TLP Five-Minute Read Over Coffee – Helping non-native speakers in international meetings

One of the biggest challenges I face in my coaching work is how to make individuals and teams more relaxed when contributing to international meetings. The first thing to highlight is this is often not a language issue! My typical client is very good at English. Yet they can still feel anxious prior to a meeting, blocked in that meeting and frustrated afterwards!

What is going on!

Two big issues are combining - the behaviours of native speakers and what is going on in the heads of non-native speakers.

Native speakers:

- Native speakers often simply speak too quickly, with no regard to their audience. Sometimes this is unintentional but sometimes it is based on a type of arrogance - this is an English-speaking company - so cope or move on!!!
- Different accents can have a big impact on understanding. Although it seems to vary from 'ear to ear' which accents cause most problems!
- These challenges are accentuated by blocking language which takes many forms. Business jargon/idiomatic expressions can cause confusion. If you don't know the meaning of 'the elephant in the room' - you might think the speaker has gone crazy.
- Add in lots of phrasal verbs and things can be even more complicated. In my experience many are known and used in Luxembourg- but many are not. Let's 'wrap up the meeting' or 'call off the meeting' are examples of this second category.

Non-native speakers:

- These issues can be compounded by the pressure non-native speakers put on themselves - if I make a mistake, it is 'game over'(finished) for my credibility in the team.

In this article - I look at what the chair/leader of the meeting can do. Tomorrow I will explore what non-native participants can do.

What to do!

1) Influence how people speak by giving gentle reminders to native speakers in advance of the meeting - '*Hi Bob, could you ask the team to speak a little more slowly as we have a real mix of nationalities tomorrow.*'

2) Plain English: It can be hard to stop people speaking using blocking language 'real time' during a meeting without sounding like a teacher! What you can do is make sure presentations commit to plain English. You can also be a model of good practice in communicating in simple, accessible language.

3) Less is more. An online meeting on a technical subject is a big challenge for non-native speakers. Commit to the principle of less is more in the meeting design. Be realistic about the number of agenda items - and know that a duration of more than an hour without breaks, is a challenge for anyone's concentration (particularly online).

Encourage content to be as streamlined as possible. If content is highly technical/detailed ensure it is sent well in advance. All of this may sound obvious but having worked with 100s of clients in this context- it is not easy to implement.

4) Take the tension out at the start by highlighting major decisions and actions will be noted and sent by email after the meeting.

5) Checkpoints: Build in 'space' in the meeting to confirm/clarify understanding after each agenda item.

6) Summarise at the end of the meeting. Clearly restate key decisions and actions taken.

7) Airtime: Gently reassert good etiquette and the need for everyone to give each other 'airtime' (space to speak) without instantly being interrupted. It might feel mechanical but 'going around the room' to ask participants for their reflections on key points can help non-native speakers access the discussions.

8) The art of checking understanding. At points you might have the feeling that not everybody understands you. You don't want to patronize people or make anyone feel stupid. Here are some useful expressions.

- *Does everyone have any questions on this?*
- *Would you like me to repeat that?*
- *Is that clear for everyone?*
- *I would like to summarise the main points...*
- *I am going to recap/restate that one more time...*

Even if you think it is one person who is struggling, generalise the question, so they don't feel like the 'stupid one'.

9) Keeping it light
Something that people often don't do in virtual meetings is give a little time for small talk at the start. When done well it can add a human face to the meeting and give a humour and lightness to the discussion. This can really help relax non-native speakers and can help make meetings a little less mechanical and dry.

I hope this is helpful and power for the week!

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