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## **INDIRECTNESS IN MALAY DIPLOMACY (WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO BUSINESS DEALINGS AND Labour Relations)**

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Indirectness is an important aspect of Malay diplomacy. This is particularly so in a traditional rural community where social harmony through conformity to accepted socioreligious codes of behaviour is emphasized.

In Malay culture, indirectness in communication is expressed and realised in different forms: the use of imagery as in "pantun", hints, innuendoes, "sindirani", "candek", "perli" (different forms of sarcasm), the use of third party or "wakil" in cases of negotiations and in marriage or engagement proposals.

The use of indirectness in communication is an important aspect of Malay community life because one of its main intentions is conflict avoidance. The importance of indirectness in Malay diplomacy has been succinctly stated by Clifford and Swettenham:

*"Like French it is essentially adapted for concealing the feelings and cloaking the real thoughts. Not even French is it possible to be so polite or so rude or to say such rude things with every appearance of exaggerated courtesy, as in the case in Malay." (Brown, 1951).*

However, the delicacy and gentleness of expressions and the indirectness employed in the language can bring about misinterpretations and communication breakdown, especially between persons from different cultures.

### **The Issue**

The rapid social changes and transformation that accompany economic growth, particularly industrial growth and technological progress,

have given rise to major conflict situations in Malay society. In particular, the rapid rural urban migration of workers into the modern industrial sectors has brought into sharp focus the significance of the traditional mode of communication as a potential source of conflict between the new migrating workers steeped in their rural tradition and mode of communication with the more urbanised and individualistic managerial and supervisory class many of whom are foreigners.

### The Objective

The main objective of this paper is to explore how indirectness in communication as practised by the Malays in the business and factory environments could result in misinterpretation. It attempts to highlight the adjustment problems faced by both workers and management which must be resolved to ensure harmonious labour management. It will also examine briefly the implications with respect to training for both workers and managers especially those from different cultural backgrounds. The paper illustrates the relevance of the study of indirectness to the resolution of important contemporary issues as mentioned above.

### Data

This investigation is based primarily on

- a) casual study observations
- b) interviews with the personnel manager and Industrial relations Officer of a Japanese multinational corporation.

From here I was able to make a study of the following:-

- (i) how indirectness affects communication,
- (ii) how the management copes,
- (iii) behaviour of Malay workers in transmitting their of dissatisfaction,
- (iv) implications with respect to training and other aspects of personnel management.

This paper is obviously based on a very limited sample. For this reason, it must be viewed as a preliminary foray into a subject which is relatively new in the Malaysian context and obviously complicated and important. Further research in this field is needed.

## Patterns of Communication

### 1. The "as-you-please" mode

Casual observations of day to day encounters with Malay taxi drivers show that many of them resort to the traditional mode of communication in their business transactions. This is illustrated in

Passenger	Berapa tambangnya, Encik? (What's the fare, Mr ?)
Taxi driver:	Biasanya tiga ringgit, tapi terpulanglah. (Normally its three ringgit, but it's up to you).

The word "terpulanglah" or "terserahlah" bears several interpretations of meaning such as "it's up to you to pay any amount you want but it has to be more than the normal fare" or "I leave it to you, whatever amount you give, I shall accept." He of course expects more than RM3.00/- but instead, of directly stating that he wants to be paid more, he uses the indirectness mode to express his wish like the use of "terpulanglah", "terserahlah", or "ikut suka". This rather unbusinesslike behaviour is typical of a direct transfer of rural based culture into the business realm. In traditional Malay culture, asking for more directly is considered coarse or too aggressive a behaviour and could result in conflict. Invariably, however, the taxi driver will get the extra fare if he employs this mode of communication with another Malay who has had the same traditional Malay upbringing. However, this kind of dealing may not be effective with those who come from a different culture.

Another example is illustrated in this episode:-

House owner:	Berapa bayaran potong rumput ini? (What's the charge for cutting the grass?)
Gardener:	Ikut suka, Enciklah... bagilah bebarapa Encik suka... (As you please, Sir, ...you can pay any amount you like).

The request for payment in this context is open and ambiguous, and it is left to the discretion of the house owner to pay the amount he wants. This mode of communication

Malay The intention is to appear less demanding and aggressive. Indirectly it demands the other party to show some kindness and sympathy, and very often he is successful in getting what he wants. He will be paid more than the usual.

## 2. The "Insyah Allah" (God willing)

The use of the Arabic expression "Insyah Allah" is part of Malay - Islamic culture and is often utilised as a social nicety. The "Insyah Allah" expression is widely used in the Malay society, both urban and rural.

It is customary for the Malays to respond with "Insyah Allah" when invited to a feast, to one's house or in matters related to the future. This is based on the Islamic philosophy that 'we plan, but God decides' (kita merancang tuhan yang menentukan). My observations show that because the expression "Insyah Allah" is so overused, it is often opened to abuse, and the overuse of "Insyah Allah" results in the loss of its actual meaning: "Insyah Allah" provides an escape route to avoid saying "no" or to avoid turning down an invitation. In fact, it bears a non-committal tone indicating tentativeness. From the pragmatic angle, one may liken it to a form of phatic communion, where such verbalisation can be meaningless although it may carry a social significance such that it helps establish and maintain rapport between speakers.

While the use of "Insyah Allah" is fine in the "kampung" context it can however, be exasperating in the business world because "Insyah Allah" could mean:-

- I may carry out your request but if I don't it does not matter, (if someone asks to convey his regards to a mutual friend)
- the subject is closed
- there is no hope unless God wills it
- good luck to you
- I have decided not to come
- maybe
- I shall be there

It is perhaps pertinent to say that the "Insyah Allah" management is rather inappropriate in a business setting, a setting which requires full commitment from parties involved particularly in matters pertaining to business dealings. It would be exasperating for a businessman, who wants to make an appointment at a precise date and time to discuss a crucial business matter, to succeed in extracting no more than an "Insyah Allah" from his counterpart. He is not sure whether the person will turn up for the

appointment or not. In the traditional Malay society which is based on subsistence farming, business conduct and ethics of the form required in the modern business world are quite unknown. It is a code of conduct which requires a commitment and is ethically binding in nature. As such the use of the open-ended "Insya Allah" may be inappropriate in business culture.

### 3. The "Merajuk" (Sulking) Mode

Where directness of communication is the norm in the modern business world and where self-acclamation and aggressiveness are the rules of the game, such behaviour is quite unacceptable in the Malay traditional society. This explains why Malay workers appear to be reticent. It is not known, at least from my interviews and observations, for a Malay employee to go directly to his boss to ask for a raise. Invariably, what he will do is that he will show his discontent by throwing various signals, by appearing to be shirking in his job, throwing hints of "boycotting" the management, avoiding his supervisors at work and socially, etc.

The episode below derived from an interview with the Industrial Relations Officer of the Japanese firm mentioned illustrates this phenomenon:-

*Case 1: Ahmad had been showing signs of slacking in his job and shirking his duty. He often reported to work late, missed deadlines and avoided seeing his supervisor. Noticing this behaviour the supervisor decided to ask Ahmad for explanation. Ahmad refused to see his immediate supervisor but chose to see another from a different department. Ahmad was evasive at first when called upon to explain, but eventually he opened up and told the supervisor that he felt "kecil hati" (slighted) as he was not considered at all for overtime work and indicated that he felt he was being discriminated against. He was in need of extra cash and was hoping to do some overtime work. He chose to show his discontent by adopting the "merajuk" mode of behaviour. Both parties eventually sorted out their differences. The supervisor promised Ahmad that he would be considered for overtime work in the future, and Ahmad in return promised to see the supervisor if he has any problems.*

It should, however, be noted here that "Merajuk" or (sulking) is a common phenomenon in the Malay way of life. The young Malays are often taught not to contradict their elders in words, deeds, gestures or facial expressions. The only way that the young can communicate his dissatisfaction is through "merajuk" - a sort of sweet sulking, a common practice especially between husband and wife, and it is normally the wife who adopts the "merajuk" mode of behaviour if she is displeased with the

husband. As the Malay saying goes "merajuk pada yang kasih" (sulk only to those who love you).

The above episode illustrates clearly how the management of indirectness is conducted and how it is carried out as a way of masking strong unstated feelings. Left undetected it could lead to further conflicts and in extreme cases, the tension can result in sabotage. A awareness on the part of the management with regard to these different signals could help alleviate and minimise conflicts and grievances amongst workers.

#### 4. The Silent Mode

*Case 2: A complaint was made against the workers in the production department that their work is slow and the products are not produced fast enough. The production department consisting of predominantly Malay workers did not take heed of the complaint. This complaint was made by another department consisting mostly of Chinese and Indian workers. The management took this matter up with the production department but it did not receive any response. The leader of the group was called up to explain. He told the management that explanation was unnecessary because the accusation was baseless. He reckoned that the complaint was purely racial prejudice. They continued to adopt the silent mode of behaviour and the same pace of work. It was subsequently discovered that the young Malay workers wanted to confront the complainants but were discouraged by the more senior Malay workers who advised them that a direct confrontation may erupt into a more damaging and serious conflict. By adopting the silence mode of behaviour, they hoped that the matter would be sorted out on its own or forgotten.*

The above episode illustrates how silence is managed in conflictual and threatening situations. In Malay culture silence is perceived to be a way of avoiding conflict. Although this mode of behaviour may benefit both parties it may develop into further conflicts since the issue is only temporarily resolved.

#### The use of "mediator"

*Case 3: The Malay workers in the production line were unhappy with the safety measures provided by the management. Complaints were made verbally to the supervisor but no action was taken. Despite the favourable conditions such as the open-plan system and the egalitarian approach adopted by the management, the Malay workers were still reluctant to go straight to the senior manager in charge to voice their complaints. Instead, they approached the industrial relation officer who is also a Malay to act on their behalf in dealing with the senior*

*manager Unlike the Malay workers, the Chinese workers, I was told are generally more aggressive and made their feelings known directly to the manager*

This type of management through the use of third party or "mediator" reflects very much the Malay way of handling this delicate situation and one that is directly transferred from the traditional society where "wakil" (representative) is extensively used in social intercourse.

It is also interesting to note that the reluctance of the Malay workers to directly voice their discontent to the senior manager even in situations where such conduct is encouraged, is in fact an expression of "respect" to the position of the senior manager. It is no indication of passiveness. This form of behaviour appears to be a direct transfer of what is considered in the traditional setting, with its rather rigid social hierarchy, to be the proper form of conduct.

#### Employers' Response

Indirectness of behaviour is not only practised among the workers but also among the management.

#### The Circular

Case 4: Workers of the company interviewed have to wear uniforms at their work place. Uniforms are not allowed to be worn outside the grounds of the company. Despite this strict regulation, the management found that two of the workers from one department did not comply with this regulation. They were seen wearing uniform even after work. Instead of calling the two workers in a face-to-face confrontation, the personnel manager, who is a Malay, decided to place a notice in the company's weekly Bulletin alerting the workers of the company's ruling on uniform. I was informed that the management had to place three notices in the Bulletin before the two workers decided to conform. The final warning included the itemisation of the action that the manager will take should the workers fail to

From my observations, this mode of management is also practised by several departmental heads both at universities and in government departments. The issuance of "circulars" to all workers seems to be a common phenomenon in Malaysia. The intention seems to be conflict avoidance and face saving. It is not clear to me, however, whether this is largely a Malaysian Malay phenomenon or it is also common in the west. My impression is that in the western world, a direct "ticking" of the

workers responsible is a more likely course of action that the management will take.

The direct method of disciplining, though it will lead to direct confrontation, is in my opinion a more effective approach.

### **Implications**

Obviously there are important implications in the training of the workers as well as the management staff. The workers should not only be technically well trained, but must also be taught how to express their feelings about their working conditions, their superiors and other matters in a clear and direct manner. The management should adopt a pro-active approach to the problem and provide all the encouragement to the workers to express their feelings. They should be trained to understand the cultural norms of the workers and read the hidden signals of discontent and react appropriately.

It is often reported that the Japanese tend to underemphasize the importance of this aspect of management training. Very few of the managers have attempted to learn the local language. The usual solution is to use a Malay personnel manager to deal with Malay workers. There is clearly a need to design appropriate training course, which will provide a clearer understanding of the different forms of indirectness employed by the Malay workers as well as other culture-related behaviours.

Malay entrepreneurial training must obviously include a course on business communication apart from the usual courses offered such as finance, marketing, production, etc. Business language must be direct and unambiguous, and Malay businessmen must learn to discard their inhibition of stating their position clearly and in a business like manner.

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

A bigger sample of factories broken down by size of workforce and ownership in terms of nationality is required. The purpose is to try to investigate in much greater depth the various forms of indirectness, the consequences in terms of conflicts and misinterpretations, the management issues which arise and how management copes. The breakdown of sample by nationality could allow us variations with respect to the consequences of indirectness and the manner of management responses. For instance, a Japanese management may react to the various forms of indirectness in a manner different from a company managed and controlled by Germans. Breakdown by size could expose the difference between the small and large firms in not only the form but also the consequences



of indirectness. One may hypothesize that in smaller firms, especially those controlled by locals, the use of indirectness may be less prevalent or result in less conflict owing to the shorter line of communication and closer personal relationship.

The sample of workers broken down by sex, race and skill level should also be studied. There could be certain variations in the form and degree of indirectness between the male and female workers. The frequent occurrence of mass hysteria among Malay female workers, for instance, could be the result of their stronger inhibitions to express their discontent in an open and direct manner.

It is hoped that research along this line could bring about greater awareness among managers, especially foreign managers, of the need for cultural adjustment on the part of both workers and managers. This awareness could lead to the acceptance of the need to devise an appropriate training program which includes various cultural components especially with respect to communication. Such realizations would result in an improvement in personnel management which is necessary for the attainment of a more harmonious relationship between labour and management.

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