

CROSS CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS

WORKING WITH INDONESIANS: SIX CRITICAL INCIDENTS

INTRODUCTION

The following 6 incidents involve encounters between Indonesians and Australians that in some way puzzle or concern the people involved. You are asked to read through the incidents and then try to select from four alternative explanations listed, why one or other party felt or acted the way they did. It is a way of learning more about intercultural encounters. Don't be too concerned about being right, it is more important for you to know why you selected a particular explanation of the misunderstanding that occurred.

I. THE SECTION HEADS MEETING

An Australian accountant with CSC, Robert, had been seconded to Indonesia to act as financial manager with CSC's joint venture partner PT Karya Indah. Robert had been working in Jakarta for 18 months, spoke Indonesian and was enjoying his assignment. The President Director of Karya Indah asked Robert to attend a meeting and brief Section Heads about a training program he had been working on. The substance of the program was already known to the people in attendance. The program was endorsed without much modification and the Director asked Bambang, a close colleague and friend of Robert's, to outline a project he had been working on to improve financial record keeping in regional offices. Again most of the people at the meeting were aware of the main thrust of the plan. Bambang outlined his proposal and his reasons for the approach taken. Robert asked Bambang some penetrating questions which forced Bambang to think quickly on his feet and defend his assumptions. When the report was finished the Director wound up the meeting. As he was leaving, Bambang told Robert that he couldn't meet for dinner as planned. Robert was surprised and concerned because Bambang seemed upset when he cancelled.

Of these four alternatives, which gives an insight into the reasons for Bambang's cancellation of the dinner appointment?

1. Bambang could not spare the time because he wanted to do more work on his proposal while the input from the meeting was fresh in his mind.

2. Bambang was jealous of the way Robert's proposal had passed on to the next phase with virtually no modification.
3. Bambang felt that Robert had not acted like a friend at the meeting.
4. The President Director had asked Bambang to re-think the basic assumptions of his proposal.

II. SPEAKING UP

Zainal had been appointed by Jakarta to represent his company's interests at the head office of their Australian joint venture partner in Melbourne. His relations with colleagues were cordial but, from Zainal's perspective, tended to be rather work oriented and formal. He was included in regular policy making sessions where he sat, rather quietly, while others generated ideas and came up with suggestions for future development.

At one such meeting, the topic of the Australian company's direction in Indonesia was on the agenda. After nearly two hours of discussion, as the meeting was winding up, Zainal, almost apologetically, made a suggestion. The local Assistant Managing Director, Allan Marshall, said almost immediately, "Why did you leave your suggestion till now? We needed your input all along." Zainal felt Allan's comment was rather harsh.

Which of the four alternatives below best explains this incident? Focus on a specific cultural difference in Zainal's experience compared with the experience of the Australians in Melbourne.

1. It is common in Indonesia for decisions to take a long time to be made. Zainal was expecting much more discussion before the company decided its new policy. When suddenly faced with the realization that his ideas had not been heard, he put them forward at the last minute.
2. Zainal did not want to stand out as an individual and therefore left his contribution until after others had spoken.
3. Zainal was overwhelmed by the new policy, procedures, people, and customs, and was not able to function appropriately in the new context.
4. Zainal was not confident with his use of the English language and therefore was reluctant to participate.

III THE NEW COMPUTER SYSTEM

Michelle is a computer programmer who has been working in Indonesia for six months in the Jakarta office of PT Indomode, joint venture partner of Ozmode, an Australian garment design company which is beginning to manufacture its garments in Indonesia. Michelle has a good understanding of Indonesian, and is working on the implementation of a financial records system that will streamline communication between the Australian and Indonesian partner firms.

Michelle is invited to attend a meeting of senior staff of Indomode called to discuss the purchase of a new computer system on the factory floor. Michelle has had no prior involvement in discussions about the computer purchase. The Director of Indomode attended the meeting but contributed little to discussions. Other staff, some from non-technical areas, seemed to introduce a whole range of information, much of which seemed irrelevant to Michelle. Yet these matters were discussed seriously alongside questions of more direct significance such as the costs of the tenders, the availability of trainers and so on. Everybody at the meeting had something to contribute, even though some people seemed to simply repeat what others had already said. There was no attempt to choose between different approaches to the technical problems they had to solve, in fact no-one seemed to even put the problem in those terms. As discussion proceeded, it appeared that there were some staff who preferred one set of equipment and training strategy, and others who favoured another approach. There was no vote taken on the merits of each proposal, just a lot of talk which seemed to go over most of what had been said already.

The meeting broke up when the Director thanked everybody for attending. No decision appeared to have been made, and Michelle was left rather perplexed by her first involvement in senior management decision making. A week later Michelle read in the company newsletter that Indomode planned to purchase computing equipment and a training package from a Japanese supplier. The announcement came from the Director and gave no reasons as to why the company had selected this particular package.

How would you interpret the failure to reach a decision at the meeting?

1. Indonesian managers are out of their depth when it comes to making decisions about complex equipment.
2. The meeting was so taken up by discussion of other matters that there was not enough time to cover the technical issues.

3. There was insufficient information available on the day to make a definite decision, and so no vote could be taken.

4. The meeting recognised that it was the Director who would make and announce the decision on purchase, and the meeting was prepared to let the Director take responsibility.

IV. A TRIP TO THE MOUNTAINS

Alex, a young Australian army officer studying Indonesian language in Jakarta, met Ami at a restaurant where he and his wife often ate. Ami, interested in having foreign friends and in improving his English language, struck up a conversation. Alex and his wife Linda were pleased to talk with Ami because they were keen to learn as much as they could about life in Jakarta. As they talked, Alex mentioned how hot he found Jakarta and how he and Linda longed to get out and spend some time in a more natural and less crowded landscape. Ami said that he was fond of hiking and frequently went to the mountain city Bandung for recreation. He said he would be pleased to invite Alex and Linda to join him on his next trip, and said he would arrange everything.

When Alex and Linda met Ami at Gambir Railway Station in Jakarta they found he had brought along about fifteen friends, all of whom were very friendly and seemed interested in talking with the two Australians. Alex was upset at the inclusion of so many people on the trip and was very quiet during the rest of the weekend. Ami was very puzzled at Alex's reaction. He could not understand why, when he had gone to such lengths to call his friends and arrange the trip, Alex and Linda did not seem pleased.

How would you interpret Alex and Linda's disappointment?

1. Ami's orientation to activities is group related, where Alex and Linda's tends to be individualistic.
2. The area around Bandung was not the kind of open space hiking area Alex had expected.
3. Alex and Linda were being selfish, thinking that they would receive less attention from Ami.
4. Alex and Linda suddenly felt shy and out of their depth with the others, all of whom seemed to be talking excitedly amongst themselves.

V THE PLAY'S THE THING

Les was assigned to Indonesia as technical advisor in the accounting division of his Australian company's joint venture partner. Les was posted to Surabaya where he had a senior financial management role. During the university holidays, Les' son Rick joined his parents. Rick was studying Asian Studies at Griffith University and had just finished a semester on popular art forms in Java. Les arranged for his son to take the two sons of a close Indonesian colleague, Suryo, to a Ludruk performance in Surabaya one weekend. His colleague seemed very pleased with the invitation and gave his permission for the outing.

A week or so later, Les' colleague called into his office and in casual conversation began to talk about how difficult it often was in Indonesia being posted to parts of the country they were not familiar with, and that sometimes they had to attend functions and meet people who were not like them and who had been brought up in different ways. Suryo finished up by saying he was looking forward to being able to take his family back to Solo one day, as he found life in Surabaya rather boisterous and undignified. Tell Rick that I'd love to introduce him to the wayang puppet plays and the gamelan music of Solo, Suryo said to Les, then he'll really understand the quality of Indonesian art.

What was the point of Suryo's comments on life in Surabaya?

1. The outing between Rick and Suryo's children had reminded him of his days as a young man in Solo, and he was sentimentally recalling his life there.
2. Suryo did not like his sons mixing socially with foreigners.
3. Suryo felt that Ludruk was a low class art form and he did not want his children seen at performances.
4. Suryo was indirectly letting Les know that he wanted a transfer out of Surabaya.

VI BIT OF A GIGGLE

Julia was a single, 45 year old Australian woman hired by P T Setia to instruct junior level management in English language for business purposes. Julia was an experienced teacher having spent time in a number of different countries. This was her first posting to Indonesia. She was enjoying her work and the people, and was attempting to learn Indonesian through night classes, unbeknownst to her students. One morning Julia approached Anwar during the class coffee break and said, using her new language

skills, that she had missed seeing him over the last few weeks. Anwar began to giggle, and said he was sorry, he had been out of town. Although she was put off by Anwar's laughter, which she had difficulty understanding, Julia kept the conversation going because she had always found Anwar to be courteous and pleasant. Were you seeing your family? Julia asked again, in slow, careful Indonesian. Yes, yes, said Anwar, again breaking into laughter, I saw my family in Padang, one of my brothers had passed away, and he laughed again. Julia moved away, disturbed and hurt by Anwar's laughter. Does he really find my Indonesian so bad that he can't help himself from laughing, even when we were talking about something serious, she thought to herself.

What is a good explanation to Anwar's reaction to Julia's conversation?

1. Anwar was amused to think that this spinster teacher had noticed he was absent, and that she would say that she missed him. He was amused to think that she saw him as attractive and available.
2. Anwar had been out of town and was unaware that Julia had been learning Indonesian. Hearing his English teacher speak his language in such a hesitant manner broke him up.
3. Laughter is a way of covering up personal emotions and embarrassing situations in Indonesia.
4. Anwar was so happy to see his teacher again that he could not help laughing even though recent events had been personally very upsetting.

SECTION HEADS - Rationales for the Alternative Explanations

(1) You chose 1. It is possible that Bambang wanted to improve his proposal, but there was no pressure to do so immediately. Moreover, if Bambang did want to re-think his outline, dinner with Robert who had suggested changes would be to his benefit. Please choose again.

(2) You chose 2. It is possible that Bambang is jealous of Robert's success, but jealousy does not constitute such a general reaction in Indonesia for this to be a likely explanation here. Bambang knew that everybody in the meeting was well aware of his proposal, including the Director, and he probably knew that his proposal would be approved, so there is no particular reason to be jealous of his friend. Please choose again.

(3) You chose 3. This is the best answer. In Australia, Robert knows that one can be a friend and a critic who makes constructive (but not personal) comment on professional matters. In fact, if friends don't help out with suggestions to improve a proposal, they might be accused of not helping out when they could. Robert is also aware that in Australia professional staff are expected to be analytic and to show their ability to think through implications of specific suggestions. **But in Indonesia, the roles of friend and critic are distinct.** The same person cannot be both a friend and someone who makes public criticism of a friend's proposals. People in Indonesia have expectations about how friends should behave, and Robert broke those expectations.

If Robert had later, in private, and in an indirect, light hearted way, raised some of his criticisms with Bambang, then Bambang would probably have been willing to listen and consider what was said.

(4) You chose 4. The Director might have wanted Bambang to improve his proposal, but would have been unlikely to ask Bambang to do it immediately. The Director was well aware of the proposal and had not indicated any lack of confidence with what was planned. If he did want to review the plan, it is likely that he would do so some time after Bambang's unhappy experience had faded. Please choose again.

SPEAKING UP - Rationales for the Alternative Explanations

(1) You chose 1. This is a good answer. It is, however, a stereotype that in developing countries it takes longer to complete a task. Meetings sometimes last a long time in Australia, and it can take a long time to make a decision. Zainal had attended many meetings and would have been aware of how proceedings were

structured. But he may not have been in Australia long enough to assimilate behaviour reflecting a deep cultural difference. A difference of this kind is involved here and there is a better explanation. Please choose again.

(2) Indonesia is a collectivist society where the group often comes before any action of the individual. Zainal was acting as he would in his own country. Rather than drawing attention to himself as an idea person seeking attention, he made his suggestions at the close of the meeting in the hope that less attention would be paid to the originator of the ideas. It is important for managers working with different nationalities to be aware of different decision making processes of those present so as to benefit fully from all possible input and to prevent misunderstanding. This is the response which best reflects culturally determined behavioural differences.

(3) Although Zainal may have had trouble adjusting, there is nothing to suggest that this was the cause of his behaviour. Please choose again.

(4) There is no evidence that this was the problem. Zainal had been especially selected for his job, and had attended many meetings. It is unlikely that if his language was poor he would have continued to be invited. There is a better explanation.

THE NEW COMPUTER SYSTEM - Rationales for the Alternative Explanations

(1) You chose 1. This reflects a stereotyped view that people from developing countries are not technically sophisticated. There is nothing to suggest that this is so. In fact the company seems intent on improving its technological edge and has employed an expert programmer for financial management control, and has a number of senior staff who are professionally trained in modern garment production using computer assisted techniques. There is a better explanation.

(2) You chose 2. Technical issues were discussed, and apparently to people's satisfaction - in fact some of the points raised were repeated seemingly for emphasis. There were other matters raised, but nobody seemed impatient with them, and they seemed prepared to consider them seriously. Please choose again.

(3) You chose 3. There was no suggestion made at the meeting that there was any lack of information. All present, including the technical staff and the Director, appeared satisfied with the information presented. There did not seem to be any particular pressure to resolve the issue in the meeting.

(4) You chose 4. Indonesians favour a consensus approach to decision making and use meetings to go over a whole range of issues which might have some bearing on the decision. No vote was taken because that would have seemed coercive. The Director did not announce his preference on the day because he did not want to seem to put down some of his senior staff in public. Indonesian society is comfortable with large differences in power in organisations, and as long as staff are consulted, they are prepared to let the most senior figure make a final choice. The Director preserved everybody's "face" by not forcing a decision on the day. This is the best explanation.

A TRIP TO THE MOUNTAINS - Rationales for the Alternative Explanations

(1) You chose 1. **Indonesians have a collectivist or group oriented culture.** It is fairly common for them to plan social or club outings together. When Indonesians plan an activity, it is rare for them to invite just one or two others. Alex and Linda come from a highly individualistic society where people prefer to do things on a one-to-one basis. This is the best explanation.

(2) You chose 2. Certainly Bandung is not like The Blue Mountains or The Dandenongs, but Alex and Linda were well-informed about Indonesian terrain and would not expect to find the Australian bush in West Java. They had, after all, agreed with Ami that Bandung would be a nice trip away. It is unlikely that Alex and Linda's disappointment was directly related to the landscape. Look for another reason.

(3) Certainly Alex and Linda would not have Ami's undivided attention, and perhaps they wouldn't learn as much from him. But there were many others in the group they could exchange ideas with, and all seemed eager to help. This is not the best explanation of the encounter. Please try again.

(4) It is a strain to mix with foreigners, and it is often difficult to mix with people all of whom seem to know each other. But both Alex and Linda are keen to mix with Indonesians, and the Indonesians themselves seem very interested to talk with Linda and Alex. There is nothing to suggest that Alex and Linda are a shy couple. There is a better explanation - please choose again.

THE PLAY'S THE THING - Rationales for the Alternative Explanations

(1) You chose 1. It is possible that Suryo was just passing the time of day and reminiscing about his youth.

But his comments about Surabaya seemed to have a wider significance. There is a better explanation.

(2) You chose 2. It is possible that this is so, but if it was true, it is more likely that Suryo would have simply said that his sons could not come because they had a family function planned. There is a better explanation.

(3) You chose 3. This is the best explanation. Ludruk is a form of street theatre popular amongst the lower classes. Suryo has his social position as a senior executive to keep up and he felt that his children attending street theatre might be taken as a lack of proper guidance from their father. Suryo also feels that it is not proper for the son of his high status foreign colleague to mix with the lower classes. He did not refuse the invitation because Rick was so keen to attend, and he felt his sons would make sure Rick did not come to any harm. But he did not want the interest to continue, and indirectly suggested that there were other, higher quality arts for Rick to enjoy.

(4) You chose 4. Perhaps Suryo did want a transfer out of Surabaya where he felt culturally out of place. But Les was not in a position to influence Suryo's transfer, as that was a decision for the Indonesian President Director in Jakarta. Suryo's comments about Rick and the arts seemed unrelated to the question of a transfer. Please choose again.

BIT OF A GIGGLE - Rationales for the Alternative Explanations

(1) You chose 1. It is possible that Anwar thought that Julia's interest was more than simple courtesy. But young Indonesian men have very conventional ideas about proper relations between men and women, and it is unlikely that Anwar would make this assumption about sexual interest unless there were other, much stronger indications from Julia. There is a better explanation.

(2) You chose 2. Indonesians are usually delighted by foreigner's attempts to learn their language, and are usually very complimentary and encouraging about even the most halting efforts. It is unlikely that Anwar would laugh at Julia's attempts, he would be far more likely to praise her and encourage her to say more. As he says nothing about her Indonesian, it seems that language is not the stimulus for his laughter. Please choose again.

(3) You chose 3. This is the best answer. In Indonesia laughter is one way of relieving tension and helping people get over difficult or embarrassing situations. Anwar was concerned that his teacher might think he had been missing class because he wasn't interested, and he

was also embarrassed because his absence was related to a very upsetting personal loss. Laughter suggests that there is no need for others to take on your cares and worries, it is an attempt to prevent others from being disturbed and upset. At the same time, if others laugh at someone else's misfortune, it is taken as a way of saying we care, our laughter will help you restore your happiness.

(4) You chose 4. Anwar might have been happy to see his teacher, but there is nothing to suggest that he was especially so. He had never been more than courteous and pleasant in his contacts with her. If he had been happy to see her, a warm smile would be an appropriate reaction. There is a better explanation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The incidents and approach above are based on R. W. Brislin et al. Intercultural Interactions: A Practical Guide. Sage, Beverly Hills 1986. Incidents I, II and IV are adapted from incidents in the Guide. Incidents III, V and VI reflect the author's experience. All events, organisations and people described are fictional.