

MORE THAN WORDS

Workplace communication tips for NEW MIGRANT EMPLOYEES

TOPIC 1

Getting Things Done: requests and instructions at work

In New Zealand, people use many different ways to give instructions and make requests politely, including:

- Using words that soften the force of the request – could, would, might:
 - » *Could you send me that letter?*
Not – *Send me that letter*
- Using softening phrases to make the instruction less strong:
 - » *I wondered if you wouldn't mind getting that file for me.*
Not – *Get me that file*
- Using "I" or "we" instead of "you":
 - » *Could I have a copy of that? – rather than – Could you give me a copy of that?*
 - » *We need to get a copy of this. – rather than – You need to get a copy of this*
- Using minimisers (a bit, quick, just):
 - » *Could I just have a quick meeting with you? – rather than – Could I have a meeting with you?*

So what does your manager really mean when she says?:

I wonder if you could look at this spreadsheet when you get a moment.

Also, I would like to send this report off tomorrow morning. Do you have time to check it before then?

If you are not sure, always clarify.

You could ask:

Would you like me to look at this spreadsheet now? So does this report need to be finished by today? Can I check with you what I should do first?

Why do New Zealanders soften instructions and requests?

In New Zealand freedom of choice and independence is highly valued and most people in professional workplaces try not to impose too directly on someone's right to make their own decisions.



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Workplace communication tips for EMPLOYERS OF MIGRANTS

TOPIC 1

Getting Things Done: requests and instructions at work

Why do some new migrants have problems with requests and instructions?

Many new migrant employees are used to a hierarchical workplace structure and managers who speak very directly. New Zealand managers, however, usually speak in a more respectful manner and make their instructions sound like requests rather than orders. It is common for NZ employers to use softeners such as:

Do you think you could bring me that file – rather than – Bring me that file

It would be a good idea to add this section – rather than – Add this section

Many migrants find these softened or tentative requests and instructions confusing and they are not exactly sure what is expected of them.

How can you make sure that a migrant employee has understood your instruction?

- Avoid giving more than one instruction at a time.
- Be clear about who is to do the task. Use "you" rather than "we" or "I"
 - » *Could you find that file – rather than – We will need that file.*
- Repeat or summarise the key points. Give the message at least twice and emphasise the most important details.
- Avoid saying "Do you understand?" A new migrant employee might say "yes" to appear willing, capable and respectful but may not understand completely. Instead, check understanding by asking:
 - » *What will you do first?*
 - » *What will you do if you have questions or problems?*
 - » *Could you summarise the main points that we have been discussing?*



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TOPIC 2

Fitting In: Being part of the team

Being able to communicate and interact with workmates is very important if you want to fit into your new team. Most new employees need to learn the style of interacting and communicating that is common in their new workplace.

This can be even more challenging for you as you try to adapt to communication styles in a language that is not your mother tongue.

What can you do to try and fit in?

1. Greet colleagues with a smile in the morning and respond to their greeting. Notice what your colleagues do and copy this. What can you say?

GREETING	RESPONSE
Hi (Name)	Hi (Name)
How are you?	Fine thanks
Did you have a nice weekend?	Yes I did, how about you?
Did you do anything special in the weekend?	Not really, how about you?

Your boss may greet you in this way too. It's normal in New Zealand to respond and to speak up, like your workmates do.

2. Show interest by joining in the small talk at tea breaks and lunch breaks. What can you talk about?

the weather the news
sport the traffic
last night's TV programmes

What can you say when you need to end the small talk and get back to work?

Oh well, I'd better get back to work

I'd better go now, nice talking to you

3. Show interest and understanding when you are interacting at work. Common ways to do this include, nodding, saying:

I see, yeah, mm, oh right, aha, that's good

4. Say goodbye in the evening. What can you say?

See you tomorrow, have a nice evening



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TOPIC 2

Fitting In: Being part of the team

Being able to communicate and interact with colleagues is one of the key aspects of fitting into a new team. Most new employees need to learn the style of interacting and communicating that is common in their new workplace.

This can be even more challenging for your new migrant employees who are trying to adapt to communication styles in a language that is not their mother tongue. Also, in some cultures small talk and developing personal relationships with workmates is not the norm.

How can you help new migrant employees to fit in?

1. Greet your new migrant employees in the morning, even if they do not respond at first. Remember even simple greetings and farewells may not be the norm for some migrants. They do not mean to be unfriendly they may just not be used to talking to superiors in an informal way.
2. Encourage your new migrants to join in the small talk at tea breaks and lunch breaks. Show an interest in their background and find out what they see as normal workplace behaviour.
3. If there is a lot of joking around in your workplace, include them in this. Again, this may not be something they are

used to, but it is an important part of friendly behaviour in many New Zealand workplace teams.

4. Give new migrants time to adapt.

For some new migrants even ways of showing interest such as nodding and saying “*mm, yes,*” when listening to someone are not usual. An attentive silence is considered respectful in many cultures.

Also, speaking up when making a contribution in a meeting is not the norm in some cultures. In China, for instance, you must always use a quiet voice when talking to a superior. Encourage your new migrant employees to speak up, like their workmates do, if they are very softly spoken.



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TOPIC 3

Difficult Talk at Work: refusing, disagreeing and complaining

In New Zealand it is alright to politely refuse to do something when you need to, for example, if your boss asks you to work late and you have a family commitment or tickets to a concert or movie.

It is also possible to disagree with a manager or make a complaint as long as this is done in a very indirect and polite way.

Ways of softening refusals, disagreements and complaints:

1. Refusals are usually softened or implied rather than directly stated, e.g.
 - a. *I wish I could help you but unfortunately.....* (provide reason)
 - b. *I'm sorry but I am just too busy to fit that in right now*
2. Disagreements are often softened to reduce their force, e.g.
 - a. *I can see what you mean but ...*
 - b. *Yes, but ... OR Yes, and ...*
 - c. *Actually, I think ...*
 - d. Using a positive adjective with *not* rather than a negative adjective
Actually, that is not quite correct – rather than – that's wrong

3. Complaints and criticisms are rarely made in public. Common ways of softening a complaint include:

- a. Using minimisers that reduce the size of the complaint:

I have a little bit of concern about ...

- b. Adding *it seems* or *there seems* to a statement:

There seems to have been a mistake – rather than – You have made a mistake

- c. Using a positive adjective with *not*:

I am not very happy ... rather than – I am unhappy/angry about ...

- d. Changing the verb from the active to the passive so that the person doing the action is not emphasised.

I was promised – rather than – you promised me



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TOPIC 3

Difficult Talk at Work: refusing, disagreeing and complaining

In many cultures it is difficult to refuse your boss even if the request is beyond what is normally expected. Sometimes employees need to refuse, disagree or complain. Sometimes you want and expect other opinions and you need to know when there are potential problems.

Making refusals and disagreement possible:

1. When asking for something beyond what is normally expected, for example asking your new migrant employee to stay late, make sure they have no other commitments first e.g.

What are your plans for this evening?

If you do not prepare in this way for your request, they may not tell you that they have a family commitment or a ticket for a concert or movie.

2. When asking for feedback make it clear that you want to hear about any problems as well as about things that will work or that are going well.

What changes would you suggest?

What problems can you see?

Expressing Refusals and Disagreement:

New Zealanders tend to be very indirect and polite when they refuse, disagree and complain. While some new migrants find it difficult to speak out others struggle to express refusals, disagreements and complaints in a suitably polite way.

Try not to react too negatively if disagreement is expressed directly or bluntly. Understand that learning to disagree less bluntly and to refuse and complain politely can take some time. Suggesting your new migrant employees read the other side of this card might help them with this.



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TOPIC 4

Maybe we could... suggestions and advice at work

New Zealanders often soften their language when making suggestions or expressing their opinions at work to avoid imposing their views too strongly on others and risking a relationship breakdown. Advice to friends and workmates is also not given as directly as in some cultures.

Many new migrants find it difficult to soften suggestions appropriately. They can also have trouble telling the difference between a suggestion and an instruction.

Ways of softening suggestions, advice or opinions:

1. Avoid phrases such as *you must*, *you should*. These are considered very direct and strong, sometimes even rude.
2. Use phrases that make the suggestion more tentative:
I wonder if we should ...
How about ...?
Would there be any advantage in ...?
3. Use the pronoun "we":
I wonder if we should ...
4. Use comparatives with might:
It might be a better idea to change this document rather than:
You need to change this document

5. Use a question rather than a statement
Could we look at this again tomorrow?
rather than:
We need to look at this again tomorrow

So what does your manager really mean when he says?:

It might be an idea to put this section at the end of the report

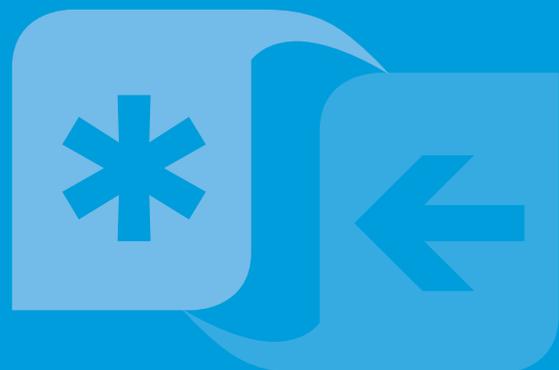
If you are not sure, always clarify.

Some people use the same words when they are making a suggestion or expressing their opinion as when they are making a request or giving an instruction, e.g.

I wonder if we should move this section to the end

It is important to clarify the meaning if you are not sure so you know whether it is just a suggestion or it's an instruction that must be followed. You could ask:

Would it be better for me to put this section at the end?



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TOPIC 4

Maybe we could... suggestions and advice at work

In some cultures you only give your opinion or make suggestions when invited. In other cultures advice is expected and given at times when New Zealanders would not give advice. New migrants can be unsure when it is appropriate to give advice and opinions in New Zealand workplaces.

New Zealanders also often soften suggestions or opinions at work to avoid imposing their views too strongly on others and risking a relationship breakdown.

Some people use the same words when they are making a suggestion or expressing their opinion as when they are making a request or giving an instruction, e.g.

I wonder if we could.....

New migrants may have difficulty understanding whether they have been given a suggestion rather than an instruction. They can also find it difficult to soften suggestions.

How can you help?

1. Directly ask new migrants for their opinions or suggestions if they do not contribute when you feel they have knowledge or expertise that is appropriate. Start with their name e.g.

Cheung, do you have any suggestions about how we can do this?

2. Understand that if they give advice too strongly or bluntly that they may just be having difficulty understanding what is appropriate. English courses often teach the use of “you should” for giving advice for example, but New Zealanders tend to avoid saying this as it is too strong and direct.
3. Make it clear when it is just a suggestion and not an instruction. Use phrases such as:

this is just a suggestion, what do you think? or

... can you think of another way we could do this?

