



Communicating with Finns

A Finn recently said to me “I wish Americans would think before they speak!” The same day, delayed at Helsinki airport, I got chatting to an English guy. He’d worked for a Finnish company for more than 10 years, came to Helsinki almost every week and loved his job. But, he said, the only problem was meetings with Finnish people. “They sit in silence and I end up talking rubbish because I have no idea what they’re thinking!”

His experience is fairly common. Finns can seem enigmatic to non-Finns and the reason lies in cultural communication differences. Finnish communication values include: silence, listening, modesty and fact-based tangible elements. These values have effects on communication styles.

The role of silence

For Finns, silence is not a sign of a problem as it is for most other Europeans. Silence signifies respectful listening and a Finn will only speak up if there’s a problem or disagreement. No news is good news. Finns think in silence before speaking. Listening is also more important than speaking. Therefore meetings are not an opportunity to showcase your brilliance, nor are they an open-ended brainstorming session. Rather, they are for confirming decisions. Similarly, don’t expect lots of feedback from a Finn. Silence is the response, if everything’s going smoothly. Negative feedback is also supposed to be inferred and so Finns often avoid giving it directly. If you’re not sure how things are going, ask for impersonal feedback. “Do you think there’s a better way of doing this?” rather than “How am I doing?”. Finns also need little direction in management. Tell them the task and then leave them. They will approach you if there’s a problem. Also, remember that Finns may worry too much about small problems. Don’t sympathise – it makes things seem worse. Downplay the problem and focus on practical action. Finally, don’t expect a Finn to interrupt you. Make sure you don’t fill all silences – give them time to speak.

Body Language

Finns don’t use much. Like silence, stillness implies respectful listening, not boredom. In a Finnish context, too much body

movement sends out negative signals. It seems restless and signals insecurity and problems. Be careful.

What is content?

Finns believe in fact-based communication and facts speak for themselves. Hypothesising and lots of “what if’s” can seem a waste of time. Similarly, Finns listen carefully to facts and expect to hear them once only. The built in repetition of English and Southern style communication can be irritating. Facts can’t be modified, so Finns don’t use softeners like “somewhat” or “possibly”. There is also little linking in Finnish communication. Finns see the connections between facts and so don’t often use phrases like: “therefore, as a result, consequently, in contrast...” When communicating with Finns, you’ll have to make the connections for yourself. Finns also present the facts directly, with little softening. Don’t be surprised by apparent bluntness. “Small talk” is not content. It can seem ridiculous to say, “It’s cold, isn’t it?” when it’s -25°C! Chatting away like that can seem like a waste of time.

The meaning of yes, but!

For Finns, “yes” signifies definite agreement to take action. It does not mean, “I understand” or “perhaps”. So be careful with saying “yes”. Likewise, “but” is also a very solid word for Finns. It means a definite problem. Lot’s of “yes, but’s” and “ahh, but’s” send out the wrong signals. Be very precise with these small words,

and make sure you say precisely what you mean.

The use of “I”

Finns tend to avoid saying “I”. Phrases such as “I think” or “I feel” can make you seem self-centred in a Finnish context. Also, things either are or not. Modifying your arguments with phrases that show it’s just your opinion weakens your point. The passive is used a lot to de-personalise issues. Finnish communication is also result oriented. This means, it is more normal to say, “The coffee is finished”, rather than the person/process oriented “I finished the coffee”. Finns are not avoiding responsibility; it’s just that the result is seen as more important than the actor or action.

Modesty

Finns believe in modesty and understatement. Recognise this. Don’t discount a suggestion just because it’s not presented as the best idea in the world! Also remember that “sales talk” and overselling represent insincerity to a Finn. When explaining something, don’t state the glaringly obvious – only give new information. The rest will be understood. ■

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Dos and Don’ts of communicating with Finns

Dos

- Value time. Focus on tangible action points instead of debating (which will be seen as wasting time and showing off).
- Use simple language. A good sentence is as simple as possible, not as elegant as possible.
- Ask direct, fact-based contextualised questions. Make them as specific as possible.
- Respect silence and stillness. Allow time for thought before speaking.
- Be prepared for directness. It’s not rudeness. Be direct yourself.
- Value the clarity of Finnish “lean” communication.
- Listen and read between the lines.

Don’ts

- Repeat.
- Fill silences.
- Expect explicit connections.
- Use humour, especially at the beginning of communication.
- Indulge in rhetorical argument or debate.
- Over-use “I”.
- Indulge in lots of small talk.
- Expect feedback.
- Expect people to interrupt.