



Cultural Awareness Guidance for Surgeons **Written and produced by Dr Margaret Murphy**

FURTHER ANALYSIS of VIDEO 2

CULTURAL AWARENESS of CONSULTANT

The trainee in VIDEO 2 was born in India and did his training at the University of Mumbai. The consultant is English and trained at the University of Exeter. There are several cultural differences (*below*) between these two backgrounds, which may play a significant role in the interactions in Scenario 2.

1: Trainee's inability to say 'no';

The first cultural difference is the trainee's inability to say 'no' to his consultant. The consultant has asked the trainee to assist her with three procedures over the course of one week. The trainee, who has an important exam, MRCS, the following week, does not want to assist with these procedures, as instead he wants to spend the time preparing for his exams. However, he cannot say 'no' to her. In his cultural background, the consultant, of a higher status, is the one in authority. As a trainee, on a much lower status, he must act according to her wishes and not challenge her, even if it means discomfort for him. Because of this power imbalance, he does not challenge her request and instead, reluctantly accedes, initially at least, to the procedures.

RESPONSE: Consultant's cultural awareness: The consultant, being culturally aware, senses that there is something on her trainee's mind that he is not saying. She attempts to redress this by making him feel at ease as much as possible by, for example, smiling, standing next to him at same level, by using indirect and non-confrontational language, using expressions of interest about trainee's own world, and minimal direct questions. She also skilfully uses eye-contact at the right times and in the right amount: too much eye-contact she knows would cause discomfort to trainee and too little, would highlight the status differences between them. She also draws on her own cultural knowledge to make the trainee feel as if he is on a similar power level by, for example, volunteering her vulnerable areas (*I needed 2 months to prepare for my MRCS*) and trying to fit in with his wishes (*by rearranging her Daycase list to suit him*). She also second guesses what is on his mind, as she tries to assess the situation from the trainee's point of view.

2: Trainee's inability to admit lack of knowledge:

The second is the trainee's inability to admit he doesn't know how to do a relatively simple procedure (open hernia repair). There are issues of loss of face here. The trainee cannot admit to a senior status person, the consultant, that he does not know how to do these simple procedures. In his culture, if he does, the consultant will, he thinks, judge him harshly and even ridicule him. Worse,

she could ridicule him in front of other consultants. That would be devastating to him, as his own sense of self-worth might be irreparably damaged.

RESPONSE: Consultant's cultural awareness: The consultant, being culturally aware, understands about loss of face and how damaging it can be to some people, especially those from Asian backgrounds. She also knows that her trainee's sense of self-worth is more important than getting him to admit to her now that he cannot do this procedure, and takes that into consideration in her skilful comments and questioning. For example, she lets him know she understands the inherent difficulties in doing procedures (*I know that sometimes it's difficult to have knowledge of all the procedures – it must be hard for a beginner trainee*), thereby showing empathy and even sympathy.

She also admits her vulnerabilities (*...I know, I've been there myself..*) which has the immediate effect of equalising status between them, if only for a short while. She even tries to help trainee (*Do you have any texts which explain this procedure?*), offers concrete assistance, as well (*I could go through the steps and explain things with you beforehand...*) and seeks his approval (*...would that be OK?*). These questions and comments, as well as others from the consultant, give the trainee a line of escape in his fear of loss of face. As a result, the relationship between them is improved.

3: Trainee's inability to say what's on his mind.

The third cultural difference is the inability of the trainee to talk freely to or to confide in the consultant about work-related matters. He seems reluctant to volunteer his current skill levels in the procedures discussed with consultant (*open hernia repair, anastomosis and circumcision*). He also is reluctant to ask for time off to study or to even volunteer his level of preparedness for the upcoming MRCS, or even to ask for assistance with text books and so on.

In keeping with the trainee's culture, the trainee defers to the consultant as she is the one in authority. According to his cultural background, he is not allowed to speak his mind, nor he does he feel comfortable saying what is on his mind to her, especially if it is something that she may dislike or may be contrary to her beliefs. This is the expected behaviour of the power differences within his culture. The trainee is respecting these power differences between them by his silence and especially his reluctance to volunteer his vulnerabilities.

He also uses indirect language to avoid disclosing his own thoughts, for example, (*An open hernia repair I see.....what does it involve?*), Here, the trainee cannot say '*I don't know how to do this and I don't know what it is*'. Indirect language is also used later on by the trainee when he says: (*Yes, I have an old text on Surgical Procedures but it's a bit out-dated,..... but I can have a look tonight, if youthink*). The trainee cannot say what is on his mind to ask directly of the consultant: *What would you advise me to do – use this one or get a more modern version?* The indirect communication as in these examples illustrates how the trainee does not want to disclose what is on his mind, as the comments rely more on suggestion, hinting and non-imposition. The indirect language may also be used by the trainee to protect his face and preserve the (superficial) harmony between him and the consultant.

RESPONSE: Consultant's cultural awareness: The consultant is aware of cultural differences in this scenario. She therefore tries to minimise the power and status differences between them, as she realises that such differences only impede relationships with trainees. She does this in several ways,

for example by smiling, standing next to trainee when they are looking at her Daycase list, using the right amount of eye-contact and in the right places, being friendly and approachable (*Nice to see you again,.. How have you been?*), and telling the trainee about her own perceived vulnerabilities (*It took ages for me to revise for my MRCS!*) and her avoidance of direct questioning (*How do you feel about assisting me with these as well?*), instead of saying in a direct way, (*I want you to assist me with these procedures*). She also admits to needing websites for her own on-going learning. (*Come to my office later and I'll give you some good sites that I use myself from time to time on surgical procedures*).

These comments put the trainee at ease and have the effect of equalising social and power distance between them. Importantly, the consultant tries to joke with the trainee in order to reduce tension and to generate a feeling of being 'approachable' (*I practically needed six whole months!*). She also encourages feedback and comments from the trainee by actively asking for them and following up (*Let me know your impressions of the texts*). To further demonstrate her cultural competence, she also ensures she is willingly accessible to trainees (*..meet me in my office then at 8am on Wed. And good luck!*) and (*... what about setting an alternative date for the procedures once you've finished...?*) She also demonstrates her desire to reinforce success and achievement in him (*We don't want you to fail your MRCS, do we, in fact, I'd like you to do well and be proud of your results*) and (*And good luck! Let me know how you got on in your exams*). All of these comments help to ensure that the professional relationship between them becomes positive and productive, and addresses any misunderstandings that may be apparent due to their different cultural backgrounds.

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