

Interpersonal skills and attitudes can make or break global business deals. Are your people prepared?

## *The human side of global business*

Companies that are going global spend a lot of time looking at numbers, business plans, market strategies, facilities, technology, materials and organizational structure.

But are they spending enough time on what is perhaps the most important aspect of global business—the people who will conduct that business?

**I**n the international business world, many successes—and many failures—stem from surprisingly small personal interactions. Three factors are critical to international relationships: knowledge of the cultures involved, an attitude that says, “Your culture is as ‘right’ as mine,” and interpersonal communication skills that lead to cooperative partnerships.

Global business introduces a new set of questions for leaders to answer: What happens when expatriates and locals are working on the same frontline teams? How much and what kind of training do the local hires need to learn the customer service or selling skills expected by their new employer? How well are the expatriates prepared to work in their new environment? Do they have time before being deployed to learn about the new culture and language? Will they recognize potential pitfalls?

How do the teammates interact with each other, and more importantly, how do the managers coach and assess performance of employees against a background of varied cultural expectations?

### **Knowledge of the cultures involved**

Even a seasoned international veteran can offend or be offended without knowing why. The result can range from an embarrassing moment to a major business failure.

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Many danger points can be avoided by “doing one’s homework.” AchieveGlobal consultant Frank Rouault suggests beginning with some basic assumptions.

To understand other cultures, says Rouault, one first must understand his or her own culture. Then one must realize that no one culture is better than another.

Cultures evolve through political, environmental and technical influences. According to their environment, people develop specific ways of solving the problems they face and the way they work. For example:

- Japanese people are used to living in 20 percent of the space expected by some cultures.
- In France, office “cubicles” are not popular.
- The Muslim world shuts down for the month of Ramadan in the spring.
- Body language (gestures, physical proximity and touching) can be as important as the spoken language. What is acceptable in one culture may be bad manners or an insult in another. And the rules can differ between male and female.
- Latin cultures use facial expressions and hand gestures to communicate. In some parts of the world, such behavior is considered inappropriate.
- A handshake is virtually universal, but in the U.S., a more vigorous grasp is used. In some countries

women shake hands much more readily than in others.

- In many countries, especially in the Middle East, a handshake is followed by a brief embrace and a kiss on both cheeks.
- Gifts often carry special significance. Seek the advice of someone who knows the culture in question. For the most part, flowers and chocolate are acceptable gifts, but the color and type of flowers are important. If you visit an Italian home, always bring an odd number of flowers and never chrysanthemums.
- Often, the best gift is something that represents your own culture.
- Knowing some basic historical or geographic facts, and making casual reference to them, demonstrates interest.
- Business cards play a role in business interactions. The Japanese, for example, look at and feel business cards with close attention. Many multinational companies are “localizing” their business cards to demonstrate respect for local cultures.
- Humor can be dangerous. Proceed with caution.
- A few minutes’ tardiness in Germany may be seen as disrespect.
- In Italy, offering a business card or inquiring about someone’s profession at a social gathering is considered bad form.
- In France, never enter a

closed door, public or private, without knocking first. Don’t ask personal questions early in a business meeting.

- Holiday customs vary widely from one country to another. Understanding and heeding these cultural variables is critical.
- Red is a positive color in Denmark, but represents witchcraft and death to some in African countries.
- Many British business people enjoy socializing after work.
- The Japanese consider it rude to be late for a business meeting, but it is acceptable, even fashionable, to be late for a social occasion.

Good manners, common sense and a willingness to learn about the people with whom you do business will take you a long way toward establishing sound cross-cultural business relations.

### Interpersonal communications

For human resource departments, cultural and language issues are as much a part of global business as compensation and benefits. There’s a popular phrase, “Think globally; act locally.” This is true for training, coaching and managing internally as well as working with customers externally. To make communication as clear and easy to understand as possible, the key is a flexible attitude and a speaking style that is comprehensible but not condescending.

Kathleen Murray,

AchieveGlobal’s vice president for Europe and the Middle East, notes that paying attention is of critical importance. Too often, a person is thinking more about what he or she will say next than about what the other person is saying.

One major international hotel chain’s human resource staff noted that 90 percent of its training difficulties revolved around communication and language.

Murray suggests that those conducting business in foreign countries or with foreign partners can adopt several simple measures to improve their communication skills. These include avoiding phrases or idiomatic expressions that do not translate well and rephrasing important concepts to make them clearer.

Even within a country, Murray says, dialects and usage vary widely.

Also, it’s important to be sensitive and supportive of people trying to speak a foreign language. Visual aids are helpful, since many people understand the written language more easily than the spoken language. Most important, take care to avoid making judgments about people’s intelligence based on their fluency in English or whatever your primary language may be.

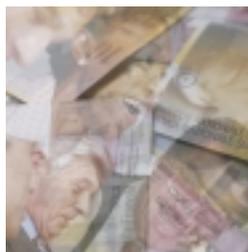
Experts note that novice speakers of foreign languages are just one syllable, letter or tone away from a big mistake at any given moment. Here are some

ways to enhance cross-culture communication:

- Realize that some phrases don't translate, or may convey a completely different meaning than intended. Don't make the mistake Chevrolet did, when it introduced its Nova model in Latin America where the expression "no va" means "doesn't go."
- Avoid technical jargon, buzzwords and acronyms.
- Realize that English-speaking countries use different versions of English.
- Be sensitive, supportive and helpful—but not too helpful—when someone is trying to speak your language.
- Remember that speaking louder does not enhance comprehension.
- Realize that some things are best done through an interpreter.
- Even a few words or phrases can do wonders in establishing relationships. Learn to say hello, goodbye, please, thank you, you're welcome and I'm sorry.
- Some people are embarrassed to admit they don't understand. Rephrase concepts, pause and check to see if the information is understood.
- Use visuals. Many people can read a foreign language better than they can speak it. Use handouts or slides with key words, summary statements and charts. Providing these

before a presentation prepares your audience to "hear" what you are saying. Get a phrase book, or find someone who speaks the language. Write phrases as they are correctly spelled and add your own phonetic hints for pronunciation.

- In much of the world,



"Remember the importance of constructive attitudes toward other cultures. Act quickly to clarify any misunderstanding. In working with a colleague from the other culture, always keep in mind the link between cultural sensitivity and the quality of the relationship." — Frank Rouault

titles are a matter of pride and prestige. To omit using them may be considered a sign of disrespect.

- Americans tend to be informal, and use first names early in the relationship. In many countries, this is not considered appropriate. Use surnames until invited to use first names.

#### Attitude: Appreciating the other culture

Some people tolerate and adapt to other cultures. The key is to genuinely respect and honor other cultures. Attitudes that lead to positive results in international dealings include:

- Curiosity
- Openness
- Patience
- Respect
- Regard for history
- Flexibility

- Friendliness
- Diplomacy
- Ethical values
- Sense of humor
- Positive outlook

Rouault emphasizes the importance of always being alert to the probability and consequences of misunderstanding. "Pay attention to the risks," he says. "Remem-

ber your culture, you may be doomed to failure. Even within one country, regional cultures differ. Often, American business people think of themselves as state-of-the-art. They forget that others may see them as 200-year-old newcomers in a world where many cultures have been doing business

ber the importance of constructive attitudes toward other cultures." His advice is to act quickly to clarify any misunderstanding. In working with a colleague from the other culture, always keep in mind the link between cultural sensitivity and the quality of the relationship.

Realize that you can't always operate "by the book." Accept that there is more than one right way to do things. Emerging economies bring constant change to the global market; what works today may not work tomorrow. Cultural differences can create unexpected roadblocks that vary from minor to monumental, or even seemingly absurd. The challenge is to exercise solid judgment in every situation.

It's important to allow the local culture to remain in place. If you try to export

for 2,000 years or more.

Most important, remember that people are individuals. Ethnic stereotyping (the awkward American, arrogant Frenchman, temperamental Italian, lazy Brazilian) and personal prejudices have no place in international business. The key is to recognize individual personalities in the context of the host culture and make a sincere effort to learn as much as possible about that culture.

When these attributes are interwoven with knowledge of one's own culture and the host culture, as well as language and communication skills, they form a foundation for understanding and success in international endeavors. ■