

Working effectively across cultures

Working effectively across cultures

by Robert Gibson



A lack of knowledge about other cultures is often the cause of misunderstandings between business partners from different countries. ROBERT GIBSON gives us ten things to remember when working with other cultures.

Introduction

In an increasingly global business world, the need for intercultural skills is becoming more and more important for ever greater numbers of people. Intercultural competence is important not only for business travellers or those on long-term foreign assignments but also for those working in international project teams or managing global organizations.

If your customers are in different countries, a key to success is understanding how they think and what they expect; this differs widely from country to country. If you want to develop innovative products and services, you will need to form and manage diverse teams. Even if you never step outside your office, virtual communication makes it increasingly likely that you will have to communicate with colleagues, customers or suppliers from different cultures.

Intercultural competence means being able to overcome cultural barriers and build constructive relationships with partners from different cultures for mutual benefit. The aim, in the business context, is to create value from diversity.

What do you need to be able to work effectively across cultures? My key tips are taken from my experience of supporting global collaboration in an international corporation over the past 20 years. Recently, I also asked my LinkedIn connections what they thought and was pleased that my question was viewed by more than 6,000 people and generated many useful comments, some of which I have integrated into this article.

Ten key tips for intercultural success

1 Tip 1: Be curious

Have a genuine interest in finding out about other cultures, (1) _____ intercultural encounters and be (2) _____ to learn languages. One of my LinkedIn connections called this "joyful curiosity". Try to see cultural differences not as a problem to be tolerated

but as something to be (3) _____ and leveraged for competitive advantage. Travel abroad doesn't automatically make you intercultural, but if you approach it with an open mind and curiosity, it can be an important way to (4) _____ your intercultural competence.

You may not be able to be fluent in all the languages that you come across, but try to learn a few key phrases. Your (5) _____ will be appreciated even if you are not perfect and you then switch to English.

celebrated | effort | enjoy | increase | keen

Tip 2:

A high-quality guidebook is often a good start to finding information about other cultures. The *Lonely Planet* and *Rough Guide* series provide well-researched basic information for travellers to many countries. Basic facts can also be found in the online CIA World Factbook.

Research on cultural differences can be helpful, too. A pioneer in the field in the 1950s was the US anthropologist Edward Hall; his books are still worth reading today. Ground-breaking quantitative research was done by Geert Hofstede at IBM in the 1970s – knowledge of his cultural dimensions can help you to understand key cultural differences relevant to setting up international organizations. Fons Trompenaars has added new dimensions and done much to popularize the topic in the business world. More recently, Erin Meyer and Andy Molinsky have written some popular and highly readable introductions to the topic. When using all these books, be careful not to oversimplify cultural differences.

If you are working in global virtual teams, you may be interested in Terence Brake's book *Where in the World Is My Team?* Those managing international organizations will find Nancy Adler's work very useful.

A great source of relevant information can be local "informants". These are people who live in, or are from, the target culture. They don't necessarily have to be high up in the hierarchy, but they need to be people you can trust and who understand not just their own culture but also yours. Experienced team assistants and interpreters can often provide this sort of information.

Continued on next page

Working effectively across cultures

Working effectively across cultures

by Robert Gibson

3

Tip 3: Avoid stereotyping

A stereotype is a fixed, (6) _____ belief about a particular category of people. When dealing with other cultures, it is tempting to try to put people into convenient categories, but the truth is that no one wants to be put into a box. When I moved to Germany, many people offered me tea to drink, working on the (7) _____ that "the British drink tea". In fact, I really don't like tea very much and would have much preferred coffee. Of course, many people do drink tea in Britain, but that doesn't mean that everyone does.

This is a (8) _____ example, but if you try to apply the data on cultural dimensions to individual behaviour, you are in danger of creating sophisticated stereotypes. While the results of the research can help you to understand tendencies, they cannot be used to predict (9) _____ behaviour. This is the problem with oversimplified lists of dos and don'ts. They may seem (10) _____, but they can give you a false sense of security.

assumption | attractive | individual | overgeneralized | trivial

4

Tip 4: _____

When travelling abroad, take time to observe how people behave before you make a judgement or take action. What is considered to be "normal" behaviour will differ according to where you are. Observe how people dress, how they greet each other and how they behave during meetings and presentations. You don't necessarily have to copy what they do, but you will then have a better idea of what they might expect of you. If everyone is wearing casual clothing and you turn up in a suit and tie, you – and, for that matter, the others – may feel awkward. Don't immediately jump to conclusions about the behaviour of your business partners: if someone doesn't do something, or does it late, it doesn't necessarily mean that they are incompetent or lazy. Maybe they have other priorities or a different approach to time or hierarchy.

5

Tip 5: Ask, don't tell

It is important to communicate effectively and in a culturally appropriate way in an international environment. Rather than telling people about their culture, ask them open questions. Recently, I was running an intercultural training course and we had a guest speaker from China. When one of the participants

came into the room, I introduced the guest and he asked her where she came from. When she replied "Beijing", he said: "Isn't the smog terrible there?" This negative, closed question was not the best way of establishing a rapport with the visitor. It would have been much better to have asked an open question like "What do you do there?" and focus on the positive rather than the negative. Avoid controversial topics, like politics, when trying to make small talk.

Tip 6: _____

Show respect for and empathize with colleagues and partners from different cultures. Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another person. Respecting those feelings doesn't mean that you have to agree with them, but at least you need to show in some way that you understand what the other person is feeling.

Tip 7: Be flexible and adaptable

Having understood the culturally (11) _____ behaviour of your international business partners, you may need to (12) _____ your own behaviour. Don't (13) _____ that methods that have been successful for you in your own culture will (14) _____ work in interaction with people from other cultures. To be successful, you need to have a toolbox of techniques (15) _____ to deal with different people in different situations.

For instance, as a manager, your instructions may have to be followed in a hierarchical culture; however, you may have to change your management style when dealing with employees who are used to being empowered to make their own decisions.

adapt | assume | automatically | available | determined

Tip 8: Cope with ambiguity

It is important to be able to cope with ambiguity and complexity in international business situations without losing sight of your own position. This is becoming an increasingly important skill in the VUCA world (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous). Change is fast and unpredictable; to keep pace with it, you need to be able to cope with unclear and complex situations, while staying authentic.

Continued on next page

6

7

8

Working effectively across cultures

Working effectively across cultures

by Robert Gibson

9

Tip 9: _____

People are influenced by a number of cultural factors, one of which is national culture. Other cultural factors are influenced by things like regional, corporate, professional, gender, age, religious, class or tribal differences. Each individual has multiple cultural identities – to work successfully with people, you need to understand the “multicollectivity” of your stakeholders.

It is also important to remember that cultures are not static but dynamic, interactive and impure; some researchers call this “polyculturalism”. The more cultures interact, the more they borrow from each other.

Culture is not a stand-alone – our behaviour is influenced not only by culture but by individual preferences, as well as by the situation and context in which the interaction takes place. For example, your behaviour will be different in a formal business setting from what it is in an informal social setting.

The Nobel Prize-winning author Daniel Kahneman has described how the brain can (18) _____ us to make snap judgements and have unconscious biases. We can't get rid of these biases, but we can try to become aware of them. As Richard Nisbett and others have shown, these (19) _____ patterns are culturally determined, and thinking is different in different cultures.

To work effectively across cultures, you need to reflect on your own beliefs, values and behaviour. This takes time and is a (20) _____ process. The book *The Mindful International Manager* contains many useful practical exercises to help you reflect on your cultural background.

Remember the saying from the Jewish text the Talmud: “We don't see things as they are. We see them as we are.”

critically | lifelong | mislead | thought | ultimately

10

Tip 10: Take time for reflection

Be aware of, and reflect (16) _____ on, your own culturally determined attitudes, beliefs and behaviour. I am convinced that, (17) _____, the key to working successfully across cultures is not so much about understanding others but about understanding yourself. What are the culturally determined triggers that make you annoyed or sad or happy?

ROBERT GIBSON has over 25 years' experience of intercultural competence development in education and business. He was responsible for intercultural training at Siemens AG from 2000 to 2018 and is currently professor of cross-cultural management at Bologna Business School. You can contact him and join the discussion on intercultural skills on LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com/in/robert-gibson-6a36a315).

© Business Spotlight, 7/2018
www.business-spotlight.de