

Saving Face: Understanding Face-Saving and Cross-Cultural Communication in International Business

About this Training

This training material was designed for professionals working within international business environments. The lesson explores how cultural differences can influence communication styles and professional relationships, with a particular focus on the concept of face-saving in many Asian business contexts.

Using authentic source materials, guided discussions and workplace scenarios, participants develop practical strategies for communicating difficult information clearly, sensitively and professionally across cultures.

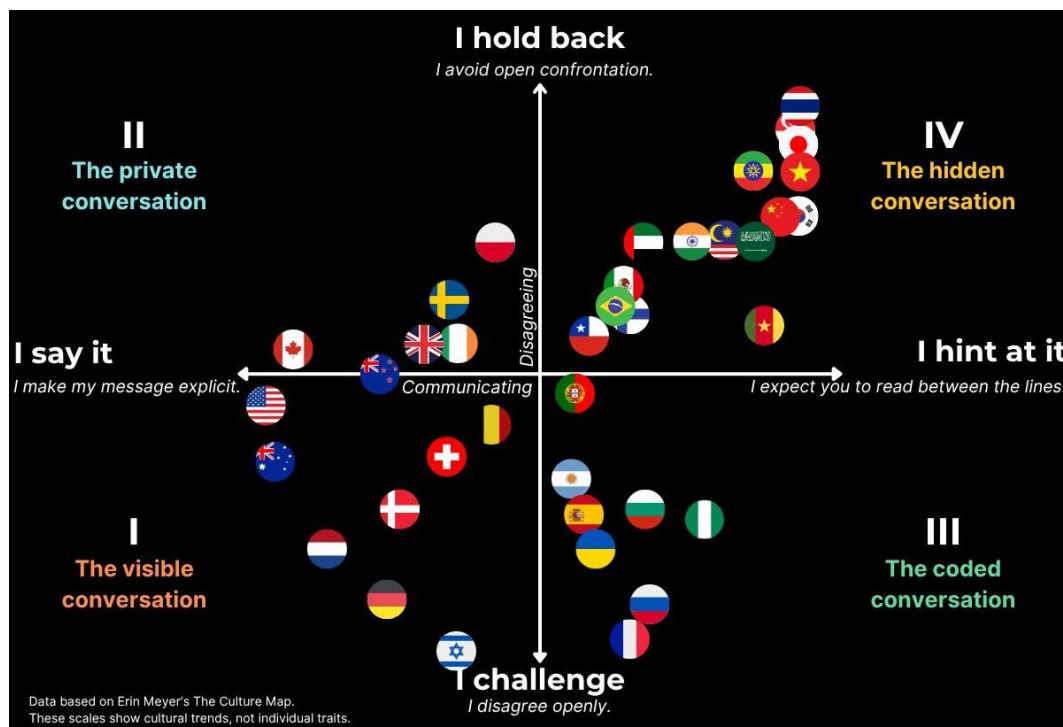
Learning Objectives

By the end of this lesson, participants will be able to:

- Understand the concept of face-saving within an international business context.
- Recognise how communication styles can differ across cultures.
- Adapt their communication style when discussing sensitive or difficult issues.
- Develop strategies for maintaining positive professional relationships while addressing problems openly and constructively.
- Communicate more confidently within multicultural working environments.

Introduction and Group Discussion

The lesson began with an open discussion around different communication styles across cultures. Using a diagram comparing levels of directness and willingness to openly express disagreement across different countries, participants reflected upon their own professional experiences and considered some of the challenges that can arise when communicating difficult information internationally.



Understanding Face-Saving

Participants then watched the following video:



The Importance of 'Face' in China - Rupert Munton - ClarkMorgan Insights

30K views • 14 years ago

ClarkMorgan Insights

'Face' or 'mianzi' is a often misunderstood human characteristic, which plays an important role in China. Failure to understand its ...

CC

Link to the video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q69wH5HvIIQ>

The video introduces the concept of face-saving and explores how cultural misunderstandings can sometimes damage both communication and professional relationships. Group discussions focused on the consequences of direct confrontation and strategies for maintaining respect and trust when addressing mistakes, misunderstandings or disagreements.

Applying Cross-Cultural Communication Strategies

The primary speaking activity centred around a series of realistic workplace scenarios involving international business relationships. Participants considered situations involving inaccurate sales figures, quality issues, budget overruns and project delays before discussing culturally sensitive ways of responding.

Rather than simply identifying the problems presented, participants were encouraged to consider how they might:

- Communicate concerns clearly and professionally.
- Encourage openness and transparency.
- Preserve positive working relationships.
- Address difficult issues without unnecessarily causing somebody to lose face.

**Below is an example of one scenario*



Conflicting Signals About Sales Performance

As a European management team, you are reviewing quarterly sales results together with an Asian distribution partner. During the meeting, the partner presents sales figures and states confidently, "These numbers show that performance is very strong, and the market response has been very positive."

After the meeting, your internal analysis shows that the figures presented are **inaccurate**: some sales have been double-counted, and others are still provisional. You also learn through informal conversations that the partner is aware of these issues but has not corrected them publicly, possibly to avoid embarrassment or loss of credibility.

The Learning Effect

By combining authentic source materials with scenario-based discussions, participants developed greater confidence when communicating across cultures. The lesson was designed not only to introduce the concept of face-saving, but also to provide practical strategies for navigating difficult conversations within international business environments.

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These materials provide just a small insight into the bespoke training I create for companies and professionals. If you're looking for tailored Business English training that reflects the communication needs of your own organisation, I'd be delighted to discuss how we could work together.

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