

Case Study: “Adventure English: Experiences with Face-Saving”

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Background

When conducting business with Chinese, it is crucial to understand Chinese face-saving practices. Face-saving refers to protecting the positive social image of others. Compared to Americans, Chinese are particularly sensitive to face-saving and otherwise enhancing the social image of others in a variety of situations, including business. This sensitivity leads Chinese to use face-saving strategies such as avoiding public disagreements; using intermediaries to avoid direct conflicts; recognizing individuals (particularly high-status individuals) with honorifics; using ritualistic apologies to smooth relationships even when not at fault; employing other signs of respect; and communicating with ambiguous phrases to allow ways out or opportunities to make expressions of obligation. The Chinese sensitivity to face is largely due to their strong relationship orientation. A focus on the permanence and mutual obligation of relationships causes Chinese to dread face-loss. Face-loss generally occurs when individuals violate social norms. However, face-loss also occurs when others do not recognize one’s face. For example, directly rejecting a request may cause considerable face-loss since it signals that the person receiving the request is not granting face to the person making the request. Chinese face-saving practices allow all members of a social interaction to preserve dignity and to avoid embarrassment.

Objectives

Participants should learn that:

1. When conducting business with Chinese, people should understand Chinese face-saving practices in order to avoid miscommunication and enhance social interactions.
2. When preparing to conduct business with the Chinese, a variety of resources and techniques may be used to develop appropriate communication skills.

Characters:

- Jackie Wong is a teacher from the Taichung School District in Taiwan. Jackie has been an English teacher at the high school level for ten years. Superintendent Li has asked Jackie to be in charge of organizing a trip to the United States for a group of interested students from their school district.
- Jenny Chan is a principal at Fengyuan Middle School – located approximately twenty miles from the Taichung School District. She took a group of twenty students to Adventure English last summer and recommended the program to Jackie Wong.
- Pat Li is the superintendent of the Taichung School District. Pat has been superintendent for nearly twenty years. Pat plans on going on the trip to the United States to find out how the program operates.

- Johnny Chang is a teacher assistant to Jackie Wong. He is training to become a full-time English teacher and will assist Jackie Wong in trip preparation before leaving for the United States and will act as an additional chaperone once in the United States.
 - Cory Wright is the marketing director of Adventure English in Sacramento, California. Cory has been in charge of marketing international programs for Adventure English for two years. Before that, Cory was a college student.
 - Robin Phillips is the president of Adventure English in Sacramento, California. Robin has been president for one year. Previously, Robin was a marketing director at another branch of Adventure English for three years.
 - Judy Anderson is a program leader for Adventure English. She schedules day-to-day activities for visiting groups as well as acts as a guide for each activity.
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Part 1

Adventure English is a company in Sacramento, California, that provides international students with short-term English learning in the classroom and in authentic environments, homestays with American families, and daily sightseeing excursions as well as extended tours to popular U.S. cities. Adventure English attracts many small groups of students from Asia and Latin America for short four-week tours.

In March Jackie Wong placed a telephone call to Robin Phillips. Robin explained that Cory Wright was in charge of setting up programs and forwarded the call to Cory. “Hello, Director Wright. I am Jackie Wong from Taiwan. I am sorry to disrupt your schedule and be so bothersome. Last year, Principal Jenny Chan guided a school from our region to your school. She said their children were very happy. You made a very safe and valuable trip for them. My school also wants to join your program in Sacramento. We know your program is very prestigious. We look forward to developing friendly relations with your school. Our school would like to make a trip every summer.”

“Jackie, thank you for your call. We would be happy to help you. If you just let us know the dates you’re interested in, we could fax or priority mail you a price proposal and optional activities for the trip. Once you’ve received the information, we’ll talk some more. We would love to have you visit us in Sacramento.”

“Director Wright, it is important that the children are taken care of very well. The Taiwan group from last year reported that one student had problems with the homestay family.”

“Jackie, our homestay families are wonderful. Your students, by and large, will have great experiences. However, sometimes there are problems with homestay families. This is the exception but is also unavoidable. I can confidently tell you that our homestay families are better than those of any program I know.”

“Thank you very much. We know you will take good care of our children. Their parents will worry very much – we must reassure the parents, Director Wright. The parents give us a great responsibility by letting us take their children.”

“Jackie, you don’t need to worry, we take great pride in making sure the kids have a great experience. After all, we’ve never lost a child yet” (laughter).

“Director Wright, thank you for your help. We look forward to your communication.”

After the phone call, Director Wright sent out a price proposal within one hour to the fax number Jackie Wong had provided. A month later Adventure English received a check paying for 40 children to arrive in Sacramento in July. The group Jackie had organized would spend three weeks in Sacramento and one week in Los Angeles.

Part 2

On July 3 the Taiwan group arrived. Judy Anderson had sent a set of five vans to pick up the Taiwan group at the airport and bring them immediately to the Adventure English center for a welcome party. Once at the center, the Taiwan group was ushered into a large room with many of the English teachers and plenty of refreshments. About five minutes after the party began, Cory Wright and Robin Phillips entered the room to greet their Chinese guests.

“Hello, everyone! You must be Jackie and Pat. Welcome to America!” Robin Phillips said to Jackie Wong and Superintendent Li, shaking their hands warmly. “It’s wonderful to have you here! Are you tired? You’ll have a great time here. And, who is your friend?” Robin continued, pointing toward a man with some of the students.

Superintendent Li said, “Greetings, President Phillips. We are honored to be here. That is Mr. Chang. We have brought some gifts we want to present to you.” Superintendent Li handed a beautifully wrapped gift to Robin.

“Thanks so much! Let’s see what we’ve got here.” Robin opened his gift to find several items. Robin beamed at the first item – a carefully crafted and painted statue of a horse. The next item was a plaque identifying the first annual Taichung School District-Adventure English partnership. Insignias of both institutions were on it. “This is wonderful – thank you very much, Jackie and Pat.”

“Also, we have gifts for Director Wright and Miss Anderson.” Jackie Wong handed gifts to Cory and Judy. Cory was delighted to open the gift – a professional pen set with the name of the Taiwan school district engraved on each part of the set. Judy followed by opening her gift – a banner with Chinese calligraphy on it. Both thanked their guests.

“Thank you, again!” boomed Robin. “We’ve got some presents for you, too! We’ve got presents for all of the students as well.” Robin handed out Sacramento souvenir pins to all of the children. Then, he gave Superintendent Li and Jackie Wong two enclosed gift bags.

“Thank you for your kindness!” said Superintendent Li.

“Go on – open it!” exclaimed Robin. The children laughed at Robin’s jubilant emotions. Encouraged, Robin once again mentioned, “See what’s in the bag!”

Superintendent Li, apparently embarrassed, said, “Thank you very much for the gift. You did not need to get us a gift.” However, Superintendent Li still didn’t open the gift bag.

Robin, once again, mentioned “Go on and open it. It won’t hurt you” (laughter).

“You didn’t have to do this kindness,” replied Superintendent Li.

“Come on – open it up and see what we’ve got you,” Judy chipped in.

Superintendent Li, clearly uncomfortable, opened the gift bag filled with California honey, caramel popcorn, and several types of cheese.

Part 3

After being in Sacramento for several weeks, Jackie Wong approached Robin Phillips. “President Phillips, I would like to speak to you about a few matters. We would like to thank you for all of your efforts. I think most of the children are very happy. I am sorry I must bother you about some matters. I do not want to be a bad guest. I am sorry that we cause you trouble. Please help me with a few matters.”

“Thank you for coming to me – what can I help you with?” replied Robin.

“Well, several of our students do not feel their teacher is very respectful. Also, some teachers let the children play too much. And, some of the activities have been changed. For instance, the water park activity was cancelled, and we went to a pioneer museum instead. The children really wanted to go to the water park. Superintendent Li worries that some of the students are not enjoying the food prepared by their homestay families.”

“As part of the contract, we agreed that some of the activities could be changed. Because there was a possibility of rain, we had to cancel the water park activity. We could do it another time, but we would have to cancel a different activity. As far as the food for the children, we really can’t control that. Possibly you could tell me which children are having problems with which teacher, and I could speak to the teacher,” replied Robin.

“No. It really wouldn’t be necessary to say which teachers. But, maybe, could you provide a Chinese lunch at the school for the final week so that the children have at least one meal they like each day? This would make our group much happier.”

“We’ll be happy to provide the lunch at whatever expense it is – we won’t add any amount for profit.”

“Don’t worry. I think everything will be okay,” replied Jackie Wong.

Later that day, Robin approached Superintendent Li. “Pat, I’ve been told you’re not satisfied with every part of the program. Perhaps we could talk about it. I’d like to make sure we get everything out in the open so that we can meet your needs.”

Superintendent Li looked surprised. “The program is great. The children are happy.”

Robin replied, “I’m glad you’re enjoying the program. Please let me know if there is anything we can do.”

Epilogue

Six months later when Cory Wright tried to contact Superintendent Li and Jackie Wong to promote the program for the following year, neither would return his phone calls or letters. Cory even contacted Jenny Chan, who had referred Jackie Wong to the program, to learn about Superintendent Li or Jackie Wong’s whereabouts as well as the possibility of future business with Jenny’s school. Jenny mentioned that she did not know how to contact Jackie Wong and that her group would be going to an English language center in New York for the next five years.

An Internet Source about Chinese Culture

<http://www.chinaunique.com>

