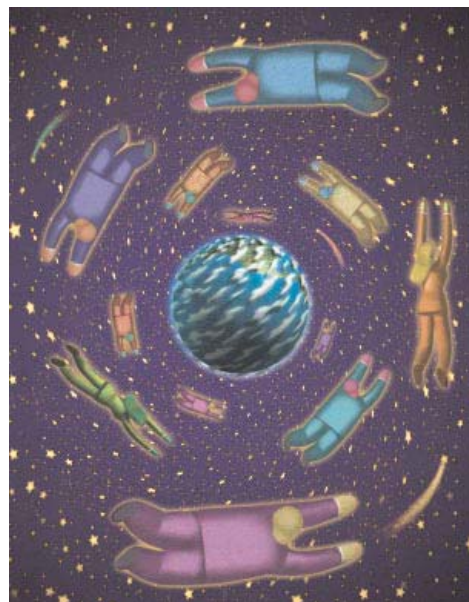


# Language, Culture, and the Drug Development Process

Ira G. Asherman



Imagine this: A teleconference in Paris where the majority of members are in the US. The connection is bad, and the Americans are using jargon and telling jokes that are not understood by their co-workers in Paris. There is a great deal of laughter in the US and, not being able to see the Parisians, the Americans have no idea of the difficulty their French counterparts are having or the damage they are doing to the overall relationship. The French stop participating. They think the Americans are rude, and the Americans think the French do not have anything to say about the issues being discussed. What has happened here is a breakdown brought about by cultural insensitivity and language differences—a state of affairs not unique to the pharmaceutical industry but very much a part of what happens every day.

Working in a multicultural environment is a distinctly challenging task. Be it leading a team, talking with a co-worker from another country, negotiating with a vendor, or meeting with the representative of a regulatory agency, cultural and language differences intrude.

American pharmaceutical managers do not fully appreciate the extent of the problem created by culture and

language, or the potential impact it may have on the drug-development process. If managers are to be effective in today's multicultural environment, they must be able to communicate and work effectively with people who represent a variety of cultures and who do not speak English as their first language. Failure to do so will compromise individual and team effectiveness. College professors Monsour Javidian and Robert House captured the essence of this issue when they pointed out that

...to be successful in dealing with people from other cultures, managers need knowledge about cultural differences and similarities among countries. They also need to understand the implications of the differences and the skills required to act and decide appropriately and in a culturally sensitive way.(1)

Failure to actively incorporate language and culture into how we work together can only serve to diminish trust, and cause confusion and misunderstanding—in the end reducing how quickly we bring new drugs to market. The remainder of this article will explore the problems brought on by differences in culture and language and make suggestions for remedying them.

## Culture

Culture affects how we communicate, how we decide to trust others, how we approach the negotiation process, how we lead or participate on teams, and how we make decisions. In short, how we interact with each other on a daily basis. Culture is basically who we are. It is imprinted upon us. As trainers Joseph J. DiStefano and Martha L. Maznevski point out:

Cultural values and norms are deeply held and almost always implicit and taken for granted. Their deepest effects on behavior and interactions are usually hidden and extremely difficult to identify and address. Cultural differences inevitably hinder smooth interactions.(2)

Typical of the dilemma posed by cultural differences for the American pharmaceutical manager is the following description from an article by Javidian and House:

To a typical American manager, effective communication means direct and explicit language. Facts and figures and rational thinking are important pillars of communication. Economic rationale and expected outcomes are the key criteria in decision making. To an American manager, communication is a means to an end. The end is deliverable results.

Others from less assertive countries ... may find it too aggressive, impolite and unfriendly to speak of explicit and ambitious expectations. They would prefer a communication process that is two way rather than one way from the manager. They prefer a highly involved dialogue with much discussion about the subject. The end of the communication process to people from such countries is not just deliverable results but better relations among the parties.(3)

The problem is not limited to dealing with individual co-workers and team work. Authors Gregory K. Stephens and Charles Greer, writing in *Organizational Dynamics* about doing business in Mexico and the impact of culture on joint ventures, found that,

...national culture has a powerful influence on people's interpretations, understandings, and assessments of those with whom they work. Cultural values can affect

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decision-making, managerial style, interpersonal trust, teamwork and the role of women in the workplace, among other issues.(4)

Because culture is so difficult to identify and understand, managers frequently fail to appreciate what is happening. Rarely is the problem discussed and understood for what it is—one of cultural differences.

### The English Language

The communication problem is not solely one of culture but is further complicated by the impact of the English language on how we communicate with each other.

Although English is the generally accepted language of this industry, it has become clear to me that, despite their proficiency in English, many non-native Americans have difficulty in their daily interactions with American co-workers. Many do not speak English as a first language, and when they do speak it, it's not the same English that Americans speak.

I typically heard during individual meetings that Americans speak too quickly, use too many sports analogies, and use far too much jargon. Trainers Mary O'Hara-Devereaux and Robert Johansen captured the essence of the issue in their book, *Global Work*, when they pointed out that,

Even with fluent second language speakers, it is easy to assume more understanding than actually exists. An exchange of words does not mean that everyone shares the same meanings and assumptions.(5)

When I asked people who did not speak English as their first language if they would ever say that they are having trouble following a conversation, most said this was something they would never do. To them, admitting they don't understand would be a sign that they don't know the subject at hand. At team meetings the problem is even more complicated, as they would have to be open in front of a large group. One woman put it this way: "I know my co-workers are losing confidence in me because I do not participate at a level they would

like or expect." Several said they often silently tried to figure out what was being said during the conversation and if that failed, would talk with a co-worker they trust (usually someone from their own country) after the meeting.

Reporting on their observations of a team meeting, DiStefano and Maznevski captured much of what I heard. They reported on the comments of one team member who did not speak English as her first language. She told the other team members,

Not one of you understands how hard it is for me to talk in meetings ... Half the time, by the time I say my piece, you think you've gone beyond the point, and my information does not get considered, and I do not absorb anything for the next minute after I've spoken. ... What frustrates me most is that the team really isn't getting my best ideas, the ones that could make a difference.(6)

Several people said to me, "The words are just not there in my English."

Today, an ever-increasing number of meetings are held via electronic media, making it even more difficult to address the dual issues of language and culture. When meetings are conducted via video or teleconference it minimizes the possibility of any feedback, and it can be nearly impossible to determine who is following the conversation and who is not. Video conferencing is only slightly better, but neither option allows us to build the type of relationship necessary for addressing complex cultural and social issues.

### Organizational Myths

Most team leaders and managers I have spoken with do not see language and culture as factors that limit organizational effectiveness. Several myths reinforce the misperception that these are issues of no consequence:

- The strong scientific and technical orientation of this industry. The culture of the pharmaceutical industry is driven by science. "If we have enough data, the data will solve the problem." Understanding cultural differences and being sensitive to language differences, while perhaps interesting, are of second-

ary importance when compared to the importance of data.

- The second complicating factor is the strong belief that, "Since we all work for the same company, we all see the world the same way." The company culture is seen as stronger than any individual country culture. As a result, "We need not concern ourselves with these issues."
- Another factor often cited is, "We all speak English, so we all understand each other—language is not a problem. Science has its own language and that is something we all understand." No distinction is drawn between those who speak English as first language and those who do not.
- The fact that no one has ever complained or indicated that he or she was having trouble and did not understand what was being said is clear evidence in the minds of many that this is not a problem.

These factors, or what we choose to call "organizational myths," limit the ability to appreciate the impact of culture and language on team and organizational effectiveness. Pharmaceutical executives tend to see the world through a very narrow, technical prism. It is difficult to admit that things are not running as smoothly as we would like. The status quo is far more comfortable.

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# Language, Culture, and the Drug Development Process, Part 2



Ira G. Asherman

This article is the second half of “Language, Culture, and the Drug Development Process.” (Part 1 appeared in the June 2005 *DIA Forum*.) In that article, I described the considerable obstacles that those who grew up in different cultures or countries and who do not speak English as their first language face when working with their American counterparts. In this article I offer a series of suggestions to address these obstacles, improve the quality of our interactions, and in the long run, enhance the drug development process.

In the workplace and elsewhere, effective communication hinges on

establishing what communication experts call “mutual knowledge.” Mutual knowledge is that which the parties to a communication share in common and know they share in common. There is mutual understanding and clarity by both parties about what is being communicated.

## Next Steps

The essential question is, “What steps can we take to ensure we have mutual understanding and that language and cultural differences do not have a negative impact on how we communicate?” If communication is to improve, Americans must first realize that although English is the generally accepted language of this industry, most non-primary English speakers do not speak it as quickly or with the same degree of understanding that we do.

There are a number of things that Americans can do to improve communication. They are:

- Encourage face-to-face meetings. As one of our clients pointed out, “They allow the opportunity to build personal relationships and friendships.” Realizing that the person you have only seen through a video screen or spoken with over the telephone, for example, has teenagers who are driving him or her crazy, or has the same hobbies and interests as you goes a long way toward making the working relationship smoother.
  - Speak slowly and enunciate. Most Americans tend to speak far too quickly for speakers who know English as a second language. This is particularly problematic at team meetings, where the conversation is usually faster, people interrupt, and more jargon is used.
  - Clarify and summarize more frequently to ensure mutual understanding.
  - Simplify sentence structure. Don’t use long, complicated sentences.
  - Don’t use jargon or colloquial expressions. They will not be understood.
- Typical confusing expressions I have heard (or used myself) include: “heard it through the grapevine,” “up to snuff,” “cut to the chase,” “lay the cards on the table,” “tackle the issue head on,” and my current favorite for confusion, “beating around the bush.”
- Don’t use sports analogies. Clients from Europe tell us over and over that Americans use sports analogies that have no meaning in Europe, particularly those drawn from baseball which is not played there. Forget “out in left field,” “touch base,” “way off base,” and “not in the ballpark.” They may work for you, but surely not for colleagues from Europe. Basketball is not much better. To say something “is a slam dunk,” or “We need a full court press” is not very helpful.
  - Don’t tell jokes. Jokes are even worse than using jargon—they just don’t translate. Jokes are culture- and language-specific. If you have to explain the joke, it is no longer a joke.
  - Don’t ask people if they understand; instead, paraphrase what you said. People will rarely admit they don’t understand. To admit that you don’t understand is a sign that you may not be competent.
  - Put it in writing after the conversation. While we believe that email is greatly overused, this is one time when it can be of enormous value. Not only does it force you to review and clarify what has been said, it allows your co-worker a second chance to review what has been discussed and agreed to.
  - Learn something about the other person’s country and culture. There may be issues unique to his or her culture that can facilitate the communication process.
  - Remember, people living in Europe are not Europeans. Europe is made up of a number of different countries, each with its own unique culture and ways of doing business. Despite the EU, many people resent it when we refer to them as “Europeans.” It tends to diminish their country and their culture.
  - Discuss the cultural and language differences with your co-workers and the impact this may have on how you work together. Make this a legitimate part of your interac-



tions. This will be of particular value on multicultural teams.

- Pause and let there be silence. Certain cultures will not speak up until others have finished speaking. Americans tend to talk over the ends of each others' sentences, leaving no silence. Silence allows speakers of English as a second language time for processing what has been said and to formulate their questions.

In the book, *Cross-cultural Business Negotiations*, Donald Hendon and his associates(1) point out that, "we should check understanding periodically, move slowly, use questions liberally, and avoid slang and idioms."

### The Non-primary English Speaker

Individuals who do not speak English as a first language also have a responsibility to help in the communication process. Although the following suggestions to non-Americans may not be easy to implement, they will help ensure that conversations are clear to both parties.

- Be more assertive about your own needs and concerns.
- Let people know when you don't understand something.
- Ask questions to ensure that you understand what is being said.
- Make sure to summarize your understanding of what has been said.
- Send an email that reflects your understanding of what has taken place to follow up on a conversation.
- Failure to let people know that you are having a problem only serves to reinforce the perception that there is no problem.

### Senior Management

It is not enough to ask only entry- and mid-level employees to adjust how they work. Senior management must also play an active role in helping this process. Management needs to set the tone and establish a culture. Among the steps management can take are the following:

- Sponsor cross-cultural and language training programs. To reinforce the importance of these

programs, members of senior management should also be required to attend. Management needs to elevate the importance of this type of training and send the message that cross-cultural skills are of equal importance to technical and other management skills.

- In company publications, discuss the issues faced in working in a culturally diverse environment. Give particular emphasis to the issues faced by co-workers who do not speak English as their first language.
- In management training programs, give special attention to the issues faced in managing a culturally diverse team where not everyone speaks English as their first language.

### Conclusion

At best, communication is a difficult process, and communicating across cultures with language differences makes the problem even more complex. If we are to surmount these difficulties and ensure that the full benefits of a multicultural work force are achieved, we must make a concerted effort to be sensitive to the difficulties experienced by our co-workers who come from different

cultural backgrounds and do not speak English as their first language.

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### Appendix

Some examples follow.

A woman brought up in New Delhi, now working in the US, notes that she was taught as a young girl not to speak to a man without permission to do so. Even though she has been in the US for many years, she still has difficulty speaking up at meetings.

A British executive, wondered why a recently tabled issue was not being discussed. She did not realize that to Americans tabling an issue means postponing the discussion, rather than bringing it up for immediate discussion as in Britain.

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## A Benchmarking Survey of Pharmaceutical Contact Centers

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reported to be validated per FDA-quality guidance. Nine companies used this method for handling adverse events, and three had single electronic entry of source information.

Two challenges in the next one to three years were reported to be managing capabilities and lowering costs. Issues identified were management of emerging technology, recruitment of sufficient numbers of qualified agents and supervisors, and enhancement of integration with other functional areas. Of interest, respondents also noted the ongoing challenge of demonstrating a positive return on investment amidst the growing cost of maintaining advancing technology in a regulated environment. The most commonly identified solutions to these challenges were further integrating similar contact center functions, outsourcing agents to external vendors, and using technology to expand the available workforce (e.g., work-from-home agents).

### Conclusions

The findings of this benchmarking survey provide only a snapshot of the current environment. However, they supply information on how pharmaceutical contact centers handle adverse event information, and what challenges may lie ahead for consideration by managers of pharmaceutical contact centers.

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A Japanese executive in Japan established working relationships through

dinner and other post-work activities. Now in the US, he finds that American employees rarely socialize after work as a group, and he is at a loss as to how to establish working relationships.

One Chinese statistician said that although he can speak English and

has no problem when meeting and working with just one person, in team meetings, where the discussion speeds up and the Americans begin using jargon and sports analogies, he has a great deal of difficulty following the discussion. ■