

2

The Many Faces of Polite

Evaluating Performance and Providing Negative Feedback

Sabine Dulac, the finance director we met in the introduction, leaned back in her chair and let out a frustrated sigh. Managing Americans was proving much more difficult than she could have ever imagined. Her new American boss, Jake Webber, had reported to Dulac that several of her team members had complained bitterly following their first round of performance reviews with Dulac. They felt she'd been brutal and unfair in her feedback, focusing heavily on the negative points and hardly mentioning all their hard work and accomplishments.

Dulac was dumbfounded. The way she had provided feedback was the same style she'd used successfully with dozens of French employees with great success. Where were these complaints coming from?

Dulac was particularly confused because she'd expected American culture to be very direct. "In France, we frequently talk about how direct and explicit Americans are. Subtle? Hardly. Sophisticated? Not at all. But transparent and direct—we all know this to be true about Americans."

In this chapter, we'll build on the Communicating scale from the last chapter while adding an important twist. Some cultures that are low-context and explicit may be cryptically indirect with negative criticism, while other cultures that speak between the lines may be explicit, straight talkers when telling you what you did wrong. As we will see, the French and the Americans are not the only cultures that swap places on the Communicating and Evaluating scales.

The Evaluating scale will provide you with important insights into how to give effective performance appraisals and negative feedback in different parts of the world. People from all cultures believe in "constructive criticism." Yet what is considered constructive in one culture may be viewed as destructive in another. Getting negative feedback right can motivate your employees and strengthen your reputation as a fair and professional colleague. Getting it wrong can demoralize an entire team and earn you an undeserved reputation as an unfeeling tyrant or a hopelessly incompetent manager.

SPEAKING FRANKLY: A GIFT OR A SLAP IN THE FACE?

One Thursday in mid-January, I had been holed up for six hours in a dark conference room with twelve people participating in my executive education program. It was a group coaching day, and each executive had thirty minutes to describe in detail a cross-cultural challenge she was experiencing at work and to get feedback and suggestions from the others at the table. The details of each person's situation were steeped in context, and I was beginning to get a headache from concentrating on the ins and outs of each challenge. We had made it through nine people and were just beginning with Willem, number ten.

Willem was a rather shy manager from the Netherlands and, given his quiet persona, it struck me as unusual that he was a sales director. He had grey, slightly disheveled hair and a very friendly smile that made me think of a loveable St. Bernard. Willem's situation involved an American woman on his team who would call into team meetings while driving her children to school, a necessity given the six-hour time difference between her home in the eastern United States and Rotterdam. When Willem spoke to her about the distraction of screaming kids in the background and asked her to find a better solution, she took offence. "How can I fix this relationship?" Willem asked the group.

Maarten, the other Dutch member from the same company who knew Willem well, quickly jumped in with his perspective. "You are inflexible and can be socially ill-at-ease. That makes it difficult for you to communicate with your team," he reflected. As Willem listened, I could see his ears turning red (with embarrassment or anger? I wasn't sure), but that didn't seem to bother Maarten, who calmly continued to assess Willem's weaknesses in front of entire group. Meanwhile, the other participants—all Americans—awkwardly stared at their feet. Afterward, several of them came up to me to say how inappropriate they'd found Maarten's comments.

For that evening, we'd planned a group dinner at a cozy restaurant in the French countryside. Entering a little after the others, I was startled to see Willem and Maarten sitting together, eating peanuts, drinking champagne, and laughing like old friends. They waved me over, and it seemed appropriate to comment, "I'm glad to see you together. I was afraid you might not be speaking to each other after the feedback session this afternoon." Willem stared at me in genuine surprise. So I clarified, "You looked upset when Maarten was giving his feedback. But maybe I misread the situation?"

Willem reflected, “Of course, I didn’t *enjoy* hearing those things about myself. It doesn’t feel good to hear what I have done poorly. But I so much appreciated that Maarten would be transparent enough to give me that feedback honestly. Feedback like that is a gift. Thanks for that, Maarten” he added with an appreciative smile.

I thought to myself, “This Dutch culture is . . . well . . . *different* from my own.”

There has surely been a time when you were on the receiving end of criticism that was just too direct. You finished an important project and after asking a colleague for feedback, she told you it was “totally unprofessional.” Or maybe a member of your team critiqued a grant proposal you wrote by calling it “ridiculously ineffective.” You probably found this incident extremely painful; you may have felt this colleague was arrogant and it’s likely you rejected the advice offered. You may have developed a strong sense of distaste for this person that lingers to this day.

You may have also experienced the opposite—feedback that was far too indirect at a time when an honest assessment of your work would have been very valuable. Perhaps you asked a colleague for her thoughts about a project and were told, “Overall it’s good. Some parts are great, and I particularly liked certain sections.” Maybe she then noted that there were just a few very minor details that you might consider adjusting a bit, using phrases like “no big deal” and “just a very small thought,” that left you thinking your work was nearly perfect.

If you later learned through the office grapevine that this same colleague had ridiculed your project behind your back as “the worst she’d seen in years,” you probably were not very pleased. You likely felt a deep sense of betrayal leading to a lasting feeling of mistrust toward your colleague, now exposed in your eyes as a liar or a hypocrite.

Arrogance and dishonesty do exist, of course. There are even times when people give offense deliberately in pursuit of political objectives or in response to personal emotional problems. But in some cases, painful incidents like the ones just described are the result of cross-cultural misunderstandings. Managers in different parts of the world are conditioned to give feedback in drastically different ways. The Chinese manager learns never to criticize a colleague openly or in front of others, while the Dutch manager learns always to be honest and to give the message straight. Americans are trained to wrap positive messages around negative ones, while the French are trained to criticize passionately and provide positive feedback sparingly.

Having a clear understanding of these differences and strategies for navigating them is crucial for leaders of cross-cultural teams.

UPGRADERS, DOWNGRADERS, AND THE ART OF TRANSLATION

One way to begin gauging how a culture handles negative feedback is by listening carefully to the types of words people use. More direct cultures tend to use what linguists call *upgraders*, words preceding or following negative feedback that make it feel stronger, such as *absolutely*, *totally*, or *strongly*: “This is *absolutely* inappropriate,” or “This is *totally* unprofessional.”

By contrast, more indirect cultures use more *downgraders*, words that soften the criticism, such as *kind of*, *sort of*, *a little*, *a bit*, *maybe*, and *slightly*. Another type of downgrader is a deliberate understatement, a sentence that describes a feeling the speaker experiences strongly in terms that moderate the emotion—for example, saying “We are not quite there yet” when you really mean “This

is nowhere close to complete,” or “This is just my opinion” when you really mean, “Anyone who considers this issue will immediately agree.”

For many years I worked with Amihan Castillo, a lawyer and business professor from the Philippines who’d come to work in Europe following a highly successful career in Manila. Unfortunately, her opinions went unnoticed when working with our European team because she was so careful to downgrade any criticisms she made of proposals and projects. For example, if we were preparing a descriptive brochure for a new executive program, Castillo might comment on the cover design by saying, “Hmm, I thought we might possibly consider giving a bolder look to the brochure cover . . . maybe? What do you think?” A European or an American would probably convey the same feeling by saying, “The look of the cover isn’t working, I suggest we try this.” Only after years of working with Castillo had I learned to interpret her messages correctly.

Of course, downgraders are used in every world culture, but some cultures use them more than others. The British are masters of the art, with the result that their communications often leave the rest of us quite bewildered. Take the announcement made by British Airways pilot Eric Moody in 1982, after flying through a cloud of volcanic ash over Indonesia: “Good evening again, ladies and gentlemen. This is Captain Eric Moody here. We have a small problem in that all four engines have failed. We’re doing our utmost to get them going and I trust you’re not in too much distress and would the chief steward please come to the flight deck?”

Fortunately, the plane was able to glide far enough to exit the ash cloud and the engines were restarted, allowing the aircraft to land safely at the Halim Perdanakusuma Airport in Jakarta with

no casualties. Moody's recorded announcement has since been widely hailed as a classic example of understatement.

The "Anglo-Dutch Translation Guide" (Figure 2.1), which has been anonymously circulating in various versions on the Internet, amusingly illustrates how the British use downgraders and the resulting confusion this can create among listeners from another culture (in this case, the Dutch).¹

For Marcus Klopfer, a German finance director at the management consulting firm KPMG, such cross-cultural misunderstandings

FIGURE 2.1. ANGLO-DUTCH TRANSLATION GUIDE

What the British say	What the British mean	What the Dutch understand
With all due respect...	I think you are wrong.	He is listening to me.
Perhaps you would think about...I would suggest...	This is an order. Do it or be prepared to justify yourself.	Think about this idea and do it if you like.
Oh, by the way...	The following criticism is the purpose of this discussion.	This is not very important.
I was a bit disappointed that...	I am very upset and angry that...	It doesn't really matter.
Very interesting...	I don't like it.	He is impressed.
Could you consider some other options?	Your idea is not a good one.	He has not yet decided.
Please think about that some more.	It's a bad idea. Don't do it.	It's a good idea. Keep developing it.
I'm sure it's my fault.	It's not my fault.	It's his fault.
That is an original point of view.	Your idea is stupid.	He likes my idea!

are no laughing matter. A soft-spoken manager in his forties, Klopfer described how his failure to decode a message from his British boss almost cost him his job:

In Germany, we typically use strong words when complaining or criticizing in order to make sure the message registers clearly and honestly. Of course, we assume others will do the same. My British boss during a one-on-one “suggested that I think about” doing something differently. So I took his suggestion: I thought about it, and decided not to do it. Little did I know that his phrase was supposed to be interpreted as “change your behavior right away or else.” And I can tell you I was pretty surprised when my boss called me into his office to chew me out for insubordination!

I learned then and there that I needed to ignore all of the soft words surrounding the message when listening to my British teammates and just analyze the message as if it were given to me raw. Of course, the other lesson was to consider how my British staff might interpret my messages, which I had been delivering as “purely” as possible with no softeners whatsoever. I realize now that when I give feedback in my German way, I may actually use words that make the message sound as strong as possible without thinking much about it. I’ve been surrounded by this “pure” negative feedback since I was a child.

Now Klopfer makes a concerted effort to soften the message when giving negative feedback to his British counterparts:

I try to start by sprinkling the ground with a few light positive comments and words of appreciation. Then I ease into the feedback with “a few small suggestions.” As I’m giving the feedback, I add words like “minor” or “possibly.” Then I wrap up by

stating that “This is just my opinion, for whatever it is worth,” and “You can take it or leave it.”

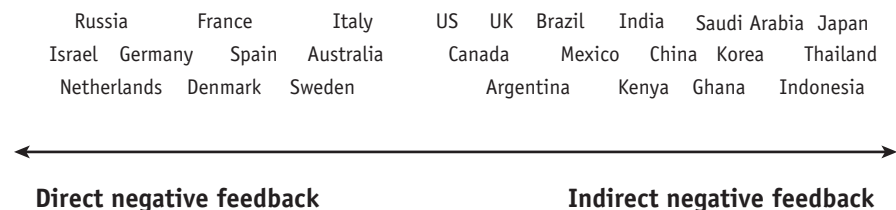
The elaborate dance is quite humorous from a German’s point of view. We’d be much more comfortable just stating *Das war absolut unverschämt* (“that was absolutely shameless”). But it certainly gets my desired results!

The Evaluating scale (Figure 2.2) provides a bird’s-eye view of just how direct people in different cultures are with negative criticism. You can see that most European countries fall to the direct side of the scale, with the Russians, Dutch, and Germans as particularly prone to offering frank criticism.

American culture is in the middle of the scale; nearby are the British, who are slightly less direct with negative feedback than Americans. Latin Americans and South Americans fall to the middle right, with Argentina as one of the most direct of this cluster. Further right on the scale fall most Asian countries with the Indians as the most direct with their criticism and the Thai, Cambodians, Indonesians, and Japanese as the least direct.

Don’t forget cultural relativity when you look at the scale. For example, the Chinese are to the right of the world scale, but they are much more direct than the Japanese, who may take offense at their forthright feedback. The continental European cultures to the

FIGURE 2.2. EVALUATING



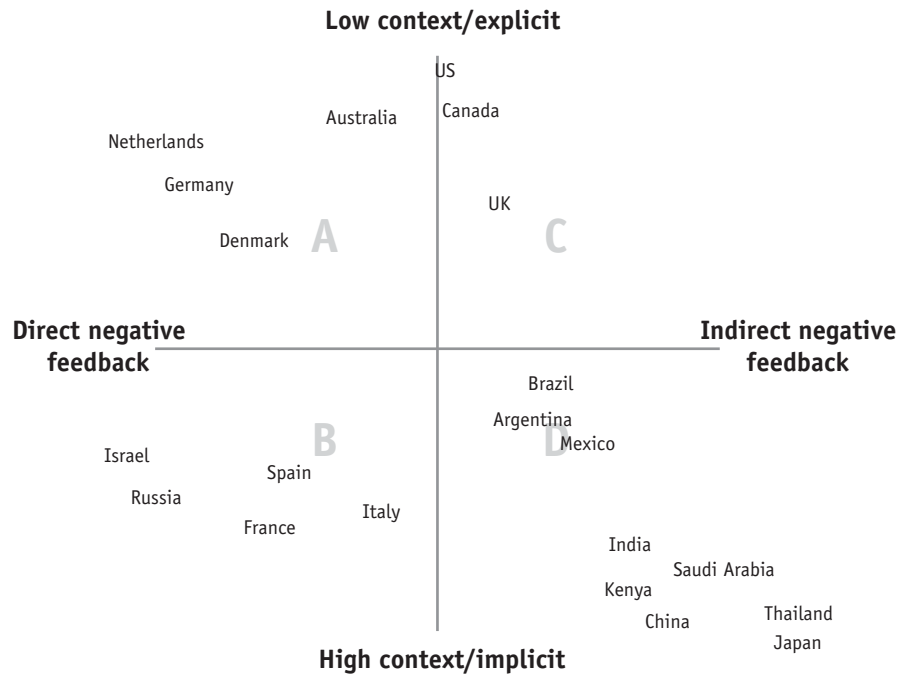
left or middle often experience Americans as strikingly indirect, while Latin Americans perceive the same Americans as blunt and brutally frank in their criticism style.

Note, too, that several countries have different positions on the Evaluating scale from those they occupy on the Communicating scale. For this reason, you may be surprised by the gap between our stereotyped assumptions about certain countries and their placement on the Evaluating scale. The explanation lies in the fact that stereotypes about how directly people speak generally reflect their cultures' position on the Communicating scale, not the Evaluating scale. Thus, the French, Spanish, and Russians are generally stereotyped as being indirect communicators because of their high-context, implicit communication style, despite the fact that they give negative feedback more directly. Americans are stereotyped as direct by most of the world, yet when they give negative feedback they are less direct than many European cultures.

One non-European country on the direct side of the Evaluating scale is Israel, where people give some of the most direct negative feedback in the world. Once I was running a class for the World Medical Association that included a large number of Israeli doctors and a group of doctors from Singapore. One of the Singaporean doctors, a small woman in her fifties, protested vociferously when she saw the far left-hand positioning of Israel on the Evaluating scale. "I don't see how Israel can be positioned as so direct! We have been with our Israeli friends here all week and they are good, kind people!"

This is an example of how stereotypes can conflict with realities. In response, one of the Israeli doctors declared, "I don't see what that has to do with it. Honesty and directness is a great virtue. The position is correct, and I am very proud of it."

FIGURE 2.3.



Mapping the Communicating scale against the Evaluating scale gives us four quadrants, as shown in Figure 2.3: low-context and direct with negative feedback; low-context and indirect with negative feedback; high-context and direct with negative feedback; and high-context and indirect with negative feedback. Particular cultures can be found in each of these quadrants, and there are differing strategies you'll find effective for dealing with people from each.

LOW-CONTEXT AND DIRECT NEGATIVE FEEDBACK

Whether they're considered blunt, rude, and offensive, or honest, transparent, and frank, these cultures are perceived as direct by all

other world populations. Cultures in this quadrant (the quadrant labeled A in Figure 2.3) value low-context, explicit communication as well as direct negative feedback. The natural coherence of these two positions makes communication from people in this quadrant fairly easy to decode. Take any messages they send literally and understand that it is not intended to be offensive but rather as a simple sign of honesty, transparency, and respect for your own professionalism.

We already met Willem and Maarten who come from the Netherlands, a solidly quadrant A culture. Willem experienced Maarten's explicit and direct negative feedback to be not just appropriate, but a real gift. What if Willem and Maarten were your colleagues? What is an appropriate way to respond to their direct style of offering criticism?

One rule for working with cultures that are more direct than yours on the Evaluating scale: *Don't try to do it like them*. Even in the countries farthest to the direct side of the Evaluating scale, it is still quite possible to be *too* direct. If you don't understand the subtle rules that separate what's appropriately frank from what is callously insensitive in Dutch culture, then leave it to someone from that culture to speak directly. If you try to do it like them, you run the risk of getting it wrong, going too far, and making unintended enemies.

I witnessed this type of mistake when working with a Korean manager named Kwang Young-Su who had been living in the Netherlands for six years. A friendly, quiet man in his early forties, Kwang had a wide grin and soft laugh that we heard frequently. But Kwang's colleagues had complained to me that they found him so aggressive and angry that they were practically unable to work with him. I wondered how this could be so, until Kwang himself explained the situation:

The Dutch culture is very direct, and we Koreans do not like to give direct negative feedback. So when I first came to the Netherlands, I was shocked at how rude and arrogant the Dutch are with their criticism. When they don't like something, they tell you bluntly to your face. I spoke to another Korean friend who has been in the Netherlands for a while, and he told me that the only way to handle this is to give it right back to them. Now I try to be just as blunt with them as they are with me.

Unfortunately, not understanding the subtleties of what was appropriate and what was not, Kwang had gone too far, missing the mark entirely. He alienated his colleagues, sabotaged his relationships, and built up a reputation as an angry aggressor. So much for adaptability.

Don't make the same mistake as Kwang. When you are working with cultures from quadrant A, accept their direct criticism in a positive manner. It is not meant to offend you. But don't take the risk of trying to do it like them. One small upgrader at a time may be all you can risk without tipping over to the side of being offensive or inappropriate.

HIGH-CONTEXT AND DIRECT NEGATIVE FEEDBACK

Quadrant B (see page XXX) is populated with those puzzlingly complex cultures that have finessed the ability to speak and listen between the lines yet give negative feedback that is sharp and direct. Russians, for example, often pass messages between the lines, but when it comes to criticism they have a directness that can startle their international colleagues.

The first time I traveled to Russia a Russian friend gave me a short little book that she referred to as "The Russian

Handbook.”² Paging through the book during my flight, I was amused to read:

If you are walking through the street without a jacket, little old Russian ladies may stop and chastise you for poor judgment. . . In Russia there is no reticence about expressing your negative criticism openly. For instance, if you are displeased with the service in a shop or restaurant you can tell the shop assistant or waiter exactly what you think of him, his relatives, his in-laws, his habits, and his sexual bias.

I thought about this observation a few weeks later when I received a call from a British colleague, Sandi Carlson. She explained to me that a young Russian woman named Anna Golov had recently joined her team and was upsetting a lot of people whose help she needed to get her job done. “I’m calling you, Erin,” she said, “because I wondered if the problem might be cultural. This is the fourth Russian coordinator we have had in the group, and with three of them there were similar types of complaints about harsh criticism or what has been perceived as speaking to others inconsiderately.”

A few days later, I had the opportunity to witness the problem in action. While I prepared to teach one morning, Golov herself was in the room with me setting up the classroom. I was going through stacks of handouts, counting pages to make sure we had enough photocopies, while Golov was carefully checking the IT equipment, which, to our annoyance, was not working properly. I appreciated the fact that she was handling the problem with such tenacity and that I did not have to get involved. The fact that she was humming quietly while she worked gave me an extra sense of relaxed assurance.

But then I heard Golov on the phone with someone in the IT department. "I've called IT three times this week and every time you are slow to get here and the solution doesn't last," she complained. "The solutions you have given me are entirely unacceptable." Golov went on scolding the IT manager, each sentence a bit harsher than the one before. I held my breath. Was she going to tell him how she felt about his sexual bias? Thankfully not at that moment.

Later, Carlson asked me, as the resident cross-cultural specialist, whether I would accompany her when she spoke with Golov about the problem. I was not thrilled at the request. I certainly did not look forward to witnessing Golov learn what her new colleagues were saying about her behind her back. But at Carlson's insistence, I agreed.

We met in Carlson's office, and she tried to explain the reputation that Golov had unknowingly developed across the campus, citing specific complaints not just from not the IT department but also from the photocopying staff. Golov shifted uncomfortably in her chair while Carlson explained that she had wondered whether the problem was cultural.

At first Anna did not really understand the feedback. She protested, "But we Russians are very subtle communicators. We use irony and subtext. You British and Americans speak so transparently."

"Yes," I interjected. "But if a Russian has negative feedback to give, it seems that often that feedback is perceived to be harsh or direct to people from other cultures. Does that make sense?"

"Yes, well . . . that depends who we are speaking with, of course. One point is that we tend to be a very hierarchical culture. If you are a boss speaking to your subordinate, you may be very frank. And if you are a subordinate speaking to your boss, you

had better be very diplomatic with criticism.” Carlson smiled, perhaps realizing why she had never personally experienced any of Golov’s frankness.

Golov went on:

If we are speaking with strangers, we often speak very forcefully. This is true. These IT guys, I don’t know them. They are the voices of strangers on the other end of the phone. Under Communism, the stranger was the enemy. We didn’t know who we could trust, who would turn us in to the authorities, who would betray us. So we kept strangers at a forceful distance. Maybe I brought a little too much of my Russian-ness into the job without realizing it.

I noticed that Golov was now beginning to laugh a little as she continued to consider the situation. “We are also very direct with people we are close to,” she conceded reflectively. “My British friends here complain that I voice my opinions so strongly, while I feel like I never know how they really feel about the situation. I am always saying: ‘But how do you feel about it?’ And they are always responding: ‘Why are you always judging everything?!’”

“Now that I’m aware of this,” Golov concluded, “I’ll be more careful when I communicate dissatisfaction.”

The French have a saying, “*Quand on connaît sa maladie, on est à moitié guéri*”—“When you know your sickness, you are halfway cured.” It applies to most cross-cultural confusions. Just building your own awareness and the awareness of your team goes a long way to improving collaboration. Now that Carlson is aware of the cultural tendencies impacting the situation, she can talk to Golov and her team about it, and Golov can take steps to give less direct criticism and replace some of her upgraders with downgraders.

When it comes to the Evaluating scale, a few simple words can make all the difference.

LOW-CONTEXT AND INDIRECT NEGATIVE FEEDBACK

Combining extreme low-context communication with a mid-indirect approach to giving negative feedback, the American evaluating style (quadrant C in Figure 2.3, page XXX) is so specific, unique, and often baffling to the rest of the world that it deserves a few paragraphs to itself.

An explicit, low-context, communication style gives Americans the reputation of lacking subtlety. Leave it to the Americans to point out the elephant in the room when the rest of us were working through our interpersonal issues nicely without calling attention to it. This means that those in quadrants A and B are often surprised to find Americans softening negative criticism with positive messages. Before moving to France, having been raised, educated, and employed in the United States, I believed that giving three positives for every negative and beginning a feedback session with the words of explicit appreciation before discussing what needs to be improved were universally effective techniques. If they worked well in America, then surely they should work just as well in France, Brazil, China and, well, everywhere.

But after living in Europe for a while I learned to see this style from a completely different perspective. To the French, Spanish, Russians, Dutch, and Germans, the American mode of giving feedback comes across as false and confusing. Willem, who works frequently with Americans, told me:

To a Dutchman, it is all a lot of hogwash. All that positive feedback just strikes us as fake and not in the least bit motivating.

I was on a conference call with an American group yesterday, and the organizer began, "I am absolutely thrilled to be with you this morning." *Only* an American would begin a meeting like this. Let's face it, everyone in the room knows that she is not truly, honestly thrilled. Thrilled to win the lottery—yes. Thrilled to find out that you have won a free trip to the Caribbean—yes. Thrilled to be the leader of a conference call—highly doubtful.

When my American colleagues begin a communication with all of their "excellents" and "greats," it feels so exaggerated that I find it demeaning. We are adults, here to do our jobs and to do them well. We don't need our colleagues to be cheerleaders.

Maarten added:

The problem is that we can't tell when the feedback is supposed to register to us as excellent, okay, or really poor. For a Dutchman, the word "excellent" is saved for a rare occasion and "okay" is . . . well, neutral. But with the Americans, the grid is different. "Excellent" is used all the time. "Okay" seems to mean "not okay." "Good" is only a mild compliment. And when the message was intended to be bad, you can pretty much assume that, if an American is speaking and the listener is Dutch, the real meaning of the message will be lost all together.

The same difference is reflected in the ways children are treated in schools. My children are in the French school system during the academic year and spend the summer in American academic programs in the Minneapolis area. In the United States, my eight-year-old son, Ethan, gets his homework assignments back covered with gold stars and comments like "Keep it up!" "Excellent work!" and, at worst, "Almost there . . . give it another try!" But studying

in Madame Zachayus's class requires thicker skin. After a recent Monday morning spelling test, Ethan's notebook page was covered sorrowfully in red lines and fat Xs, along with seven simple words from Madame Zachayus: "8 errors. Skills not acquired. Apply yourself!"

Oooooof! That hurts a mom from Minnesota. What about "Nice effort!" or "Don't give up!" or "You'll get it next time"? And I should note that Madame Zachayus is known as the least "sévère," that is, the softest of the teachers at Ethan's school.

At first, I worried that Ethan might begin to hate school, dislike his teacher, become discouraged, or just plain stop trying. But to the surprise of his American mom, he is coming to interpret negative feedback as the French would. The scathing comments strike him as routine, while a rare "TB" (*très bien*—very good) leaves a deeply positive impression on his young psyche.

However, adapting to quadrant C can be quite challenging for those from other cultures. Frenchwoman Sabine Dulac recalls an experience that happened soon after her move to Chicago:

Along with a group of American colleagues, I was on a committee which was organizing a big conference to market our new product line to current clients. The conference was a disaster. There was a horrible icy, rainstorm that morning, which meant low attendance. The keynote speaker was a bore. The food was horrible.

Afterwards the committee met to debrief the conference. Everyone knew the conference had been a disastrous failure, but when the team leader asked for feedback, each committee member started by mentioning something good about the conference: the booths had been well organized, the buses to the restaurant were on time, . . . before moving on to the calamities. I was

stunned. I actually had to hold my jaw closed while I watched my colleagues detailing positive example after positive example in describing a situation that was so clearly anything but.

When it was my turn, I couldn't take it any more—I just launched right in. "It was one disappointment after another," I began. "The keynote was uninspiring, the food was almost inedible, the breakout sessions were boring . . ." but as I spoke I saw the Americans around me staring at me saucer-eyed and silent. Did I have food on my face, I wondered?

People in Dulac's position can follow a few simple strategies to work more effectively with people from quadrant C (that is, Americans, Brits, and Canadians).

First, when providing an evaluation, *be explicit and low-context with both positive and negative feedback*. But don't launch into the negatives until you have also explicitly stated something that you appreciate about the person or the situation. The positive comments should be honest and stated in a detailed, explicit manner.

When I gave Dulac this suggestion, her first reaction was to feel that I was asking her to lie. "If I thought the conference was a total disaster, isn't it dishonest to not say what I think?"

But I pressed her: Wasn't there anything honest and positive that she could say about the conference? Dulac considered the question and came up with a couple of ideas. After I explained the differing attitudes of Americans toward the "proper" way of delivering feedback, Dulac understood the kind of adjustment she needed to make:

If I were in that situation again, I might start by talking about how much we learned from the event about what to do differently next time. I might also mention how impressed I was that

there were no IT snafus, thanks to the logistical staff led by the always tenacious and hard-working Marion. And then, when I get to the disaster part, I might use a downgrader. “It was a bit of a disaster” might go over better than “a total disaster” the next time around.

Second, *try, over time, to be balanced in the amount of positive and negative feedback you give.* For example, if you notice something positive your colleague has done on Monday, say it there and then with explicit, open appreciation. Then, on Tuesday, when you need to severely criticize the same colleague’s disappointing proposal before it is sent to the client, your comments will be more likely to be heard and considered rather than rejected out of hand.

Third, *frame your behavior in cultural terms.* Talk about the cultural differences that explain your communication style. If possible, show appreciation for the other culture while laughing humbly at your own. Someone in Dulac’s position might say, “In the U.S., you are so good at openly appreciating one another. In France, we aren’t in the habit of voicing positive feedback. We might think it, but we don’t say it!”

To those she works with frequently, Dulac might also explain her natural feedback style: “When I say ‘okay,’ you should hear ‘very good.’ And when I say ‘good,’ you should hear ‘excellent.’”

Framing comments like these build awareness among people on both sides of the table, and may lead to useful discussions about other cultural misunderstandings.

HIGH-CONTEXT AND INDIRECT NEGATIVE FEEDBACK

Among people from cultures in quadrant D as shown on page XXX, negative feedback is generally soft, subtle, and implicit. Turn

your head too quickly and you might miss the negative message altogether. Whereas in American culture you might give negative feedback in public by veiling it in a joking or friendly manner, in quadrant D this would be unacceptable; any negative feedback should always be given in private, regardless of how much humor or good-natured ribbing you wrap around it.

Charlie Hammer, an American manager in the textile industry living and working in Mexico City, offers this example:

I was really taken aback when one of my Mexican employees gave me his resignation. I had given him some negative feedback in a meeting, but I did it in a way that sounded to me almost like a joke. The mood in the room was light and after giving the feedback I quickly moved on. I felt it was no big deal and I thought everything was fine. But apparently it was a big deal to him. I learned later from one of the team members that I had seriously insulted him by giving this feedback in front of the team. He felt humiliated and worried that he was going to get fired, so he decided it would be better to quit first. It took me completely by surprise.

As this situation suggests, the first simple strategy for giving negative feedback to someone from a culture in quadrant D is, *Don't give feedback to an individual in front of a group*. This rule applies even if you use a lot of soft, cozy downgraders or rely on a joke to lighten the mood. And, yes, it applies to positive feedback as well. In many cultures that are less individualistic than the United States, it may be embarrassing to be singled out for positive praise in front of others. Give your individual feedback to the individual and give only group feedback to the group.

A second powerful tool for giving feedback to those from quadrant D—especially those from Asian cultures—is the technique of

blurring the message. People from most Western cultures don't like the idea of making a message blurry. We like our messages short, crisp, and, above all, transparent. But blurriness can be highly effective in many Asian cultures if it is used skillfully and appropriately, as I discovered early in my career.

I had been working as a consultant for an international training firm for about a year. One of my programs was a custom-designed international leadership course for the large Swiss-headquartered food multinational Nestlé. I co-taught the program with Budi, an Indonesian consultant who had been with the company for decades and was close to the founders. He had a reputation as a highly skilled trainer, but over the last couple of years his classroom performance had been declining dramatically, much to everyone's chagrin.

Let me also add that it was politically useful to have Budi on your side. As someone very well connected within the organization, he could open many doors if he liked you, and he had done so for many of his favored colleagues in the past.

With all of this in mind, I winced when my contact at Nestlé gave me quite clear feedback that they wanted to eliminate two of the three sessions that Budi taught in the program based on mediocre evaluation ratings.

I went home that evening with a knot in my stomach. When Budi heard that I was replacing his sessions with two sessions led by a more junior consultant, he was likely to be hurt and embarrassed. To complicate an already difficult situation, Budi comes from one of the most indirect cultures in the world, where giving negative feedback to someone older and more experienced is particularly difficult and painful. I didn't sleep well that night.

The next morning in an anxious stupor I set up a lunch with a long-time Indonesian colleague and friend and asked her for

advice. Thankfully, Aini introduced me to some strategies for blurring the message.

The first strategy: *Give the feedback slowly, over a period of time, so that it gradually sinks in.* “In the West,” Aini said, “you learn that feedback should be given right here, right now. In most Asian societies, it is best to give feedback gradually. This does not mean that you beat the direct message in periodically, again and again. Rather it means that you make small references to the changes that need to be made gently, gradually building a clear picture as to what should be done differently.”

With Aini’s guidance, I composed a first e-mail to Budi, alluding to the fact that I would need to redesign the program in future months based on the feedback of the participants and that this would have an impact on his sessions. I mentioned that I needed to focus more on topic X, which meant we would have less time for topic Y. Budi responded kindly, saying that he would be pleased to discuss it with me when he was in Paris later that week.

Budi and I spoke by phone the week before his visit to Paris, and I mentioned that I would be sending the most recent client feedback so that he could see it before our meeting. I indicated that the program would be reworked entirely and that I would also be inviting our junior colleague to teach in some sessions. Bit by bit, Budi was beginning to get the picture.

This led to Aini’s second strategy: *Use food and drink to blur an unpleasant message.* Aini told me, “If I have to provide criticism to someone on my staff, I am not going to call them into my office. If I do, I know that they are going to be listening to my message with all of their senses—and any message I provide will be greatly amplified in their minds. Instead, I might invite them out to lunch. Once we are relaxed, this is a good time to give feedback. We don’t

make reference to it in the office the next day or the next week, but the feedback has been passed and the receiver is now able to take action without humiliation or breaking the harmony between the two parties. In Japan, Thailand, Korea, China, or Indonesia, the same strategy applies.”

This would be an easy rule to apply. I told Budi that when he was in Paris I would love to have lunch with him at my favorite new restaurant near the Champs-Élysées, where I knew he would love the black squid pasta.

Aini’s third and final piece of strategy baffled me at first. She urged me: *Say the good and leave out the bad*. Was Aini suggesting that I could pass the negative message without saying it at all? Via telepathy?

Aini explained by using an example:

A while back, one of my Indonesian colleagues sent me a set of four documents to read and review. The last two documents he must have finished in a hurry, because they were very sloppy in comparison to the first two. When he called to ask for my reaction, I told him that the first two papers were excellent. I focused on these documents only, outlining *why* they were so effective. I didn’t need to mention the sloppy documents, which would have been uncomfortable for both of us. He got the message clearly, and I didn’t even need to bring up the negative aspects.

Well, I understood the concept, although the execution for someone from Two Harbors, Minnesota, was not easy.

The next week, I met Budi at the Italian bistro I had told him about. After forty-five minutes of catching up over delicious

artichoke hearts and sun-dried tomato antipasti, the moment of truth had come. "Say the good, leave out the bad," I reminded myself, easing gently into the subject, my heart beating just a little faster than normal.

"Budi," I began, "your first session is very much appreciated. Although I am redesigning the program, I definitely do not want to touch this session. In fact, I thought I might build on your first session by working with our junior colleague on Tuesday morning's session."

Budi replied, "That sounds great, Erin! I much prefer to have a shorter amount of presentation time with a really big impact. And if that works for the program, it works for me."

Hallelujah! Not a moment of discomfort! I had somehow managed to pass the message without ever giving the criticism explicitly. Thank you, Aini!

Here is one final warning for anyone working with people from a quadrant D culture. While indirect feedback is the norm, it is quite possible for a boss to give scathing negative feedback to an employee while remaining entirely within the realm of the appropriate. In these cases, the strongly hierarchical tendencies found in many quadrant D cultures trump their indirect feedback patterns. Thus, it's not unheard of for a boss in Korea to berate an employee publicly or for an Indian boss to bark criticism to their staff in a way that shocks and silences any Europeans or Americans within earshot.

But you, the foreigner, should not try this. For your purposes, whether you are the mail boy, the manager, or the owner of the company, stick to the blurring and leave the direct downward vertical feedback to those who call that country home.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE POLITE?

Maarten, the Dutch manager we met earlier, explained to me once, “In the Netherlands, we give feedback very directly, but we are always polite.” I love this comment, because a Dutch person’s feedback can indeed be both brutally honest yet delightfully polite—but only if the recipient is Dutch. If you happen to come from one of the 195 or so societies in the world that like their negative feedback a bit less direct than in the Netherlands, you may feel that Maarten’s “politeness” is downright insulting, offensive, and yes, rude.

Politeness is in the eye of the beholder. Giving feedback—especially when it’s negative—is a sensitive business at the best of times. It can be made a lot worse if the person receiving the feedback believes he or she has been spoken to rudely. Precisely what constitutes rudeness, however, varies enormously from place to place.

The sophisticated global manager learns how to adapt—to alter his behavior a bit, to practice humility, to test the waters before speaking up, to assume good will on the part of others, and to invest time and energy in building good relationships. With a little luck and skill, it’s possible to be perceived as equally polite in Amsterdam, Jakarta, Moscow, Buenos Aires, Paris, or Two Harbors, Minnesota.

