



# EAST ASIAN/MAINSTREAM COMMUNICATION/ BEHAVIOR STYLES

## OTHER MISMATCHES

### BIAS AGAINST THE EAST ASIAN COMMUNICATION STYLE

At one newspaper a white male editor said, "I need someone who can be aggressive, and get the story in time for me to meet deadlines. A quiet Asian woman just doesn't fit the bill." I asked an Asian woman in the room at the time if she could get the story that was being discussed. She replied, "My aunt knows people in that neighborhood. I could find out what happened very quickly." The point was powerful: there is more than one way to meet business goals. Newsrooms generally reflect an U.S. mainstream cultural bias: favoring individuals that are verbal, visible, assertive, and need to be reminded from time to time that Asian news reporters also meet deadlines and Asian newspapers also come out on time.

With respect to differences in communication style, the U.S. Mainstream pattern emphasizes, "Be explicit! Say what you mean!" The East Asian communication style emphasizes, "Go deep! Try to figure out what is meant!" These styles conflict when East Asians "read" more things into what is being said than what the speaker meant, or conversely, "say less" than what they mean, expecting the listener to "figure it out." East Asians call this style of communication "stomach talk." For example, our colleague Adrian Chan told of an Asian woman who, approaching one of her work cohorts, said, "I have a letter that has to go to our downtown office"--she knew that the white woman drove by the office on her way home, but didn't want to ask a favor directly. The white woman commented on the literal meaning of what was said, by responding, "Why don't you just fax it?" She missed the indirect suggestion: the Asian woman was making a request to have it delivered personally. The Asian woman also did not want to remind the CWW that she had done her three favors the week before, so the CWW, in effect, "owed" her.

A similar "read" is necessary when an East Asian woman or Latina comes to the boss's office. What is implied by that action, but not made explicit, is that it has taken a lot of courage and trust and many



sleepless nights for the East Asian woman to make this kind of move. If the boss is a CWW who doesn't know how difficult it was for the Latina or East Asian woman to come in, she may too quickly dismiss what may initially sound like a small issue, but is really just the tip of an iceberg.

## DISCOURSE STYLES

A South Asian woman started to share with a CWW, "My daughter is in school at Washington University, in St. Louis." The CWW said, "Oh, my daughter is in school at Purdue." The South Asian woman wondered why she didn't ask more questions about her family before changing the topic to talk about her own family.