

4. How do stereotypes and selective perception act as obstacles to effective communication? How important are these factors in communication across cultures?
5. Managers of many global corporations believe that the Internet and e-mail are making communication much easier. Is this necessarily true? Explain why or why not.

Minicase

Johannes van den Bosch Sends an Email

Joseph J. DiStefano

After having had several email exchanges with his Mexican counterpart over several weeks without getting the expected actions and results, Johannes van den Bosch was getting a tongue-lashing from his British MNC client, who was furious at the lack of progress. Van den Bosch, in the Rotterdam office of BigFiveFirm, and his colleague in the Mexico City office, Pablo Menendez, were both seasoned veterans, and van den Bosch couldn't understand the lack of responsiveness.

A week earlier, the client, Malcolm Smythe-Jones, had visited his office to express his mounting frustration. But this morning he had called with a stream of verbal abuse. His patience was exhausted.

Feeling angry himself, van den Bosch composed a strongly worded message to Menendez, and then decided to cool off. A half hour later, he edited it to "stick to the facts" while still communicating the appropriate level of urgency. As he clicked to send the message, he hoped that it would finally provoke some action to assuage his client with the reports he had been waiting for.

He reread the email, and as he saved it to the mounting record in Smythe-Jones's file, he thought, "I'm going to be happy when this project is over for another year!"

Message for Pablo Menendez

Subject: IAS 1998 Financial statements

Author: Johannes van den Bosch (Rotterdam)

Date: 10/72/99 1:51 P.M.

Dear Pablo,

This morning I had a conversation with Mr. Smythe-Jones (CFO) and Mr. Parker (Controller) re the finalization of certain 1998 financial statements. Mr. Smythe-Jones was not in a very good mood.

He told me that he was very displeased by the fact that the 1998 IAS financial statements of the Mexican subsidiary still has not been finalized. At the moment he holds us responsible for this process. Although he recognizes that local management is responsible for such financial statements, he blames us for not being responsive on this matter and inform him about the process adequately. I believe he also recognizes that we have been instructed by Mr. Whyte (CEO) not to do any handholding, but that should not keep us from monitoring the process and inform him about the progress.

He asked me to provide him tomorrow with an update on the status of the IAS report and other reports pending.

Author's Note: The author prepared this mini-case as a basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a business situation. The mini-case reports events as they occurred. The email exchanges in both cases are reported verbatim, except for the names, which have been changed. Professor DiStefano acknowledges with thanks the cooperation of Johannes van den Bosch in providing this information and his generous permission to use the material for executive development.

Therefore I would like to get the following information from you today:

- *What has to be done to finalize the Mexican subsidiary's IAS financials;*
- *Who has to do it (local management, B&FF Mexico, client headquarters; B&FF Rotterdam);*
- *A timetable when things have to be done in order to finalize within a couple of weeks or sooner;*
- *A brief overview why it takes so long to prepare and audit the IAS f/s; and*
- *Are there any other reports for 1998 pending (local gaap, tax), if so the above is also applicable for those reports.*

As of today I would like to receive an update of the status every week. If any major problems arise during the finalization process I would like to be informed immediately. The next status update is due January 12, 2000.

Mr. Smythe-Jones also indicated that in the future all reports (US GAAP, local GAAP and IAS) should be normally finalized within 60 days after the balance sheet date. He will hold local auditors responsible for monitoring this process.

Best regards and best wishes for 2000.

Johannes

JOHANNES VAN DEN BOSCH RECEIVES A REPLY

A little more than an hour later, with his own patience again wearing thin, Johannes van den Bosch watched with relief as Pablo Menendez's name popped into his Inbox messages. His smile quickly turned to disbelief, and then horror, as he read the response from Mexico City. Not only was the client's need still unmet, but now he had another problem! Stung by the apparent anger from Menendez, and totally puzzled as to the cause, he reread the email to make sure he had not misunderstood the message.

—Original Message—

From: Menendez, Pablo (Mexico City)
Sent: Wednesday December 10, 23:11
To: van den Bosch, Johannes (Rotterdam)
Subject: RE: IAS 1998 financial statements
Importance: High

Dear Johannes,

I am not surprised of the outcome of your meeting with Mr. Smythe-Jones (CFO). However, I cannot answer your request until I heard from local management. As it was agreed on the last meeting, we were precluded from doing any work without first getting approval from management at the headquarters and we were instructed by local management from not doing anything until they finalized what was required from us. It appears to me to be a Catch 22 game! I believe we (your Firm and ours) should not fall in the game of passing the ball to someone else before getting a clear understanding of what is going on. We have had several meetings with local management where the issue has been raised and were responded that other priorities were established by the headquarters (on my end I thought they tell you everything they have been instructed of locally, unfortunately it does not seem to be the case). In my opinion it looks very easy that you accept from management at the headquarters to hold us accountable from something we are not responsible of, and this does not mean I do not

understand the pressure you are receiving from your end. However, we are not the enemy. I am not sending copy of this message to our client because I believe that internal issues have to be primarily dealt of internally without involving our clients in the internal politics. The last is what myself truly believe.

Could you tell me how can you accept a deadline from our Firm without first having involved local management? Don't you think they are the first to be involved local management? Don't you think they are the first to be involved on this? I may be wrong but if we are in an international Firm I think we should understand the other side and not just blame someone else of our client's problems.

I really do not want to be rude, but you do not let me any option.

Despite the differences we have had, it has been a pleasure working with you.

Best regards and seasons greeting.

Pablo Menendez

Worried that he had somehow offended Menendez, van den Bosch printed off a copy of the email which he had sent the day before, and asked the two partners on either side of his office for their reaction to the message. The audit and tax specialists, one Dutch and the other Belgian, had nearly identical replies. "It seems to me that you got the point across clearly, Johannes," they said. "You laid out the facts and proposed actions to solve the problem. Why do you ask?" they queried. When he showed them the letter, they too were puzzled. "Smythe-Jones will no doubt be the next person to send me a message!" he thought. As a frown reflected his increasingly grim mood, van den Bosch wondered what he should do now.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why is Mr. Smyth-Jones upset with the situation? Is his upset reasonable? Should he hold the Rotterdam company responsible for the process?
 2. Is Mr. van den Bosch correct in assuming that the e-mail from Mr. Menendez reflects anger? Is there anything in Mr. van den Bosch's e-mail that would have upset Mr. Menendez? If so, why?
 3. Would you have done anything differently? Why or why not?
 4. What should Mr. van den Bosch do to continue with his assignment and monitor the financial statements?
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 3. R. Mead, *Cross-Cultural Management Communication* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1990).
 4. L. Beamer and I. Varner, *Intercultural Communication in the Global Workplace*, 2nd ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill/Irwin, 2001).
 5. E. T. Hall, *The Silent Language* (New York: Doubleday, 1959).
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 7. Ibid.
 8. "The 21st Century Corporation," *BusinessWeek*, November 6, 2000.
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