

BEYOND BUSINESS CARD ETIQUETTE

CULTURAL AWARENESS IN A GLOBALISED WORLD

With increased globalised streams of information, networked societies have become more aware and skilled in addressing what connects us and what sets us apart from one another. Associations globally, in their capacity of representing civil society, are often regarded as particularly accustomed in dealing with the challenges which especially cultural differences might impose on current trends in various areas of our daily lives.



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But when it comes to business communication and decision-making processes there are several aspects that even seasoned professionals need to remind themselves of on a regular basis managing (association-) business globally calls for a deeper understanding of your client/member profile. Running such a business is so much more than financial transactions and offering goods and services in other locations. As leaders in and of international organisations we need to be sensitive to different approaches to doing business and able to adapt to different situations.

Each society is – of course – unique in that it owns and represents specific customs and practices. Culture itself is defined through our values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviours – all of which are influenced not only by our origin but also by other factors such as: age, gender, religious beliefs, social background, position, etc. To merely reduce cultural behaviour to the origin of people could easily lead to stereotyping and would have the opposite result of the desired cultural sensitivity.

Further, from our own experience of working around the globe and with different groups in our industry, the

adaptation to cultural practices has started long ago in other parts of the world. When studying for example various Asian business etiquettes, one might find themselves in situations where the Asian counterpart has long adapted to western business style. Often we will end up in some kind of a “hybrid situation” which embodies cultural adaptations from both parties. It is therefore extremely important that we consider something called the “Cultural Iceberg”.

While both parties will strive to adapt business styles and etiquettes of each other, and therefore are able to have harmonious conversations, what lies beneath is often where we discover the real challenges. It is easy to understand style, it is much harder to understand deeply rooted cultural nuances that are usually not as obvious or visible such as: decision making processes, beliefs, pride, personal motivation. We are aware of the unique personalities of people in general, however, when speaking about cultural differences we often try to paint entire groups of people with one brush. For proper cultural awareness one must therefore keep in mind that there are always two levels that influence behaviour in any personal interaction: the greater society norms of the country/culture you are dealing



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with and the personal background and belief system of the individuals with whom you are dealing. While we can to some extent educate ourselves in the former, the latter requires empathy and emotional intelligence – in this case often coined as CQ (Cultural Intelligence).

For some practical reference, let's look at some of the most common differences in society norms that might help facilitate common understanding of business processes and thus strengthen international connections. These are by no means always applicable and generalizable but may provide overall pointers.

HIERARCHIES

Whereas Western organisations increasingly implement flattened hierarchy structures, in many parts of the world such as Asia, leadership roles and hierarchies are still much more important

TACKLING PROBLEMS

While in many European and North American cultures, we tackle problems head on, other cultures – like in Asia – are seeking more holistic solutions. The long term view – harmony and a pleasant work environment are more important than short term problem solving.

INDIVIDUALISM VERSUS COLLECTIVISM

Many cultures – especially in Asia – tend to consider it more important that a society prospers overall, whereas other societies – especially in North America and parts of Europe – put the well-being of the individual in the foreground and measure individual success as a factor for prosperity. This changes the way people are rewarded or complimented on work and how certain tasks as well as issues are being addressed.

UNCERTAINTY

Another area where different cultures have to some extent very different views is around uncertainty and how comfortable they are with that. Sometimes this can be a contentious issue when one party is eager to plan things by the minute while others feel the need to leave some room for flexibility. While people who plan things well are usually considered more organized, they often lack a big vision that comes from people that are willing to take bigger risks.

VALUES

Values have a huge impact on personal interaction. We see that in many cultures values like determination are held to high esteem, while others put more emphasis on being able to consult with others and making sure everyone is being heard. When these cultures end up doing business with each other they can often perceive each other as weak or displaying undesirable traits. No question that religion and general social surroundings also add to the value system a person holds.

In terms of business relations, communication is, of course, one of the most important factors to understand correctly. Not all approaches and outreach tactics will result in fruitful common understanding. As a practical association example, one large medical association is currently in the process of expanding its network into East Asia via relevant social media channels. However, what seems relevant to us (Facebook, Twitter LinkedIn) is not necessarily considered relevant in many Asian countries and apart from language issues, proliferation of Western social media platforms is still not always a given. It would appear that chat platforms such as WeChat and WhatsApp are much

more common channels to employ in many Asian (and indeed also African!) countries. For a Western organisation to tap into such channels and push information to potential recipients is not an easy task and requires careful co-ordination and handling of private user data.

What is appropriate in one society may not meet standards in another. In light of the GDPR in Europe, and otherwise increasingly stricter guidelines with regard to the handling of personal data and privacy issues, a sensible solution will need to be found. The first steps of walking in the right direction have been made. With sufficient care and respect for 'the way things are done elsewhere' we are sure to find solutions that bridge not only technological differences but also cultural ones when communicating with one another. Our industry thrives on the harmonious collaboration of different cultures – trying to understand and making steps towards each other is therefore not only necessary but can be extremely gratifying and empowering.

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