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Do You Cycle or Swim?

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Communication and coordination are among the most challenging areas when working with geographically distributed teams spread across different time zones, countries, and cultures. Though English is spoken in several countries, usage and accent differ from country to country. Do you find it difficult to communicate and coordinate with geographically distributed teams or customers? Do you find it hard to decipher their accent or pronunciation? Are your team members going through these issues? If yes, this article is for you!

When we find it difficult to understand our customers and partners, we need to ask ourselves the following two questions. First, are we competent in our working language with respect to reading, speaking, listening, and writing in a business context? Second, is the accent of our conversation partner unique and hard to understand? The first question is about our competency in business communication. Language competency in business English makes us confident. When we are confident, we become less fearful in deciphering unfamiliar accents. We also take the initiative to ask our conversation partner to repeat or slow down at the right time.

What makes a phone conversation different from email communication? “Email is asynchronous. Phone conversation is synchronous.” This is what I hear from techies. That is an obvious difference. But we must think deeper in order to identify the nuances that differentiate these two forms of communication.

You can read an email several times before preparing your response. You can review and revise your message and consult others before making the final cut and clicking send. Your eyes, brain, and hands coordinate in the process of reading and responding to emails. You can afford to accommodate interruptions or do context switching when you are in the midst of an email.

When you are in a conference call, you are in real-time communication. Your eyes, brain, ears, mouth, tongue, vocal chords, and hands coordinate in this process. Lack of coordination and harmony can derail a conference call. Interruption in any form is a no-no. Think for a moment – do we browse, read emails, or have a quick talk with team members when a conference call is in progress?

What are you used to? What are your eyes, brain, ears, mouth, tongue, and vocal chords used to? Naturally, if those parts are not used to English, you are going to find it very challenging to make sense out of conference calls. You will struggle to understand. You will freeze when you feel like asking a question. You will limit yourself to minimalistic forms of informal English and fail to get the best out of the call.

Imagine throwing someone who does cycling (and only cycling) for several hours a day into a swimming pool for 60 minutes! It will be a disastrous situation – unless that person is also a confident swimmer.

At work, some of us are strengthening our brain, mouth, tongue, and vocal chords consistently only, unfortunately, in local languages. We are not giving adequate focus to our business language. Naturally, this puts a lot of stress on us when we attempt to start a conference call with a customer in the evening. We cycle all day, and then throw ourselves in the swimming pool. When this happens, we manage to swim by tactically remaining in the shallow end of the pool. When we have conference calls, we are not communicative enough. We do not ask enough questions. We use minimalistic English to avoid embarrassment. That is an opportunity lost!

Every conference call with a geographically distributed team or a customer is an opportunity to know more – about requirements, designs, expectations; an opportunity to get clarity – by asking relevant questions, by validating our understanding; and an opportunity to build relationships. When our language competency in business English results in a mental block, we misunderstand the whole issue as an accent issue and are sent to quick-fix programs or sessions. These programs do not help! We could also watch numerous Hollywood movies. These also would not add significant value. In the end, nothing has changed and we wonder what to do! If you want to improve your (as well as your team's) participation in and contribution to conference calls involving geographically distributed teams or customers, you cannot let your team members cycle all day, then throw them into a swimming pool for an hour in the evening! Here are some tips for you and your team members to consistently improve your business English skills.

To-Do List:

1. Read aloud: 30 minutes every day. This is necessary to get your brain, eyes, and vocal chords used to English. Do this for 90 days.
2. Listen: Watch BBC News or CNN 30 minutes every day. This will get you acclimatized to a specific accent. Do this for at least 90 days.
3. Talk: When everyone around you knows English, speak English! This helps us overcome the fear of talking and improves our ability to respond.

- If you go out for a cup of coffee with someone, make it an opportunity to converse in English.
- Set up a 1-1 meeting once or twice a month with your tech lead or project manager and speak in English.
- At the lunch table, try English!

When you talk to your team members in English, you are also providing them the opportunity to speak in English. If you don't do this, won't you feel guilty next year during their performance appraisal discussions? Won't you feel guilty when you say, "You need to improve your communication skills so that you can handle conference calls independently" to some of your team members? When you maneuver through your workday very comfortably using local languages, what is the guarantee that your team members are going to improve their communication skills in English?

When you speak in English 90% of the time, you are creating an opportunity for everyone in your team! During the other 10% of the time – especially when there are tough situations or special occasions – you can use your local language to connect well with colleagues. This is a great technique for bonding within teams. If you use local languages 100% of the time and make it a daily affair, you are going to miss this opportunity as well. Think about it!

4. Read: Read English-language articles or books written by famous authors for anywhere from 30 to 60 minutes a day.

Conference Call Tips

Assuming that you are going to attend a conference call at 4:30 p.m.:

1. Complete all your activities (such as having the status report ready, gathering additional information, listing questions to be asked, etc.) by 4:15 p.m.
2. Take a ten-minute break. Visit the washroom and freshen up. Read the status report couple of times.
3. Dial at 4:25 p.m. Start the conference call.
4. If you are talking to Alan and his voice is not audible, feel free to say, "Alan, could you please speak up?" Or, "Alan, I am not able to hear you. The volume is too low. Could you please come closer to the phone?"
5. Feel free to ask questions during the call to get additional information. If you have a question, say, "Alan, I have a question. Should I ask now or wait till later?"
6. At logical ends or at the end of every segment, respond by saying, "Alan, let me tell you my understanding of this ... Is this correct?"

7. One person at a time! Avoid communicating among team members in the conference room when someone is talking on phone.
8. At the end, take the initiative to summarize and articulate the list of action items.
9. After the conference call, send a meeting summary that includes a list of action items. Make sure that the meeting summary is read and that feedback is provided.

When you are competent and confident, you will find ways to decipher new accents. It is all right to make adjustments to these suggestions, including the 90/10 rule. However, even minor corrections to this approach open the danger of sliding down a slippery slope! Until we become conversant, confident, and competent in English, we need to take certain steps to reach this milestone. Once we have done so, 90/10 is a good form of maintenance. Try an approach that suits you for a week, reflect on it, make course corrections, and move forward! Feel free to internalize and customize these ideas to meet your own goals. ■

> about the author

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