SOME MISSION CRITICAL CROSS-CULTURAL ISSUES WHEN WORKING WITH INDIAN IT PROFESSIONALS

The following are some of the major hot points or issues for global team work with Indian IT professionals. These issues can be addressed in a workshop for Indian and/or American professionals.

Language barrier

Our research shows this as one of the most critical communication challenges. Indian English, both written and spoken, is not always understood well by non-Indians.

Key challenges include:
- Use of different sentence structure
- Speech patterns
- Accents and intonation
- Vocabulary
- Difficulty in processing complex information in English

The above may lead to a lack of shared understanding of what is being said, discussed or agreed upon in a teleconference or face-to-face meeting. Thus, miscommunication or misunderstanding can kill the process of seamless joint work.

A related major challenge for global team work with Indians is that the Indian side is more likely to make different assumptions about task requirements after a meeting and begin to work/act on those assumptions without getting clarification, pushing back or asking proper questions. This may lead to misdirection in the project and unnecessary delays and additional costs.

Hierarchy in Indian organizations

Hierarchy in Indian organizations/teams has serious ramifications/manifestations in the business context which are very different from those in Western cultures.

Some key areas to consider in which hierarchy in India can have an adverse effect:
- Effective and open communication during negotiations, brainstorming and idea generation
- Obtaining meaningful information and giving objective feedback
- Proactive in proposing solutions to critical issues
- Dependence on superiors to provide direction and solutions
- Tendency to say "yes" to requests from clients and superiors
- Agreeing to things without analyzing task requirements properly; lack of willingness to offer alternative solutions and defer to authority more easily
- Tendency to not ask questions for fear of losing face
- Effective decision-making
- Knowledge transfer/acquisition
- Technical training
- Team communication

Indirect communication style

Indian professionals prefer a more indirect communication style in comparison to the West. This may delay business activities for want of more objective information or feedback. In addition, the Indians' cultural preference is to utilize more high-context communication where the larger emphasis is on the background information or past significance, thus taking longer to come to the "key point."

Some other ramifications of the indirect communication preference include:
- Using language with implied meaning
- A tendency to make assumptions instead of asking questions directly
- Not directly asking the source of information for clarifications but depending on input from inner-circle of colleagues to explain something that was not clearly understood
- It is harder and may take longer to correct misdirection

Indians in general also like to make more use of body language. The Indian head nodding is legendary, a gesture not easily understood by non-Indians.

Time orientation

Indians are more polychronic than their counterparts from the West and thus tend to demonstrate a greater comfort level with delays and interruptions in their work as well as deliverables. They are less likely to inform the superiors or client teams immediately when a potential delay is first known, but wait longer before communicating if something cannot be done; also a larger tendency to justify the delay with a good "contextual" reason. The clients may not always find out about or understand potential problems or issues until too late in the project.

Another factor which may lead to delays is that lots of discussion and suggestions take place, even after the decision has been made or conclusion already reached.

Hard work vis-à-vis smart work issue

The cultural tendency in India is to be evaluated and rewarded for the "effort" or "hard work" alone. The challenge is to redirect them so the focus is more on "smart work" rather than just "hard work". The intended goal is working more effectively and efficiently to achieve goals.