

**POWER DISTANCE IN INTERCULTURAL BUSINESS SETTINGS: NONVERBAL ASPECT**© **Chekhovskaya S. A., 2015**

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The article describes various nonverbal signals indicating a person's high status or showing power relations between people at work-place. In business etiquette nonverbal behavior is considered as important as verbal communication; therefore, showing respect for authority is essential for international business practices. The paper outlines some of universal and culture-specific indications of power distance, focusing on the different interpretations of the same non-verbal behavior across cultures.

*Ключевые слова:* power distance, nonverbal behavior, business etiquette, intercultural communication.

**W**hat is the role of power relations in international business and management today? It depends on the culture. Western management, for instance, expects employees to think independently and to be honest and critical. The line between "boss" and "employee" is blurred. However, across much of the Middle East and Asia, it is quite different. Respect for seniority, wisdom, and age play into it [1].

In social science, power is the ability to influence or control the behavior of people [2]. In global business this ability is often associated with power distance — the degree of inequality in society and the emotional distance that separates subordinates from superiors. Power distance is the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations and institutions accept this inequality. Individuals in a society with a high power distance accept hierarchies in which everyone has a certain place. On the other hand, societies with low power distance seek to have equal distribution of power. Cultures that have low power distance expect and accept power relations that are more democratic [3]. Understanding where a culture ranks on the power distance scale can be helpful when one is dealing with a businessperson from another culture.

Nonverbal communication is communication without the use of spoken language. It includes gestures, facial expressions, body positions, and other conditions which may affect any interaction between people [4]. The interpretation of the nonverbal signals may be difficult. Some nonverbal signals are polysemantic. Others are understood differently in different cultures. As a result, people may start questioning the authority of their partner from another culture, which can hinder successful communication.

One of important nonverbal signals is appearance and dress code. In many cultures, dress defines a person as belonging to a specific group and having a certain status. Usually conservative suits indicate the person's relatively high status. Let us consider some examples. Japanese employees working for German companies were once attacked by Germans who took them for Asian illegal immigrants. After the attacks it was decided that the Japanese workers have to observe a strict dress code even after working hours. Therefore, they had to wear dark conservative suits with white shirts, ties, and dress shoes at all times. In this way they showed that they are busi-

nesspeople, not just illegal immigrants. Another example describes an American businessman who traveled to Japan. After a long flight, he was met by a Japanese partner at the airport. Though it was the weekend, the Japanese was wearing a formal business suit. Obviously, he wanted to show his respect. The American, on the contrary, was dressed very casually, so he felt embarrassed and uncomfortable [5]. Both examples show how appearance may be perceived by people from different cultures.

Another nonverbal signal is eye contact. In most cultures, superiors have more rights to look at subordinates than the other way around. Eye contact is related to power, which means those who maintain eye contact are usually superiors. Subordinates normally avoid direct eye contact. While it is a universal rule in Western cultures, in Asia it doesn't work. Looking directly in the eye of the interlocutor is not appropriate at all. In Japan, for example, they look at the partner's neck, so it is almost impossible to understand from the eye contact who has power and who does not. At the same time, Japanese managers may not only avoid direct eye contact, but also close their eyes during negotiations. Americans see this as a lack of interest or even disrespect, but for the Japanese it means listening attentively [6].

Posture may also be indicative of a person's status. The psychologists say that people who have power are free to have a relaxed and comfortable posture. The subordinates, however, have to be careful about how they stand or sit. In Western cultures, a confident and powerful person stands erect with the shoulders back and the head up. The posture signals, "I am not afraid of anything." A manager may stand erect when talking to subordinates, while the subordinates may drop their shoulders when talking to the manager. As for Asian cultures, lowering one's head may represent accepting low place in the hierarchy, but it also may be an indication of intent listening [7].

Gestures, very expressive nonverbal signals, may be confusing when used in intercultural communication. If we consider one culture, the speaker who uses gestures freely seems to be more powerful than the person who is more reserved and careful about his / her body movements. However, when people in various cultures communicate, it depends on these cultures. For example, Americans are very expressive when it comes to body

language. They may use big arm movements. People of Latin and Arab cultures are even more expressive, but it does not mean that they have a higher status than Americans. Asians, on the contrary, do not use gestures much. Personal space in Japan is limited, and big arm movements could invade someone's private space. In addition, big gestures draw too much attention to the speaker, which threatens the harmony of the group [8]. So, no matter which status and rank a Japanese may have, he is unlikely to gesticulate a lot. Someone from a more openly expressive culture may misinterpret it thinking that the Japanese partner is too submissive or timid, and probably not powerful at all. We can conclude that a top manager from Japan and, for example, Arab cultures, will have very different arm movements.

Timing of spoken exchanges is meaningful in international business etiquette. Although the words are obviously important, the timing of the exchange also carries a significant nonverbal message. It is not *what* is said, but *who* takes more time in a conversation. Generally, the superiors initiate the conversation and finish it; they may speak longer and interrupt the subordinate. However, it may also be culture-specific. For most people in the US, a discussion is a give-and-take procedure in which people take turns speaking. In other words, timing of conversation emphasizes equality in the US. In contrast, the timing in a Japanese conversation is dominated by the person with seniority, who typically is higher in the hierarchy. In some high-context cultures, modesty or lack of initiative, especially in conversation, is the sign of respect to the superior. For example, a Thai job applicant who seems quiet during the interview is not necessarily wrong for the job. He may simply be reflecting his culture's acceptable behavior toward someone who is in charge. Asking many questions or speaking a lot during an interview may be interpreted as arrogance and egotism and disqualify a candidate with a Thai firm in Thailand. An interviewer from Canada, in contrast, may interpret this behavior as lack of drive and ambition. The Thai job applicant, therefore, is at a disadvantage. At the same time, the interviewer may miss a good employee [9].

The use of space and working environment is another aspect of nonverbal communication. In the US, the size of an office and its location show a businessperson's success, importance, power, and status within the hierarchy. Since many offices in the US do not have windows, windows are a status symbol. American top managers have their offices on top floors with plenty of windows. The furnishings of the office also signify the level of importance. The kinds of desks, desk lamps, artwork, and plants employees can have in their workspaces are dictated by their status. On the other hand, the Japanese seldom have private offices. Japanese managers may sit or work in the same area with their employees. They believe that this arrangement emphasizes the importance of the group and the need to work together. The furnishings in Japanese offices are also not as important as they are in US offices. Therefore, American businesspeople may misinterpret this modest working environment and

question the importance or profitability of the Japanese business they are dealing with.

There is another point concerning space. During international business meetings, seating arrangement is very important. In some cultures, for example, China, the seating is arranged by rank. The host should escort the senior-most guest to his or her seat as well as any VIP guests. The place of honor is to the host's right on a sofa or in chairs that are opposite the room's doors. If the meeting is held around a large conference table, then the guest of honor is seated directly opposite the host. Other high ranking guests sit in the same general area while the other guests can choose their seats from among the remaining chairs [10]. If Chinese businessmen are not seated in accordance with their rank, they may feel disrespected.

Lack of knowledge about other cultures may interfere with business communication. Sometimes people fail to show proper respect for their foreign partners or cannot designate their own high status by misusing nonverbal language. To avoid this, global managers should provide training to their employees in order to make them sensitive to cultural differences. It will help people work more effectively when interacting with people from other countries. ■

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## **Дистанция власти в межкультурном деловом окружении: невербальный аспект**

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В статье описываются различные невербальные сигналы, указывающие на высокий статус человека или показывающие дистанцию власти между людьми на рабочем месте. В деловом этикете невербальное поведение считается столь же важным, как и вербальная коммуникация; поэтому, проявление уважения к власти важно для международного бизнеса. В статье обобщены некоторые универсальные и специфичные для культуры признаки дистанции власти, сделан акцент на различных интерпретациях одного и того же невербального поведения в различных культурах.

*Ключевые слова:* дистанция власти, невербальное поведение, деловой этикет, межкультурные коммуникации.