a guide to indian work culture

Take a look at Delhi street life outside your gate or at the way traffic progresses. It is obvious that many things in Delhi are quite different from what you are used to in your home country. Such as zig-zagging across the street while signaling to cars with your hand or negotiating to buy vegetables from the vegetable seller's cart.

What do you think happens when you enter your company's Indian office and see desks, phones and meeting rooms, almost like an office that you are used to from back home? You might think that (phew) here in this office environment you can behave "more like at home". This is tricky, because even though on the surface the office might appear somewhat like the one at home, under the surface - when communicating and collaborating - there are lots of differences between individuals working in an Indian company and individuals working in your company back home.

In the following sections, I will describe some of the most significant cultural characteristics that you are likely to experience in your daily work in India. For example, if a communication misunderstanding happens, you can use these general cultural characteristics to try to understand what is actually going on in the situation. However, you should also be aware that other factors than just the broad cultural characteristics might play a role, for example your company's culture, individual personalities and the fact that different projects are very different.

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Hierarchy in Indian Society

Let us first explore the hierarchy of Indian society in which your working colleagues spend their lives. The hierarchy of Indian society is rather steep - especially compared with societies in the so-called western part of the world. This means that Indian society and its institutions have many layers and that to each of these layers a certain portion of more-or-less high status is attached. For your Indian colleagues, it will play a role to which layer they belong. For example, most Indian families have a family head, the oldest male in the family, who makes important decisions for the family. Another example is the teacher-student relationship in Indian schools and universities. Generally, teachers and family heads are looked upon as authorities, and teacher authority should not be questioned. We also find similar layers with different status, influence and power attached to them in Indian companies.

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Hierarchy in Indian Companies

I am sure that you will hear some of your colleagues say that "the boss is always right". Sometimes this saying is a joke, but very often there is quite a lot of truth to it. Do you want to know why your Indian colleagues use such a saying? Let us first look at what factors make your Indian colleagues influential or powerful in your organization. First of all, the titles that your colleagues have earned, and the salary levels that come with them, will add to their power in the organization. Seniority, i.e. the number of years that your colleagues have spent in the company and their levels of experience, is important as well. And in many cases, age in itself often creates respect for people. So, if your colleagues have "grey hair factor" (another popular saying in India) there will be some extra respect for them. Moreover, your colleagues' skills will add to their power and influence. The last factor that I will mention will typically apply not only to your Indian colleagues, but to you as an expat in the company, too. Belonging to or coming from the client or HQ organization also typically attributes power to employees. The factors I have mentioned so far are likely to play a role in all Indian organizations including private and international/global companies. However, if you work with public Indian companies or Indian family-based companies, you might experience that other factors such as strong networks and connections to the right powerful people play the most important roles.

Hierarchy in Indian Teams

Let us take a step back from looking at the whole organization and now look more into how hierarchy functions in Indian teams or groups. If you observe how one of your teams works or if you ask some of your project managers or team managers, it is quite likely that you will see the following pattern. Managers assign tasks to team members and give them directions about how to work with their tasks. Managers follow up every day to make sure that progress is being made. If team members have any doubts, they will seek advice from their manager, who will tell team members what to do. If you are from a culture with a flatter hierarchy, for example the U.S., Europe or Australia, you are used to more responsibility for tasks delegated to team members. In a flatter work culture, it is expected that team members on their own figure out how to solve tasks, and it is not common that team members give precise directions to other team members. Because of this difference, many expats have the initial experience that some of their Indian colleagues do not take proper responsibility for tasks. If you see this from a more neutral perspective, you could say that responsibility is dealt with differently in teams with steep or flat hierarchies, so you have to find the right balance in your case.

Communication Style

Indian communication style is softer than what we find in many western countries. "Softer style" means that Indians like to speak more about the positive side of the story than about the negative side. Another trait of this "softer style" is that Indians have ways of saying "No" that are different from what you find in most western countries. If Indian

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colleagues say that something "is going to be difficult", it most probably means "NO, that is not possible". When this softer Indian communication style is combined with hierarchy in Indian organizations, it is enhanced. This means that it is even more difficult for your Indian colleagues to reply negatively to you if you are their superior. And as mentioned earlier, expats and their colleagues at home are often looked upon as superiors in Indian organizations since you are in many cases either clients or from HQ. On the other hand, if communication goes downwards through the hierarchy, it could be much more difficult and direct than if it goes upwards through the system.

Motivational Factors and Competition

Getting used to working for a new company - especially a company with a completely different hierarchy and communication style - can take some time. Therefore, this section is concerned with how you can motivate and retain your Indian colleagues so that they stay in your company and are able bring about some value. You might be surprised to discover that the first and foremost motivational factor in this country is money - combined with the wish to earn better titles and better career opportunities, which will again facilitate earning more money. This might sound cynical if you are from a western country. However, this focus on money has to be understood in an Indian context. India has no real social support, and most good schools, colleges and universities are private and expensive. In many cases, the best hospitals and doctors are private as well. Therefore, for your Indian colleagues, money means security - not just for your colleagues but for their entire families. Besides money, other motivational factors are important. For many of your colleagues, it is very motivating to visit HQ or to go abroad to work. You might also find that some of your colleagues, typically young or internationally experienced, appreciate a less hierarchical way of working.

So, what can we do?

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, your Indian office might seem like just another global office on the surface. Now we have scratched that surface and seen that there is a reality that is different from your home office. As a recap to this article, I will present some recommendations to you and other expats on how to deal with the reality under the surface:

- *India is a Continent of Contrast*, and you will find all parts of India represented in huge metros. Therefore, go into any first meeting without prejudices and be prepared to look at individuals and companies with an open mind.

- *Navigate the hierarchy:* Create an overview of the people you are working with and their levels in the company so that you know who have which authorities and who the right people are to talk to in a given situation.

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- *Use open-ended questions*: Instead of asking lots of yes/no questions, try asking more open-ended questions (wh- questions). When you use open-ended questions, you are more likely to get more information, and thus it is easier to understand answers and to avoid misunderstandings.

- *Understand the Indian No*: In your daily work, be alert to your Indian colleagues actually sending you negative messages or rejecting questions, even though they may not directly use the word "No" or the sentence "I have a problem". For example, hesitation or signs of insecurity in answers could be indicators of a "No" or a negative message.

- *Find the right mix of motivational factors*: As with anywhere else in the world, you have to know your employees to find the right incentives. It is most likely that the right incentives in your Indian organization are a mix of motivational factors from your organization AND from Indian culture. It is your job to find the right mix.

- *Build A Third Culture*: There are many different ways of doing things. One way could be the Indian way, another your company's way. Both ways function well in their own environments. In many cases, the most effective way to bridge two such different ways of working is to create A Third Culture. In order to create A Third Culture, your team needs to openly discuss different expectations of the team, possibly including communication and team roles, then together find and build up the best culture for the team.

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