often in disappointment, frustration, and mutual mistrust.

When Indians and Westerners both mistakenly believe there has been successful communication, this can only result down the road in surprise, frustration, and mutual mistrust.

Neither side wants this to happen, of course, and in a moment we will describe how these cultural incidents can be avoided. But first it is important to make the point that these incidents are in fact legitimate, honest misunderstandings, with neither party (or both parties equally) at fault. If we examine the scenarios objectively, it cannot be said that one party is somehow more responsible for what happened here than the other. The Indians did not realize the Westerners had misunderstood them (or they would have said something), and the Westerners honestly believed they had understood the Indians (or they would have asked questions). In other words, the Indians did not intend to mislead the Westerners, and, for their part, the Westerners weren’t trying to misread the Indians.

There has still been a misunderstanding, with serious and unfortunate consequences, but it helps both parties if they can understand that what happened was completely unintentional. If Marian and Bill believed they had been deliberately misled, they would be justifiably upset, and likewise if Kumar and Anu thought the Westerners had deliberately misinterpreted them. But when each side understands that the mistakes were quite innocent, that neither the Indians nor the Westerners intended or were aware of what was happening—indeed, that they would be appalled to realize what was happening—then everyone can calm down. We still have a problem—we don’t want these things to happen and we need to prevent them as much as possible—but at least now we realize that no one was acting in bad faith. While this doesn’t make the issue go away, it does take the sting out of the situation, and that goes a long way toward restoring good working relations.

Even legitimate problems are still problems, of course, and in need of a solution. So let’s continue our analysis of Indian communication style. Earlier we were looking at the Indian “no,” and we had established that Indians never actually say “no”; they just refrain from saying “yes,” and that means “no” to other Indians. Indians actually have a number of ways of refraining from saying “yes,” each of which we will now describe in more detail.

The “No-Response” Response

One of the most common ways Indians communicate “no” is not to say anything in response to an inquiry. Suppose you send an e-mail to an Indian colleague suggesting a solution to a coding problem, and the Indian, who is always very good about answering his e-mails, does not respond. There’s a good chance this lack of a response is, in fact, his response—and it’s not a positive one. Remember: if there’s any way the Indian could respond positively to your suggestion and tell you what you want to hear, he would do so immediately, heartily commending you on your most excellent logic. If he doesn’t respond, therefore, it’s probably because your logic, sadly, is not especially excellent. Nothing has actually been said, of course, and that’s precisely the point: praise has been conspicuously withheld. And everybody knows what that means.

Avoiding the Question or Changing the Subject

Another way to get around saying “no” is to simply dodge or avoid any question that would have to be answered in the negative, which is often accomplished simply by changing the subject.

KARL: Ashok, how’s the data analysis going?
ASHOK: Not too bad.
KARL: Will it be ready for the meeting?
ASHOK: The meeting? Right. When is that scheduled for again?
KARL: Friday. Your guys will be ready, right?
ASHOK: Actually I wanted to ask you about the meeting. Who's going to be there exactly?
KARL: Well, my team, Sharon's team, and probably Eric's people.
ASHOK: I see. Should be very interesting.

In this exchange, Ashok has twice steered the conversation away from Karl's inquiry about whether the data analysis is going to be ready in time for the upcoming meeting. The Indian assumes Karl will understand what this means—that he (Ashok) doesn't want to answer this particular question—and furthermore that Karl will also understand the reason: that the analysis will not be ready in time. After all, why would Ashok not want to answer the question if the analysis was going to be ready? Indeed, Ashok expects that at any moment Karl will ask him if he needs more time to complete the analysis (for this is what another Indian would do at this juncture). The point here is that when Indians avoid your question, it's because there's something wrong with your question, and what's wrong with it is that it would require a negative answer.

The Postponed Answer

A related technique here is to postpone or put off the answer to a question or request, using replies such as these:

"Let me ask my team."
"I'll get back to you on that."
"Let me look into it."
"Can I call you later?"
"Can we talk about this another time?"
"I'll make some inquiries."
"Let me follow up on that."

Once again, the principle here is that you're not really getting a response to your inquiry, which can only mean one of two things: either the Indian is not able to answer your question at this time, or he is not willing to answer. If the person is not willing, then we are back in "no" territory, for why would someone be unwilling to answer a question in the affirmative? If you receive replies like the above, then, you can either take them as a "no" or wait a short while (usually no more than a day) to see if the Indian actually does bring the matter up again. If the matter is not brought up again, then that's your answer. Westerners typically follow up in such cases, assuming the Indian has forgotten, at which point Westerners will need to be alert to all the other varieties of "no."

Repeating the Question

Another way to not answer a question (thereby giving a negative answer) is to simply repeat the question, in effect sending it back to the questioner. This is what Kumar does in his first exchange with Marian when he responds, "Move it up?" to her question about whether it's possible to change the date for the systems test. Clearly, if Kumar thought it were possible, he would say so at this point. When he tries to avoid the question, therefore, he's indicating that moving the date forward is not possible.

Anu does the same thing twice in her exchange with Bill. When he asks her if Tuesday would be OK for the tour, she simply repeats "Tuesday?" If Tuesday were possible, why would she repeat the question and not simply say "yes"? When Bill then asks if 10:30 would be OK, Anu again repeats the question. Once again, what the Westerner needs to understand is that Indians would not repeat questions they were quite comfortable answering. So if the Indian is not comfortable, one has to ask oneself why, and surely the reason would never be that the Indian is going to have to answer "yes."

Turning the Question on the Speaker

Kumar and Anu both use another common technique of responding in the negative: they ask the two Westerners what they think of their own suggestions. When Marian asks Kumar if he thinks it's possible to move up the date for the systems test, Kumar turns the question on her: "I see. Do you think it's possible?" When Marian persists and asks Kumar point blank what he thinks, he again turns the question on her: "I guess you
don't see any problems?” Similarly, when Bill asks Anu if 10:30 on Tuesday is a good time for the tour, she responds by asking him: “Is that good for you?” When Indians turn your questions back on you, when they won’t answer your question, that is your answer.

Some of the most common examples of questions that are usually negative replies include any form of the following:

“Does that work for you?”
“Is that good for you?”
“Do you think that’s possible?”
“Is that what you would like?”
“I’m not sure. What do you think?”

Hesitation

Another indication of “no” from Indians is any kind of obvious hesitation in response to a question or request. Coming from people who instinctively and automatically agree whenever possible, the slightest hesitation is a not-so-subtle sign of trouble. This hesitation can take several forms: one is a period of silence preceding the Indian’s response; another is body language that indicates how uncomfortable the Indian is with the question or request, such as a nervous laugh, wrinkling of the brow, a quick intake of breath; another is tone of voice indicating how painful the question is; and another is a noncommittal response, such as the very common “I see” (which Kumar says twice to Marian). What the Westerner must remember here is that when Indians can’t immediately commit, when they are obviously weighing their answer, it’s not a good sign (and probably is their answer).

The Qualified or Conditional “Yes”

In addition to avoiding questions that would require a negative answer, another way Indians express “no” is with a qualified or conditional “yes.”

Whenever you get a positive response—sure, fine, yes, OK, great—followed by one of the common qualified responses listed below, you should follow up to see what the Indian means, or simply accept the answer as an outright “no,” which is most likely what is intended:

“That should be OK/possible.”
“That might be OK/possible.”
“That shouldn’t be a problem.”
“We’ll do our very best.”
“Perhaps.”
“Maybe.”
“Possibly.”
“Probably.”
“Good chance.”
“Good possibility.”
“I think so.”
“We can try.”

What is most significant in any exchange like this is the fact that the Indian has not quite managed to respond with an unequivocal “yes,” for which there is no doubt a very good reason. What usually happens in these exchanges is that the Indian, who is very attuned to nuance, expects the Westerner to hear the qualifier and discount the “yes,” whereas in fact the Westerner, generally less conditioned to pay attention to nuance, hears the “yes” and discounts the qualifier.

For Indians, qualifiers are usually not something between “yes” and “no”: they are much closer to “no.”

The other cultural difference here is the meaning of qualifiers in India and in the West. In the West, qualifiers are something between “yes” and “no,” but they are generally closer to “yes.” For Indians, on the other hand, qualifiers are usually not something between “yes” and “no”: they
are much closer to “no.” You can always probe with a follow-up inquiry if you're not sure what the Indian is telling you, but if the Indian then becomes uncomfortable or uses any of the other techniques described in this section, then the qualified “yes” you just got was indeed a “no.”

**Combined Forms**

Needless to say, Indians often combine one or more of these forms of “no” in the same exchange, depending on the situation. Here's an example of no less than five in one short conversation (a slightly altered version of the exchange between Sumitra and Brigitte in chapter 2). See if you can find them.

BRIGITTE: I was wondering, Sumitra, if your team can come in on Saturday?
SUMITRA: Saturday?
BRIGITTE: Yes. Just for a couple of hours.
SUMITRA: I see.
BRIGITTE: Just to finish up that application test.
SUMITRA: Right.
BRIGITTE: I think Ram’s team is coming in also, so it should go pretty fast.
SUMITRA: Yes. They work quite fast.
BRIGITTE: So what do you think, Sumitra?
SUMITRA: That’s probably OK.
BRIGITTE: That’s great.
SUMITRA: Let me ask my team and get back to you.
BRIGITTE: No problem.

Brigitte has been told five times that Sumitra is not available on Saturday, but there’s every indication that she’s still expecting the Indian to come in. On Monday, therefore, Brigitte is legitimately going to be very annoyed with Sumitra for “misleading” her, and Sumitra is legitimately going to be very surprised (and maybe hurt) since she told Brigitte several times she could not come in on Saturday. As we noted before, these are legitimate, innocent misunderstandings—neither party expects nor desires the decidedly unfortunate outcome—but that doesn’t change the result.

**Bad News**

Figuring out the Indian “yes” and the Indian “no” are certainly the two biggest communication challenges Americans and Europeans face and the source of more misunderstandings than any other cultural difference. But there are at least two other common challenges that come under the communication umbrella and deserve special attention: the way Indians deliver bad news and the way they give negative feedback. As the reader can well imagine, these are very delicate topics, fraught with implications for harmony and face and therefore requiring Indians to tread very carefully. And whenever Indians tread carefully, as we have seen throughout this chapter, Westerners are unable to follow.

Bad news is never something people want to hear, which makes delivering it, especially to clients, customers, or to one's boss, quite painful for Indians. A lot of bad news gets delivered in the form of a negative response to an inquiry or a request, and we have already described in detail the many forms negative answers can take with Indians. But sometimes Indians initiate the bad news, and Westerners have to listen closely to catch it.

**Behind Schedule**

Probably the most common and most frustrating example for Westerners is when Indians have to admit that they are not on schedule, need more time, or are going to miss a deadline. Admitting these things is very uncomfortable in Indian culture; so as is the case with all difficult or delicate topics, Indians have worked out certain prescribed formulas for delivering this news without actually saying the dreaded words. The problem with these formulas is that Westerners do not understand them, with the usual result that Indians assume they have communicated the bad news when in fact they have not. This is especially unfortunate in
the case of a missed deadline because by the time Westerners discover the Indians are in fact late and by the time Indians realize Westerners thought they were on time—a moment that is usually very close to or even the same as the deadline—it's too late to do anything except, perhaps, engage in mutual recriminations!

So what are these formulas Indians use to announce they going to miss a deadline? They are different in different situations, of course, but it's possible to list a few common conversational gambits that are very often stand-ins for and early warnings of “We're getting behind.” They include:

Repeatedly bringing up the subject of the schedule or deadline (to prompt you to ask if they need more time).
Mentioning that the schedule is inconvenient or ambitious.
Asking if the deadline is still good for you.
Asking if all parts of the work need to be done by the deadline or if certain parts could be done later.
Talking about how busy they have become.
Mentioning that part of the project is taking longer than expected.
Mentioning that some parts of the project are on schedule.
Asking if members of another team are busy or observing that they don't appear to be very busy.
Mentioning how late people are working each day or how much overtime people are putting in.
Mentioning that some people are coming in on the weekends.
Pointing out how another team was recently given more time to finish their project.

The point is that while these seemingly innocuous comments would in fact raise alarms among fellow Indians, who would respond by asking if the schedule needed to be adjusted, Westerners would usually overlook them. And with good reason; most of these remarks make no direct reference to the actual subject, and those that do mention the schedule stay well away from any reference to being late or needing more time. In the first instance, Westerners will not even realize that the schedule is the topic of discussion, and in the second they would not normally interpret the remarks as cries for help.

That’s Not Possible

Another type of bad news that is difficult for Indians to deliver is to say that something is not possible, that they are not able or available (for whatever reason) to do something other people have asked of them. The strong desire to please, and beyond that to be responsive and helpful to the client, the boss, or one's elders, makes it hard for Indians to refuse a request.

Indeed, Indians are so aware of how awkward it is for someone to have to refuse a request that they have devised a strategy for making sure that the situation almost never arises. When Indians have a request to make and they're not sure the other person can agree to it—when it's possible, in other words, that the other person might have to say “no”—Indians are careful to never actually make the request. What they do instead is make it quite clear through comments and observations that they could use some help if the other person was so inclined, and then wait to see how the other person responds. If the Indian is free and willing to help, she will offer assistance. If the Indian is not free and willing, she will simply say nothing. In this way the Indian is never put in the awkward position of having to turn down the “request” because, in fact, no request was ever made.

But awkward requests do sometimes come about, even among Indians—and routinely with Westerners—so Indians have worked out ways to turn down such requests and still preserve harmony. These approaches involve the usual polite circumlocution (from the Western point of view) and avoid any direct refusal. We have already examined several of these formulas when we described the various Indian ways of saying “no,” but there are a few other responses Westerners should also be aware of (all preceded, of course, with some form of “yes”).

Answering with any kind of qualifier: “That might be possible.” “We can probably do that.” “We'll try our best.”
Postponing the answer: "Let me ask my team." "Can I get back to you on that?" "I'll check my calendar."
Not answering or responding with a question: "Do you think that's possible?" "Is that what you'd like?" "Would you like us to be available?"
Making references to how busy they are.
Agreeing to the request and then bringing it up or asking about it again later in the conversation or in a subsequent e-mail.

Once again, no words are used that constitute an outright refusal, but much more important (for Indians) neither were any words used which constitute clear agreement. Westerners listen for the former, of course, and assume their request has been agreed to; Indians expect Westerners to listen for the latter and realize they've been turned down.

**Asking for Help**

Another awkward situation for Indians is to have to ask for help, to admit that they don't know how to do something, for example, or that they don't have the resources or time to do something that has been asked of them, especially if this is something they have previously said they could do. This is a potentially embarrassing situation in most cultures, of course, not just in India, but it is especially acute in face-saving cultures.

The Indian way of handling this situation, not surprisingly, is to never actually ask for help but merely to make it clear that help is needed, and then wait for the other party to respond. Common techniques Indians use to ask for help include:

- Repeatedly mentioning how busy they are.
- Mentioning that something is taking longer than expected.
- Implying that a deadline might be missed (hoping you will then ask why).
- Mentioning that something was more complicated or more involved than they had originally thought.
- Talking about another team that recently needed and received help.

Talking about a time in the past when they received help in a very similar situation.

As usual, the Indian way of handling this delicate situation is never to actually make a request for help in so many words; what Indians typically do instead is to make it very clear they could use some help and then wait to see how the other party responds. In India, the other party will then offer help if he is able or willing to do so or simply say nothing if he is not. Westerners, who won't hear any request for help in such statements, will not realize (1) that Indians are in trouble and need assistance and (2) that by not offering assistance, Indians will assume the Westerners are not able or willing to help them.

**Negative Feedback**

It happens quite often in the workplace that one party asks a second party what he thinks of an idea, a proposal, or how something has been done. And the second party tells the first party what she thinks. This sounds pretty simple, but as the astute reader will have by now figured out, nothing is ever simple when you're dealing with someone from a different culture. For Indians, positive feedback is automatic and almost instinctive, the very embodiment of the Indian cultural imperative of telling other people what they want to hear. Negative feedback, needless to say, has nothing in common with telling people what they want to hear and for Indians, therefore, is practically akin to torture.

Negative feedback, needless to say, has nothing in common with telling people what they want to hear and for Indians, therefore, is practically akin to torture.

Consider the following exchange:

BILL: So what did you guys think of that suggestion I e-mailed you about last week?
SUNIL: Last week?
BILL: You know, the idea to . . . ?
SUNIL: Oh, yes. I remember. Yes, we got that one.
BILL: And?
SUNIL: We had some good discussions.
BILL: Great. What did you think?
SUNIL: Deepak actually had another idea.
BILL: Great. I'd like to hear it, but before that, what did you think of my suggestion?
SUNIL: You'd like us to try that, then?
BILL: If you think it would work.
SUNIL: We liked the one part where you said . . .
BILL: Great.

Negative feedback is in some ways even more difficult for Indians than saying “no.” It’s one thing to disappoint or even annoy other people, but it’s quite another to criticize them, thereby causing a possible loss of face. If Indians have to be careful and resort to all manner of circumlocutions just to say “no,” imagine the lengths they have to go to dress up negative feedback. Indeed, that’s precisely the problem; most Westerners can’t imagine how Indians do this and usually miss the feedback altogether. Some of the most common forms of Indian-style negative feedback are evident when we closely examine the exchange between Bill and Sunil.

No Response

Though he doesn’t know it, Bill has already received Sunil’s feedback on his suggestion even before this conversation opens. Bill sent Sunil an e-mail the previous week with a proposal about something the two men are working on, and Sunil never responded. In Indian culture, this is Sunil’s response, and it is negative. We must remind ourselves again what’s going on in an Indian’s mind in this situation: Sunil would love nothing more than to be able to heap praise on Bill’s wonderful suggestion, thereby preserving and strengthening his and Bill’s excellent working relationship and, not incidentally, saving Bill’s face (which would be at risk if Sunil criticized Bill’s suggestion). Under such strong cultural pressure to say something positive, if Sunil is so bold as not to reply to Bill’s e-mail, then it’s clear what Sunil thinks. (It’s always possible, of course, that Sunil did not get the e-mail or did not have time to respond, but it is made clear in the next sentence that Sunil did get it.)

The problem here, of course, is that for Europeans and Americans, no response is not negative feedback; it’s the absence of feedback because for Westerners, negative feedback means actually saying something negative.

The Repeated Question

Needless to say, Sunil is quite surprised that Bill did not understand his non-response and that Bill has now tracked Sunil down to ask him...
in person what he thinks of Bill’s proposal. This is exactly the kind of face-to-face confrontation Sunil had hoped to avoid by not answering Bill’s e-mail. Sunil tries to deflect the confrontation with another technique that we have already examined—the repeated (hence unanswered) question—when he says “Last week?” As noted earlier, when Indians try not to answer a question, it’s usually because if they were to answer it would have to be in the negative.

A Very Loud Silence

When this technique doesn’t work, an increasingly uncomfortable Sunil moves on to his next version of negative feedback, which we might call the loud silence, when he admits he did receive Bill’s e-mail: “Oh, yes. I remember. Yes, we got that one.” And then says nothing else during the excruciating silence that follows. This is the point where Indians would immediately add how much they liked Bill’s suggestion. The fact that Sunil says nothing during this very pregnant pause is quite significant.

Sunil’s next comment—“We had some good discussions”—is effectively more of the same, for this sets up yet another logical place to follow up with positive feedback. Once again, the silence at the end of this observation, the space Sunil leaves conspicuously blank instead of saying what the team thought of Bill’s idea, is extremely telling. Alas, it doesn’t tell Bill anything because Bill needs messages in the form of words.

Suggesting an Alternative

Sunil’s next technique is to comment on Bill’s idea by suggesting an alternative. Once again he deliberately sidesteps Bill’s direct question (“What did you think?” which is in fact a response) and then mentions that Deepok has another idea. The real message here is not that Deepok has an idea worthy of discussion, although that is important, but that Bill does not. When Indians say nothing about a proposal and offer an alternative instead—in effect, making a counterproposal—this is as much a comment on the original proposal as it is a conversation about the alternative.

Asking Your Opinion

Beginning to exhaust his repertory, Sunil now tries yet another approach by asking Bill what he thinks of his own suggestion: “You’d like us to try that, then?” As noted earlier, this type of question is almost never a question with Indians; it’s an observation. Of course Bill would like the Indians to try his suggestion! Why else would he have made it? Sunil knows this too, of course, so when he asks Bill if he wants the Indians to try his idea, this can’t really be a question. And it’s not. It is, rather, a polite way of saying that Sunil thinks it won’t work, polite because it comes in the form of a query rather than in the blunt form of a statement, but the meaning is the same. Notice, too, that Sunil uses the qualifier “try,” suggesting pointedly that he has some doubt as to whether this idea will work.

Damning with Faint Praise

Not pointed for Bill, however, thereby forcing Sunil to try yet another technique when he says, “We liked the one part where you said . . .” This technique, sometimes referred to as praising the part to dismiss the whole, allows Indians to say something positive about a suggestion or proposal even as they are dismissing it. The essence of the technique is to admire a detail, a minor, unimportant feature of the proposal (“one part”), and say nothing about the core or centerpiece. The real message—We’re not commenting on the essence of your suggestion (and you, of course, know why that is)—is not lost on Indians. It is lost on Bill, however (“Great.”), at which point Sunil has run out of techniques.

Bill probably walks away from this exchange assuming there’s at least an even chance his suggestion is going to work, especially since Sunil has never criticized the proposal. For his part Sunil, who has made it repeatedly clear that Bill’s suggestion is unworkable, walks away assuming Bill knows this, believing Bill wants him to try out the idea anyway (since Bill keeps pushing his idea in the face of Sunil’s persistent criticism), and assuming Bill realizes that there’s little chance of success. As the curtain falls, we are left again with the familiar scene of Indians and Westerners
believing themselves to be moving forward on parallel tracks when in fact they're on a collision course.

To recapitulate, the most common forms of negative feedback Indian-style, just like the forms of saying “no” Indian-style, do not involve the use of negative words; they involve the conspicuous absence of positive words. They do not involve commenting on the topic but studiously avoiding all invitations to comment on the topic (or commenting on another topic). And the meaning is not in what is said but in what is not said. Is it any wonder that a common Western complaint is that “Indians never tell us when they don’t like something or when they don’t think something will work”? Any wonder either, as it happens, that Indians for their part are quite surprised to hear this?

When Westerners Talk Like Indians

At this point, Western readers may be asking themselves a question: If we are supposed to interpret all these techniques for saying “no,” communicating bad news, and giving negative feedback to mean what Indians mean when they say these things, then do Indians think we mean these things when we accidentally use these same techniques in our speech (accidentally in the sense that Westerners don’t usually mean “no” when they talk this way)? In other words, if an American says “I think so” in response to something an Indian asks, will the Indian think the American is actually saying “no?”

The short answer here is: of course. Indians interpret the messages they receive from other people to mean the same thing they would mean if an Indian said those things. But in fact the truth here may be a little more complicated. Certainly some Indians will think a Westerner is saying “no” if he responds with a qualified “yes,” for example, or that the Westerner is giving negative feedback by praising only part of a proposal, in particular those Indians who have not had enough contact with Westerners to realize that they don’t use these techniques the way Indians do. But Indians who have had some experience with Westerners will have learned that they cannot interpret Western behavior from the perspective of Indian culture, and they will be better able, as a consequence, to interpret Western behavior the way other Westerners would.

Advice for Westerners

We have established that Indians communicate “no,” deliver bad news, and give negative feedback in a number of ways Westerners do not use, do not recognize, and do not understand. Moreover, we have also established that while the resulting misinterpretations and misunderstandings are unintended and legitimate—that no one is trying to miscommunicate—these misunderstandings are still a major nuisance.

So what can Westerners and Indians who work together do to avoid these misunderstandings? Ultimately, there are only two ways out of this dilemma: Westerners can get better at reading Indians, or Indians can get better at talking like Westerners. Ideally, some of both would take place, with each side going to some lengths to understand and adapt to the communication style of the other. After all, when both sides move toward each other from opposite ends of the communication spectrum, they meet a lot sooner than if either side has to travel the entire distance.

Who Adjusts to Whom?

Indians and Westerners who work together, then, should certainly aspire to and work toward this noble compromise, but in many cases it will not be practical. This is because in most circumstances where Indians and Westerners interact, one is the majority or dominant culture and the other is the minority or secondary culture. And it is only natural in these cases for those from the minority group to have to shoulder the burden of learning about and adapting to those of the majority. In most cases, it is the Indians who will end up adapting to the Westerners.

We hasten to add that the reason the minority should adjust to the majority is not because the behavior of the majority is necessarily more logical, normal, or evolved; it is, rather, simply because there are a lot more people (which is why they’re called the majority) behaving in this