

This report has many good general guidelines. However, it should be noted that some of the communication styles described may not represent all Native American tribes. As in all generalized styles, we realize that there are differences between subsets of cultures as well as individual differences.

RESEARCH SUMMARY: COMMUNICATION STYLES OF INDIAN PEOPLES

By Mary Heit, originally printed in the AWASIS Journal, March 1987

"Silence is the cornerstone of character. The fruits of silence are self-control, endurance, patience, dignity, and reverence." (Dakota Sioux).

"It is not the case that the man who is silent says nothing." (Unknown)

When is it appropriate to speak?

1. It is appropriate to wait until you know someone before you begin to speak to them at length, or to confide in them. This is in direct contrast to many non-Native people, who talk in order to get to know one another.
2. While it is appropriate for children to be present at adult functions, it is not appropriate for them to display themselves verbally in the presence of adults. This is interpreted as bragging, or as thinking that you are more important than others. Nor is it appropriate for adults to display themselves or their knowledge in front of others. Instead, you understate your case and let your actions speak for you rather than your words (actions speak louder for the character of an individual than do words.)
3. It is inappropriate to express strong emotions, either verbally or non-verbally, in public or with people whom you don't know very well.
4. It is inappropriate to ask questions in a direct manner, expecting an immediate response, from people whom you don't know very well or for whom you should be showing respect. Direct questions force the respondent to answer immediately and to frame the response in a particular way. This infringes upon the right of the individual to decide when and how a response will be made, if at all. (This is not to say that direct questions are never used. They have their place.)
5. It is inappropriate to verbally discipline or praise a child profusely in public. Misbehavior or stepping out of bounds is dealt with quietly and privately, frequently in a non-verbal manner, again with the intention of allowing the misbehaving individual to maintain autonomy, to acquire a sense of responsibility for his/her own actions, and to realize that these actions reflect on the group. Similarly, praise can be conveyed privately, or by a smile, a touch, or a simple comment.
6. It is inappropriate for anyone to speak for someone else, even if that someone is a child. Everyone is entitled to his or her own opinion and has a right to be heard.
7. It is inappropriate to always be the first person to talk, and then to talk only about what you are interested in. In deference to others, it is important to let everyone have a chance to speak and to control the topic as well. Thinking out one's thoughts carefully before speaking is valued, rather than an immediate response to what has been said.
8. It is inappropriate to directly say that someone is wrong, again because of the value of arranging social situations so that no one is threatened and that individual autonomy is maintained. No one should be directly told what to do. Therefore, indirectly, inexplicit, general answers are considered appropriate in many cases because listeners can draw their own conclusions from them and make their own decisions. Herein also lies the value of the legend and of the oral tradition as a means of indirectly transmitting the values of the culture in story form (similar to an allegory).
9. In Indian conversations, it is not the person who speaks first who necessarily controls the topic. This is because an immediate response to what someone has said is not always expected, but may be delayed. The respondent therefore has control over the topic by choosing when to speak and what to say.

When is it appropriate to be silent?

1. It is appropriate to be silent at a religious ceremony or when an elder is speaking.
2. It is appropriate to pause frequently and at length in conversations. Sometimes listeners indicate with a nod or a murmur that they are still listening when the speaker pauses.
3. It is appropriate to be silent in an unfamiliar situation or when you are with strangers. This is based on an unwillingness to disturb the harmony of a group of people unfamiliar to yourself by thrusting your presence upon them. It is very rude to do that.
4. Pauses in conversations are sometimes used for emphasis, rather than using word stress or intonation, which in many Indian languages, can change rather than emphasize, the meaning of an utterance. These pauses do not mean that the person has finished speaking.
5. It is appropriate to be silent when someone is angry, out of control, or overcome with sadness, until that person regains control.
6. Silence can indicate disapproval of something that is being done or said. It can also be an indication that members of a group are waiting to reach consensus.
7. It is appropriate for children to watch and listen quietly by age three or four, and to learn from what they have heard and observed, rather than learning by direct verbal instruction or by asking a lot of questions. Children demonstrate their skills and knowledge by what they can do rather than what they say.
8. It is appropriate to visit someone and not say much, just to enjoy their company.

How do we take turns when we are speaking?

1. It is appropriate for a speaker, particularly in a formal situation, to verbally signal that he or she has finished speaking. This is a characteristic of Indian languages and gets transferred to English as well.
2. Simply ceasing to speak does not always mean that one has finished. It can also mean that one is considering what to say next, is emphasizing points already raised, or is giving the content of the conversation the pause it deserves.
3. It is appropriate to wait for a little while before taking your turn at speaking or answering a question. Immediate responses are not expected. Proper regard (respectful silence), especially in public or formal situations, should be shown for the well-considered thought and response.
4. It is appropriate for everyone to get a chance to speak if they so wish, and to take as much time as they need, before a subject is brought to a conclusion.

How do we show politeness when we are speaking?

1. It is very rude to interrupt or to speak before someone has signaled that she or he has finished speaking.
2. It is rude to ask direct, personal questions, especially when you have just met someone. To refuse a direct request is unthinkable, so that an individual may politely affirm that your request has been heard, but you, on the other hand, are obliged to realize that no commitment has been made. Often, it is better to phrase questions indirectly, or as statement, in order to give the respondent the choice of how to reply. (E.g. "I wonder if it might be the case that...")
3. It is inappropriate to gaze directly at someone the whole time that they are speaking. As well, it is inappropriate for a speaker to gaze directly at his/her listeners all the time, which is in keeping with giving non-directive, inexplicit, and general answers. An unwavering, direct gaze is unsettling, intimidating, and interpreted as being over-familiar. Again, this is not to say that direct eye contact never occurs. It does, of course. Also, there may be reasons for avoiding eye contact that have nothing to do with being polite (fear, embarrassment, shyness, insecurity).
4. It is inappropriate for one or two people to control the conversation of a group and to do all the talking. Nor is attention always focused solely on the person who is talking, but is distributed more evenly to everyone who is present in order to gauge their non-verbal reactions to what is being said. This is part of the important process of arriving at decisions through group consensus.
5. There is sometimes an absence in Indian conversations of what in English conversations are considered politeness formulae: excessive use of greetings, farewells, expressions of gratitude, etc.

This does not mean that Indian people are not polite; it simply means that politeness is conveyed differently.

6. It is inappropriate to single people out, or to compete for "correct answers." Such behavior will meet with peer group disapproval.
7. It is inappropriate to pay attention to only a few people at a social gathering, or to draw them aside at such a time for private conversation. Instead, it is appropriate to enjoy the presence of everyone at a gathering and to draw people aside for private conversation at a more opportune time. If one does engage in conversation with two or three people in a group setting, one does so quietly, keeping in mind the harmony of the group.

It is not difficult to see how problems could arise between non-Native peoples and those Indian or Metis peoples who may employ aspects of the communication style described above. Misunderstandings in interpersonal communication will result if such communication styles and the unconscious assumptions and values behind them are not held in common or at least mutually understood.

Moreover, the implications for the classroom are not too difficult to envision. What could be some of the things that teachers might do to accommodate varying degrees of Indian or Metis communication styles that they might encounter in the classrooms? What are the potential benefits for all students of doing this?

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