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Direct and indirect communication

When it comes to communication styles, dividing lines are very clear: each side finds the other's way of communicating rather inefficient, although for different reasons.

In daily life, when talking with colleagues or friends or in training situations, I frequently observe that people struggle to imagine and understand the «why and how» of the other style. Even more difficult is trying to understand the messages sent by that style. The ultimate challenge, of course, is to adopt and practice the other style in order to communicate with the other in the most appropriate style for that person or group.

This is one of the most challenging exercises in letting go – our communication styles arise from deeply rooted dimensions of our identity and our culture.

This article will first remind us of the main differences between both styles, before focussing on the relevance of style in two dimensions of communication: questions and feedback.

This text is written to accompany relatively direct communicators in their exploration of the indirect world. To sense the indirect, to understand it and learn to practise it are essential competencies for any person wishing to work in places where the indirect style is dominant. I hope to be able to share some useful keys (lifelines) with those direct communicators who want to learn how to swim in the wide indirect ocean.

Context – both styles have deep roots

Both direct and indirect communication styles exist in all cultures and all communities. However, clear majorities will be found in different contexts.

The **direct** style consists in choosing words that faithfully express the speaker's thought. The meaning is in the word. Priority is given to precision and clarity of the message. Listening to what is said is central to understanding a direct speaker, because the message is explicit.

This style is found mainly in cultures where security and freedom of expression are relatively high, where one can express one's thought without having to face major risks. The direct style will also prevail in most contexts where autonomy and individual responsibility are highly valued.

The **indirect** style, on the other hand, gives priority to the implicit. Words do not always express the thought of the speaker literally. Words can be codes, the meaning is hidden. Attention is given to harmony, and saving face is the ultimate priority. Exploring the context in which words are spoken is central to understanding an indirect message.



The indirect style is very common in community-oriented cultures where the interdependence of all members is high, where one tries by all means not to offend others and to maintain good relations with everyone, by avoiding topics that may hurt. In a community-oriented culture that is also oppressed or under a dictatorship, communication codes will need to be twice as indirect - survival is at stake.

The indirect style will prevail in any space where insecurity, oppression, and fear reign, in regions where one learns to weigh every word uttered. During the Second World War, in the French Resistance, people who would be quite direct in a normal situation had to develop indirect skills and secret codes to protect each other in their communication. Still, even in times of peace and prosperity, many groups feel most comfortable communicating in indirect styles.

Two keys for navigating the indirect world

Relationships

Questions, answers, feedbacks – from a direct communicator's perspective, none of these will be obvious in indirect contexts. All communications must be viewed in light of relational loops. All words and glances must be decoded, searching for hidden and coded messages.

Community life is made of belongings, interdependencies, hierarchical systems, formal and informal leadership patterns, of tasks, responsibilities, and a few rights. Any person belonging to – or wishing to be integrated into a – community-oriented group will need to invest time and energy developing authentic, multiple and differentiated relationships.

Community-oriented cultures believe that «Alone I am nobody. I am only in relation to others: the son of, the sister of, the friend of, the neighbour of...»

In such a context, it is impossible to obtain anything without relationships, without taking time to know and be known. An initial period of relationship-building is central and forms the basis for any future collaboration. It allows everyone to start understanding that which is not visible at first sight.

Trust

One can never stress enough the importance of building a relationship – and of nourishing it – in an indirect context.

In a sensitive context, the quality of the answers each person receives is always a measure of the trust and the relationships they have established.



In the field of international cooperation, especially in dangerous contexts, it is also sometimes necessary to hold back certain intentions or certain pieces of information, to avoid putting oneself or others in danger. In situations where words can be a source of danger, silence can protect. Expatriates in the fields of international cooperation, who are frequently used to practising the direct style, can – and really must – learn not to insist, learn to accept and respect silence. In such situations, a lack of information, a lack of clear answers should not be taken personally. It needs to be put in a broader perspective of extreme caution.

Trust is not automatically granted, it needs to be earned. Someone who has never had to be careful about his or her words for security or survival reasons may have trouble with this. That person will need to become aware of the impact of his or her statements and questions. At the early stages of collaboration, that person will receive limited trust. Trust can grow as collaboration develops, if relevant people come to believe the person can be trusted.

Questions

- *«I have been here for two years now. Nobody has ever asked me the simplest question.»*
- *«My question seemed very open and neutral to me, but my colleagues reacted in a very offended way.»*

These observations and experiences of disorientation illustrate what is at stake with regard to questions in a mainly indirect context. For the person coming from a mainly direct context, it is like learning a new language.

Recognizing questions... in the indirect world

Persons who prefer the indirect communication style tend to make their questions invisible. Indeed, indirect questions are rarely formulated as questions in the usual sense of the word, and they are not ended by a question mark. Questions tend to come in the form of **statements or comments linked to the topic one wishes to explore**. The speaker then observes the responses of the other person, and gets the answer to a question that was not asked...



* *In order to know what a colleague thinks about the present government of his/her country, one might begin a conversation about politics leading to the following statement: «One doesn't hear much about your country in the international media. Most people know more about your country's tourist destinations than about its political system. I have to admit that was true for me too. I had to do some research before coming.» For an indirect speaker, this is recognized as a question, while a direct person would expect you to ask «What do you think of your present government?»*

Talking about **situations similar** to the one you have questions about is another well known indirect strategy. The interlocutor's response might contain an interesting answer to the question you have not expressed as such.

* *An indirect communicator who wants to know whether it is possible to give feedback to superiors will find the appropriate occasion and mention a situation linked to her/his question: «When I was in Thailand, I observed that employees never gave feedback to their superiors.» Any indirect person would immediately know that this comment is actually a question about the feedback rules in their own context. They would also know whether it is safe to start answering, or whether the necessary level of trust is insufficient.» A direct person may not even think that giving feedback to a superior may be an issue, and if at all, would simply ask: «Can you give feedback to your superiors?»*

Indirect communicators are very **observant**. They cross-check comments, attitudes, answers and behaviours, and thus get a lot of information without ever having to ask a single question. Observing nonverbal behaviour is central to the indirect communicator's strategy to «ask questions»...without asking them.

* *«These two colleagues used to take coffee together every day. In recent times, they continue collaborating, but they stopped taking coffee together. In the evening they go home earlier, or tend to hang out with other persons.» An indirect person will have observed a deterioration of the relationship, and will refrain from asking intrusive questions... at least not to the two persons involved.*

If one needs to talk about a sensitive issue, one should do so in a **discreet** place, and never in public. Most frequently one would ask a third person to look for the information.

Finally, let us remind the more direct persons that their indirect friends or colleagues will never perceive a question as a simple question. Indirect communicators will always look for a hidden meaning, a coded message. Sometimes even when the direct person had none.



Feedback

- *«People never give me feedback»*
- *«My local colleagues never give me positive feedback»*
- *«How to give feedback without harming the relationship?»*
- *«Does one need to be careful even with positive feedback?»*

The verbal feedback culture, as it is practiced in some cultural or professional spaces, is neither universal nor perceived positively, nor is it considered desirable everywhere.

In multicultural contexts, handling feedback is closely linked to direct or indirect communication styles. Whilst more direct cultures value direct feedback, be it positive or negative, and perceive it as a sign of trust, respect and development, more indirect cultures always value relationship, interdependence and harmony far more highly. For indirect cultures, to single out a member of a group by giving him or her positive or negative feedback in front of the other members can create problems for the person and for the rest of the group, at the levels of relationship, function, and place in the system. If in addition the context is dangerous and insecurity high, none will want to be singled out and made visible by feedback. The famous Japanese proverb reminds us that «The nail that sticks up gets hammered down.»

There is no simple recipe and no absolute solution for feedback issues. These are simply a few useful dimensions to consider surrounding feedback in indirect contexts.

Giving indirect feedback

Giving positive indirect feedback

Direct communicators struggle to understand that positive feedback may put someone in a very uncomfortable position. In a community-oriented context, positive feedback given in very expressive ways may indeed be a source of embarrassment for the recipient.

In many indirect cultures, positive feedback can give rise to **serious worry**: «If you give me positive feedback on my work, I know that you expect a favour from me, or that you'll give me a more difficult task. Even worse, I may understand that you are jealous and that your feedback is to be read as a warning...» (A colleague from Central Europe)



In indirect cultures, giving positive feedback to one person, especially in front of his or her colleagues, is usually inappropriate. Indeed, the latter may interpret such feedback as a hidden criticism of their own work, because they have not been praised the same way. Thus, positive feedback should be given carefully, **discreetly**, and without putting anyone in an embarrassing situation. Actually, the most appreciated feedback in indirect contexts is **collective feedback**, given to the whole team or to the whole project.

Finally, in many indirect cultures, positive feedback is not given verbally. Everybody observes and decodes **non-verbal communication**, which is read as feedback: a warmer hand-shake, a smile, interest for the well-being of the family, sensitive tasks given to one person rather than to another,... all these are recognized as positive feedback.

Giving negative indirect feedback

In community-oriented cultures, where relationships, harmony and relational security are the highest priority, giving explicit negative feedback about a task that was not well done or a responsibility that was not carried out properly may be uncomfortable and even dangerous for all involved.

To prevent this, one usually needs to choose one of the following strategies: group feedback, expressing a wish, anonymous feedback, intervention by a third person, and encouraging the person rather than criticising him or her.

In indirect contexts, sensitive feedback will be offered more easily if people have the opportunity to consult in small groups, and then to give **group feedback**. Thus no one needs to be named personally. In indirect contexts, this is by far the best way to obtain global feedback on a training session, a workshop, or the management of a project.

Indirect feedback comes more frequently in the form of **wishes and requests** than in the form of criticism or negative feedback. It is thus essential to create spaces and structures where such wishes may be expressed.

** A bold direct communicator might say to the boss: «I have told you several times that due to heavy traffic in the morning, I can't guarantee I will arrive at work on time. If I could start later or could work from home, it would solve many problems». A more indirect approach for expressing a request could be: «A colleague from another institution told me they have introduced the possibility of working from home in certain circumstances. This possibility has solved many challenges linked to heavy traffic».*

** Rather than telling a colleague «You are too noisy at the office, I can't focus», one might request the following from one's superior: «In order to be able to focus well on my task, I would appreciate being able to work from a home-office or to have an office for myself».*



In indirect contexts, feedback is also easier to handle if it is **anonymous**. A letterbox where people deposit feedback can encourage this anonymous endeavour. Anonymous feedback forms fulfill the same goal.

An indirect person will most frequently ask a **third person** to express feedback, preferences or hurt feelings. Direct communicators often dislike this practice, but indirect communicators appreciate the face saving aspect of what they see as the courageous act of giving feedback. If necessary, the messenger can go back and forth between those involved, until the relationship has found new stability.

In indirect contexts, delicate feedback will frequently be offered in the form of **encouragement** to pursue the effort or valuing the efforts invested in the task. «I can see that you have worked a lot» or «thank you for your hard work». The accent will be put on the effort invested rather than on what is lacking. Sometimes one would not even mention a poorly carried out task. The people in charge will simply know they need to give a more appropriate or less difficult task next time. And the person will be able to read the message.

In situations of feedback, a person needs to ask herself or himself the following questions: «Am I able to adapt my feedback message to the style of the receiver? Am I able to express my thoughts and emotions in order to get as close as possible to the way that is most helpful for him or her?» These are first steps in developing new competencies...

Decoding indirect feedback

The strategies discussed above are also relevant for receiving and decoding indirect feedback. This time, what is at stake is not to be able to practice them, but to be able to read them, to decode them. Reading between the lines plus decoding images, metaphors, and proverbs are essential to understanding indirect feedback, especially because the last three approaches are used often to give feedback indirectly. Finally, much can also be gained by cultivating the ability to read nonverbal messages.

What message does the boss send to the employee by saying: «*Alone one goes fast. Together one goes far*»? or «*For the body to be quiet, the head needs to be quiet*»? or also «*A rolling stone gathers no moss*»? The following paragraph will give us some clues.

«*Alone one goes fast. Together one goes far*» may suggest that the person functions too much as an individualist, and needs to improve his or her team spirit.

«*For the body to be quiet, the head needs to be quiet*» can remind a leader of the importance of not getting emotional in front of the team, to avoid destabilising them.



«*A rolling stone gathers no moss*» may mean that the person is too agitated, not taking time to be quiet and listen, learn and develop. In another context, the same proverb may be heard as an advice to get moving, to get away from old habits that may stifle and rigidify a person.

It is thus essential to be able to decode proverbs and metaphors and, if necessary, to get help with doing so... but not from the person who sent the message.

Decoding positive indirect feedback

For persons used to the direct style, decoding indirect verbal feedback is challenging enough. Even more difficult, however, is learning to decode nonverbal feedback, when verbal feedback is absent. In this case, one needs to develop a greater sensitivity to the behaviour of a person, to learn to interpret his or her gestures, attitudes, tones of voice, and to draw appropriate conclusions.

- * To be invited to a family celebration or ceremony is positive feedback.
- * The fact that a colleague agrees to render a service or to do an extra piece of additional work is positive feedback.
- * A team or a colleague who work with enthusiasm is positive feedback.
- * To be assigned a complex and sensitive task is positive feedback.

Decoding negative indirect feedback

As the following examples show, negative indirect feedback is often expressed in nonverbal ways:

- * A greater relational distance, expressed by greater physical distance. Someone might sit further away than usual, take another car, or no longer have time for a cup of coffee or for conversation.
- * When the other is suddenly in a hurry and no longer has any time for you.
- * When people don't come to the meetings you call or the trainings you run, and don't give the slightest sign of apology.
- * **Silence** is a common strategy for giving negative feedback indirectly.
- * When you are not consulted any longer on topics in which you have expertise.
- * Answers like «I don't know» or «ask somebody else who is more competent than me».



- * A colleague stops talking suddenly or suspends a dialogue.
- * The use of **generalisations** or stereotypes can be an indirect strategy to give feedback.
- * Expressions like «the Europeans» or «you the Whites, you the Blacks...» should be translated as «you»!

Last but not least, when work is very demanding or takes place in very tense, oppressive, or dangerous contexts, one may end up only seeing the negative. Even indirect communicators are at risk of falling in that trap, using negative language to express their own exhaustion, disorientation or suffering. People no longer take time to say positive things to each other, they forget to do so, and everyone is caught in a vicious negative cycle. At this stage, it is essential to become aware of the dynamic and to take care of oneself and the team.

Conclusion

For direct communicators, learning to navigate an indirect space is like learning a new language. It requires interest, curiosity, patience, and hard work. Resource persons from the host culture, or people who know the host culture well, and with whom one can explore various aspects of indirect culture become very precious. Project coordinators and intercultural trainers or coaches are also valuable resources on the journey.

The effort is worth it. The richness one discovers is infinite and unexpected. Communication styles reveal the soul of a people, their priorities and challenges, their identity. Being able to take it all into account when talking, listening, communicating, allows us to meet the other in his or her full humanity and to rediscover ourselves in the process.

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