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Dale Carnegie Comes to India

By Madhur Singh

"Remember to touch a personal chord," the instructor tells the class of mostly twenty something techies with resumes that spell fat salary packages. "Make the other person feel important." Thus advised, the 20-odd students split into pairs, each earnestly practicing a routine they've spent four months learning. "Hi, my name is ..." I'm told while my hand gets a vigorous shake. Dazzled by the bright smile and seemingly effortless eye contact, I barely manage to mumble my own name before I realize the conversation has moved into Part II of The Routine — I'm being asked what I do for a living. All around me are similar smiling faces and attentively nodding heads, as if straight off an assembly line. But soon the conversation takes on a more effortless, relaxed tone, until one male voice blurts out: "Are you single? May I have your number?" Not exactly a professional business query, but still deserving of full marks for spontaneity and confidence.

The first graduating class at Dale Carnegie Training, which has just set up shop in the IT mecca of Bangalore, has lapped up its lessons in the art of winning friends and influencing people in transnational corporate culture. Among the Indian techies and management graduates who flocked to this Silicon Valley-in-training opportunity is 28-year-old IT professional Pallavi Deshpande. "I was overwhelmed when I moved to Bangalore last year. I saw all these IT people who looked so smart and spoke perfect English," she says, "And I realized that my MCA [master's degree in Computer Applications] was not going to be enough." Her college in Nagpur — the giant city in central India that is a political and economic hub but has not acquired the cultural cosmopolitanism of Mumbai — had given her the technical qualifications that attract recruiters, "but I didn't have much self-confidence, and my English was a big problem." That's what brought her to one of the many finishing schools mushrooming in Bangalore. Six months and a Certificate Program in Executive Excellence later, her speech is peppered with Carnegieisms. "I learned that at an interview, you must talk in terms of the other person's interest, and show respect for the other person's opinions," she smiles.

The huge number of Indian expats staffing the tech firms of Silicon Valley, and the outsourcing of much of America's after-hours tech support to India, has led many in the West see this country as a nation of 1.2bn software engineers. The Indian Institute of Technology brand owes much to Asok, the super-geek of the popular comic strip *Dilbert*, who claims to be "mentally superior to most people on earth," is trained to sleep only on national holidays, and can reincarnate from his own DNA. But studies point out that while India's pool of 14 million university graduates grows by a further 2.5 million every year, only one in four engineering graduates — and one in 10 graduates of other disciplines — are considered "employable" by multinationals. The quality of degrees varies widely between institutes, and while many graduates may possess cutting-edge technical skills, their interpersonal and communication skills lag far behind. A study by the

National Association of Software and Services Companies (Nasscom), the leading software and outsourcing industry body, foresees a shortage of a half million IT professionals by 2010, mostly because existing graduates lack the "soft skills" needed to fit into a cosmopolitan work environment.

Enter the finishing schools. "We spoke to companies, educational institutes and students across three states while preparing our course curriculum, and they all said there was a huge need to develop personal leadership, and inter-personal and communication skills among graduates," says Pallavi Jha, Chairman and Managing Director, Walchand PeopleFirst Ltd., which is partnering with Dale Carnegie Training to offer courses in India. "We've had requests to train people at vice president level in presentation and networking skills!"

Currently, a course has just ended at Zensar, and another is on at Oracle. Bangalore may be a long way from Hauppauge, New York, where the industry leader in corporate training is headquartered, but that doesn't seem to matter. "What we've learned here, basic principles like 'Ask questions instead of giving direct orders,' are a given in [international corporations]. Everyone picks up these skills along the way, and if you want to join the ranks, you must learn these too. It's like learning to speak the lingo and to fit in," says Gerald Santiago, who previously worked at AOL and is hoping to join Infosys soon.

A large part of the training is overcoming cultural differences. "The handshake, if you are a woman, is tricky," says Geetika Verma, an instructor at Dale Carnegie Training who has previously worked at Wipro. "We tell our female students, if a man doesn't reach out to shake your hand, take the first step and shake his hand. Show confidence." Other tips include learning to address everyone by their first name, and handling networking lunches and dinners. Another significant part is developing self-confidence. "Youngsters raised in lower middle-class families and in smaller towns, when they manage to enter good colleges and land good jobs, still have to battle a feeling of inadequacy," says Srinath Gopalakrishna, co-founder and operations head of Bangalore-based ThinkVarsity Finishing School. "We try to do away with the left-brain, right-brain dichotomy and ensure our graduates have the entire range of technical and soft skills they need to be good at their job as well as feel at home." Among the toughest parts is remedying wrong English. "When you have institutes claiming 'We teaches English,' you know the quality of students they produce," says Gopalakrishna, "We don't think we need to correct Indian-isms, but graduates must at least know proper business English."

A reverse cultural acclimatization is also underway, however, as growing numbers of former expatriates and Indians born and raised abroad begin to work in India. "Until 10 years back, the only foreigners were at the CEO level," says Jha, "but today, they're at all levels." Various informal expat clubs offer tips to ensure a soft landing for first-timers, and even books are available containing tips on avoiding cultural faux pas, doing business in Bangalore, and on taxation, banking and foreign exchange regulations in India. "No matter where you're working in the IT industry, in three to four years' time, everyone reaches a uniform level of sensitivity and an ability to communicate," says C. Mahalingam, Executive Vice-President and Chief People Officer at Symphony Services. "In that way, it's a pretty good equalizer."