

A woman in a dark business suit with a light-colored striped collar is looking down at a tablet computer she is holding. She is engaged in a conversation with a man whose back is to the camera, wearing a dark suit and a patterned tie. The background is a bright, out-of-focus office setting.

# Navigating cultural bumps in the road

Today, about half of those who apply to PEO for professional engineer licensing are foreign-educated, as are about one-third of Ontario's 65,000 P.Engs. Immigrants to Ontario bring their international work experience; they also bring their cultural differences. Giving feedback in a culturally diverse workplace holds challenges both for Ontario engineers working overseas on projects and for foreign-trained engineers and engineering graduates who work and live in Ontario. Getting around cultural misunderstandings will be easier if we are aware of the different interpretations of the same information.

**by Lionel Laroche, PhD, P.Eng.**

Immigration, mergers and acquisitions, and globalization over the past 10 years have changed the face of Ontario's workforce. The number of engineers who report to or manage someone who comes from a culturally different background has increased significantly as a result. Culturally different managers and employees working well together can be very effective, combining a wide range of techniques and approaches to solving problems. However, many cross-cultural manager-employee relationships are not as effective as they could be. One of the issues culturally different managers and employees commonly face is feedback misinterpretation. Responses often seem inappropriate. For example:

- Some employees may not respond to the feedback they are given by managers. For example, a Romanian engineer working in a Canadian plant had to be placed on a Performance Improvement Plan by his manager for him to realize that his behavior did not meet expectations.
- Other employees may overreact by the manager's standards. A Mexican engineer who was given some negative feedback by his Canadian manager in front of his colleagues resigned the next day. In his manager's mind, this reaction was not warranted; the initial issue was not major and certainly would not have prompted the average Canadian engineer to resign.
- Some employees appear not to appreciate the positive feedback that man-

agers give them. For example, a Polish engineer who had received all the technical and merit awards that his company had to offer considered quitting the organization because she thought that her skills were not given proper recognition.

Giving and receiving feedback is an integral part of any organization's development. Interpretations vary within the cultural context.

### Single cultural context

The range of feedback, from negative to positive, can be represented as an axis, as in Figure 1.

In Figure 1, the left side of the axis, marked with "Unacceptable," corresponds to feedback of unacceptable performance. Managers commenting to employees that their performance falls in this area would be giving them notice that some fast and significant corrective action is needed ("shape up or ship out").

The range on the far right, marked "Excellent," corresponds to feedback for outstanding performance. This corresponds to situations where the employee will receive some form of recognition

(e.g. raise, promotion, award) in the near future.

The range between the first and second marks, marked "Negative," corresponds to negative feedback. Managers commenting to employees that their performance falls in this area expect corrective action. The range marked "Positive" corresponds to positive feedback.

The central range, marked "Neutral," corresponds to the "neutral zone." Feedback in this area corresponds to words that may or may not carry a value judgment. Feedback falling in this range is neither positive nor negative; additional information is needed in order to determine the true feedback. For example, comments like "It's nice" or "It's interesting," made with blank tones of voice and without gestures, do not give any indication of what the person really thinks. The feedback recipient needs to wait for the next comment to determine whether the feedback provided is positive or negative.

Within a given culture, the positions of the boundaries separating these zones vary from one individual to another. In essence, some people are more sensitive to feedback than others.

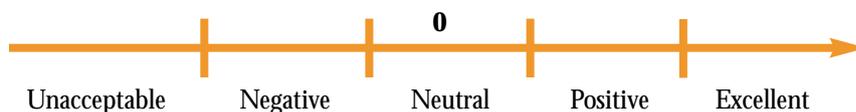


Figure 1: Range of feedback within a single cultural context. Between negative and positive feedback lies the "neutral zone."

## HELPING ENGINEERS TO INTEGRATE

For foreign-educated professionals, getting that first Canadian job in their field can be as much a challenge as navigating their way through multicultural misunderstandings in the workplace—and for many of the same reasons. Pathways is a program that prepares internationally educated engineering graduates for engineering employment in Canada. Created by the Ontario Society of Professional Engineers and funded, in part, by the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, the program is designed to help bridge the employment gap for internationally educated engineering graduates now living in Ontario.

Applicants accepted into the program must be registered in PEO's Engineering Internship Training program, must have had their education and experience assessed by PEO and be exempt from writing the technical examinations, and meet strict benchmarks for business English language skills. Participants pay a tuition fee of \$3,350 (plus GST) and move through two components:

- six weeks of in-class training in Canadian workplace norms and teamwork (reporting to a Canadian manager, working in a Canadian team etc.), as well as additional training in English language communication skills.
- a 52-week paid internship with an engineering employer, aimed at giving participants the necessary experience to qualify for licensing as a professional engineer in Ontario.

Additionally, applicants will receive ongoing online advanced communication skills training and work placement support. For more detailed information on the Pathways program, please visit [www.pathways.ospe.on.ca](http://www.pathways.ospe.on.ca).

## USEFUL RESOURCES

For newcomers to Canada and recent graduates, building a network of professional contacts is a good way to improve career opportunities. Volunteering with one of the many technical societies or other engineering-related organizations is extremely important in developing a network. Links to many of these organizations are provided at [www.peo.on.ca](http://www.peo.on.ca) under "Links." PEO also encourages engineering graduates to apply for licensing as professional engineers and to register in PEO's Engineering Internship Training program, which enables them to connect to the engineering profession by taking an active role in their local PEO chapter.

Here are some of the other resources available to foreign-trained engineering graduates, ranging from settlement support to employment assistance.

A.C.C.E.S.	416-921-1800	<a href="http://www.accestrain.com">www.accestrain.com</a>
Access to Professions and Trades	416-325-4957	<a href="http://www.equalopportunity.on.ca">www.equalopportunity.on.ca</a>
Catholic Community Services of York Region	905-415-9537	<a href="http://www.ccsyr.org">www.ccsyr.org</a>
C.A.C.E.E.	416-929-5156	<a href="http://www.cacee.com">www.cacee.com</a>
COSTI	416-789-7925	<a href="http://www.costi.org">www.costi.org</a>
Humber College Program for foreign-trained professionals	416-745-0281	<a href="http://www.humber.ca/cecalendar/eap/cftpt.htm">www.humber.ca/cecalendar/eap/cftpt.htm</a>
Job Connect	1-800-387-5656	<a href="http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/training/cepp/aboutjc.html">www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/training/cepp/aboutjc.html</a>
On-site	416-599-4567	<a href="http://www.epi.ca">www.epi.ca</a>
Ontario Society of Professional Engineers	416-392-4558	<a href="http://www.ospe.on.ca">www.ospe.on.ca</a>
Possibilities Project	416-392-4558	<a href="http://www.possibilitiesproject.com">www.possibilitiesproject.com</a>
Settlement.Org	416-322-4950	<a href="http://www.settlement.org">www.settlement.org</a>
Skills for Change	416-658-3101	<a href="http://www.skillsforchange.org">www.skillsforchange.org</a>
Technoskill	n/a	<a href="http://www.technoskill.com">www.technoskill.com</a>
The Centre for Foreign Trained Professionals and Tradespeople	416-745-0281	<a href="http://www.cftpt.org">www.cftpt.org</a>
The New Canadian Program	519-883-0216	<a href="http://www.newcanadians.org">www.newcanadians.org</a>
The NOW Program	519-393-0350	<a href="http://www.tdsb.on.ca/business/cspd/workplacment.htm">www.tdsb.on.ca/business/cspd/workplacment.htm</a>
Working for Work	519-570-3552	<a href="http://www.workingforwork.ca">www.workingforwork.ca</a>

### Multicultural context

In a multicultural situation, the challenge for managers and employees comes from the fact that feedback scales differ widely from country to country and that, in most cases, neither managers nor employees are aware of this difference. For example, Canadian technicians may interpret comments made by some Polish engineers, which were intended to be only slightly negative, as harsh criticism. Figure 2 is a schematic description of the dynamics that lead to feedback misinterpretation.

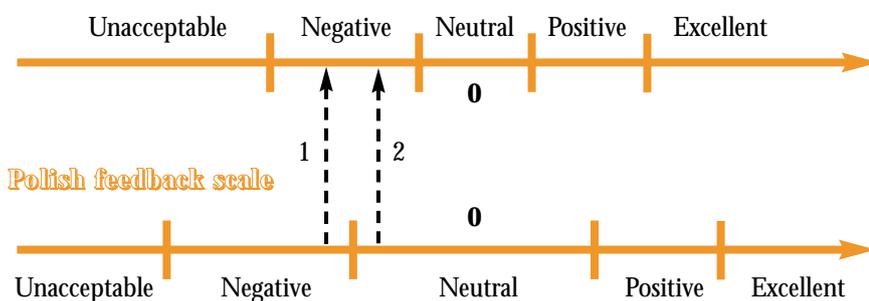
Here is an example in the case of France and Canada (France occupies the same position in Figure 2 as Poland relative to Canada), as described by a French engineer working in Canada: "I once wrote a report that included some potentially controversial recommendations. Before showing it to my management, I showed it to a few colleagues: Two English Canadians and one French. In essence, the comments of my two English Canadian colleagues were: 'Good report, I suggest you modify recommendations #4 and 5 in the following manner.' The comments of my

French colleague were substantially: 'Not bad, but some of the recommendations are totally out to lunch; you should rewrite recommendations #4 and 5 this way.' The suggestions that my French colleagues recommended were the same as the recommendations provided by my English Canadian colleagues."

In the case of Mexico, Japan and China versus Canada, the relative positions of the two axes are reversed (Figure 3): The neutral zone of Mexicans, Japanese, and Chinese is, on average, narrower than the neutral zone of Canadians and Americans. As a result, Canadian managers may experience unexpected reactions from their Chinese, Japanese or Mexican employees with comments that, in their minds, are either neutral or slightly negative; in the minds of the Chinese, Japanese and Mexican recipients, the comments require a response or correspond to a severe warning. This is what happened in the case of the Mexican engineer who resigned after he received some mildly negative feedback from his Canadian manager.

Negative comments made by people who have a wide neutral zone may be interpreted as far more negative than intended by people who have narrower neutral zones. Consider the situation where

### Canadian feedback scale

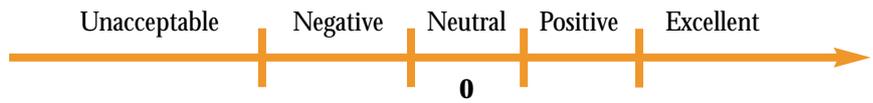


*Figure 2: Multicultural misinterpretation in action. (1) When a Polish engineer makes a slightly negative comment to his or her Canadian technicians, the feedback is often interpreted as harsh criticism. (2) A comment that is meant to be rather neutral may be received as negative.*

an Austrian engineering manager told his American employees that their presentations were “totally unacceptable.” The American employees interpreted the manager’s comments as if they were about to be fired, when he meant that the presentations needed a lot of additional work. Using Figure 3 to represent this case, Austria takes the place of Canada and the U.S. takes the place of Mexico.

This also explains a common misunderstanding between Canadian engineers working in Japan and their Japanese counterparts, which is particularly common at the beginning of their assignments. According to a Canadian engineer working in Japan: “I would make a request to my Japanese counterparts. By Canadian standards, this request was quite simple and would not raise any eyebrow. The response I would get went like this: My Japanese counterparts would take a deep breath and respond ‘This might be a little difficult.’ ‘A little difficult?’ Great! I love challenges. Why is it difficult?’ I’d reply. I would then switch to a problem-solving mode and start looking for a solution. In most

### Mexican feedback scale



### Canadian feedback scale

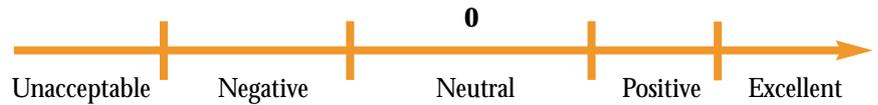


Figure 3: Canadian and Mexican feedback scales.



Negative comments made by people who have a wide neutral zone may be interpreted as far more negative than intended by people who have narrower neutral zones.

cases, we would find one that seemed to work; however, in virtually all cases, nothing happened. It took me a while to realize that when Japanese say: ‘It might be a little difficult,’ they mean something like: ‘Forget it. Not in a million years.’”

### Getting the point across

When a Canadian manager provides mildly negative feedback to his or her French employees, this feedback may appear to “fall on deaf ears” (Figure 4). The mildly negative feedback provided by the

Canadian manager falls in the neutral zone of the French employee. The words are heard, but the negative content of the feedback is not recognized. As a result, the French employee does not take any corrective action, contrary to the expectation of the Canadian manager.

Often, the Canadian manager will come back to the issue after a little while and make a second negative comment, which is usually more pointed, as indicated in Figure 4. If this comment again falls in the neutral zone, the French employee will again hear the words but not take any action.

Clearly, being aware that those different cultural backgrounds may have widely different interpretations of the same feedback represents an important step toward a solution. Another important step is a manager-employee expectation-sharing session. Culturally different employees and managers need to sit down and discuss how they are going to handle feedback between the two of them.

Finally, the Canadian manager will usually “crank up the volume” until he or she makes a comment that is sufficiently negative for the French employee to recognize it as negative (i.e. a comment that falls in the negative zone of the French employee). It’s only at this point that the French employee will identify that there is a problem and that he or she needs to do something about it. By this time, however, the Canadian manager might have lost patience and be ready to fire his or her French employee. By contrast, this negative feedback appears almost to have come out of nowhere to the French employee.

Similar issues can be observed with positive feedback, although their frequency

and magnitude are usually significantly lower. In Figure 4, the French employee does not recognize as negative the feedback provided by his or her Canadian manager. The same situation may occur on the positive side, where the French employee does not recognize the positive feedback provided by his or her Canadian manager. As a result, the French employee may feel unappreciated.

In extreme cases, a new Canadian engineer may consider that his or her skills are not given the proper respect they deserve, whereas management is providing extensive recognition by Canadian standards. This is what happened to the Polish engineer who considered looking for a job because she felt unappreciated, even

though she had received all the technical and merit awards that her company had to offer. The positive feedback she was given was too mild for her to register.

#### What can you do?

Clearly, being aware that those different cultural backgrounds may have widely different interpretations of the same feedback represents an important step towards to solution. Another important step is a manager-employee expectation-sharing session. Culturally different employees and managers need to sit down and discuss how they are going to handle feedback between the two of them. A third step consists in training both the employees and managers on how to reap the benefits of cultural differences. When culturally different managers and employees have created a common set of expectations and ways of working together, they can then capitalize on the different ranges of knowledge and experience that they have. ❖

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#### Canadian feedback scale

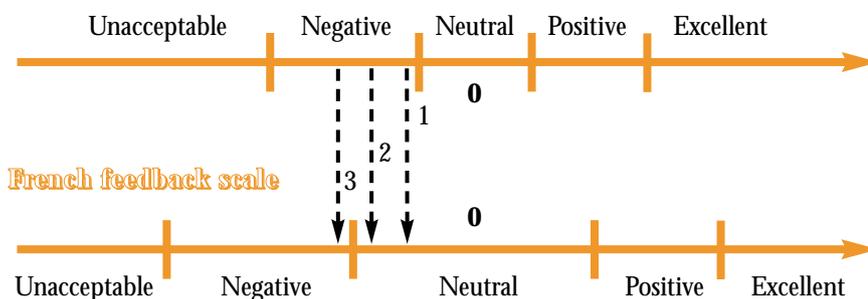


Figure 4: Making the point (1) When a Canadian manager makes a mildly negative comment, his or her French employee may not react because the feedback appears inconsequential. (2) The manager usually follows with a harsher criticism. (3) Only when the feedback is negative enough does the employee react.