

# UNDERSTANDING THE NUANCES OF ENGLISH

Internationally-educated professionals (IEPs) may experience frustration in their workplace communications when they fail to understand the slight, often barely discernible differences in meaning in business emails, memos and letters.

**F**ailure to comprehend subtle messages in spoken and written business communications may impede a newcomer's advancement by damaging relationships with co-workers, supervisors or managers.

When sending spoken and written messages, it is important to understand how the words we speak or write can convey a certain message – sometimes one that is unintended.

In spoken English, we have different ways of sending a message: not only by the words we use, but also by the tone of and intonation (rise and fall) in our voice, as well as non-verbal (body) language.

Although we cannot use intonation or body language in our written communications, we can convey a certain meaning or 'tone' by the words we choose in our message.

Tone refers to the writer's or speaker's *attitude* and is delivered in the arrangement of words in a sentence and the usage of words.

A variation in tone or meaning is called a nuance.

Consider the following reply to a manager's email summarizing a performance review in which the employee was advised his work was less than satisfactory and required improvement:\*

*I do not agree with the remarks in your email. I find them very inappropriate. I do not believe you have reason to accuse me*

*of unsatisfactory performance. I have never received negative feedback in my previous jobs. If you do not take back your comments, I plan to take this to a higher level.*

With the use of words like "do not", "very inappropriate", "accuse", "never", "negative", and the short, clipped sentences and a threat, the employee is sending a message that has a very confrontational attitude.

What kind of reaction on the manager's part is this message likely to produce?

Most managers are aware that they need to provide "constructive criticism", not outright condemnation, of an employee's performance. In fact, most managers will use indirect language in their written and spoken assessments.

Had the individual softened his tone by beginning with a neutral opening statement like, *I have read your summary in regard*

*to my performance evaluation, and I have to say that your comments caught me by surprise,*" he would have left a very different impression.

He might have followed up with examples of positive feedback from previous supervisors to support his statement.

In this way, his message would have matched that of his manager's in terms of attitude.

The use of indirect language and subtle messages in the workplace can cause confusion and newcomers often need assistance "reading between the lines" to interpret their co-worker's or manager's intended message and respond appropriately.

Before writing and sending any kind of business communication, make a conscious decision about what tone you want to deliver based on the purpose, audience and desired outcome.

In this example, while you want to express your disagreement with the assessment, you also need to address the manager's concern and maintain a productive relationship with him/her based on mutual respect.

*\*While a few words have been changed, this is not a hypothetical example. The writer has seen a very similar email with a threat by an employee.*

– MARJORIE FRIESEN

## MARJORIE FRIESEN

Since 2003, Marjorie Friesen has taught English language to adult immigrants and workplace English to IEPs to help them advance in their careers and achieve their goals. For more info, visit [www.improveyourworkplaceenglish.com](http://www.improveyourworkplaceenglish.com).

