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 TRAINING IN MANAGEMENT & COMMUNICATION SKILLS

## In form

**In Form no. 10**

### **Style shifting**

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Imagine you are on a business trip to Japan. You are making a presentation in a meeting with some potential clients – all Japanese. During the presentation you get the feeling that some of the people are not at all interested as they sit with their eyes half-closed. Should you speak louder to wake them up or should you speak more quickly to sound more enthusiastic? Or maybe you should speak more quietly so as not to wake them up and embarrass them!

Now imagine you are in the UK speaking to the CFO of one of your suppliers. He seems more interested in the details of your new scheme for preferred suppliers than in the broad picture you want to show him. Do you go to his level of detail or should you try to enthuse him with even more visionary statements?

Finally imagine you are in Africa and are shaking hands with a new business acquaintance. He keeps hold of your hand after shaking it and continues to talk to you. Should you pull your hand away or let him keep holding it? Will he ever let go?

We meet all sorts of people from all sorts of backgrounds when working internationally. Cultural differences, language barriers and different personal styles can combine to make communication extremely difficult. Generally we are looking to build long-term business relationships based on trust and mutual respect. But we don't have to love or even like each other to do business. What we want is to be able to build a neutral platform on which we can work together. And if we can then become business friends over time that is an added bonus. To build this neutral platform you need to be able to style shift.

What does style shifting mean? It's the skill of taking a step towards the other person's way of behaving and communicating in order to make them feel more comfortable with the situation.

Here are some simple examples:

- When making a business presentation in the UK you could add a little self-deprecating humour, which a British business audience will often expect and appreciate.
- When talking to Asian business people you might stress the benefits of what you are suggesting to the whole group - rather than stressing the individual opportunities your proposals offer.
- When talking to a lively group of your own sales people don't just mention the financial rewards of increasing sales but also the fun and personal satisfaction involved
- When meeting some older Arabic clients put more polite and diplomatic phrases into your English to show the respect they want from a younger person.

But why should we style-shift? It's to create a feeling of empathy; to show that we want to build bridges and build relationships.

Some people say, "I am who I am. Take it or leave it." That's OK, but what you are then doing is forcing the other person to do all the style shifting. If you are in a strong purchasing position this might work. But generally people prefer to do business with people they like and feel comfortable with. Usually if we style

shift and show our willingness to adapt to our business partner they automatically reciprocate. They style shift back.

Style shifting requires several skills:

1. Cultural awareness. Read about the cultures you are going to visit. Be curious. Ask questions. Be observant. Bring up cultural differences in your small talk and listen and learn.
2. Linguistic flexibility. Have some politeness phrases that you can pull out when the situation demands. Speak slowly and clearly when you notice your business partner's English is worse than yours. Speed up a bit when speaking to native speakers.
3. Personal sensitivity. Look for the personal style of your business partners. If they are detail oriented then give them some more details than you would do normally. If they are interested in people take more time over small talk and offer some personal information about yourself. If they are business oriented then get down to work quickly and stress the effectiveness of what you are suggesting.

Style shifting also requires practice. When you style shift you are moving slightly outside your normal way of behaving and it can feel a little uncomfortable at first. For example – fold your arms. Now fold them the other way. It feels strange and slightly uncomfortable. We are so used to folding our arms in one particular way that any other way seems unnatural. But the more you do it the easier and more acceptable it becomes.

Some people can style shift without really thinking about it. Those are the lucky ones. Many of us find it harder to step outside our normal way of behaving. It's a question of awareness and practice. Think of yourself as a rubber band. This rubber band has a natural size and shape but you can stretch it a certain amount. Not too much or it will break. Then when you let go it reverts to its natural shape again. Human beings are the same. We have a comfort zone of behaviour. But we can “stretch” ourselves temporarily. And afterwards return to acting normally.

Remember style shifting is always a personal choice depending on the situation. You don't have to do it! But those business people who are able to style shift and create empathy with their business partners are often the people with whom we want to do business.

### ***Japan***

*The people with their eyes closed are probably struggling to keep up with your English. Slow down and see if that helps. Next time perhaps you should give everyone a handout at the start of the presentation so that they can easily follow the main ideas.*

### ***UK***

*Some people love the details. You could either go into a little more detail during the meeting or say that you will provide a detailed description afterwards.*

### ***Africa***

*In some cultures communication is easier if you are touching. Just let him keep holding your hand – he'll let go when the conversation finishes.*