

# Saving Face: God and Mankind

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**ABSTRACT:** The matter of face is important in most of the world's cultures. A manager who desires to practice successfully in global business must understand the underpinnings of his/her host country's cultural conception of face. After the introduction, this paper discusses the role of face in the Old Testament then considers concepts of gaining, losing, and maintaining face. Face is discussed in business, politics, and selected societies. The lack of training programs is critiqued.

**KEYWORDS:** face, global business, Old Testament, public image, reputation, self-image, training

## INTRODUCTION

The "concept of face is a universal phenomenon" (Ting-Toomey, 1999, p. 38). Gaining face can contribute to a person's well-being, while losing face can be serious enough to lead to social exclusion. Because of the importance of the concept of face, the international businessperson must understand it and know how it works in the culture in which she or he is doing business.

A person's *face* relates to his or her self-image and public image in a social context. With respect to self, it is "a claimed sense of desired social self-worth" (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001, p. 19). "Face is an intangible quality that reflects a person's reputation, dignity, and prestige" (Solomon & Schell, 2009, p. 160). With respect to the public aspects of face, it is similar to reputation or status in society. A person has good face if he or she is behaving according to the norms of and expectations for that person's position in society. For the international businessperson desiring to be cognizant of the use of face, the challenge is to learn the expectations of any society in which the businessperson works.

Accompanying face is name; a person's name is the carrier, the brand, of that person's face. Mistreating or misusing the name is equivalent to mistreating or misusing the face.

Although the concept of face is universal, it is treated lightly or not at all in many major international business texts. For example, Daniel, Radebaugh, and Sullivan's *International Business* (13th ed.) book does not cover the topic at all. Ahlstrom and Bruton's *International Management* book devotes one paragraph to the topic. Peng's *Global* book does not discuss face. Solomon and

Schell's book *Managing Across Cultures* gives a definition of face on one page and then devotes parts of two pages considering face in the context of discussing intercultural communication. Due to this lack of coverage in major texts, it behooves the business professor to treat the topic using other resources.

The concept of face has been studied extensively by scholars, primarily by those in communication theory and psychology. Ting-Toomey's (1999) and Cupach and Mett's (1994) works are foundational for the topic. Oetzel and Ting-Toomey (2003) contributed significantly to the study of face. Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner's (1998) research added to the theory.

## GOD AND FACE

Face was an important cultural artifact in ancient Israel and in the ancient Middle East. The societies of that area and era were high context (see definitions at end of paper) societies in which face and name were important. The Old Testament preserves many references to God's face and the use of God's name. God's face and name became increasingly important to the Israelites as time passed and their cultural identity developed.

The Jewish theologian Kaufmann Kohler in his book *Jewish Theology* (2015) reported on the evolution of the concept of God in Jewish history as passing through three stages. The first stage was the belief that every nation has its god. The second stage was that every nation has its god, but Israel's God was stronger than the other gods. The third stage was that there was only one God, Israel's God, Jehovah. Since most of what we know as the Old

Testament in its current form was written in post-exilic times, most of the Old Testament reflects this last understanding of Jehovah God.

Jehovah God is the God of the nations, as described in Isaiah 2:2: “In the last days the mountain of the Lord’s temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it.” God’s face is wonderfully expressed in Habakkuk’s song of victory in Habakkuk 3, which begins: “Lord, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, O Lord” (v. 2). (The Scripture references in this document are taken from the Holy Bible [New International Version, 1989]).

An important statement about Jehovah God’s character is found in Isaiah 5. Described here is Isaiah’s vision in the year King Uzziah died, with Isaiah hearing angels sing the glories of God: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory” (v. 3).

The Old Testament Scriptures are replete with references to God’s face used in the sense of this paper. There are many Scriptures that refer to attributes of Jehovah God that are important aspects of God’s reputation, characteristics, and attributes, such as faithfulness, kindness, holiness, justice, love, and protection. In some places, the word “face” is used metaphorically and in other places anthropomorphically. An example of the latter is found in the story of Jacob, who proclaimed that he saw God face to face and yet his life was spared (Genesis 32:30).

King Ahaz caused Jehovah God to lose face by not trusting in His advice. Because of Ahaz’ lack of faith in Jehovah, God, through Isaiah, foretold the destruction of the nation. Even so, God provided redemption and gave promise of the coming Savior in the wonderful prediction: “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14).

The most important Scriptures in setting the basis for God’s face and name are found in the First, Second, and Third Commandments (Exodus 20), quoted partially here: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me...You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.” These Scriptures tie together the concepts of reputation, name, and worship, and from these concepts, the face of God emerges. Note that the brand (see definitions at end of the paper) of God is His name. Many of the writers of the Old Testament used God’s face in asking God for

salvation from their enemies or for release from difficult situations. If God did not save them, then God’s reputation among the nations would be tarnished; God would not be respected as before when He was viewed by the surrounding nations as a powerful God who had saved the Israelites in times past.

In Exodus 32:6-13, we find the story of Moses coming off the mountain and finding the children of Israel worshipping idols and committing gross sins. God responded by wanting to destroy them, but Moses prayed to God that He would not do it. Moses appealed to God’s promises and reminded Him that He had sworn by His own self about the multiplication of the nation. God would lose face if he annihilated the people.

God’s face was also important in establishing David’s face. Consider Psalms 31:1: “In you, O Lord, I have taken refuge; let me never be put to shame; deliver me in your righteousness.” In Psalms 35:17-19 the psalmist called on God to exercise His recognized attributes; this will keep the psalmist from losing face, and David will give praise to God: “O Lord, how long will you look on? Rescue my life from their ravages, my precious life from these lions. I will give you thanks in the great assembly; among throngs of people I will praise you.” In Psalms 109:26-27 the psalmist asks for God’s public help so that God will get the honor: “Help me, O Lord my God; save me in accordance with your love. Let them know that it is your hand, that you, O Lord, have done it.”

God’s name is recognized in Psalms 22:22-23: “I will declare your name to my brothers; in the congregation I will praise you. You who fear the Lord, praise him!”

Note that God is jealous of the use of His name. In Old Testament times, and still the case in many parts of the world, one’s name is considered very important, almost sacred. One’s name is one’s brand before the world, the symbolic carrier of reputation and face. “A good name is more desirable than great riches, to be esteemed is better than silver or gold” (Proverbs 22:1).

In ancient Hebrew culture, a person’s name was synonymous with their nature. To know the name was to understand his or her personality. The nation of Israel believed this was also true of God. They held one name for God that was deemed so sacred it was spoken only once a year by the High Priest in the Holy of Holies. When they wrote the name of God, they did not use any vowels, only consonants, out of reverence to The Name (YHWH). (Busic, 2016, p. 6)

Protecting one’s name is protecting one’s face.

There are numerous Scriptures that call us to reverence God's name and attributes. The most important is the Third Commandment. A few others are: Psalms 22:23, quoted above, and Psalms 29:2:

Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness; Psalms 113:1-4 reads: Praise the Lord. Praise, O servants of the Lord, praise the name of the Lord. Let the name of the Lord be praised, both now and forevermore. From the rising of the sun to the place where it sets, the name of the Lord is to be praised.

Various verses show that God's name and reputation are to be treated with high respect, in fact, the *highest* respect. We must never do anything to cause God's reputation or God's name to be degraded.

## EXPLORING FACE

### Losing and Gaining Face

Face can be maintained, reduced, or enhanced. Behaviors, actions, or speech that are in conflict with societal norms may cause a loss of face. Loss of face may come for serious or minor infractions. Face can be gained by behaviors, actions, or speech that support or enhance social values or norms. Face, once lost, and if the infraction is not too serious, may be regained by behaviors, actions, or speech that is deemed positive in the social context.

In each particular social situation an individual is concerned not only about his or her own face, but also about others' faces. In most cultures, part of preserving and enhancing one's own face is preserving and enhancing the faces of others. Thus, face-saving and face-enhancing behaviors are simultaneously directed toward self and others. Giving honor and prestige to another is typically viewed as a face-giving behavior.

**Facework.** Facework may be defined as the various methods one uses to enhance, maintain, or prevent loss of self-face and others' faces. "Facework is communication designed to counteract face threats to self and others" (Cupach & Metts, 1994, p. 7). In those societies where face is most important, individuals will consciously use facework as a strategy in communication, negotiations, and conflict management.

Research on facework shows that persons from low context cultures (see definition at end of paper) tend to favor facework behaviors related to self-face, while persons from high context cultures tend to focus more on a bal-

ance between self-facework and others' facework (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001).

**Where is Face Most Important Now?** As a general rule, face is more important in high context societies than in low context societies (Hofstede, G. & Hofstede G. J., 2005). In collectivist cultures,

Dishonor (the loss of a good name) is a fate worse than death. The honor of one's family has equivalent priority; the family name is sacrosanct. In the face-to-face society, where all transactions are personal and anonymity is not an option, no humiliation is ever forgotten. (Cohen, 1991, p. 24)

Individuals in high context cultures who violate social norms are likely to feel *shame*, which is defined in *Webster's Universal College Dictionary* as "the painful feeling of having done or experienced something dishonorable, improper, foolish, etc." (p. 719). Shame is a social concept; it exists in relationship to the social context. This may be contrasted with guilt, which is more likely to be felt by persons in individualist societies who violate social norms. As Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) pointed out, an individual may feel guilt whether his or her infraction is discovered or not. Shame will not occur unless another knows about the infraction (Boiger et al., 2014).

**Face in Political Negotiations.** An example of the use of face in political negotiations may be found in the establishment of relationships between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC). President Nixon of the United States wanted to make an approach to the PRC, so he sent Henry Kissinger to China to begin discussions about a rapprochement. The result was an invitation, approved by Premier Mao Tse Tung, for President Nixon to visit China. Very important in these discussions was the wording of the invitation, for China could not lose face. According to the Chinese worldview, China is the Middle Kingdom, the center of the world. Barbarians come to China, not the other way around. The communiqués giving the formal invitation and acceptance made it clear that Nixon was the supplicant who desired to visit the Chinese, and the Chinese were graciously granting his request (Cohen, 1991).

**Face in Various Business Actions.** Face has some level of importance in all countries, but especially so in high context cultures. Managers and employees may have attitudes and take action based solely or partially on the basis of face. It is incumbent on managers to be cognizant of the role of face and to use face activity as a conscious tool.

To demonstrate how face may impact work, several examples are given in this section. Our first example

comes from the area of developing business relationships. In most high context societies business cannot fully be carried on between individuals until a personal relationship has been developed. Once the relationship is established, the two individuals have face with each other. Note that the relationship, the face, is between the individuals, not the companies they represent.

Another area in which face is important involves labor relations and negotiations. It may not be good for management to force a labor agreement on the workers, even if management has the power to do so. It would be wise for management to give in to some of the worker demands for that saves face for both the employees and management.

In the area of employee supervision, LeBaron (2003) had an important insight. The employer may be so concerned with face that he/she does not confront a supervisee about poor work performance. In the formal review system, the employer gives an adequate appraisal, but tries indirect methods to communicate displeasure and to obtain better performance. The employee may not get the message and is eventually terminated, to the employee's surprise.

With respect to written business communications, the writer must take care to build the face of the recipient and to establish a personal relationship. The negative message which is the real cause of a letter is subtly worked in so that the recipient doesn't lose face and so the letter doesn't jeopardize the personal relationship. In China, the concept of face is important in business communications, especially in use of emails. Erin and McFadden's (2016) research showed that emails that included appropriate facework were received better than emails with poor facework.

Face is important in making public speeches. In the United States many speakers will start with a story, perhaps a joke. This warms up the audience and makes them comfortable with the speaker. In China, on the contrary, the "Chinese speaker starts the presentation from an apology. It is a way to show modesty and humbleness" (Nuriyeva, 2006, p. 6).

Finally, consider the matter of lying in business. In societies in which face is important, the maintenance of relationships and face is generally more important than the matter of truth. Telling something true that causes a break in relationship may not be honorable and may reduce harmony in the relationship. The telling of lies may not be viewed as morally repugnant; in fact, the telling of "altruistic lies" may be considered honorable (Bond, 1991, pp. 59-60).

We now turn our attention to some specific cultures.

*Face in Chinese Culture.* Arguably China has the most highly developed understanding of face. The concept of face is related to one's place in society, which in turn is based on the five foundational relationships described by Confucianism. These five relationships are: friend and friend, brothers and sisters, parents and children, husband and wife, and ruler and subject. Confucianism emphasizes honor, loyalty, duty, respect for relationships, knowing one's place in each of these relationships, and respect for seniority and age. If these values are lived out in life, and if harmony is maintained, then society as a whole will be stable.

One's membership in the family, the factory, and the school are critical, and having good face with the other members of each group is critical. Harmony must be maintained. Leaders must not be contradicted in public. One's own needs are placed below the needs of the group. Creating disharmony will cause loss of face for the individual and the group. Maintaining harmony sustains self-face and group face.

For a person from a high context culture such as China, the ultimate nightmare is loss of face. In business negotiations, in order to avoid loss of face, the Chinese negotiator will make every attempt to reduce uncertainty. Typically, the negotiator will attempt to find out early and in advance if there are non-negotiables and determine if these are implicitly accepted in advance. "Most likely, they will not come to the table if they think there is too much potential for humiliation and loss of dignity" (Rosenberg, 2004, p. 3).

In business negotiations, relationships are most important. There is a need for the negotiators to get to know each other and build trust. Once the trust is built, the business matters can be treated, but they will typically not be treated in a hurried fashion. Highly emotional statements and confrontation will not normally be used. The Chinese do not want to say "no" to a proposal but prefer an indirect statement that puts off a definite negative response. All these aspects of negotiations are part of the attempt to preserve harmony, balance, and face for all parties involved.

*Face in Japanese Culture.* Japan has been strongly influenced over the centuries by Confucian thought with its emphasis on balance, order, harmony, and social relationships. In order to preserve harmony and balance, Japanese do not like to confront another by saying "no" to a request or by directly contradicting a statement. Furthermore, the word "yes" does not necessarily mean that the hearer agrees with a statement, but rather that

the hearer has heard the statement and is thinking about it (Hofstede, G. & Hofstede G. J., 2005, p. 86).

Failure in school constitutes a huge loss of face for male students. There is exceeding pressure on parents to start their children's schooling early, to hire tutors, to pressure the children to make good grades, and to encourage their children to get into the best universities. Newspapers regularly report suicides of young people who have failed in school or failed to get into the next level of education (Hofstede, G. & Hofstede G. J., 2005).

In business negotiations, Japanese will be much concerned about failure. They will tend to gather as much detailed information as possible about the matter at hand so they have in-depth insight into the situation and can construct their negotiating positions for what may be realistic and acceptable in the context of that negotiating situation. All these preparations are taken to reduce the risk of loss of face (Rosenberg, 2004).

*Face in Latin American Culture.* Most macro-cultures of Latin America are collectivist, with all that implies about interaction between and among persons. Maintaining one's personal honor and dignity and that of one's family is very important as is maintaining the reputation of one's company and the glory of one's nation. Face is important in most of Latin America, but not as important as in China, Japan, and South Korea.

The word for face in Spanish is *cara*. The word can be used for face in the sense of this paper. It can also be used to connote such words as nerve, gall, cheek, or chutzpah, as in *Tienes la cara dura* or "You've got a lot of nerve." *Ella tiene tanta cara como un buey con paperas*, or "She has as much face as an ox with the mumps."

Four terms can be used to illustrate aspects of face in Latin America. First is *simpatía*, or liking, likability, support, or solidarity. This is a norm that says that individuals must be friendly to others, even in the context of conflict. A second concept is *confianza*, or trust. Trust applies to personal relationship between persons, with the expectation of "mutually interpersonal reciprocity." Third is *respeto*, respect, which signifies that one must protect one's own dignity and honor and other individuals must be treated with dignity and honor. Fourth is *personalismo*, or interpersonal warmth. This is the notion that people have more value than possessions (Wardrope, 2005, pp. 3-4).

Wardrope (2005) illustrated these concepts by describing a business letter as it might be written in the individualist United States in comparison with the business letter written in Latin America (p. 4). The situation

prompting the letter is that the addressee owes money to the writer. Wardrope described the Latin American letter as wanting to demonstrate *personalismo*, build good will, protect the recipient from embarrassment, and maintain *confianza*. According to Wardrope (2005), the writer may not even explicitly mention the debt.

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

To bolster his understanding of the concept of face and its use in business, the author obtained stories and anecdotes about face from businesspersons and others with international experience. These same individuals were asked about the training they had received about face and about their companies' training in the use of face. The result was a convenience sample of 32 individuals who contributed to the discussion of face and training. All had extensive business experience outside the United States.

The 32 respondents represented 16 organizations with international business ties. They provided 88 stories and anecdotes, which covered a wide range of subjects, including manners and etiquette, business negotiations, employee management, respect, honor, and ethics. Every country represented had stories regarding face.

*Training.* The interviewees were asked about training they had received concerning face and culture and about training programs provided by their companies. Several volunteered they had received no prior education about culture; they were left to their own devices to learn about the cultures where they would be serving. Twenty-eight reported that their corporations gave little or no training about face.

*Future Studies.* There does not appear to be much research about the use of face in many of the smaller developing countries. It is suggested that in future studies a small group of developing countries be selected and those countries studied in depth.

Finally, we come to the matter of training for international work. A random sample of Fortune 500 companies having significant international business work might be studied to determine in more depth the nature and extent of their training of expatriates for international work. This would provide information about current practices but also might uncover some best practices in training.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

The lessons learned from this study are few but powerful. First, it is imperative that persons desiring to work internationally have a general understanding of culture and its role in human society and in business. The second lesson is that face is an important aspect of culture in most of all the world's societies. In general, face has a very important role in high networked societies, which generally correspond to societies with low individual and high power distance Hofstede indices. In other words, face plays a key role in day-to-day life in two-thirds of the world's population. The third lesson is that many companies are sending their employees to work abroad without adequate training about culture in general or face in particular.

A recommendation coming from this study is: Instruction about face should be incorporated into business education courses

## DEFINITIONS AND DESCRIPTIONS

**Brand.** Using Hofstede's terminology, a brand is a software of the mind; it is everything that comes to mind when the brand name is given. "When we see a product labeled with a particular brand name, we assign to that product a certain value based on our past experiences with that brand" (Wild & Wild, 2012, p. 366).

**Collectivist Culture.** A collectivist culture is one "in which the interest of the group prevails over the interest of the individual" (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010, p. 90). Group identity is more important than individual identity (Ting-Toomey, 1999). "Collectivism is the tendency of people to associate with groups where group members look after each other in exchange for group loyalty. They work together more readily and do not mind subordinating themselves to the goals of the group" (Ahlstrom & Bruton, 2010, p. 49). China, India, and most African countries are considered as collectivist cultures.

**High Context Culture.** In communication "...intention or meaning can best be conveyed through the context (e.g. social roles or positions) and the nonverbal channels (e.g. pauses, silence, tone of voice) of the verbal message" (Ting-Toomey, 1999, p. 100). "In high-context cultures...people tend to regard seemingly peripheral information as pertinent and to infer meanings from things said either indirectly or casually" (Daniels, Radebaugh, & Sullivan, 2011, p. 65). Most Arab and Asian cultures are considered to be high context cultures.

**Individualist Culture.** An individualist culture is one in which the "interests of the individual prevail over the interests of the group" (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010, p. 91). Individual iden-

tity is more important than group identity (Ting-Toomey, 1999). Individuals honor personal success over group success.

**Low Context Culture.** "In general, low context communication refers to a communication pattern of direct verbal mode — straight talk, nonverbal immediacy, and sender-oriented values (i.e., the sender assumes the responsibility to communicate clearly)" (Ting-Toomey, 1999, pp. 100-101). In low context cultures "people generally regard as relevant only firsthand information that bears directly on the subject at hand" (Daniels, Radebaugh, & Sullivan, 2011, p. 65). The United States, Canada, and most Western European countries are considered to be low context cultures.

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