

IDIOM OF THE MONTH:

LIKE A BULL IN A CHINA SHOP

means to speak to behave in a tactless and undiplomatic way.

e.g. One problem for task-focused specialists is that their direct form of communication can cause offence in a face-saving culture, rather like a bull in a china shop.



SAVING 'FACE'

In task-oriented cultures, communication is usually direct, explicit and to the point.. Such communication is not meant to be taken personally as it refers to the task in hand and not to the persons involved. There is no hidden message, no insult intended.

By contrast, relationship-oriented cultures communicate more indirectly, and implicitly. They are very careful to save the listener's face. Messages are hidden between the lines, so that if there is a misunderstanding, it is easy to say: "Oh, that is not what I meant. What I meant is this and this!"

There is more 'beating about the bush', another idiom which means: to approach an object indirectly so that you do not offend the other person or appear to be aggressive.

This difference in style can mean that a task-oriented person communicating directly can give the impression of being 'a bull in a china shop' and cause unintentional offence. On the other hand, the hidden message the indirect communication typical of many cultures may not be heard and understood by those used to speaking directly.

AGREEING & DISAGREEING

'Face' is particularly important when disagreeing with another person, as the hidden message is: „I am right and you are wrong!“.

Indeed, in many Asian cultures where the question of 'face' is so important that a person will not disagree even if he or she has a different opinion.

'Agreeing', therefore, is not a problem:

*I agree.
I completely agree that ...
I think you are right.*

Disagreeing, however, is very sensitive in face-saving cultures. It is important to respect the other person's opinion, and then to give your opinion as being on the same level of importance. The more detailed your summary of the other person's opinion, the softer your disagreement:

*"In my opinion it is very important to improve the speed of our payment transaction processes".
"I agree with you that increased speed is very important. On the other hand, however, we must be careful not to price ourselves out of the market."*

The less detailed the summary of the other person's opinion, the stronger the disagreement:

*You've got a point there, however ...
I agree in principle, nevertheless ...
I can see that. But on the other hand, ...*

If there is no summary of the other person's opinion, then disagreement is very strong as the implied message is: "I cannot agree with anything you have said!"

*I'm not totally convinced.
I don't quite agree with you.
I'm afraid I don't share your view.
I see it a little differently.*



In relationship-oriented cultures, agreement is extremely important. If no agreement can be found, then it is usual to 'agree to differ' and to come back to the issue later.

Let us agree to differ for the moment. We can discuss the matter again at our next meeting.