



WORKING IN AND INDIAN ORGANIZATION

“Always show respect to the managing director. Although no one of the staff of your host organization will attack you for being disrespectful, one will respect you less because of it”.

“Be happy when things are happening the way you planned them, but don’t count on it next time”.

“No problem, means that one has no idea of what problems might pop up when one tries to comply with your request. It’s a question in disguise: ‘please give me some time to find out’”.

Working in an Indian organization gives you an entirely different taste than in the West. It’s more informal *and* more formal at the same time, dependent on whom you’re with. Then again, where Indian orgs blend with Western ones, if you happen to work at the office of an INGO (International NGO, like Oxfam, for example, or UNICEF) different rules apply. AMAIDI’s partners however are 100% Indian. No international flavor here. Although it does matter whether you’re working in an NGO, a school or a hospital, whether in a small organization or a big one, we can nevertheless say *in general* that in every Indian organization:

- There’s only one person who’s the boss and that’s the boss.
- Apart from losing your job, losing your face is the worst thing that can happen.
- A foreign guest will never hear the truth if one thinks that will harm him/her.

Recognize these?

“I’m simply asking for a document about the organization’s activities and all I get is a brochure with minimal information. How can I make them clear that I need something else?”

“Wherever I go I have to sit down on a chair, with people of the village sitting around me on the floor. And when I get of my chair and sit down on the floor, everyone gets upset...”

“When I’m invited to have lunch with my translator at her home, she keeps on putting rice on my plate, in spite of my protest that I really had enough...”

“Can’t they see that as a foreigner it is useless to go to their meetings, as it is all in their local language?”

“I’m getting used to it!”

Although very strange and startling at the beginning, to most volunteers and interns working in a typical Indian context starts getting normalized by the end of the second week or so. One week later ‘things go a lot easier’, so they tell us. What happens is that, individual differences notwithstanding, volunteers get less fuzzy about our concept of time and speed. ‘Oh, sure, I’ll wait, no problem’. Acting this way - copying the behavior of their hosts, including wobbling their heads - the volunteers enable their hosts to take the time to find out what needs to be done. There’s always a mild confusion about that in the beginning. Slowly bridges are built from both sides. It is there where the volunteers and their Indian hosts meet, midway.

“I know what my aims are”

Did you have a 100% clear picture of what was waiting for you by the time you got here? Most likely not. Never mind, although communication - on paper - has clearly defined what *needs* to be done, the first week or so will be used anyway to redefine the appointments and clarify what *will* be done. Sometimes it’s clear at the end of the first day; sometimes it takes more than a week. Take that time, even if you stay for a short time. It’s worth investing. And then there’s the fact that you might have set your aims and objectives long before you actually landed here. In the meantime ground reality for the receiving organization has often changed. And needs shifted. Flexibility is the magic word. If necessary recreate your aims and objectives, so that they (again) fit the needs of the organization. Even if you’re an intern where the mission is often structured by the university you’re studying at: you might build in some extra space to negotiate if you find out the situation is not quite what you expected it to be.

Assessment/Evaluation

Who says you did not do a great job, once you’re done? No one. Everyone probably agrees you couldn’t have done it better. Who’s everyone? First of all: the managing director of the organization and - most likely - your guide or local supervisor. It is appreciated that you leave a small report of some sorts, if only a ‘bulleted list’ with ‘points for improvement’. If a more in-depth report is your aim, a summarized list of highlights makes a good impression at the final meeting in the director’s office. You will have to take the lead, sometimes. If you feel that more relevant questions have not been asked, the answers being important points to be made. And then: be proud of yourself. You did a good job. People enjoyed your presence and will remember you. Especially when you leave some photographs behind.