

HOW TO SAY NO IN HIGH CONTEXT CULTURES

Here is a number of ways that Asians say no without coming right out and saying it. In response to a Westerner's question "Has my proposal been accepted?" an Asian businessperson is likely to reply as follows:

- ☐ The conditional 'yes ": "If everything proceeds as planned, the proposal will be approved."
- ☐ The counterquestion (answering a question with a questions is often used in lieu of a NO): "Have you submitted a copy of your proposal to the Ministry of Electronics?"
- ☐ The question is criticized: "Your question is difficult to answer."
- ☐ The question is refused: "We cannot answer this question at this time."
- ☐ The tangential reply: "Will you be staying longer than you originally planned?"
- ☐ The 'yes, but. . ." reply: "Yes, approval looks likely, but . . ." The meaning of "but" could mean "it might not be approved."
- ☐ The answer is delayed: "You will know shortly." (postponing an answer is often a NO in hiding)
- ☐ Changing the subject is usually a sign of a problem and a NO.
- ☐ Unlike other Asian cultures where silence is used for contemplation, delaying in India often masks a problem.
- ☐ Repeating the question often masks an issue.

When you need to know whether your counterpart is willing to do something, but his answer to every question leaves you more confused than before, remember this: If possible, **avoid posing a yes-or-no question**. Rather than "Will you do this?" try "How long would it take you to get this done?" And when you do ask a yes-or-no question in Southeast Asia, Japan, or Korea (perhaps also in India or Latin America), engage all your senses and emotional antennae.

Even if the response is affirmative, something may feel like no: an **extra beat of silence, a strong sucking in of the breath, a muttered "I will try, but it will be difficult."** If so, the deal is probably not sealed. You may well have more negotiations in front of you.

When you're working with people from cultures where harmony is important and "saving face" is a strong cultural value, it's a good idea to be alert for long pauses, evasive responses and non-verbal cues such as **avoiding eye contact**. Communication is meant to allow both parties to retain face, which means that they avoid overtly showing anger and other negative emotions.

In general, you should consider responses such as **"maybe," "probably," or "I'm thinking about it,"** as "perhaps," while the response "I'll consider it" is frequently negative.

It is often a good idea to **ask the same question several different ways** to ensure that you have understood the response you receive.