

## **Conflict resolution: working with Indians. Case study**

**Ramona Georgiana Moldovan (Bratosin)**

PhD Candidate

International Business and Economics

The Bucharest University of Economic Studies

Dacia Bvd. No.41, Bucharest, 010404, Romania

Email: ramonageorgianamoldovan@yahoo.it

### **Abstract**

*The article analyzes conflicts arising from the work relationships with Indian employees in a multinational company. The article tries to explain these conflicts in terms of cultural differences, but also in terms of process defects. The article suggests some strategies and measures that can be implemented in the resolution of both types of conflicts, cultural and originating from the process. If till now conflicts arising from the work relationships with Indian employees were settled by employees or managers, the article suggests that it would be appropriate to seek the services of a specialist in conflict resolution or to require even a suggestion on resolving each conflict. It would be even recommended that the company hires several specialists to handle such problems.*

**Keywords:** conflict resolution, mediation, negotiation, cultural differences, Indian culture

### **1.Introduction**

In the era of globalization more and more companies are expanding into other countries and even other continents in an effort to record larger revenue, or as a result of the conquest of new markets, either through lower expenses with salaries, office administration, etc.

Most companies have made the decision to relocate production or services in countries and areas such as China, India, Malaysia, Mexico, South America, Eastern Europe, etc., thanks to the very low cost of production and to the low cost of labor force.

But the relocation of production in these areas is not only about winning opportunities, but also about facing legal, political and other types of challenges. Companies should not neglect especially cultural differences.

There should be an analysis of cultural differences before relocation and the company should establish the strategic approach in case of conflict. Also, after the completion of the relocation process it is necessary for the members of each culture to be notified about the cultural differences and to be given training on intercultural communication.

Proper management of cultural differences and correct strategic approach have a substantial impact on customer satisfaction. A crisis caused by intercultural conflicts within the firm can be felt by customers, resulting in the loss of some of them to competition. In an article is shown that customer service strategy must take into account the cultural differences. "We will set out why such a customer

service strategy means making strategic decisions incorporating cultural diversity. Making the wrong decisions will in the worst-case scenario result in substantial loss of resources and customer defection. The key is to manage customer service centers to satisfy customers better than the competition does and that can be done by using cultural differences as a competitive advantage " (Wursten, Fadrhonc & Roersoe, 2009).

## **2.Methodology**

The research was conducted between 2009 and 2012 at an IT company. Research tools used were direct observation and discussions with employees, managers or employees who had contact with Indians. Data were also collected through direct discussions with employees from India. Research is important because it provides information on conflicts that occur between Europeans and Indians in the workplace and on how to resolve these conflicts. Large companies that have business in India can understand what types of conflicts can expect and how they can avoid or resolve them when they occur. The study may be useful also for Indian firms operating in Europe.

## **3.Literature review**

The literature is rich in the field of cultural differences. Important research was done by House and collaborators on a number of 62 societies (House et al., 2004). Hofstede conducted the most comprehensive study of how values in the workplace are influenced by culture. He analyzed a large number of data based on employee values scores collected by IBM between 1967 and 1973 in over 70 countries. (Hofstede, 2001). Works were written on culture in general, on how to understand cultures and cultural differences (Geertz, 1973), on how culture influences human progress (Harrison & Huntington, 2000) and on the impact of culture in organizations and on organizational culture (Hofstede, Trompenaars & Hampden,1997 and Turner, 1998). A real interest for understanding the subject has a work written by Eliade on the history of religions (1968).

## **4.Values and beliefs in Indian culture**

For a deeper understanding of Indian culture we should review some aspects of religion.

In 2001 most of the population of India was of Hindu religion. From a population of 827.5 millions people, 80.5%, over 138 millions were Hindus (Office of The Registrar General & Census Commissioner India, 2011).

India is the cradle of Hinduism. Hinduism was born in that space four millennia ago. This is the reason why it is so much diversified; as Delahoutre said (1995) " there is not only one Hinduism, but more Hinduism". Hinduism is a polytheistic religion. Hindus believes that the world was created by several gods, such as the fire god Agni, the moon god Chandra, the sun god Surya, etc., which they divided between areas. There is one trinity associated with the great creator, formed by Shiva, Vishnu and Brahma.

The basic idea underpinning Hinduism, and Buddhism in general, is to attain Nirvana. Nirvana is associated with that stage the person's soul no longer reincarnates, thus putting an end to the cycle of

successive reincarnations. The soul is thus released. According to Buddhist belief, reincarnation is the result of acts committed in past lives. Hinduism is based on the law of action and reaction. If a person leads an exemplary life without sin and full of virtues, he will find peace, he will no longer get lost in the cycle of successive lives and he can reach the state of Nirvana. There is also the belief that the life we live, the family we have and the caste we are born into are the result of past lives. Indians therefore accept their fate as a given, as a predestination and they are not allowed to move from a lower caste to a higher caste. Their whole existence is closely related to religion. They try to behave according to religious rules and not to break them, in order to evolve spiritually and to acquire a better future existence, being reborn as possible in an upper caste or ending long series of existence (karma) by tapping Nirvana or Supreme Absolute (Brahma). The soul liberation is made through knowledge and devotion to a deity and by committing ritual. Rituals are officiated in family. Every family has one person in charge to celebrate sacred rituals. In Hinduism there is no notion of sin against God. Sins are the result of our ignorance against our ego, of forgetting our identity.

Another principle of this faith is to be in harmony with nature and ourselves, to respect everything around us to be kind and loving to others and to show compassion. Religion has a certain dose of animism, considering that a soul can reincarnate not just a human being, but an animal too. Also for Hindus people world is transient, unlike for Christians that perceive it as God's creation.

According to monistic faith, man is regarded as a manifestation of the Supreme Absolute, of Brahma, is one thing with the Absolute and does not have individual or personal value. Brahma is impersonal and distant; it is not involved in the affairs of the humanity. Man, as a manifestation of God must know himself, but not by logical reasoning, rather through a spiritual, transcendental, deep experience, of knowing the ego and the ego is equivalent to the Absolute. Pantheistic belief, however, considers man as different from God. One must be a good servant of Krishna, the personal God, and to acquire Krishna consciousness.

### **5.Cultural differences**

Cultural differences can generate conflicts. The differences between the two cultures are higher, the potential risks are greater. The only way to avoid problems is to know the values, customs, traditions, rituals of the other culture.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, almost everything in Indian culture is viewed and analyzed through the prism of religion. The multitude of religions, religious sects appeared in the 4,000 years of Hinduism, has led to a predisposition of Indians to religious tolerance. If Europeans are more reserved with regard to other religions, Indians easily accept and respect the religious beliefs of others. This does not mean that Indians have no taboos against certain behaviors of the Europeans. Rather, they feel aggrieved, offended by certain attitudes. For example, if in Europe in general is normal and even desirable somebody open a gift when receive it, thus showing respect for the person who has given the gift, in India is not polite to open gifts in front of the others. It is considered that the pleasure, the joy of receiving a gift has to be quietly "savored" in privacy. The person who received the gift can, after seeing it, thank the person who gave the gift and can tell how pleased he/she was by receiving the present.

Indians are very sociable. They are part of a collectivist culture and feel the necessity to communicate, socialize even with people they do not know, with people they meet on the street. It is a common habit, even in relationships between colleagues or business relationships, that a person is invited by Indians to the dinner. It is assumed that who makes the invitation, pays for the meal. It is recommended that invitations are honored.

Typically, Europeans, like Americans, are more direct in their business relationships or with colleagues at work. More communicative are the persons who belong to cultures of Southern Europe and Eastern Europe. For Indians is quite difficult to understand this lack of communication. When a European or American starts a conversation with a colleague, greets firstly, perhaps he asks "how are you?", and then he enter the subject. The conversation for Indians is a whole ritual. Firstly they salute, then they exchange other questions about the other or the other's family as "how are you?", "where have you spent the weekend?", "How is your family?", "how is at work?," "are you tired?". Comments are made after receiving the answers. The person who asks the questions expect that he is also asked the same questions. Only after ending this ritual they enter the subject. At the end of the discussion, after solving the problem, the ritual resumes and the persons thank each other, expressing their pleasure of being worked together, they greet each other and they promise to keep in touch.

Conversation for Indians is a pleasure, a ritual with pre-defined rules. The purpose of conversation is not only to solve a problem, but also to create a relationship. It might be told that for the Indians is important the relationship itself, not the problem. Conversation is a tool for establishing relationships, creating harmony and stability. Ritual conversation is another feature of collective culture.

If in Europe and USA the differences between the duties and occupations of persons of different sexes are coming to be minor, these differences are still prevailing in India. Women and men have well-defined roles in society, especially in traditional families. Women have not reached the degree of independence enjoyed by women in Europe. In India men avoid to shake hands with women, but they greet verbally or with palms together.

Respect is very important to Indians. It is mandatory that a young man greets the elder. Hindus, ask the blessing of the elders by touching their feet. Even in corporations, when younger employees address the older, they are using the person's last name. I have encountered situations when the discussion was by email. The young Indian did not know how old is the person who he was interacting with and preferred to use the appellation "madam", showing deep respect to that person. Although the discussion is lead between people of the same age or different sexes, the behavior is also polite, and is used the first name of the person.

Power distance in India is high. It is maintained also by the belief in human inequality and by belonging to different castes, as a result of acts committed in previous lives. Employees respect managers, considering them as mentors, counselors and even as some older, wiser, experienced relatives, or persons with greater authority. Employees are very dependent on managers and ask them

for advice in most of the decisions, which rarely happens in Europe. European or American corporations' control is of lower intensity. Generally, employees are assigned greater powers of decision-making, they are more independent, and the power distance is low. This does not mean that they are not controlled. But the system is somewhat different. Employees are trained firstly, before taking the tasks and they are verified several times during the year. And depending on the results they are proposed for improvement or promotion. In contrast, in India the responsibility is to managers and employees are often just performers. Employee-manager relationship could be characterized as a paternalistic relationship. An European could perceive the Indian type of control as restraining independence and freedom of action, and an Indian could perceive the European type of control as too permissive, and he could have the impression that he is not protected and helped. Indians also use to work after working hours, thus giving proof of loyalty to the company. The company on turn reward employees for their loyalty by offering awards or promotions. Because of the collectivistic trait of the Indian culture, employment and promotion are based on loyalty and relationship.

As a male culture, Indian culture encourages competition. The promotion based on thank you emails is an often practice. In the Indian culture, employees are encouraged to inform the manager on their results and on the feedback received from customers or people they work with. Employees can be promoted based on positive assessments and praises.

In India people accept things as they are. Although they avoid making mistakes, when they fail, mistakes are allowed, based on the premise that no one is perfect and mistakes can be repaired. Mistake is seen as something acceptable, as characteristic for human being. Summarizing, we might use the Latin phrase *errare, humanum est*. But this does not mean that employees are not trying to improve. When they are reminded that something is not right, the first reaction is to contest, but then they quickly fix their mistake. Not few times we can see ID statuses on social networks or on instant communication tools as *errors make me perfect*. This statement demonstrates that errors can be an opportunity to realize that something is not done right, and that an acknowledged problem is half solved. Gaining experience can not be done without failing.

Indian culture is a polychronic culture. In India, time seems to be measured in other units of measure. For Indians time seems to run slower. What for a western person (European or American) is an hour, for an Indian can mean more. Therefore most of the times, Indians are not punctual. It happens that an Indian change his mind or changes the plan at the last minute, what for a person from West can be very stressful.

Indians are very generous and kind. They offer flowers to a person in order to show their appreciation and gratitude. Kindness can be a major asset in business, especially in the sales relations between seller and client. Kindness can make the client feel overwhelmed by attention and emotions, and determine it to buy.

In India there is a real cult for and inner purity. This purity is reflected on the places, which are considered sacred. Shoes can not be used in temples, because temples are sacred places, which could

thus be desecrated. Many times, shoes are not used in house too, because of the same reason. In some Indian traditions the influence of Islam can be felt. A common habit to Hindus and Muslims is to eat or receive something with the right hand, never the left. Right hand is associated with cleanliness, while the left hand with dirt.

## **6. Conflicts present in working relationships with India and their resolution**

The studied company, because of the business specificity, develops working relationships with India. Collaboration with Indian employees is a challenge for European workers. Neither for Indian workers is easy to work with us, Europeans, because of cultural differences and because of the challenges involved in everyday activities.

The study has identified a number of conflicts due to different sources.

I think that the main challenges are due to cultural differences, and most of the conflicts have been identified in this area.

I will give some examples in order to understand more clearly the subject.

I identified conflicts related to differences in *the perception of time*. India's role in the corporation is to process requests from clients, "filtered" firstly by European employees, such as the introduction or changes of data in the system database. Indian employees receive requests from European workers and must process them in a certain time. I encountered many cases when, although requests were urgent, the Indians were slow to process. If they were asked how much time will imply finishing the task, they used to estimate fewer time than real or than expected by European employees.

This is not beneficial to the business, because European workers can do some calculations on their own time management. If the processing implies a longer time period than expected, and customers expect urgent response, they may be dissatisfied because of the delay. The dissatisfaction seriously impact the business and it can lead to major financial losses.

How can these problems be solved? I have always sustained the middle way. If the question is who should adapt to whom, the answer is obviously that both sides should make a compromise. As we know, the values, attitudes, beliefs, habits change very slowly or not at all. Such a change requires time and patience. But if both parties join efforts to understand and adapt to the culture of the other, the time of finding a "common denominator" is significantly reduced.

Regarding the resolution of conflicts arising from different perceptions of time, firstly employees, managers or specialists have to talk to Indian colleagues as to explain why it is so important that the customer's requests are resolved quickly. Indian colleges must realize that customer dissatisfaction will not only affect business, but it will affect them. If the requests' processing is not done in time, then relocation of production in India is no longer profitable for the organization and appear the potential risk that all there remain without jobs. Some very important values in Indian culture, as

honor and respect to the client, as concern for the others and as group harmony, can be included in discussions.

*Differences in language and expression* represent another source of conflict. I met Indians who speak very good English, both grammatically and as expression. But others fear to speak simply because they do not speak very well. Not few times it happened that Indians had doubts in processing a request, and they wanted more information. It is difficult to provide clear information in writing. The message is better understood if expressed verbally, by phone, for example. Some Indian colleagues are reluctant to telephone talks. Even European colleagues are reluctant to resort to verbal messages and they prefer written messages, because in the past they have tried to communicate and communication has proven so difficult. Therefore they dropped the telephone communication and they used in further the communication in writing. So it takes more time to process the requests and there is a risk that the requests are not fully understood.

This is not the solution. It would be helpful that the management provide English language courses for those who do not have advanced knowledge of language (both for Indians as well as for Europeans), to help them to communicate better and faster. A phone conversation would not only explain more clearly the problems and misunderstandings, but would require fewer time resources, and the customer could receive a prompt response. Also, language classes should improve pronunciation, not just vocabulary. Indian pronunciation is particularly special, what makes it difficult to be understood by other speakers of English.

Another language problem is the use of words "ok", "yes" or "no". Indian culture is a high context culture. This means that each thing can be subject to interpretation. Even language can be interpreted depending on the situation. If in European or American culture, which belong to weak contextual cultures, expression is direct and the words clearly express what the other person wants to communicate, in Indian culture words can acquire different meanings, new meanings depending on the context.

In the studied corporation, I met such communication barriers. When the European workers make their requests to India, the language is clear, precise, and direct. When responding to a request, is often used an indirect language with symbolic colors. European employees had difficulties in understanding even simple words such as "ok", "yes" or "no". When the European workers wondered whether the request was understood, and if all was clear, the Indians responded with "ok". Later, European workers realized that Indian employees did not actually understand what they have been asked, although asserted otherwise. This can be particularly stressful for Europeans. Both sides, both Indians and Europeans should be aware of the differences. Everyone must understand and respect each other's culture. Indians have no strength to refuse, because of their conception of life. Indians are very respectful and helpful people who can not afford to offend or upset others. There is a way to understand the message that lies behind the words. Most times, when the Indians does not understand something, they express using the word "ok", because using the word "not" is too hard. If they understand the message, they use the word "yes". There are Indian employees who begun to understand Western culture and try to adapt to it. They will tell you if they did not understand

exactly what they were asked. But will not necessarily use the word "no", but rather phrases like "Can you please confirm that you asked me that?" or "this is what you wanted to say?".

*Different perceptions on control.* Europeans are part of a more direct and independent culture, where control is not as strict. Employees are encouraged to make their own decisions and take responsibility for them. In India, however, things are different. Indians need to be told what and when to do it. They need confirmation permanently. They do not want to be wrong, because according to their conception, the fault does not only affect them, but also the others of the group they belong to. Usually, in the same corporation, work more members of the same family, and employment is made based on recommendations. If one of the members makes a serious mistake, this may affect the esteem and honor of other members. For these reasons, many times the Indian employees receive requests and they are not quite sure how they should process them, they ask for clarification to their managers or to European colleagues who have sent the requests. Often the questions are fairly simple. But what impact has different perception on the concept of control over European employees and business? Europeans are faster. We could say that they focus more on material than spiritual, and for them time is money. Indians put more emphasis on harmony and relationships, they develop with others. But an European, who is in a race against time, may feel frustrated and may charge these additional explanations as a prevaricate. Not few times, European colleagues felt that their colleagues in India have demanded explanations to win additional time to extend the dead-line. In only 30% of cases European colleagues were right.

How can we avoid unnecessary tensions in this case? We can not ask Indian employees to change their mindset and give up control. But we can ask them to be faster in processing the requests and if they have doubts to express them in time. In this way, European workers would no longer be obliged to extend the dead-line in the last minute. It was also found that about half of the requests for discussion or escalation are not formulated properly, that expression is cumbersome, and it is not entirely clear, the number of changes required is too large and the dead-line too short, the information is not sufficient. I found, therefore, that we are dealing not only with a cultural barrier but with a process barrier. Europeans should be more concise and clear when they make the request and Indians should work faster the modifications, and if necessary, to ask further information when receiving the requests or shortly after receiving them.

*Fear of being accused and apologies.* If an Indian is informed about a processing error he made in processing the request, he tries to find a lot of arguments in his/her favor, trying to apologize and to save his/her honor. He/she accuses the incomplete information in the request or difficult or incomprehensible expressing. However, as I mentioned above, only half of the disputed claims contain unclear or missing information, due to European employees. Other disputes have as source the inappropriate processing or exceeded dead-line because of Indian employees. When applying an inappropriate strategy in resolving the dispute, broader conflicts can arise. Therefore when misunderstandings come into sight, the real source of the conflict has to be found. Individuals should focus on solving the problem and not finding the culprits. It is important to know the factors that caused dispute, in order to know how to prevent other similar disputes in the future. If the dispute was caused by the fault of European employees, they must take measures so that future requests to

make content more clearly and provide all information necessary for processing. If conflict arises because of Indians, they have to be explained where they went wrong, but without charging them and without using inappropriate language. It is necessary that the European colleagues communicate to the Indians, that the situation was understood, but in the future they have to try to avoid similar problems.

Unfortunately, among colleagues in Europe there is a tendency to blame and often resort to complaints and escalation in a way that may seem violent or disrespectful for the colleagues in India. Europeans are pressed for time and they try to solve requests as quickly as possible, to please customers. If a request is not processed properly and European workers consider that the fault is due to colleagues in India, it is possible they use the complaints. For European employees receiving a complaint has not the same impact that it has on an Indian. For an Indian is a matter of honor. Therefore colleagues in Europe, before making a complaint, should consider whether the complaint is justified or not, if the error is due to Indian employees and if it is a mistake that has a big impact on business. If the fault can be rectified easily or is a minor mistake, it would be advisable that the involved employees try to resolve the problem directly without the involvement of other persons, such as managers. If there is great difficulty in understanding the request, the Indians can be provided with short training, in order to clarify uncertainties. If misunderstanding is clarified, a future similar request will be processed smoothly and without requiring any additional information.

I have encountered cases where European employees were dissatisfied by the fact that colleges in India did not process requests on time and they made mistakes. The incapacity of processing the requests in time and committing mistakes can also be the result of a *high volume of work*. There are also times when work volumes are much higher than usual. A larger volume of work involves more processing mistakes.

How might we fix this problem? If constant workload exceeds an employee's ability to process it, the company should increase the number of employees. If the workload is high only in a certain period, we might appeal to other colleagues in the department who have a smaller work volume.

## **7. Conclusions**

The article shows that in the studied company can be met conflicts from different sources in work relations with India. I encountered conflicts arising from different perceptions of time, from differences in language, from perception of control, from fear of being blamed and losing honor. But we can see that there are conflicts with source the process itself.

If intercultural conflicts, we can see that these sources generating conflicts could be easily removed if both parties would be willing to know the culture of the other party.

There is no question of giving up their own culture and their own habits, nor the appropriation of another culture, but of adapting to the requirements of the organization, of the process and of the business needs.

I consider appropriate, that managers or specialists in conflict resolution explain to employees how

to adapt to the culture of other parts and how to proceed in order to avoid misunderstandings, pointing to the importance of maintaining a calm and harmonious working environment.

Also Indian employees should show a little more speed and attention in the processing of requests, and if the volume is too high compared to the number of people to demand more employees or help from other teams.

European workers should pay more respect and importance to Indian employees. Even if their job involves fewer responsibilities, mechanical work rather than decision-oriented work, employees in India are a very important link in processing customers' requests and in business success. The location chosen for the relocation of this activity, the processing of requests, was chosen for economic reasons. This does not mean that Indian employees are less prepared than Europeans.

Indians are tolerant and sympathetic people. If they are clearly explained and if they are given all necessary information, they can work very well. A calm tone, more diplomacy, goodwill and understanding are *ingredients* that help avoid unpleasant conflict situations. Using them, European employees may determine the Indian colleagues to process the requests perfectly without being necessary to resort to complaints and to generate unnecessary conflicts.

As I have written in an article, the creation of a conflict resolution department, having specialists in conflict resolution, would be of great help for the company and for understanding how to settle these tensions and how to eliminate the conflict sources.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Eftimie, M., Moldovan (Bratosin), R.G., Matei, M.C.-*The negotiation role in the corporate sustainability. Case study*, Petroleum-Gas University of Ploiești Bulletin, Economic Sciences Series, Vol. LXIV, no. 1/2012, pp. 82-93