

Humor in Chinese-Western Business Relations

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Humor theory suggests that humor and laughter are primitive ways of signalling good news and consent in a group. Having a common sense of humor can be experienced as sharing a secret code. Humor also says something about the person expressing humor as confidence, intelligence and timing are all required for a well placed humorous remark.

Humor requires the ability to respond to others in the moment and its use can be effective in difficult negotiation situations. For example, engaging in humorous interaction right after a difficult agenda item has been addressed may function as a release of tension. Ultimately, humor may constitute an effective way of managing guanxi between negotiating parties.

When it comes to Chinese humor in particular I would like to share a couple of stories. This first one has been told to me by a Chinese:

Deng Xiaoping, when he was alive, had a visitor – the American president – who brought a fantastic gift. It was a telephone from which you could call anyone, dead or alive, fantasy figure or real person. Deng Xiaoping made three calls: the first one to the US president to thank him for the gift; the second call to C. Elai, one of the most honest politicians that have ever lived in China (he was in heaven at the time of the call); the third call to Mao Zedong (in hell). Later on, Deng Xiaoping got a telephone bill and was surprised since it did not fit his expectations. He called the telephone company and said that he had received a strange bill with only two calls registered. The lady said that she would go and check and soon came back to say that it was very simple really, “the call you made to Mao was a local call”

This second story, extracted from an interview with a Western director at a large firm in Nanjing, further depicts the characteristics of Chinese mentality and humor.

In a negotiation setting, my Chinese counterpart suddenly bursted out, “I really like win-win situations. First I win, and then – I win again, ha ha”. The Chinese can often be quite straightforward in their behavior. They can look at you, really gazing you in the eyes and tell you the most unexpected things, just like that. In another occasion, my Chinese counterpart gazed at me and said, “The other suppliers have accepted to the terms and conditions and you have to comply, ha ha, otherwise your competitors will get the contract, ha ha”

What can we learn from these stories? To begin with, we need to dig deeper to really understand the underlying forces of the Chinese mentality. We also need to remain open minded as prejudice and taken for granted opinions can be quite deceitful.

The strategic uses of humor in the stories include:

1. To make oneself appear stupid and weak
2. To communicate the forbidden and unspoken
3. To critique indirectly
4. To mask threats

In the latter story, in the viewpoint of the Chinese, he is purely stating the obvious. His behavior is not necessarily rude, although it understandingly may be interpreted as such. He conveys his message, using humor as a tool to mention the forbidden. He might be laughing

to hide his nervousness. He might be using humor as ways of releasing tension. He might not only be protecting himself, but also the Westerner's feelings by conveying his statements indirectly. Certainly, the Chinese are well known to avoiding saying "no" straight out (rather they tend to use any of the plethora of ways of saying no indirectly).

How can we view his laughing, this seemingly rude behavior, in a different light? Many times, this behavior is about saving face. He might laugh since the matter is sensitive. He might feel uneasy and perhaps even be embarrassed, thus trying to hide this in his laughter. At the same time, his behavior might also be interpreted as an honest reminder of the power balance in the relationship, i.e. his bargaining strength.

Undoubtedly, there are several possible interpretations. In any case, try to avoid assuming the worst or the first thing that instinctively comes to mind. Remain open minded and try to really understand the underlying intentions.

Finally, how can we ourselves use humor to our advantage in our business relations? We can use it reactively and proactively:

- As an ice breaker
- To smooth and speed up the courteous phase
- As a way of fishing for information
- To say things that cannot normally be expressed (taboos, masked orders etc.)

Hence, humor not only provides a strategically effective method for argumentation, but also serves to mask true meanings and making direct statements appear indirect. Successful use of humor may also serve to express discontent, since it permits the speaker to express a problem while at the same time saving face.