

visible|leaders

# Communications Across Cultures

Flexibility and integrity in an Asian context

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Over the last couple of years we have witnessed an increased demand from Asian leaders to help them develop a communications style that can be effective across the globe. In contrast we have no shortage of experience in helping Western leaders operate more effectively in an Asian context.

In this paper we talk to two of our associates, Anita Lo and Sally Dellow who, between them, have decades of experience of consulting with leaders on these challenges.

Colin Hatfield, Founder of Visible Leaders, provides additional insights and commentary.

## Flexibility and integrity in an Asian context



Anita Lo

**Anita Lo's** focus is on expanding people's capacity for leadership, insight and contributions. Anita has a unique combination of experience and skills in coaching, facilitation, assessment, learning design and HR consulting, gained through her various HR and leadership development roles with the Asian conglomerate, the Jardine Matheson Group.

Prior to that, she spent a number of years in marketing and management roles relating to China trade. Anita is fluent in English, Cantonese and Mandarin. She has in-depth experience of multinational organisations in the Greater China region.



Sally Dellow

**Sally Dellow** is an executive coach, group learning facilitator and professional roleplayer for corporate clients. Her focus is on enhancing personal and professional effectiveness for leaders (established and emerging) and senior managers. She has a particular interest in women in leadership and in the management challenges specific to intercultural teams.

Hong Kong-based, she grew up internationally, and has worked throughout Asia for more than 20 years. She is also a professional actress, and a published poet.



Colin Hatfield

**Colin Hatfield** began his career at Imagination, before leaving to set up In Real Life, a pioneering experiential agency. After selling the agency to Chime Communications, he began to explore the world of corporate communication. Colin established Visible Leaders in 2010 to focus on this aspect of communications and works with leadership teams from organisations around the world.

He specialises in helping leaders to develop the leadership narrative, for themselves, their team and their organisation.

## The heart of our conversation

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As more of us do business in Asia, we need to think harder about the cultural challenges that this brings with it. This is especially key when it comes to leaders and their personal communications. Poor cross-cultural communications can create disengagement, confusion and at its worst, resentment and anxiety on both sides.

In this article, we explore some of the underlying issues and seek advice on how best to tackle such challenges.

The economies of Asia embrace some 4.4 billion people (60% of the world's population). Asia is the fastest growing economic region, with China and India now being the first and third largest economies in the world, respectively. As globalisation accelerates, we are seeing more and more leaders with purely Western experience arriving in Asia, and facing communications challenges in unfamiliar territories.

In parallel, as Asian multinationals expand and grow, we are seeing an increase in capital and human flows from East to West. More and more successful Asian leaders are now managing teams where their own culture may be in the minority. They face the corresponding communications challenge: how best to adapt an Asian communications style to predominantly Western audiences.

### Leaders and communications

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These issues are not only impacting the classic communications-rich functions (CEO, COO, CMO). Today, functions that in the past were seen as primarily technical (such as IT and Accounting) are having to think harder about communications effectiveness as part of leadership. Colin Hatfield summarises: “No function is immune from this trend. Today, all senior, global leaders are expected to be accomplished communicators”.

“What we are seeing as individuals move into genuine leadership roles, is that they often

need help with the communications transition involved. In more operational roles, they may only be involved in communications that are about explaining and informing. As leaders and strategists, they need new skills, such as listening, influencing, persuading and relationship-building”.

These skills are hard to master in a single culture. When operating cross-culturally they are more challenging still.

## The shock of the strange and the new

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Around the world, communications norms vary. What works in some cultures works less well in others. Only a naïve or arrogant leader would lay this variability aside, and not consider its impact.

Sally Dellow told us: “Different individuals respond differently to landing in a foreign culture. Some are curious, open and very keen to learn. Others are anxious, and close down. But what matters most is that we don’t allow ourselves to view what we encounter through our own cultural lens. That’s the biggest trap, and the one to avoid most”.

Anita Lo agrees: “Speak less, listen more, and ask lots of questions,” she says. She feels that it is fine to admit that you don’t know “how things are done here”, provided that the person making this statement is sincere. “If leaders use naivety as a tactic, it doesn’t work. People tune in to sincerity, and trust is built that way”.

Sally adds: “If people aren’t getting your message, or responding in the way you think is right or normal, then focus on yourself, and ask yourself what you need to do to adapt your message or your style to suit them”.

Anita believes that what the culture receiving you notices most is how much you genuinely pay attention to them. “Obviously, those who take the trouble to learn our language are much respected and admired. But anything that gets across the idea that you care about where you are is helpful. People like leaders to be interested in them”. Anita went on to give examples of Europeans who had lived in Hong Kong for up to 30 years, without learning the language at all. Her view was that this sends a signal – and that this signal is not positive.

## Clarity versus flexibility

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Both Sally and Anita agreed that many Asian countries share communications traits that put them at odds with many Western cultures. For example, Western business cultures tend to use written communications to create quasi-legal clarity, and as a driver of efficiency. This is especially true of the US, and the UK. In contrast, China, Japan, India and South Korea tend to employ more nuanced, layered communication styles in which “reading between the lines” is normal, and is used as a way to avoid conflict or to avoid losing face. A leader working in these cultures may need to commit less to the written word and email, especially in sensitive situations.

Anita warned that the issues in play here are often misunderstood. “The notion of flexibility is often read negatively as vagueness,” she said. “But, especially on mainland China, being too clear is not always seen as a good thing, as it makes it more difficult to avoid conflict by subtly shifting position later”. She links this to a broader point about trust-building: “In China, trust is built much more by relationships than by contracts”. This inevitably affects how business deals are discussed and negotiated.

## Directness vs harmony

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When it comes to delivering opinions or negative feedback (for example, in a performance review), Western directness can be a risk. In many Asian countries, retaining harmonious relations is paramount, and directness can be decoded as insensitivity or even rudeness. This risk is exacerbated in super-hierarchical cultures such as Japan, Korea and China, where directness is even less acceptable when speaking to a superior, or to a leader in front of their direct reports.

Colin highlights that much of what we have been laying out so far works both ways. “If a leader heading East needs to think hard about how to be more flexible and less direct, so a leader heading West from Asia needs to think about the opposite. They may need to be more to the point than they otherwise would be”.

Sally agrees that such challenges work both ways. “Communicating cross-culturally is a real skill. But you have to be careful not get stuck between two cultures. I had a Thai client who was promoted into a leadership role in Switzerland. He did his best to bridge both cultures. But, the feedback was that he was too outspoken and aggressive for his Thai

colleagues and too reticent when in Switzerland. He had tuned in to both cultures, but become somehow stuck on the cultural bridge. He had to learn to make a more conscious effort to switch between the two cultures. This is not easy. But, it’s what the expert cross-cultural communicator does”.

Colin Hatfield adds: “There is another point here, for the Asian leader in a multinational with an HQ in the West. Here, the corporate communications culture will naturally feel Western. It may be flat, open, transparent, challenging and quite direct. All of which is at odds with the traditional Asian communications style, which tends to be more hierarchical, more back-room and more about private negotiation and consensus building. In this situation, the individual leader needs to think really carefully about how to adapt to the corporate culture, whilst retaining their own integrity and authenticity”. Getting this balance right is key – at a personal level.



## Reticence versus speaking up

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Sally highlighted another oft-quoted Asian trait: reticence in meetings. She accepts the stereotype, but believes that the reasons for it are often misunderstood:

“There is so much going on here. For a start, in many Asian cultures, it is rude to cut across or interrupt. They encourage a type of deference that means that people wait to be asked, rather than volunteer their views. If the person chairing the meeting doesn’t understand this, and doesn’t design a process to take account of this, intelligent, valuable contributions are lost – to the detriment of the organisation and the leader”.

As Sally points out, most leaders from the West come from “Speak Up” cultures. We are not familiar with “Listen Up” cultures, where silences in conversation are longer, and where social rituals reinforce deference, waiting to be asked to contribute and only speaking up after much thought. Anita adds:

“Historically, the Chinese education system has tended to reinforce this, with students trained to speak only when very sure, and not to share rough thoughts or half ideas”.

Colin adds: “The Chinese are not reticent

because they are shy, but because speaking out means something very different in China from what it might mean in, say, The Netherlands or the USA”.

Unsurprisingly, a brainstorming session feels psychologically very different for a Chinese team member compared to their Western colleague sitting alongside them. Anita says: “Most Chinese people have a voice inside their head telling them not to be too playful, and to remain serious most of the time”. This affects the way that they relate to creative workshops and brainstorming. They are likely to need more reassurance, and a more explicit invitation to participate, without risk.

More generally, the Asian meeting is a quieter more deferential space than its Western equivalent. For those facilitating meetings in Asia, this may call for different tactics to encourage participation by all. Sally Dellow suggests: “Those leading meetings may need to break the group into pairs or trios to encourage involvement. Silent brainstorming on to Post-it notes may also work better than free-for-all discussion and flip charts. The Chair may need to work harder to make it clear that participation is expected from all, and to ensure that everyone has a voice and feels safe offering their views”.

## Language, meetings and set pieces

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Colin Hatfield believes that leaders need to think very hard about the language skills of those they are interacting with. “Language can create barriers and intimidation, if those in positions of strength don’t properly consider those with less command of the language being spoken in the meeting”.

Sally agrees: “So often, those of us who speak English as a first language forget just how much harder it is to express yourself in a second language. If leaders really want feedback from those speaking English as a second language, they need to work far harder at making those people feel comfortable, and able to offer ideas, in a safe space, where their contribution is encouraged. It’s no good saying that they didn’t speak up. That’s looking at the issue through a Western, English-speaking lens. That’s blaming the individual when the culture and the communications process needs looking at”.

Much of what we have touched on so far pictures the leader in a meeting, as chair or as a facilitator, enabling healthy communications across cultural divides.

But leadership communications also often involves a solo set piece, such as a speech or a presentation. Here, questions of language and style arise more starkly. We asked Sally whether or not leaders should adapt their language for those speaking English as a second language in Asia. The broad answer was “yes”, provided the adaptation does not stray into mimicry or obvious dumbing down. “By all means, speak in shorter, clearer sentences, avoiding complexities and metaphors that don’t translate. That kind of linguistic flexibility makes sense,” she said. “But, do be careful. If you go too far it can be patronising, or even offensive”.

## Universal communications traits

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We asked both Anita and Sally if they felt that, despite the need to nuance your approach to different cultures, there were still some aspects of leadership communication which were universal, and therefore applicable to all cultures, not only in Asia, but globally.

Anita told us: “Showing that you care and that you are listening works everywhere, provided, of course, that you are sincere. As a leader, your good intentions matter very much, and I believe that whatever language you speak, people can – and will – read these”. Sally touched on similar themes: “Generally, people will respond to enquiry over advocacy, and a genuine, authentic desire to listen”.

Anita added that “not being too opinionated” was also a universal communications trait that would play as a positive, universally, across cultures. This left us, at Visible Leaders, wondering. Through the lens of China and Hong Kong, this makes perfect sense. But what would a New Yorker or a Londoner have to say about such a statement? We suspect that there may be differing views here, driven by the culture of the person expressing the opinion (Vive La Difference, by the way!)

## When you get it right

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For those who take the time to study and practice cross-cultural communications the rewards are huge. As Anita said: “Leadership is about making good decisions, which depend upon getting good information and intelligence from those around you. Without good cross-cultural communications skills, you just won’t get that input. And, worse, you won’t know what it is that you don’t know”.

For Anita, the heart of the matter is almost spiritual: “It’s about having good intentions. If people can see that you are sincere and that you respect the intellects of those around you, regardless of cultural differences, you will take people with you. You need to operate for impact, and check that you have made that impact, with the local people whose input or support you are seeking”. She adds: “It takes work. You have to invest. There are no shortcuts”.

Accomplished cross-cultural communicators also pay attention to communications formats and processes. They understand that a process can be culturally skewed. As Sally says: “The telecon that suits those in New York and Frankfurt but that has the Asian team up until midnight is just the most

obvious example. Who has their best ideas when they are badly fatigued? Who can offer best advice when they have been working for 16 hours already?” She feels strongly that multinational leaders need to think harder about this, and about ways to ensure that communications are designed to suit all cultures, not just the head office in the West. “The leader is key here. They set the example. They create and reinforce the norms”.

Sally highlights that what the strong leader-communicator does is “re-balance the room”. She explains: “the great leader creates a psychologically safe space, where all cultures can contribute. They ensure that all cultures get equal attention and that there are no smart people staying silent, because of a cultural or habitual reticence”.

**Even in this brief article, this much is clear: the leader who takes cross-cultural communications seriously will be infinitely more effective than the leader who overlooks this increasingly important subject.**

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*“Visible Leaders is dedicated to building up a unique network of global associates with expertise in every aspect of leadership communication. In our White Papers we aim to share experience, learning and insights that have helped us to develop our thinking and be valuable to our clients.”*

– **Colin Hatfield**

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