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Moving Beyond the “Kiss, Bow, or Shake Hands” Advice of Cross-Cultural Communication

by Michelle Bruno



Communicating with international counterparts can be enriching as well as frustrating. In her new book, “The Culture Map: Breaking Through the Invisible Boundaries of Global Business,” cultural expert and professor at INSEAD, Erin Meyer, details the obstacles inherent in working with people of other cultures. Putting cultures in context and knowing how to interpret behaviors can help international exhibition organizers understand their overseas partners, employees, and customers better.

Meyer’s book is organized around an eight-scale model representing the key areas of behavior that managers should consider in order to communicate effectively across cultures:

Low-context vs. high context

Context, Meyer explains, is a matter of “unconscious assumptions about common reference points and shared knowledge.” The U.S. is on the low-context end of the scale. Americans, she suggests, feel the need to be very explicit and repetitive when making a point. In contrast, many Asians (India, China, Japan) are high-context communicators, rely-

ing on the situation in which they find themselves to convey the meaning of behaviors and words. In the latter group, for example, one word can have multiple meanings depending on the context in which it is used.

Direct negative feedback vs. indirect negative feedback

Performance reviews are a common practice in many countries and the way feedback is given in the U.S. (the good nestled in with the bad and negative feedback expressed in a positive manner) differs greatly from criticism given in The Netherlands (negative feedback delivered directly and publicly) or China (only behind closed doors). “Having a clear understanding of these differences and strategies for navigating [feedback styles] is crucial for leaders of cross-cultural teams,” Meyer says.

Principles first vs. applications first

“The art of persuasion,” Meyer explains, “is one that is profoundly culture-based.” Thus, arguing a point or selling an idea across cultures can be a difficult task. Some cultures (Germany, for example) insist on knowing how (the methodology) the presenter arrived at a conclusion before listen-

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ing to the argument. In the U.S., audiences focus on the conclusion and its practicality rather than the process.

Egalitarian vs. hierarchical

Status, power and position figure prominently in most cultures. In a few, Meyer writes, a disregard for position or an emphasis on familiarity (calling the boss by his or her first name) can seem strange and off putting to those from very hierarchical cultures in which extreme deference is shown to senior executives and managers. Thus, the casual style of Americans (and the Dutch) to treat everyone in the room as equals contrasts with the style of Russians or Japanese who prefer a healthy “power distance” between managers and subordinates.

Consensual vs. top-down

Understanding how a decision is arrived at is fundamental to working across cultures. For example, Meyer writes, “German culture places a higher value on building consensus as part of the decision-making process, while in the United States, decision-making is largely invested in the individual.” The propensity of American executives to make a decision and expect his or her employees to abide by it is irksome to those from cultures who prefer to arrive at a decision only after healthy group debate.



Task-based vs. relationship based

The contrast between “getting right down to business” and engaging with potential partners on a more personal level first can be striking among cultures. Many cultures, (Brazilians, for instance), according to Meyer, prefer doing business with people they come to know over meals and casual conversation. Americans on the other hand, interpret too many breaks from the business at hand as inefficient and a potential red flag.

Confrontations vs. avoids confrontation

Engaging in spirited debate or even open confrontation (especially in a public forum) is variously expected or admonished across cultures. The idea of “saving face” is well known in international circles. Meyer advises that individuals who engage in discussions with people from other cultures, especially those on extreme ends of the confrontation spectrum, understand the types of behavior that can impact a relationship negatively and learn how to have productive disagreements.

Linear time vs. flexible time

A culture’s approach to adhering to schedules is more of a reflection of history and societal conditions than of the importance of the meeting. “Positions on the ‘Scheduling’ scale are partially affected by how fixed and reliable, versus dynamic and unpredictable, daily life is in a particular country,” Meyer says. Knowing why a person pays more or less attention to time is critical for avoiding misunderstandings.

That differences exist among cultures is not the point of Meyer’s Book. Anyone who has engaged in cross-cultural communication can attest to that fact. Her point is that the contrasts are both quantifiable and navigable. Having a deeper understanding of what motivates individuals from other countries to behave in certain ways, as well as how they might perceive Americans, can illuminate communication and improve business relationships.

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