

Vicki Flier
4032 Doral Drive
Atlanta, Georgia 30360
770-936-9209
vflier@mindspring.com

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Cross-Cultural Competency: The Skill You Can't Survive Without

By
Vicki Flier

After waiting twenty minutes for their African associates to arrive at the meeting, five Japanese executives from ABC Enterprises* returned to their hotel angry and insulted. What could have been a three-million-dollar deal was lost, and the Japanese refused to do business with the African company ever again. The African contingency, however, never knew what went wrong.

The days have gone where cultural diplomacy skills (a.k.a. soft skills) can rest at the bottom of an organizational wish list. In today's global market, the chances of losing business to cultural misunderstanding run high. No one is exempt from interacting with "strangers" anymore, and as a result our business and personal lives have become unpredictable. More and more businesses are learning that culture is not just about how people bow, shake hands or dress, but how they interact on subtle, yet complex levels. We need a whole new set of skills to survive in the era of globalization, and these skills are far from "soft."

** Name of company changed by request*

The first step to working effectively across cultures is to suspend quick or simplified assumptions. We could chalk up the lost business of ABC Enterprises to insensitivity on the part of the Africans or overreaction on the part of the Japanese, but the true story lies somewhere in between.

Global diversity calls for an expanded view of the story -- a new paradigm in which no one is at fault, but each has differing priorities and values. Africans often arrive late for appointments, but not out of disrespect for clients. Africans have a saying: "Ten minutes late will not stop the world from going around." Their relaxed, fluid view of time stands in stark contrast to the Japanese, who adhere to strict formalities in business, as a sign of respect. These opposing dimensions of culture can wreak havoc on business relationships, and worst of all, most of the time the two sides don't even know what went wrong.

Stories like this one are not unique. After signing a contract with a U.S.-based retail coffee outlet, a Saudi prince was handed a wet rag to clean the counters at the coffee shop. The U.S. executives had insisted that he go through training just like everyone else. At that moment, the prince decided he did not need an American coffee chain in his portfolio, because in his culture, cleaning a counter did not accurately reflect his stature in Saudi society.

In spite of countless tales like these, many organizations still underestimate the value of intercultural skills and consider them low priority or nonessential. Cross-cultural communication often cannot compete for credibility with "hard skills," like engineering or IT aptitude. Why? Because

buzz phrases that sound too much like new-age talk get linked with the world of cultural diversity. Phrases such as “sensitivity training,” “global harmony” or “just getting along” are not easily accepted in business. While a company may value those ideas, business favors measurable results, and in the case of cultural diversity, the true value may not get quantified until too late, such as when an executive loses a top account because he inadvertently insulted an Indian client. What’s more, many people confuse cultural diversity training with racial diversity, which is not the same issue. Such confusion causes organizations to think their existing programs address all forms of diversity and inclusion, when they do not.

Companies that incorporate cross-cultural principles into their core values always win. Not only do they lower their risk of lost revenue, but they also gain a new set of strategies and a clear perspective of what is offered by other cultures. In a recent Harvard Business School study of 450 bank branches, performance improved measurably when employees chose to value and incorporate members’ diverse perspectives rather than suppress them.

Global diversity training methods have changed, as well. Instead of a getting a lecture about political correctness in the workplace, employees in today’s intercultural training learn the nuances of culture, varying communication styles, international management skills and how to balance local needs with global ones. A class, course or a book on cross-cultural effectiveness reveals how values are prioritized in each country, explains how to prevent culture clash and teaches how to negotiate a deal between or

among varying cultures. In other words, this is not your mother's training – it's much more useful and fun.

Globalization has completely reshaped the flow of information, goods and services. Four-fifths of the Fortune 500 companies now outsource work to other countries. Within these changes are worlds of hidden opportunities. Rather than view successful cultural skills only as a means to prevent lost revenue, smart decision makers and employers emphasize the personal benefits of cross-cultural skills. Engaging the heart as well as the head increases the chance that participants will retain information taught in training and apply it in the real world. With the right guidance, employees better deal with the anxiety and challenges that often accompany cross-cultural encounters. Workers also gain a wider repertoire of communication and diplomacy, confidence to face unfamiliar situations and better conflict management, all of which lead to more opportunities for their future.

Perhaps your company never handed a wet rag to a Saudi prince and lost a contract. You may deem cross-cultural training unnecessary because you "get along just fine" with international associates. Maybe you assume that your employees show enough sensitivity and goodwill to bridge cultural gaps and prevent blunders, but culture clash does not need to be extreme to damage your business. Many cultures, such as those of Latin America and the Far East, do not give any signal of negative emotions toward others until it is too late. While those cultures have systems in place to work out conflict, those systems rarely work with outsiders. If you enter the situation

unprepared, you might find yourself wondering what happened to your relationship with your international partner.

Culture embodies far more than etiquette, history or ritual. You could memorize a book of do's and don'ts for China and still experience mass confusion and difficulty working with the Chinese. Successful intercultural encounters call for the rooting out of the covert culture underneath the etiquette: how people move, identify with each other, interact with family, deal with uncertainty or make decisions.

To go global, you need a willingness to live with discomfort and experience conflicting emotions. Only in this way can you go beyond the rules of culture and into the richness of it. You must be willing to examine your own culture, even the negative parts, as a frame of reference by which to understand others. To expand your global horizons, invest the time to explore the complex layers that lie beneath the surface of every culture. Do not assume you have the skills you need just because you haven't offended an international business associate. Investigate how other companies address cultural diversity and ask what worked and what didn't. Ask experts to help you make the transition into the multicultural market, set an example for your employees and stay current with global diversity trends. Most importantly, reflect on what you can gain from interacting with other cultures. When you understand the financial and cultural rewards of dealing with an international community, you'll understand the value of sustaining your diversity goals.

In the business world today, it would be rare to stand in front of a group of associates and not see someone from another country. To survive, executives, educators and employees must step into the new model of global diversity, a paradigm that acknowledges the importance of cross-cultural skills, that makes learning fun and interactive and that goes beyond sensitivity training. When you continue to ask the question "What's in it for me?" you will find exciting possibilities. Perhaps you will travel to new countries, present valuable ideas to your organization, make friends from around the world, sample exotic cuisine or make the deal of a lifetime. Just make sure you know what time the meeting starts and what time the others actually expect to arrive.