

CLOSE TO IDEAL PERFORMANCE MODEL

Hey, nothing is perfect!

SAMPLE ADAPTATION DISCUSSION – Jeremy and An

INTRODUCTION

The following is part of an Adaptation Discussion between An and Jeremy. Leading an adaptation discussion is one the 11 TIIS skills. Jeremy and An are part of a joint venture (JV) located in China between a Chinese company (Jade Inc.) and a British company (Silversmith Inc.). Jeremy is a managing director and is An's direct boss. As with most intercultural JVs, there have been challenges with new work processes, policies and procedures, and developing effective working relationships.

Recently, Jeremy and his group, including An, participated together in a two-day workshop focused on working with colleagues from other cultures. An and Jeremy, along with other members of their group, found the workshop to be helpful. They learned a lot about how other cultures' work processes are practiced differently due to cultural value differences. The workshop emphasized the differences between British and Chinese work culture. Upon workshop completion, they were better able to see and explain the cultural reasons for some of the work process challenges they had been facing, particularly decision-making, problem-solving, meeting styles, leadership styles, obtaining information, and cross-functional collaboration. Because of this cultural research, An felt confident to approach Jeremy and talk with him about some of the dissatisfaction she was having with their meetings.

AN'S PERSPECTIVE

These were some of the thoughts An had that led her to have this meeting with Jeremy:

When we have meetings run by Jade managers, they are very efficient. The leader runs the meeting in a very structured way. There is a report around the meeting topic, some roundtable discussion, with statements made in the order of our job levels, and then the leader of the meeting makes final remarks, giving clear direction and we all know the decision and our role in carrying it out. Much of the time, I know what will happen in the meeting before it starts. Often the meeting manager talks to me one-on-one before the group meeting to get my input and thoughts. He will tell me if I need to have any special role in the meeting or not. Then during the meeting, there are not really any surprises.

When I participate in Silversmith meetings run by my boss Jeremy, everyone talks a lot. People freely share their opinions and can disagree with each other at that time. They sometimes talk about topics totally different from the agenda topics. Jeremy often asks for my thoughts or ideas or what I think of someone else's idea. I can see that he is disappointed when I don't speak out loud. He doesn't understand how hard it is to do that when I don't have any preparation for the question ahead of time, or if I don't know what others think about the question. Maybe the biggest problem is that we all talk but then it doesn't come to a decision. So, we leave the meeting and then have to talk about the same thing in the next meeting too, trying to get everyone to come to an agreement. It is very frustrating for me. I think we are taking too long to make decisions and it is starting to slow our responses and problem-solving for customers. Jeremy needs to be a stronger leader and make more decisions and clearly direct us. That will help us to better accomplish our objectives and meet customer needs.

AN'S PLAN

An learned in the workshop that Western managers like Jeremy often like to receive feedback initiated by their employees on how they can improve their management practices. This is because they believe that a more egalitarian relationship with direct reports will result in stronger employee performance. Though An was uncomfortable with the idea, she decided to give it a try with Jeremy regarding this meeting issue.

She also learned in the workshop that a Best Practice within intercultural JVs is to have proactive and open discussions about cultural differences to see who can change their behavior to bridge the cultural gaps. The training facilitators had explained a way to do this – they called it an Adaptation Discussion and practiced it during the workshop. Even though An didn't yet feel fluent in this process, she felt she was skilled enough to give it a try. It felt a little bit like jumping off a cliff to her, but she was very motivated to reduce her frustration level with the way meetings were being held, and she thought that cultural differences were part of the reason for the different ideas about meeting styles.

An went to see Jeremy in his office and the following is part of their Adaptation Discussion:

An: Hello Jeremy, do you have some time? I would like to talk to you about something.

Jeremy: Sure, you know my door is always open to you An.

An: Can we discuss our meeting styles? I'd like to see if there are ways we could have more effective meetings. It seems we have quite different ideas about meetings and I think maybe there are some cultural differences. Are you interested in improving our meeting processes?

Jeremy: Yes, for sure An. I think we have a lot to improve upon in our meetings. I really appreciate you taking the initiative to bring this up to me. I'm very interested in your perspective on this. I agree that there must be some cultural reasons that can explain our different behaviors in meetings.

An: And I am very interested in your perspective too Jeremy. I feel quite uncomfortable right now because I have never initiated feedback to my boss before. Are you sure you want this?

Jeremy: Yes, yes definitely An. From my egalitarian-based perspective, our relationship has just become deeper by you initiating this feedback to me. I guess that, for most people in your status-based culture, this kind of feedback typically is often not welcome?

An: No, it can be seen as disrespectful.

Jeremy: Then I further commend you...I can see how hard this could be for you...

An: OK, I feel that there are two different kinds of styles, depending upon who is leading the meeting and who the participants are. Jade meetings seem very efficient to me. They aren't long and they are to the point and a clear decision is reached and clear direction given by the leader. Silverstone meetings seem very confusing to me, with everyone talking a lot but no clear decision made and no direction given to us. It feels to me like you need to be a stronger leader in these meetings Jeremy. I think the main cultural difference again here is probably between our status-based system and your egalitarian system. Also, in our status-based system, it is usually difficult for us to speak directly and openly in a multi-level group meeting, giving opinions and agreeing or disagreeing with others.

Jeremy: But I think you have such good ideas about how to solve many of our problems. It seems a waste to me that you don't bring these ideas up at meetings.

An: If you want my ideas, it would be easier for me to talk to you about them in private. I would appreciate more one-on-one meetings with you. Private meetings are safer and you don't have to worry about other people's face.

Jeremy: Oh, I see now what you mean...you communicate more indirectly in group meetings and in front of your boss so that you don't make your boss look bad...I must have put you in some uncomfortable situations then when I asked you very direct questions about what others in the meeting said.

An: That's OK Jeremy; I think you didn't understand the cultural reasons. I can see that it is challenging for you to be in such a different environment here. One thing – I also don't understand why so many speak in Silverstone meetings and you don't say more and just make a decision.

Jeremy: Well, sometimes I do. But in general, when we have an important issue to discuss, I like to have everyone together to talk it out before we decide. In the egalitarian system, if we do that, then it is more likely everyone will be able to accept the decision – to “buy in” or commit to the decision in action. That may be what is confusing to you I guess. I can see now that if everyone operates in a status-based system, then the leader’s decision is generally accepted and bought into. I can also see that meetings here in a status-based system can be more efficient and provide better response time for customer issues.

An: Yes, and the leader gets input from others in one-on-one meetings also. Well, it seems that these meeting differences are being caused mostly by egalitarian/status-based values and indirect/direct communication values. It seems that you generally value egalitarian behaviors more than status-based behaviors, and I value the opposite.

Jeremy: Yes, and given our different preferences, I have found this discussion so far to be very helpful. What next?

An: What do you think Jeremy?.....right now please let me be status-based (An and Jeremy both laugh).

Jeremy: Well, let’s review the behaviors that we identified so far that I could try differently to make our meetings go better – I could hold more one-one-one meetings with you and the other managers, I could summarize decisions at the end of meetings and give clearer directions to everyone as to how to carry out the decisions, I could make more decisions more quickly at the top, especially when it comes to quick response to customers. What else?.....

An: Please don’t put me on the spot at meetings by asking my opinions and if I agree or disagree with others.

Jeremy: (thinking) OK An, that is very reasonable and it makes sense to me. How about now if I ask you to do one thing differently?

An: OK, what is it Jeremy?

Jeremy: I still want to find a way to get your ideas and solutions to problems rather than you always asking me first what to do about a problem. I have asked you to initiate meetings with me and come with solutions to problems before asking me what to do but have not seen you do that. I now understand this would not be the status-based way, and so would be quite challenging for you. But I think it would help the organization by having more ideas come from people like you who are closer to the customer. In our intercultural workshop, I learned that in many status-based cultures employees expect their manager to have all the answers. Well, I don’t have all the answers. How could I? I have only been here for a short time. I will work harder on finding out answers over time if you agree to initiate a meeting with me once a week and come to me with a new solution to an existing problem. When you bring the solution to me, you can analyze its strengths and weaknesses and then we can decide together what to do – understanding that I as the manager always have the final word in the decision. What do you think An?

An: Yes, I am willing to do that. Can we schedule another meeting to talk about the details of that?

Jeremy: Sure.