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Multicultural e-Business Solutions

Can You Speak the Language of Business with Other Cultures?

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There I was, my eyes welling up with tears, thinking, "I just want to go home." There she was behind me, thoroughly disgusted with my behavior. It seemed we were from different planets rather than just from different countries. Thinking about it now, I still feel horrible. I had been standing in line at a store and noticed that the woman behind me was buying the most beautiful lime green sweater. I touched it, telling her how gorgeous it was. She said, "Go ahead and touch it!" But the look on her face and the tone of her voice said something else entirely. I deeply felt her utter contempt for me. The only thing we had in common at that moment was that we couldn't believe how rude the other one was. I wanted to say to her, "Do you know how many people have touched that sweater before me?"

The 'Space' Bubble

When attending English as a Second Language classes, I learned not only the language, but also many aspects of American culture. We were taught that most Americans feel comfortable with about five feet of space between each other in a conversation. I thought to myself, "How can you talk without touching and hugging?" But I was committed to the adage "when in Rome, do as the Romans," so I made the effort to respect the space bubble, which I found to be amazingly challenging and unnatural. I was sometimes so self-conscious about it that I missed the point of the conversation. After a while it became easier to do, but it still feels like the conversation is incomplete, and sometimes the ways of my country of origin, Brazil, still come out.

Even though I work in the field of cultural diversity, it took me some weeks to view this exchange through

Five ways to Support Diversity

- Go to three events this year where you are in the minority, perhaps a cultural awareness or holiday observance. You'll stretch your comfort zone and learn a lot.
- Make time to get to know co-workers who you perceive as 'different' from you. Don't be afraid to ask informational questions.
- No matter how odd someone's culture seems, avoid judgments, slurs and jokes.
- Try doing something a different way than you are used to, just to see the other perspective.
- Consider how these individual actions can be extended organization-wide for even greater impact.

the eyes of a professional, and realize that it was a perfect example of two cultures bumping up against each other. She was from a culture that expects a considerable space bubble and I had not only violated her perimeters, but I had touched something of hers without asking permission. On the other hand, my culture has almost no space bubble and we can't really communicate without touching. Many cultures communicate primarily through



facial expressions, tone of voice and gestures, and if you just listen to the words and don't take into account the context, you often will miss the true meaning of what people are saying.

I was recently with a group of people who communicate in this high-context manner, as they discussed food. They got so animated, gesturing with raised voices, that others nearby thought they were arguing and were afraid they were going to become violent. No, they were just passionate about what they were saying. When all the points had been made, the gesturing and decibel level dropped, and all felt satisfied that they had just had an invigorating exchange. In contrast, the others nearby breathed an audible sigh of relief.

Often in translation, we have to account for this cultural context issue. English manuals and instructions often are infused with polite terminology such as, "Please turn to page 3." When translating into several other languages, we have to remove these niceties because they become too heavy and distract from the content. Many cultures rarely use the words 'please' and 'thank you' because the tone of the spoken voice conveys the polite sense of request and gratitude.

Lost in the Translation

Even the big multi-nationals run into translation trouble when attempting to crack an international or ethnic market. Parker Pen in their Mexican marketing campaign attempted to convey that their ballpoint pen "won't leak in your pocket and embarrass you." An inexperienced translator thought that the Spanish word *embarazar* meant embarrass. The ad actually said, "It won't leak in your pocket and make you pregnant." A Pepsi marketing campaign in Taiwan translated "Come alive with the Pepsi Generation" to "Pepsi will bring your ancestors back from the dead." Imprecise translations are not the only challenge that international marketing presents. Marketers at Pepsodent emphasized the ability of their product to whiten teeth in Southeast Asia. They were unaware that many local natives chew betel nuts to achieve a culturally attractive blackening of their teeth.

Telling Time: Cultural Differences

Another of the most common issues that pose cross-cultural challenges is how people view time. I quickly learned that in America, if you commit to a deadline, it's expected that you meet it. Common sense, right? Not in many parts of the world. "I'll get it to you by eleven" can mean anytime that day or even the next day.

Most American business adhere to the maxim, "time is money." When meeting with a potential client, the norm is to get right down to business. However,

people from many parts of the world prefer to get to know their potential business partners socially to aid them in the decision of whether to proceed in doing business. Those who want to get down to business can be perceived as rather pushy, while those who engage in small talk first might be seen as less than serious about their business.

I have seen countless examples of just how powerful culture is—and how deeply the "way we do things" is ingrained in each of us. None of the individuals in these situations is right or wrong. Our concepts of personal space, communication and time are just different, and they make perfect sense in the context of our culture. When someone invades our space bubble, doesn't say please, or is one hour late, if we don't know much about other cultures, we may think the behavior is just plain rude and take it very personally. But if we know that some cultures believe that touching is important and complimentary, and that the politeness is conveyed through context, and that commitment is more important than timeliness, we might take less offense.

On the other hand, if we know that some cultures place an importance on personal space, verbal politeness and being on time, we can be more careful to respect those expectations. It does take some commitment and time to be able to see both sides of a cultural mis-adventure. But making that effort is often very rewarding. It's not really the differences that cause problems; it's our lack of knowledge of the differences. Usually when we learn more about cultural differences, there is a way to meet somewhere in the middle that allows all the different cultures to thrive together.

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Every really new idea looks crazy at first.

-Alfred North Whitehead