

Crossing the Cultural Chasm

By Dianna Booher

Intellectual property rights in China, American auto import tariffs in South Korea, Japanese manufacturing plants in the U.S., emerging markets in Vietnam... at no time in history has cross-cultural communication been more important. But increased business relations between disparate cultures necessitates enhanced communication skills to cope with the differences.

During early business ventures between U.S. and Japanese companies, cultural miscommunication complicated relations. In one example, Americans mistook a show of respect by Japanese for unreliability. The Japanese consider it disrespectful to disagree. So as not to offend the American business people, they very often agreed "yes it will be done (in this way, by this date)," even when they couldn't deliver what the Americans thought was being promised. Eventually the American business-people discovered the cultural quirk, but only after considerable frustration and confusion on both sides of the Pacific.

Another miscommunication involved a major U.S. cola company's marketing effort. The company translated the soda's name and slogan into Chinese. Only after spending millions on advertising in China did they discover that the slogan, when literally translated, states that the cola will "raise your ancestors from the dead"!

As these two stories demonstrate, cultural awareness is a central tenet of successful communication, whether you're selling soda pop or giving instructions to your Malaysian staff assistant.

The first step toward successful cross-cultural communication is recognizing respect for what it is. For example, Americans stand up to show respect, Fiji Islanders sit down to show it, and Japanese bow. Some people raise their faces while others lower their eyes for the same reason. Some shake hands while others refrain to show deference and humility. Americans show cordiality by using first names; Germans and Koreans prefer the use of surnames in business dealings, and view the use of first names as disrespectful.

Even something as simple as exchanging business cards varies from culture to culture. Westerners tend to exchange cards at the end of a meeting. The cards serve as reminders, so notes may be jotted on them before they are casually slipped into a pocket or briefcase.

In Japan, cards are exchanged upon first meeting. Ceremonially, the person of highest rank in the group presents his or her card first; then others follow. The card is extended with both hands so that the printing is readable to the receiver; it's expected that the receiver read the card carefully and nod approvingly of the title and/or company before tucking it away.

Different cultures make small-talk differently too. For most American business people, personal information is often sensitive; thus, we approach personal issues with generality: "Do you play much golf?" "Is your family from this part of the country?" In some African cultures though, even on first meeting it's appropriate to ask specific, personal questions: "Is your father rich or poor?" In Arab countries, such personal matters are totally off limits to business acquaintances, and to use personal inquiries to make conversation is thought to be intrusive.

Taking the time to increase your cultural awareness helps to develop an appreciation for our differences. And of equal importance, you'll also save yourself effort, ill will, aggravation, and even dollars.

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***Dianna Booher** works with organizations to increase their productivity and effectiveness through better oral, written, interpersonal, and cross-functional communication. She is a keynote speaker and the author of more than 40 books (22 on communication) including The Voice of Authority, Booher's Rules of Business Grammar, Speak with Confidence, and Communicate with Confidence. Dianna is CEO of **Booher Consultants**, a communication training firm offering programs in presentations skills, business writing, and interpersonal communication. Successful Meetings Magazine named her to its list of "21 Top Speakers for the 21st Century." Executive Excellence Publishing also named Dianna to its "Top 100 Thought Leaders" and "Top 100 Minds on Personal Development." www.booher.com or call 800.342.6621.*

For more tips on conflict resolution, see Communicate with Confidence: How to Say It Right the First Time and Every Time (McGraw-Hill) by Dianna Booher.