Managing conflict
Focus on improving workplace culture

In some parts of the world, people might not think twice about being late for a meeting because the previous meeting ran longer than anticipated. In fact, it would be considered rude to end a meeting where people are engaged in good conversation and sharing enlightening information just to make the next meeting on time.

"Meetings in some places don't end until they reach the natural end of a conversation," says Jeffrey Sanchez-Burks, assistant professor of organizational behavior and human resources management at the University of Michigan Business School. "Tardiness is not looked upon as being rude or disruptive. In the United States, however, everything people do is controlled by the clock - not the relationship."

A study conducted at the university under Sanchez-Burks' supervision concluded that Americans should be friendlier to one another - and not as motivated by time or other outside factors. They compared American work styles with those of other cultures and found that Americans are the most distant in their work relationships. The result is that people ignore or misinterpret nonverbal communication.

"Workers in other cultures tend to be more social and better at picking up nonverbal cues," Sanchez-Burks says. "The study also examined conflict. We had amazing discoveries about how conflict between people in a team or department can destroy or hinder a project or goal."

For example, the study revealed that Americans do not feel that conflict is damaging. Nor do they feel that relationships with coworkers are an imperative part of a healthy workplace culture. In other parts of the world, however, conflict is viewed as very serious and problematic. People feel that until it is resolved, projects cannot move forward, or they cannot get back on track of any collaboration, project or goal.

"We have conducted studies on a wide range of companies in Korea, Thailand, China and the U.S.," Sanchez-Burks says. "East Asia, Latin American and Middle Eastern cultures tend to believe social and emotional relationships are just as important at work as a relentless focus on the task at hand. There is a lot more work to be done to learn about the differences in people's workplace behavior and how it affects company culture, but we have already identified a lot of differences."

Sanchez-Burks says it does not matter what country one compares to the United States in workplace cultural styles.

"People can communicate in two ways," he says. "Direct and to the point - taken literally. The other way is more indirect. For example, one says something, but expects the response to be related to an underlying meaning. Much of this has to do with how people from different parts of the world use body language to aid the spoken word in attempting to get their message across."

In terms of research, Sanchez-Burks says it appears there is not one style - with or without body language - that is best. However, he learned that people from other cultures do take notice of all the interpersonal stuff going on in the workplace. Americans do not, and it puts them at a disadvantage. They aren't seeing all of the other signs of what a person means outside of the language they speak. Nor do Americans follow nonverbal cues. Sanchez-Burks attributes this to how American life culture is unfolding.

"It's a mainstream American theme that hard work is a good thing," Sanchez-Burks says. "We consider it the right way to live. When we are working, we tend to set aside emotions. Some other cultures put emotions into every aspect of their lives, including in the workplace."

"Despite enormous differences in the nature of social relations across societies as diverse as Mexico, Japan and India, the U.S. may differ from each of them in reduced social emotionality in work settings," Sanchez-Burks continues. "The present research findings have several implications for improving cross-cultural working relationships. By creating informal environments where employees from different cultures can relax and socialize with each other in the office and by offering plenty of chances for employees to get to know each other away from the office, organizations can help to reduce cross-cultural misunderstandings at work."