

# How India works

Making sense of a complex corporate culture

**Aarti Kelshikar**

**Aarti Kelshikar is an intercultural consultant and coach with fifteen years experience in India, Singapore and the Philippines.**

**The swiss by nature are conservative, empirical minded and prefer to stick to rules. Fuzzy logic has no place in their thinking. Meetings cannot be held spontaneously. If you come to a meeting on time, you are late because you should have arrived a few minutes earlier so that the meeting could 'start on time'.**

**Whichever way you look at it, the prospect for an expat to live and work here with its unmatched diversity and contrasting character is complex at many levels.**

**Power distance Index, (PDI) is the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations and institutions accept and expect that power is distributed unequally.**

**Malaysia has a PDI of 100, China has 80,  
India 78, USA 40, Germany 36**

**Eric Labartette, former MD of Metro One operation comments that ‘ In India, a boss is like god’’. This may be a bit of an exaggeration, but there are vestiges of truth in this statement. In organizations headed by expats, people tend to look up to them more than Indians.**

**Ashish Vijayakar, a manager in a foreign bank says ' people don't react to you as a person. First they react to your designation, to the car you drive, to the watch you have on, so obviously it is a lot more materialistic.**



**In India, employees display initiative not as much in finding the solution, but in identifying the problem. There is a boss culture, rather than a team culture, people will look to the boss to find the solution.**

**On the flip side, a boss who is used to giving solutions and instructions may find it difficult to accept that someone else can come up with a solution.**

**Most importantly, the leader has to walk the talk. In India, leaders talk of empowering their subordinates but when the latter take decisions that don't plan put well, they don't support them.**

**When you come to India, said an NRI, you get a new last name, sir, followed by ji, or sahib. In general people aren't comfortable calling their bosses or seniors by their first name.**

**Hierarchy, even in an MNC seems to be alive and kicking.**

**What is imperative for a culture of openness is to have a good rapport or trust in place.**

**The culture of hierarchy if used well, allows a ruthless focus on efficiency, keeping the team on track through implementation.**

**In India when two senior people have a disagreement, they are not able to deal with it in a mature fashion. Invariably the boss has to step in to say, let's do this.**



**Hierarchy is effective but a leader or boss who issues clinical instructions, dictates directives and demands tasks to be carried out will be heard and obeyed, but not necessarily liked or respected.**

**A boss has to strike a balance between being authoritarian and also caring and concerned**

**Due to social pressures or expectations, upward mobility is perceived by a change in job titles. If one is in the same position for more than two years, that person may be perceived by his peers and family as not 'growing' or worse, stagnating.**

**In general, a polite but firm style works well. People want a boss to be nice but also someone who knows what he wants and is not afraid to seek it.**

**Hierarchy puts power at the top. How do you reverse it? Keep the hierarchy as it is and start empowering people under you. So you leave the system unchanged but you change the mindset.**

**If you sitting at the top are going to question everything, then you are promoting hierarchy.**

**Saving face is important across cultures and India is no exception. Indians are conscious of causing loss of face to others and about losing face themselves.**

**People care about how bad news is  
communicated, difficult conversations can  
take longer than elsewhere.**



**It is not often that one sees deeply embedded processes in place. Rather, it is an individual or a few people who make things work. So, work is more individual dependent and consequently relationship dependent.**

**So, things get worked around in India. I am not referring to a flagrant breaking of rules, but ton the slight tweaking of rules and bypassing the procedure.**

**Things are often 'adjusted' in order to accommodate requests and favors for friends, relatives, colleagues and perhaps clients.**

**All expats feel that Indians are friendly,  
warm, considerate and wanting to help.**

**A Japanese opined “ what struck me most about Indians was the lack of respect for personal space. Simple things like sharing the armrest on a flight or picking up the newspaper without permission from the neighbor’s seat pouch are culturally different. We in japan are very careful about the usage of shared space.**

**In a conversation in India, people tell you what they think you would like to hear rather than what they believe. With trust this gets better. After several chats, they get to the issues they have.**

# How a CEO built trust

1. I used to spend time on the floor with the teams every week
2. I would have townhalls and breakfast meetings
3. In starting a meeting, I would first have small talk and then get to the agenda
4. Showing emotion is a good way to build trust
5. Participate in celebrations
6. I spent a lot of time having conversations over tea.

**In India, to a large extent , work is life**



**India is not a country for the anonymous.  
You must be somebody to survive with  
dignity. Rank is the only acceptable  
substitute to money.**

**Indians place a huge premium on education, a good education is viewed as a gateway to a successful career and life.**

**At times, there is a sense that hard work matters more than results. A person will say, I worked all weekend, I couldn't finish the task or project, but I worked all weekend.**

**People try and push their way through, in that sense, its an intrusive work culture.**

**At dinner parties, Indian men tend to talk shop, notwithstanding that it's the end of the week and they are with their spouses.**

**Not only are Indians able to juggle and switch between the professional and the personal but they are also adept at balancing the rational and the traditional.**

**How women dress is a huge discussion point**

**It is important to understand that the code of conduct and the rules of behavior for men and women while they are changing now, are not exactly the same.**



**While Indians have a penchant for talking, there is also a tendency for people to not address the question asked. Or, to briefly address the question and then digress.**

**Broadly speaking Indians do not share the same enthusiasm for listening as they do for talking.**

**Indians talk without listening to what the other person is saying, very often cutting him off when he is in the middle of a sentence.**

**Indians have a tendency to write lengthy, at times rambling emails, which maybe unclear and confusing.**

**Mails from junior managers reek of subordination, are copied to irrelevant people and do not follow the simple rules of etiquette.**

**When people are conveying an idea or a concept, they tend to use 100 words when 10 will do.**

**Being to the point may actually be seen as a sign of rudeness and arrogance**

**Of all the people, I have dealt with, Indians response to e mails is terrible. You have to follow up with an SMS or a call.**



**Whether it is an external or internal meeting, it is a challenge to stick to a strict agenda in India.**

**Meetings are often free flowing, where one point can lead to another which can lead to a completely different topic.**

**On a lighter note, this habit of wanting to say something when there is no need for anything to be said comes from 'class participation' in MBA schools**

**Broadly speaking, there is a reticence and unwillingness to stand up for oneself or get into conflicts as Indians don't like to confront.**

**In general, there is more emotion on display at the workplace but dissent is less visible.**

**An expat said “ in my entire career, the most difficult performance appraisal reviews / pay reviews have been with Indians. Indians largely believe that they are underpaid, they should have a higher performance rating than they get.**

**Indians will challenge on pay and seniority  
but not in terms of anything strategic or  
technical.**

**One factor is the huge ambition, people want to make it big in a short time span, one that is often unrealistic.**



**Indians want to conquer the world in three or four years.**

**Indians will tell you what they think you want to hear, so the good news is shared but the bad news is underplayed or not shared.**

**There are small sections in the USA with whom you need to follow up. I would say 80 % of the people in the US meet their commitments and 20 % need follow up. In India, it is the reverse**

**The need to follow up is there, you cannot give directions and leave it. You need to have a strong reminder system**

**Its like saying, I trust you but I need to validate.**

**Indians find it difficult to say a frank NO.**

**Implementation is to a large extent dependent on leaders and their ability to articulate clear, specific, and tangible deliverables.**

**In India time is elastic, 2 minutes might mean an hour or whatever.**



**The main difference between working in India and elsewhere is the quality of the infrastructure. Not having the right infrastructure stops all of us from being the best we can be**

**If you have an appointment in the next three four days, then it will likely happen, if the appointment is a month away and blocked , as you get closer to the date, it will get cancelled. The culture of appointments is very different in India.**

**Meetings in India may not always have an agenda**

**The job gets done at the end of the day, the planning is poor, the process isn't structured and a lot of work happens at the last minute.**

**In general, working in India is less structured,  
processes aren't robust or streamlined**

**Things get done but not to the level you want it to. Often the approach is to 'fix' the issue temporarily so that it 'works'. The compromise is on quality.**

**Indians are not a patient race as evidenced by the jostling in queues or cutting traffic lanes.**

**The most important thing is to deal with ambiguity. If you are looking for clarity in any stakeholder engagement- be it the government, clients, staff, it's going to be a nebulous environment.**



**You have to design a team much more carefully in India. Here you have to make sure that there are not too many superstars in a team or too much overlapping agendas.**

**In India , you cannot take everyone at face value. The person who is polished or savvy is not the guy who does the work. Understand that things are not straight forward.**