



Psychologist  
Meme Rhee  
helps AAs say  
exactly what  
they mean.

# Say What?

STORY Meme Rhee, MA

**An American male complains to his Korean girlfriend that she never says thank you whenever he buys her dinner. She says nothing. He then gets annoyed that she does not verbally express her feelings.**

**An exceedingly hard-working and effective Indian middle manager is astounded when his supervisor gives him his annual review, advising him that he should be more autonomous in his decision-making. He is also bowled over that he is not offered a raise.**

**An Asian American subordinate, invited for the first time to an executive meeting, enthusiastically suggests how a few of the executive decisions can achieve greater success if they were implemented differently. He begins to squirm in his seat as he notices his Asian superiors avoiding eye contact with him in the deathly silence that pervades the room.**

**An American businessman becomes incensed with a prospective Korean partner who has not fulfilled all of his verbal promises.**

As a psychotherapist, I have had the rare privilege of listening to the heartfelt and authentic communications of my Asian patients. And as a business consultant, I have also been privy to the complaints of both Asian and non-Asian clients who misconstrued the communication of the other. Because language is an organizer of cultural experience, mending the breakdown in communication that so often occurs between and among Asians

and non-Asians demands a greater awareness of the cultural platform from which people express themselves.

One of the most salient features across all Asian cultures is the high priority that is placed on cultivating and building harmonious relationships, as well as preserving the hierarchy that so often defines the relationship. In contrast, Western values of individuation, assertiveness and self-reliance provide a more comfortable platform for self-expression. One can easily see how communication between two people coming from such divergent perspectives can be easily misunderstood and engender unwanted tension. One specific conflict that springs to mind involves a young Asian American rookie, Ned, who, wanting to impress his Japanese superiors, enthusiastically gave them his personal opinions about a project. It was Ned's first invitation to an executive meeting. Having been born and raised in the States, Ned was flabbergasted when his very logical, sound suggestions were disregarded and he was treated like a social outcast. Ned did not take into consideration that among traditional Japanese, communication places a much greater priority in preserving the esteem of the superiors, than in exemplifying proactive, self-directive traits in which many Westerners would place great value.

In fact, a common complaint from American executives is the lack of such self-assertiveness from their Asian employees. In the case of Indian-born Samir, who was putting in 60-hour weeks as a manager in a small manufacturing firm, he could not believe that with the winning results his department produced, his superior would complain about his lack of autonomy. In his culture, to be autonomous and not defer to his supervisor for approval of decisions would be considered disrespectful. Moreover, in relationships involving professional hierarchy, while the superior has greater entitlements to respect and deferential treatment, s/he also has the greater responsibility of nurturing and mentoring the subordinate. In that sense, subordinates often surrender themselves to their bosses whose job is to look out for them. Samir had an expectation that his boss would bat for him regarding the raise without him having to ask for it.

One of the most difficult things to teach Westerners is the implicit expectations that are built into relationships. In the case of the American, Greg, who complained to his Korean girlfriend, Young Mi, about her not ever thanking him for dinner, she was genuinely confounded that he would expect such a thing. Such explicit interchanges are communicated with outsiders, not intimate partners. In her culture, to thank him is almost an insult in that it places her outside of his inner circle. Young Mi also found his need for her to verbally express her wants and needs to be simple-minded. Young Mi perceives one of her personal duties in the relationship is to empathically intuit and fulfill her partner's needs so that he rarely has to ask her for anything — a talent she internalized in observing her mother's attitude toward her father while growing up. For Greg, who comes from a verbally expressive family, the insecurity of trying to figure out what she's feeling or wants is frustrating.

The complexity of communication between and among inner and outer circles of Asian relationships often creates confusion in that many Asians present two distinct identities: a highly private self accessible only to those in his/her inner circle, and a public self who follows the proper social decorum to outsiders. Westerners, who generally are given the liberty and comfort of presenting their private self to the public, are often less comfortable and more resistant to the chameleon that exists in many Asians. In fact, a big complaint many of my American clients have about their Asian business partners is the inscrutability of their real feelings. Because many Asians often seem so agreeable and less explicitly opinionated in their communication, less culturally aware Americans may find themselves constantly second-guessing how the other feels, and as a result have difficulty trusting the other. However, for such Asians, preserving harmony in a relationship requires one to act with self-effacing deference, an age-old Confucianistic virtue which holds greater priority over speaking truthfully.

One of my clients, Michael, a Hollywood movie producer, found himself continually frustrated in his business dealings in Korea. "They are constantly promising to do X, Y and Z and none of their promises ever materialize!" he complained. While

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flowery exchanges among Korean businesspersons is a common way of building rapport, unless such promises are in writing, the obligation to fulfill them is not always that concrete. To Michael, such behavior makes him question their integrity. But to the Koreans, verbal communication is one of many components of relationship-building that, over time, as promises get fulfilled on each side, may eventually bring Michael closer to the inner circle.

In considering the variety of communication styles that exist across cultures, entering a dialogue with cultural sensitivity and awareness can not only greatly enhance how effectively you communicate, but also put into proper perspective the expectations you might have as a result of that communication. Effective cross-cultural communication can be defined as the ability to convey an idea, thought or feeling that stays within the proper boundaries that exists in each culture, and can be comprehended/received without too much disturbance to the harmony. Some

- 1.** strategies to keep in mind: Be mindful of the appropriate place and time. For Asians, relationship building demands an investment of time through social interactions like lunches and dinners, exchanging introductions and favors. Often, the efficiency with which many Americans communicate their wants and needs can be
- 2.** perceived as hasty. Keep in mind your place in the relationship. Most Asian relationships (in both the familial and professional realms) rely on a very specific pecking order. And while you may want to prove a point that you are the person's equal, if the other person does not feel this way, your objectives in communication may not be met. A Korean American fresh out of college and steeped in feminist ideals was invited to have Korean barbecue with a group of older male associates. The men at the table were given a bib while she was given the apron. In protest, she let the meat on the table burn so that they were forced to do the cooking. And when she attempted to contribute to the check at the end of the meal, the oldest male in the group was visibly miffed. Factor in what has greater priority for you: proving a point or getting what you want.
- 3.** Try to be sensitive to cultural values and attempt to notice when you're projecting your own. In the situation between Greg and Young Mi, when Greg's friends and their wives came over for dinner, the women sat together and made a comment to Young Mi that she should make Greg clean up since she had done all the cooking. Even if Young Mi may have felt this way, she certainly would not shame Greg by admitting such a thing to this group of outsiders. "Oh, it's no trouble," she replied awkwardly to the pitying faces that were so ready to project onto
- 4.** her their feminist values in which she had no interest. Bilingual persons need to be mindful not only of literal translations of common expressions, but also how grammatical constructions alter the impact of a communication. For example, "Have you eaten yet?" is a common greeting in a number of Asian countries, but can be inappropriate and misconstrued as an invitation to lunch in a Western environment. In addition, in Chinese sentence constructions, the reasons for a request will be explicitly stated before the request is made. The "because/so" sentence construction prompted one Chinese administrative assistant to initiate her request for a day off by giving her boss a number of reasons as to why she needed the day off before actually asking
- 5.** for it, causing him to snap at her to "get to the point." When in doubt about how to properly communicate, you can never fail by asking for guidance. The fact that you are mindful of the other's cultural difference speaks volumes about your sensitivity and curiosity, and will usually earn you the other's

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