

SAY THREE NICE THINGS FOR EVER ...

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One of the joys of teaching ESL is that it allows us to cross cultural boundaries and to discover that the values we assumed were universal are actually aspects of American culture and not simply the way that all peoples think.

One value that has heavily influenced education is the American cultural attitude towards giving negative feedback. Compared to many cultures in the world, Americans can be very indirect in the way they give criticism. This is reflected in the American saying, "Say three nice things for every negative thing you say." This thought shows how Americans tend to wrap negative statements in copious positive comments.

Consider how an American teacher might give feedback on a poorly written paper that was so badly organized that it couldn't even be understood? She might say something like

Your first sentence made me very interested to read the rest of your paper. You didn't have any spelling mistakes, and I liked the funny story you had on page two. You could improve the paper by working on its organization a little bit more.

Now to an American, this is such an obvious way to give feedback. We rarely give direct negative feedback; it usually is adorned with numerous positive statements. We also use what are called *downgraders*, words that soften the criticism such as *kind of*, *sort of*, *a little*, *a bit*, and *maybe*, so that the force of the negative message is indirect.

I want to ask you to try a little thought experiment and pretend for a moment that you are the student hearing this feedback but you are not an American student and you bring no particular cultural expectations to the meeting. What do you hear in the teacher's words? I hear my teacher give me three compliments and a minor little suggestion for change. I guess my paper must be really good!

You might think that no one would make that mistake of interpretation, but you would be wrong, because there are cultures where criticism is given much more directly and is not submerged in positive comments. For example, French culture is known for being direct in giving negative comments but much more indirect in giving positive feedback, the opposite of American culture!

In *The Culture Map*, Erin Meyer tells a humorous story of a French expatriate Sabine, "a highly energetic finance director" who moved from her native France to take a two-year assignment in Chicago that she had been seeking for a number of years. Meyer, an expert on cross-cultural business communication based in France, had prepped Sabine for her move to American culture. After four months in the U.S., Meyer called Sabine's American boss for a pre-scheduled follow-up conversation to see how the move was going.

Jake, Sabine's boss, gave a critical evaluation. He said,

... there are several critical things that I need Sabine to change about the way she is working, and I don't see her making an effort to do so.... I have spoken to her a handful of times about these things, but she is not getting the message. She just continues with her same work patterns. I spoke to her last Thursday about this again, but there's still no visible effort on her part.... We had her performance review this morning and I detailed these issues again. We'll wait and see. But if she doesn't get in gear with these things, I don't think this job is going to work out.

Meyer, understandably concerned, later called Sabine to ask her how the job was going. She replied,

Things are going great! My team is terrific. I've really been able to connect with them. And I have a great relationship with my boss. *Je m'épanouis!* ["I'm blossoming."] For the first time in my career, I've found a job that is just perfect for me.... Oh, and I have to tell you—I had my first performance review this morning. I'm just delighted! It was the best performance review I have had since starting with this company. I often think I will try to extend my stay beyond these two years, things are going so well.

Why was there such a misunderstanding between the American boss and the French employee? Upon probing deeper, Meyer identified how the opposing values of American culture and French culture led to the breakdown in communication. As mentioned earlier, Americans tend to give positive evaluations openly while negative evaluations are wrapped in positive comments. French culture tends to give negative feedback more directly and positive feedback implicitly. Thus, it was not surprising that when Sabine received her performance review, she heard the positive comments and didn't hear the negative ones because she and her boss had different expectations for what each meant.

If you are an ESL teacher here in the United States, how might you apply an awareness of cultural difference to your work? First, I am not suggesting that you suddenly change your way of giving negative feedback to students by being very direct and eliminating all the softening statements Americans add. If you did, you would be considered rude and harsh in an American school system! Rather, I wanted to show you that when you cross a cultural boundary, the person you are talking to might not truly hear you. The same words when filtered through different cultural understandings can mean different things.