

PAE Newsletter

On Language and Communication Training in Seoul

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Last year, I had the opportunity to travel to Seoul to set up a five-week English language and communication training for a local team of market analysts.

While each Asian city I had visited previously - Beijing, Shanghai, Taipei, Manila and Tokyo revealed its unique character and left memorable images, I was particularly delighted by Seoul, which reminded me of a favorite American city to visit - San Francisco (but fifteen times bigger!). My apartment was on a hilly street in one of many distinct neighborhoods; I appreciated the variable weather on a given day amidst the looming mountains and I was struck by the earnest spirit of young people I met in cafes and other public places.

In my professional interactions, I found people to be warm, certainly proud of their culture and, without a doubt, demanding of respect for the Korean way of doing business. This played itself out as an important issue in the training.

Our course took place at a U.S.-based company with a small office in Seoul - staffed entirely by Koreans. Early in the program, while discussing differences between western organizations and Korean companies, participants expressed frustration that their western managers (all based in English speaking countries) did not appreciate the organizational structure differences between American and Korean companies. They pointed out the impact of that difference on the way people do business.

Specifically, western companies generally maintain more horizontal organizational structures. Employees at all levels are encouraged and expected to communicate openly and reciprocally, as needed, with others at all levels of the company. An analyst can speak openly to an executive if he or she needs specific information. The expectation of the westerners was that the Koreans at this company (whose job was market research and analysis) would communicate with anyone at any level of another Korean company in their effort to get needed information.

However, Korean companies maintain a more vertical organizational structure, more formal relationships and position titles that indicate, in effect, who can communicate with whom. VPs would not talk to research analysts who have no real authority and the analysts themselves were reluctant to call people who hold higher positions within another company. The Koreans at this company wanted titles that would give them an appropriate 'in' to speak with Koreans in higher positions at Korean companies.

Awareness and appreciation of these types of issues, on our part, was a key factor to being accepted as a trainer in that environment. We quickly realized that we needed to include, in the curriculum, strategies and language for the local Korean team to talk to their western managers about these types of issues. In doing so, we could build trust and credibility, demonstrating along the way that our training package was not simply an exercise in helping people speak 'western' English, but a practical effort to support strengthening professional relationships at many levels.

Our challenge now – and the company's challenge as well - is to help western managers to engage in clear and open communication with non-native speakers about these issues as an important step towards making changes. Lack of such effort on the company's part will lead to continued differences in expectations and behavior – and in the end, less than satisfactory work performance. Conversely, meaningful efforts to communicate about these issues before anything else will lead to more productive, happier employees with greater loyalty to the company.

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