



THE PHILIPPINE PRIMER

Cultural considerations critical to success.

BY MAJOR DUSTIN DELCOURE

The Republic of the Philippines is a long-standing U.S. ally and former colony with common ground in World War II, government and military structure, an English school system, and is the only foreign country with a U.S. Veterans Affairs Clinic. While important in shaping a close, even familial history, our shared experience disguises a wide cultural gap.

This article addresses that gap by explaining cultural considerations critical to success in the Philippines, yet routinely overlooked or misunderstood by U.S. partners. In line with the Army Special Operations Forces approach to capacity building, in an environment where mission accomplishment is directly tied to relational success, maximizing that effort should be a priority, thereby enabling strategic goals through military partnership.⁰¹

These considerations are relevant to anyone who routinely interacts with Filipinos, regardless of purpose. Lessons shared were gleaned through 14 years of living, working and traveling in the Philippines, studying the language, marriage and the counsel of friends and relatives in business, military and government. Masters research on cross-cultural interpersonal skills aided in translating real-world experience into the considerations offered here. More than one, if not all, apply to any situation related to the Philippine context, whether preparing or analyzing reports, reading a news article, attending a meeting with partners or joining a military exercise. They will not always ease frustrations experienced by U.S. partners, but will explain and reduce their occurrence, and help find a path to better partnership and reasonable solutions.

COLLECTIVIST (PHILIPPINES) VS INDIVIDUALIST (U.S.) CULTURES

In research on cross-cultural negotiation, the most commonly cited aspect is the difference between collectivist and individualist cultures.⁰² Collectivist cultures behave in a way that will best retain harmony for the group, which is more important than solving a specific

issue or problem.⁰³ Individualist cultures are more intent on solving the issue at hand, and less concerned about impacts of a solution on the larger relational situation.⁰⁴ Many people never think about how their natural behavior translates to decision and action, so these terms help digest them in context.

As one example, we employed a local worker who had spent more than 10 years working overseas. While there, he funded education for five siblings, built his parents a home, helped an aunt with medical bills and supported routine family expenses; all selfless actions for the good of the greater family. This large difference in motivation for people's actions translates to many activities and relates to each of the considerations mentioned here. The logic and rationale for decisions in this context, in some cases life changing in nature, are very different from that of most Americans.

INDIRECT (PHILIPPINES) VS DIRECT (U.S.) COMMUNICATION STYLE

The Philippines' collectivist cultural identification translates to a subtle, indirect form of communication. It is common for people to say yes, despite intention to act otherwise. Whereas, Americans are more likely to directly confront a problem or identify someone's failure in a given situation. This often results in Americans suspecting dishonesty on the part of their partners, when really, they overlooked what would have been routine interaction among Filipinos.

It takes time to capture these subtleties of communication; but understanding will help manage expectations and prevent a blunder. For example, I once witnessed an American request support to a training event in a somewhat directive manner. The Filipino replied with something like, "Okay, but we are very busy at that time," coupled with less confirming body language indicating what I characterized as a "no" in that context. Later, the American scolded his counterpart in a meeting for failing to uphold that "agreement."

That was a non-functional relationship until the American departed. In the Filipino context, it is often





polite to acknowledge support for something, while offering a very subtle hint that it will not happen. This is how Filipinos deal with one another; it is not an effort to slight American partners. Watch how partners communicate internally, including body language, eye contact, etc. This will be helpful in gauging how to act in different situations.

UTANG NA LOOB: THE CYCLE OF DEBT REPAYMENT

When you help someone out in the Philippines, they are expected to return the favor. The Filipino world is very cyclic in nature, every action requires a reaction. This is a double-edged sword often misunderstood by Americans. On the positive side, when you help someone out, give them a small gift, render an act of kindness or assist with a request, they will feel compelled to return that favor.

This is especially true if someone genuinely likes you or considers you a friend. They will often instinctively return a favor in much larger capacity than it was issued. It is one of many complementary aspects of the culture. However, when you ask someone for assistance, you should understand they might naturally arrive at the conclusion that you should provide them help in return.

Additionally, be aware that someone might leverage a situation to achieve their own agenda, offering a small favor, forecasting an intended return down the road. This is very common and folks should be aware that in many cases even friends would use their relationships to facilitate mutual needs more so than in the U.S. As an example, on many occasions I have seen Americans frustrated when a Filipino did not follow through with a request, or displayed some anger towards them. When, in reality, their Filipino counterpart had fulfilled numerous requests that were perceived as expectations of U.S. assistance.

For example, I had a senior officer inform commanders we should tell Filipino leadership they had to share plans for upcoming operations on which we would advise them. With good intention, he explained that the Philippine government requested U.S. assistance, which meant we should hold partners accountable to share information supporting our effort. Many Americans have requested assistance or information from individual Filipino partners, with the expectation that U.S. funding and support at the organizational level legitimized the request. In reality, organizational agreements factor very little into individual action.



01

One-sided individual requests are abusive to the relationship and can become disrespectful. Organizational level agreements are often necessary but not sufficient for transactions at the individual level. Another example would be the common experience of Americans visiting counterparts in their office, almost always being welcomed. On the other hand, Philippine counterparts have limited access to U.S. areas, often only for special occasions, upon invite, and receive little in the way of hospitality. When problems arise, or hospitality declines, relook your actions or those of your predecessors and adjust accordingly.

KAGANDAHANG LOOB: PHILIPPINE HOSPITALITY

Philippine hospitality is challenged by few, respected by many, and is a highly complementary aspect of the culture. However, this can also be a double-edged sword due to perceived relational success. If you are the guest of a Filipino person, family or organization, extra efforts will be taken to extend hospitality. This will occur on many occasions even if people don't know or like you.

Similar to debt repayment, if someone does know you and genuinely likes or respects you, they will go to exceptional lengths to extend hospitality. It would be common to visit a small home and have someone give up their only bed for a guest. People would take a loan if needed to buy the food and snacks to treat a guest at a level appropriate to their title or respect. It is important to understand what lengths people and organizations would go to on the account of guests.

General courtesy aside, this is also why accepting whatever might be offered is the right idea. Someone

WATCH HOW PARTNERS COMMUNICATE INTERNALLY, INCLUDING BODY LANGUAGE, EYE CONTACT, ETC. THIS WILL BE HELPFUL IN GAUGING HOW TO ACT IN DIFFERENT SITUATIONS.



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A Special Forces Soldier from 1st SFG(A) assists with doctrine development at the Philippine Army Special Forces School in Fort Magsay, Philippines.

U.S. ARMY PHOTOS BY JENNIFER G. ANGELO

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A U.S. Army Special Forces officer talks to a student at the Philippine Army Special Forces School in Fort Magsay, Philippines.



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likely put themselves or their organization in a bind to provide that courtesy and it could be disappointing, even offensive, if refused. As one example, when observing U.S. units coordinate for staff training, they commonly failed to see that a primary planning factor for their partners was providing snacks, drinks and lunch. Ultimately, that was considered secondary to planned training.

Misperception is the primary concern with hospitality. It is rendered in the process of formal and informal meetings, then taken as an indicator of relational success, misleading Americans as to their standing with a person or a group. As an example, one of our element leaders dealt with counterparts on the use of airfield space. Engagement had been limited to short duration meetings where hospitality was rendered, assistance requested for issues and counterparts agreed to help. When no change took place he became frustrated, explaining his efforts and the indicators of success. In the U.S., his actions would have been more than acceptable. Part of this process is understanding success in a different context.

UTAK TALANGKA: CRAB MENTALITY

Most aspects of Philippine culture are positive in nature, and if issues arise they are because of misunderstanding or misperception by outside visitors, not mal-intent from Filipino partners. Crab Mentality is negative in nature, but it is essential to understand when attempting to foster interaction among competing groups in a shared workspace, such as law enforcement and military. I am also sharing this because

it was learned from mentors in the Philippines and explained as a barrier to success. This is the willingness to undermine another person or group in order to retain a better standing, even if that “better” only results in maintaining status quo while moving your opponent to a lower level.

For example, not helping another person or organization because it could result in them gaining credit for a success that could be yours or place them in higher standing. This translates to the military in the form of issues with intelligence sharing, joint operations and planning. Savvy leaders in the Armed Forces of the Philippines understand this, manage information accordingly and either leverage existing relationships or forge new ones to overcome these limitations. Americans routinely misunderstand the history and complexity of these situations, and pressure organizations to operate with one another without setting conditions.

I would recommend finding or establishing common ground between key leaders before placing organizations in a constrained partnership. This can also be seen within conversation in various forms such as: work, family businesses or personal background. With good intention, people want to represent themselves and their family to the highest degree possible, so descriptions of money made, business holdings, interactions with people of power or awareness of ongoing events might be used to influence someone’s standing. Information could be inflated to maximize the reputation of the speaker or an ally, or to scar the reputation of a rival.

For example, a local government employee was invited to a U.S. headquarters for social events. During visits, he would share knowledge of recent U.S. efforts, or ask



about things to come. The information was not sensitive and something we would routinely ask of counterparts. With good intention, the questions were seen as posing a security risk, created concern and resulted in his exclusion from further events. In this example, U.S. security protocol was not aligned to cultural norms. This effort on the part of a guest to maintain and increase standing in relation to other visitors was misunderstood.

SOCIAL INTERACTION: PLAY FIRST, WORK LATER

In the Philippine culture people rarely interact just for work. Whether handling a military, government or business deal, most if not all, successful transactions occur in an informal social setting or directly because of bonds formed in that context. As such, personnel interacting and partnering with Filipinos need to understand that short, work-focused interactions alone will not translate to success without investment in the social space. Even in the Philippine only context, where successful partnership is found, social engagement is always one step away.

Where failure and conflict exists, there will be a gap in social interaction and common ground among leaders. Previously established relationships and mutual friendships help reduce the time and effort involved in forging new ground, but those are exceptions, not the rule. When an individual or group is new to your network or suspect of your intentions, the best way to improve the situation is to engage in genuine social interaction, disregarding work-related goals for the meantime. Expect for this to take hours and days, not minutes, in some cases weeks or months.

As a close friend in the Philippine intelligence community often jokes, “If Americans only understood this is a 99 percent play, one percent work environment, they

would be exponentially more successful in working with us.” This factor is the most important one mentioned here. With genuine human interaction, over time rapport will develop. With rapport comes the ability to solve the myriad of other issues encountered, and overcome a deficit in other areas mentioned.

When true friendship is earned and extended, each of the positive considerations mentioned are amplified and understanding of the environment increases. This consideration is highly critical to mission success, yet counter-intuitive in terms of U.S. cultural norms and military or organizational culture, even in SOF. As an example, during multiple deployments to the Philippines, whether in 2005 or 2016, U.S. counterparts typically spent a majority of their down time in U.S. only spaces. If they left, it was generally for a specific work reason. When social events did occur, U.S. partners tended to congregate, missing out on the opportunity.

It is common humor among U.S. citizens working in the Philippines that less work will be accomplished during the Christmas Holiday season, due to extensive celebration. In fact, participation in related events with partners is perhaps the best possible time to forge relationships, which directly translates to mutual success. Here are some options for increasing social interaction: sports (shooting, badminton, basketball, biking, golfing), coffee, meals, drinking and singing karaoke. For Filipinos, relaxation with family or friends and enjoyment of social time cannot be underestimated.

IMPORTANCE OF JEALOUSLY AND FACE

If a person is scolded or embarrassed in front of their peers, it will be more harmful to their reputation than in the U.S., both emotionally and socially. That could also cause someone to be less eager to assist at an unexpected time down the road. This is especially important for people in leadership positions and should be considered in terms of gift giving and praise. Giving gifts to a group of folks or one person, and not others could create jealousy and resentment or in the least a misinterpretation about where they stand in larger context.

An example comes from a friend in the Philippine Army where tension developed between unit leaders and their U.S. counterparts. During an exercise, the U.S. partners had given training material requested by an Army unit to another participant in front of the collective group. This created tension between the units and U.S. partners that took time to repair. It appeared that U.S. partners saw this as an inconsequential mishap over cheap training items. By not addressing the issue it was exacerbated. A recommended approach is to be aware of group, personality and positional dynamics and consider an equitable approach in sharing or gift giving. Where exceptions exist, such as a performance award, ensure partners understand their context.



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A U.S. Army Special Operations Soldier works with Philippine partner forces during a training exercise. U.S. ARMY PHOTO

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A classroom of young Filipino children sit at their desks during class. When teaching and training partner-nation forces, their group dynamics and learning style should be considered and methods should be adjusted accordingly. U.S. MARINE CORPS PHOTO BY STAFF SGT. JEFFREY D. ANDERSON

TEACHERS TEACH, STUDENTS LISTEN

In Asia in general, and the Philippines specifically, the classroom environment is usually one where teachers teach and students listen, take notes, memorize material, then reproduce it during a test. Classroom scenarios are less dialogue based. As such, if you teach a class and expect to call upon students to demonstrate understanding, this could be embarrassing or awkward to them. Consider your approach before teaching and training personnel. U.S. methods can be employed to a degree but the instructor should be aware of individual and group dynamics, and adjust accordingly.

PHILIPPINE ENGLISH

English is one of two official languages in the Philippines and it is used in the education system. On one hand, most Americans are comfortable working there because basic communication is not an issue. On the other hand, common language makes it easy for people to overlook the cultural gaps explained here.

Folks should be aware that English is used within the local linguistic and cultural context, including idioms, so meanings are not always exactly the same as U.S. colloquial English. Likewise, a significant majority of Filipinos carry out their daily business using a native dialect, not English, because it is their true comfort zone and a means of identifying with others from the area. Consider these differences as you engage with partners.

When teaching a class or interacting with personnel, be aware that when you speak fast and use odd vocabulary words people may have difficulty understanding you, requiring people to rely only on context.

Yet, because of the collectivist cultural norm, people will be less likely to acknowledge the issue. This does not mean Filipinos should be spoken to like elementary students or small children, which would be rude. Know the audience, keep a reasonable pace, leave out colloquial sayings unless explained, and reinforce key points before assuming communication is not a problem.

In closing, this is my effort to broaden awareness of missed potential with a key ally. It is also an opportunity to shed some light on difficulties our Philippine partners experience in accepting U.S. assistance, but might be too courteous to mention. Finally, in relation to the considerations mentioned here, respect many Filipinos have for Americans in general, and our military experience in specific, ignorance of these principles is sometimes overlooked by partners. While good intentioned, this results in implementation of advice within a context governed by these principles, creating the potential for unintended consequences. 

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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