

# Developing Cultural Relationships

## How to attract, influence and build great relationships

By Deborah Swallow



In this period of increasing global economic uncertainty, it is more important than ever to raise your game and stay ahead of the competition. Growing your business internationally could well provide the answer that you are looking for.

Doing business abroad is much more than flying out, staying in posh hotels and eating different food. It's entering into a different world where everyday business events have different rules. To be a successful international accountant you need to know what these rules are, and how and when to adapt your style. *You need Cultural Intelligence.*

### Cultural Intelligence

Hidden cultural differences often cause a great deal of misunderstanding and friction. These differences are a serious problem because they are mostly invisible and inaudible but they affect the true meaning of any interaction. Being aware of the cultural factors that create 'interference' and having the ability to successfully understand and adapt is Cultural Intelligence.

### What is Culture?

Culture relates to the symbolic dimension of life and society. This symbolic dimension is the place where we are constantly making meaning and enacting our identities. Culture places a series of lenses through which we 'see', which colours how we perceive and interpret, where we draw boundaries, and how we distinguish right from wrong. Cultural messages from the

#### Top Ten Tips on how to attract, influence and build great business relationships with overseas clients:

1. Understand the culture of the nation you are dealing with
2. Get the protocols right, including initial greetings, social manners and taboos
3. Learn how to oil the wheels. What you consider "corruption" may be the norm in another country
4. Fit in with the pace and rhythm of the other person, speeding up or slowing down as necessary
5. Let your sales pitch meet the expectations of the other person
6. Learn when a "Yes" is not a "Yes", and what constitutes a contract in that country
7. Understand how English is used as a foreign language. Avoid double negatives, slang and metaphors
8. Learn body language – and mind what yours says about you
9. Acknowledge the status of the other person
10. Build relationships based on trust and respect

groups we belong to inform us about what is meaningful or important, who we are in the world and in relation to others — forming our identities and shaping our behaviour and cultural fit. Much of what we say, do, and feel is so ingrained in us that we do not realize that cultural conditioning has had a deep effect because, although cultures are powerful, they are unconscious as we internalise them at a very early age. Cultures permeate our lives and relationships. They eventually determine our behaviour by giving us messages that shape our perceptions, attributions, judgments, and ideas of self and other — our values.

### Cultures Create Standpoints

Different approaches to meaning-making result in people developing differing world views. Inner-directed people (North Americans, Northern Europeans and Anglo cultures) are 'masters of their fate' and 'captains of their souls' — they are outcome focused and believe they can control their destinies. Our language has sayings that reflect an efficient, activist driven society: 'Actions speak louder than words' and 'Time is money'.

Outer-directed people (Africans, Arabs, Asians, South Americans, Southern Europeans) are fatalistic; paying attention to the process not

the outcome; nurturing relationships, living in harmony with nature, going with the flow. They can't hurry for anything and frustrate those who are deadline-driven. Their languages will tend to use the passive voice — 'It was observed' instead of 'I observed' — because they are more fatalistic than active in approach to life. Inner-directed cultures are also individualistic valuing competition, confrontation, independence, personal achievement, self-reliance, self-development and fulfilment.

Outer-directed cultures are group-minded, valuing co-operation, harmony and cohesion, filial piety (respect for and deference toward elders), teamwork, reputation of the group, and interdependence. Thus, the Japanese perceive our culture's individualism as immaturity; our unseemly behaviour as rude; and, our 'no holds barred' approach to challenge as confrontation - which, in their culture, bring dishonour and loss of face.

## Impact on Business

Any country's business behaviour reflects its societal values. The Chinese proverb 'Ru xiang sui su' (Enter village, follow customs) advises us to manifest these. But how are we to know what they are? How is an international accountant to know how to behave in Beijing or Beirut? In Trondheim or Toledo? Fortunately, we

don't have to learn 101 different rules for 101 different counties. There are frameworks to guide us.

## Relationship Selling

In the UK, Northern Europe and North America, business is contractual in nature. Personal relationships are seen as unhealthy as they can cloud objectivity and lead to complications. In Southern Europe, South America, Africa, the Middle East and much of Asia, business is personal. Partnerships will only be made with those they know, trust and feel comfortable with. So you must invest time in building relationships before conducting business.

## Negotiations

The way in which we approach negotiation differs across cultures. For example, in the Middle East rather than approaching topics sequentially negotiators often discuss issues simultaneously. South Americans and Latin cultures can become quite vocal and animated. The Japanese will negotiate in teams and decisions will be based upon consensual agreement. In Asia, decisions are usually made by the most senior figure or head of a family. In China, negotiators are highly trained in the art of gaining concessions. In Germany, decisions can take a long time due to the need to analyse information and statistics in great depth. In the UK, pressure tactics and imposing deadlines are ways of closing deals whilst in Greece this would backfire.

**"Language is what we hear:  
culture is how we understand"**

## Conclusion

Developing cultural intelligence is a core competence for anyone who is involved with overseas clients. Cultural intelligence involves recognizing and acting respectfully from the knowledge that each culture has a different symbolic dimension: approaches to meaning-making; communication patterns; and ways of naming, framing, and taming conflict; all based on how we relate to people, to rules and authority, to time and to our environment. Developing this skill will help you build a clear, personal, culturally-intelligent brand as a professional that is recognised as being adept at creating rapport and understanding between those of culturally diverse backgrounds.

The transaction costs in international trade are high. Organisations cannot afford to get things wrong – it could cost thousands. Success comes through a firm foundation of understanding the different etiquettes and approaches to doing business overseas. So, put developing cultural intelligence on your learning list.

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