

## FILIPINO TRAITS GENERAL

Filipinos are descendants of Malay explorers but the bloodline has been infused with Chinese, Arab, Indian, Spanish, and American lineage. This fusion of cultures has given rise to no less than 133 distinct cultural and linguistic groups, each with its basic Malayo-Polynesian roots but with varying degrees of other foreign influences.

The warmth and hospitality of Filipinos are known throughout the world. Guests are grieved with food and drink, and often, a place in the host's own home. It may be generosity to a fault, but there is nothing more pleasing to Filipinos than knowing that their guest is never wanting for anything.

Filipinos have a strong sense of family. Three generations often come together. Aunts and uncles (tita and tito) help raise and discipline the children as secondary parents. In turn, cousins grow up as informal siblings. The grandparents and elderly members of the family are the family's source of history and stories and are taken care of until their last days. Visitors and guests to family gatherings would do well to pay their respects to the elderly clan members. Pagmamano, taking the elder person's right hand and bringing it to your forehead, is a great sign of respect. Similarly, calling them lolo (grandfather) and lola (grandmother) and adding the honorific po to your sentences denotes your recognition of their age and rank in the clan structure (such as "How are you po?").

Filipinos are expressive talkers, incorporating eyes, mouth, and hands in their speech. In this way, depth and nuance are added to something that cannot be said or put into words. Courteous language and gentle demeanor are the norm; exaggerated movements and boisterous speech are frowned upon and considered especially by the elder generation as uncouth (walang modo). Direct eye contact is always avoided since it is an aggressive stance and regarded as offensive. Pointed or direct remarks are avoided, and sensitive topics are best left untouched. Westerners might find it rather tiresome and long-winded. Nevertheless, it goes a long way when developing relationships with Filipinos.

The importance of "keeping one's face," meant as pride and self-esteem, is very important to Filipinos. Sensitive and delicate topics are often avoided to prevent misunderstandings, criticisms, or fights. "Losing face" is the worst thing that a Filipino can think of happening to him. Thus, the sense of *hiya* or being sensitive to the pride and self-esteem of others is a quality learned early on. Sociologists have come up with a term defining this quality—smooth interpersonal relationships or *pakikisama*. By trying to "get along," Filipinos adopt a group mindset, thinking and doing what everyone in the group decides. This is not inaction or passivity, but Filipinos do not care to be the odd one out.

Filipinos dislike upsetting anyone and that's why they make it a point never to ruffle any feathers, whether directly or indirectly. If forced to give negative answers, the Filipino will say something without explicitly saying "no." *Pakiramdaman* or the sensitivity afforded by one to another comes in. Simply, this is feeling each other out or, more concretely, sensing what is not said. This aids in completing the gaps or the omissions in the conversation because every Filipino knows that much of what is not said in any conversation is as weighty as words that are spoken.

Another Filipino trait is utang na loob or recognizing a personal indebtedness owed to the one who has bestowed favors. It's quite simple: favors long past are never forgotten and are always remembered to be reciprocated with similar or greater kindness. Something like a gracious *quid pro quo*, but it is not a forced reciprocity. Because of *hiya* and smooth interpersonal relationships, returning the favor is almost an unspoken, unasked-for given. Resilient and optimistic in the face of adversity, Filipinos are spontaneous and convivial in their celebration of life, best exemplified in festivals and fiestas.

The arrival and 333-year rule of the Spaniards left its indelible mark on the islands and its people: the Catholic faith. About 80% of all Filipinos are Catholic making the Philippines the only predominantly Catholic country in Asia.

With the arrival of Sharif Kabunsuan to Mindanao in the early 14th century came the introduction of Islam to the country. To date, Mindanao is the center of the Islamic faith in the country with followers numbering to over three million. The greatest concentration of Muslims is in the provinces of Cotabato, Zamboanga del Norte, Lanao, and the Sulu Archipelago.

At the turn of the century, two independent Filipino religions were established—the Iglesia ni Kristo or Church of Christ, and the Philippine Independent Church, more commonly known as Aglipayan after its founder, Gregorio Aglipay. These two make up the local independent religions.

A vast majority of tribes inhabit the mountains of Northern Luzon and Mindanao, and a small number in the mountainous islands of Palawan and Mindoro. These indigenous tribes have withstood waves of Spanish and American missionaries and still adhere to their nature-based, animistic beliefs.

## FILIPINO TRAITS AND VALUES

Much has been said about so-called negative Filipino traits and these have been blamed for the perceived weak character of the Filipino. We need to use an orientalist yardstick to measure success or failure as it would be unfair to use Western standards to evaluate Filipino traits.

It is very Filipino to stress negative points, to find fault in ones behavior, to compare themselves unfavorably with Western standards.

There is something strange in the very way the Filipino looks upon success. A person is not supposed to exert effort at the expense of sanity. They will ridicule a person who teaches himself how to think and label him *Tasio*, the philosopher. They want people not to learn too much lest they be like Jose Rizal (Philippine national hero) who was executed at the Luneta in 1896. Assertiveness is frowned upon because it smacks of pride and hubris. Success to the Filipino, must come naturally; it should not be induced or artificially contrived. One should not be successful at an early age because that would mean exertion and hard work. Success must come very late in life, if it is to come at all.

Filipino traits must be understood in the above context. Hence, they are considered negative only according to other yardsticks.

The following Filipino traits show an ambivalence of positive and negative aspects.

- SHAME (Hiya)**  
Negative, because it arrests or inhibits one's action. This trait reduces one to smallness or to the "morality of slaves" thus congealing the soul of the Filipino and emasculating him, making him timid, meek and weak. Positive, because, it contributes to peace of mind and lack of stress by not even trying to achieve.
- PROCASTINATION (Ningas-cogon)**  
Negative, by all standards, because it begins ardently and dies down as soon as it begins. This trait renders one inactive and unable to initiate things or to persevere. Positive, in a way, because it makes a person non-chalant, detached, indifferent, nonplussed should anything go wrong, and hence conducive to peace and tranquility.
- GROUP LOYALTY (Pakikisama)**  
Negative, because one closes one's eyes to evils like graft and corruption in order to conserve peace and harmony in a group at the expense of one's comfort. Positive, because one lives for others; peace or lack of dissension is a constant goal.
- TEST OF STRENGTH (Patigagan)**  
Negative, because it is stubborn and resists all efforts at reconciliation. The trait makes Filipino's childish, vindictive, irresponsible, irrational. Actions resulting from this trait are leaving the phone off the hook to get even with one's party line, stopping the engine of the car to prove that one has the right of way; standing one's ground until the opposite party loses its patience. Positive, because it is sign that we know our rights and are not easily cowed into submission.
- RESIGNATION (Bahala na)**  
Negative, because one leaves everything to chance under the pretext of trusting in Divine providence. This trait is really laziness disguised in religious garb. Positive, because one relies on a superior power rather than on one's own. It is conducive to humility, modesty, and lack of arrogance. BECAUSE, i.e., scapegoat (Kasi)  
Negative, because one disowns responsibility and makes a scapegoat out of someone or something. One is never to blame; one remains fly white and has a ready alibi for failure. Positive, because one can see both sides of the picture and know exactly where a project failed. One will never suffer from guilt or self-recrimination.
- SAVING FACE**  
Negative, because, being closely related to *hiya* and *kasi*, it enables a person to shirk responsibility. One is never accountable for anything. Positive, because one is saved from undue embarrassment, sleepless nights, remorse of conscience. It saves one from accountability or responsibility. This trait enables one to make a graceful exit from guilt instead of facing the music and owning responsibility for an offense.
- INCLUSION (Salap)**  
Negative, because one never learns to be on one's own but relies on one's family and relatives. This trait stunts growth and prevents a person from growing on one's own. Generating a life of parasitism, this trait is very non-essential. Blaring music, loud tones are a result of this mentality. We wrongly think that all people like the music we play or the stories we tell. This mentality also makes them consider the world as one vast comfort room. Positive, because one cares for the family and clan; one stands or falls with them. This trait makes a person show concern for the family to which he belongs.
- PROCASTINATION (Mabasa or "Bakas na")**  
Negative, because one constantly postpones action and accomplishes nothing. This aggravates a situation, a problem grows beyond correction, a leak or a small break becomes a gaping hole. This arises from an indolent mentality that a problem will go away by itself. Positive, because one is without stress and tension; one learns to take what comes naturally. Like the Chinese *wu-wei*, this trait makes one live naturally and without undue artificiality.
- INDEBTEDNESS (Utang na loob)**  
Negative, because one overlooks moral principles when one is indebted to a person. One who is beholden to another person will do anything to please him, thinking that by doing so he is able to repay a debt. One condones what the other person does and will never condemn him for wrongdoing. Positive, because it is a recognition of one's indebtedness. This trait portrays the spirit behind the Filipino saying, "He who does not know how to look to the past will never reach his destination."
- SELF-CENTREDNESS (Kanya-kanya)**  
Negative, because self-centered; one has no regard for others. So long as my family and I are not in need, I do not care about the world. Positive, because one takes care of oneself and one's family; "Blood is thicker than water."

Information for foreigners

# PHILIPPINES



## FILIPINO BUSINESS NORMS, ETIQUETTE AND STYLE

**Business Etiquette:** Start out by addressing a new business acquaintance by his or her family name. "Mister" is obviously proper for men, while many married Filipinas prefer "Mrs.;" use "Ms." sparingly, or at least until her preference is clear. Filipinos are status conscious, so be quick to use formal titles: Doctor Aquino, Attorney Rodriguez, Secretary de Ocampo. Avoid using someone's first name until they've known you for a while, or until they ask you to be more informal.

Many Filipinos have multiple names: Enrique Ramon, Juan Jesus, Maria Teresita. Always ask what they prefer to be called, then make a note regarding both formal names and nicknames (with proper spelling). Nicknames, some of them seemingly flippant, are common: Johnnyboy, Pasady, Babes, Junior, Bobby. In written form, the nicknames are often enclosed in quotations as a middle name: Antonio "Tonyboy" Cojuangco, Ferdinand "Bong Bong" Marcos.

The rules on handshakes are about the same as in the West, although Filipinos may use a little more contact (pat on the side of the arm as gesture of hospitality or friendship). If there is a clear status differential, or you are meeting a senior executive, it may be best to let him/her offer the handshake first.

Filipinos have fascinating nonverbal language, much of it involving facial expressions. Lifting the eyebrows without smiling means no—but lifting the eyebrows while smiling is defined to greet a friend. Filipinos often point by purring their lips. Pointing your finger is a definite *no*, and you should avoid too-direct eye contact.

**Time Orientation in General:** Although there is a tendency to think of the Philippines as a place where it's fine to be late, this is no longer true. Businesspeople have gradually come to appreciate the importance of punctuality, and it's best to arrive on time. I generally allow extra time for traffic congestion and unexpected delays, figuring it's better to kill some time in a coffee shop than to be an hour late for a key meeting. It's always a good idea to call ahead to confirm a business appointment, either earlier the same day or the afternoon before the meeting.

For most social occasions, it is almost rude to arrive at the stated time. Fashionably late is the name of the game, by as much as an hour. At a party, the more important the guest, the later he or she arrives. More generally, expect slow and indifferent service wherever you go.

Integrate that concept and don't try to fight it, as it won't do you any good to complain except on a situational basis. Try to adapt a Zen frame of mind when shopping or dealing with crowds rather than fuming or doing a slow burn. No point.

**Time Orientation as Related to Business Deals:** The pace of doing business in the Philippines is casual and leisurely, to say the least. Things usually unfold at a snail's pace that can be downright excruciating for the results-oriented Westerner. However, it has been like that here for centuries and current trends toward Westernized modes of business interaction have yet to make a significant dent in long-established custom. If you aren't a patient person, it might be a good idea to practice deep breathing and mental imagery, setting up about it is probably going to be counterproductive.

The pace and content of meetings is different than Westerners are used to. There may be several minutes of small talk before getting down to business (about the stock market, basketball, the latest flap at Malacañang, whatever). People like to hang around afterwards for more of the same, even if the meeting itself has been tense. It would be impolite to top up and immediately take your leave, even if you're running late for another meeting or you've just lost a difficult negotiation. Mend fences, leave with a smile and hearty farewell, and return to do battle another day.

**Gandhi in the Philippines:** Many Westerners are used to organizational cultures in which confrontation is the norm. In meetings, folks show their feelings, glare and gesticulate, criticize and even yell one another. But—they, no hard feelings—they end going out for a drink after work or watching a ball game together that weekend.

**Not in the Philippines!** A raised voice, the wrong intonation, the implication of incompetence, or excessive direct eye contact can do major damage. Although Mahatma Gandhi invented passive resistance in the fight for Indian independence, one might think it's actually an indigenous Philippine phenomenon. Once you've perceived as arrogant and pushy, you're in interpersonal quicksand. Among the forms taken by passive resistance in this context: not returning phone calls, missing deadlines, misinterpreting instructions, failure to follow through. Most of the time you won't even know what hit you until it's too late.

**The Philippine Business as Family:** The family is always of vital importance in the Philippines; not surprisingly, most business organizations are modeled on the Filipino family. The boss and subordinate often exist in a *bata* relationship, basically like that between parent and child (bata literally meaning "child"). As a consequence, paternalistic management styles are the norm.

Further, the Spanish *compradazgo* system, with its dense networks of godparents and other quasi-relatives, affects most business settings. The Filipino family is defined quite broadly, and includes many people who are called "uncle" (*Tito*), "auntie" (*Tita*), and "cousin" (*Pisana*), even though they are not related by blood. In many companies, a good proportion of employees fall into this category, which means they are not likely to be fired for inefficiency unless they really make a mess of things. In larger corporations, the nepotism may devolve to the departmental level and may be less salient, but it probably still exists.

As you might expect, such a paternalistic and hierarchical management structure implies that decision making in most organizations is done at the top. And unless you have some excellent inside connections or referrals, your initial contacts are not likely to be with the decisionmaker. Getting to someone who can and will act on a proposal (i.e., sign a contract, write a check) often has been done through one or more gatekeepers, a process that can take a seeming eternity. However, once you finally push your way through to the top, the gears can shift quickly and deals completed at warp speed.

**Unknown Vocabulary Word - "No!"** In dealing with Filipinos, you soon discover that they don't much care for the word "no." In a Western setting, it's usually pretty clear when the other party isn't interested in your proposal, whatever it might be. The responsible executive simply looks you in the eye and says: "Sorry, but I'm afraid the answer no." If you ask why, he or she will probably tell you the reasons for the negative decision.

However, as usual, the Philippines is different. Given the culture value of *pakikisama* (group loyalty) and the importance of maintaining social harmony, disagreement or interpersonal tension of any sort is distasteful. As a result, business negotiations often have far more ambiguity than the typical Westerner is used to.

For example, when a Filipino executive feels that telling the truth might embarrass or offend, he or she will often beat around the bush. In this context, "yes" doesn't necessarily mean "yes." The word "yes" could also mean "maybe," "I guess that's what you want to hear," "Perhaps someday," "I have no idea," or "No." There are, of course, a wide array of subtle cues to the real meaning, some nonverbal and some in Tagalog. For example, if the word *mamaya* implies "later today," while *sakna* means more like "sometime later," maybe tomorrow, maybe next month, or next year ...

This unwillingness to say *no* affects the international businessperson in several ways. Many Filipino executives will always be "out" rather than answer a phone call or meet with someone they know they're going to have to turn down. This can be very frustrating when you're trying to nail down a contract or find out what's going on one way or the other. It can take a lot longer to get a firm negative answer than in other countries, a situation which can leave you hanging in a way that can be hard to explain to, let's say, the head office back in London. Another consequence is *ningas cogon*, an idiomatic phrase referring to what happens when you see a blazing fire, only to watch it quickly fizzle out. The phrase refers to a rather unfortunate tendency to start projects and never finish them. Many meetings in Manila seem positive and productive, fueled by the adrenaline rush of money to be made, and sure to lead to great and wonderful things. All too often, the projects under discussion never get off the ground as the parties involved move on to other projects. This is usually because some participants were reluctant to show their reservations in the first place; they wanted to go along with the group consensus and share your favor. While this has the short-term advantage of everyone leaving the meeting with a pleasant buzz, the longer-term consequences include puzzlement, frustration, and resentment.

**Summary:** In closing, I would stress that the communications and management styles described here are not dishonest or intended to cheat you. They simply reflect the Filipino culture and long-established way of doing things. The models and ideal type taught in Western-oriented MBA programs are based on certain assumptions, many of which are invalid in the Philippines. Although organizations here have most of the structures and formal procedures of Western business, actual day-to-day business processes and interactions necessarily proceed within the matrix of Filipino culture and values. Thus, the need for the Westerner to go "the extra mile" to understand what's really going on and adapt a culturally sensitive style of doing business.