



Challenges Indian Offshore Teams Face in Working with Americans

by Karine Schomer

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As the foremost “hot spot” for America’s offshoring and offshore outsourcing of technology and business services functions today, India presents an important case study of differences in business culture. In the course of years of giving seminars to both American and Indian teams working together, I have found recurring themes and incidents that point to underlying cross-cultural differences in mindset, values and approach to business interactions.

Once you get past the more obvious mutual adjustment issues of time zones, logistics, work and holiday schedules, accents, names and language (American vs. Indian English), there are five elements of American business culture that pose special challenges for Indian teams interacting with their American counterparts — whether in the ITO, BPO or call center environment.

1. Mindset about Management Hierarchy

In American business culture, rank and title aren’t as important as they are in India. Hierarchical forms of behavior are frowned upon. The expectation is that subordinates will speak up, offer suggestions, push back and take initiative rather than just do what they’re told. Decisions tend to be less top-down, authority is more delegated, and managers expect team members to take responsibility and assume ownership of results.

2. Attitudes Towards Appointments and Deadlines

For Americans, strict adherence to time commitments is seen as a basic principle of professionalism and courteous behavior. Because everything tends to be strictly scheduled, delays in one appointment or deadline can have a serious ripple effect on a colleague or customer’s other work commitments. The more flexible and open-ended approach to time of Indian business culture can create tensions and unfavorable impressions on American counterparts.

3. Meaning of Agreements and Commitments

Americans have a preference for clear, detailed agreements and are uneasy with vague expressions of general commitment. In business interactions, commitments are taken literally and seriously. Failure to follow through on them precisely is viewed as a sign that a person isn’t trustworthy. Indian business culture tends to view agreements more flexibly as intentions and guidelines for future action.

4. Results vs. Process Orientation

In Indian business culture, following the rules and implementing correct processes is highly valued, but in American business culture, it’s all about results. There is impatience with individuals who come across as more concerned with following established processes



correctly than with achieving the desired goal. Americans don't like to be told all the procedural reasons why something can't be or hasn't been done.

5. Directness — Especially in Addressing Disagreements

The American style of communication is characteristically direct, candid and relatively unconcerned with face-saving or the avoidance of conflict. The expectation is that questions will get answered with a clear “yes” or “no,” and that disagreements will be dealt with openly and straightforwardly, in a “tell it like it is” manner. Indians and people from other cultures that tend to avoid conflict and loss of face often find it hard to say “no” or raise problematic issues effectively with their American counterparts.

Cultural awareness and the ability to adapt effectively to another culture's way of doing things are complex skills — whether you're a programmer in Bangalore or a project leader in Sunnyvale. Everyone tends to take their own cultural ways of doing things for granted and to assume they are self-evident to others.

About the Author

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In recent years, American companies offshoring or outsourcing to India have shown growing awareness of the hidden costs of cross-cultural mismatches in work-related behaviors. They have been willing to invest in general and region-specific cross-cultural training for their onshore employees and those who are asked to travel to India. They have also learned to devise process accommodations to circumvent the negative effects of certain cultural tendencies in their off-shore teams.

What these companies seldom undertake to address directly is the need to seriously educate their offshore teams in the fundamentals of American business culture — the attitudes, thought patterns and behavior norms that Americans expect. They're missing a golden opportunity to improve the productivity and experience of their onshore-offshore teams.

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