



Cultural training can help keep an international train wreck from happening

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By Kari Heistad

Have you ever pushed to close a deal with a French company before going to dinner? How about demanding a no answer from a Japanese counterpart? Served a Hindu coworker from India a beef dinner? Given a desk set to a Chinese customer?

If you have answered yes to any of these questions, you have entered the treacherous waters of cross-cultural interactions. Knowing ahead of time that the French will often only close a deal over dinner, that the Japanese rarely say no directly, that Hindus are vegetarians and that the knife in a desk set symbolizes the severing of a friendship to someone who is Chinese might have saved you at best an awkward moment, and at worst damaging an important business relationship.

Are any of the cultural values in these examples wrong because they are different than yours? No, of course not. Which by implication means, that your values are not right. Cultural values are neither right nor wrong, however they are fundamentally different. Understanding the basic differences in cultural norms, empowers you to skillfully use culture to get more done, with the same people.

The cultures you were raised in, the ones you currently live in, and your life experiences form your assumptions norms, values and expectations. They are the lens through which you see the world and how you frame your interactions with others. When you interact with someone from another culture, you are seeing that interaction through your own lens, just as they are seeing it through theirs.

According to Liz Lynes, an HR consultant with Aquity, "I find in the high tech field that assumptions across cultures can lead to miscommunication and critical delays. When a company decides to partner with an overseas firm things can get very dicey because cultural differences are not discussed. As more and more companies develop overseas partnerships, if assumptions are not clarified up front, the consequences can be costly in lost time, revenues and quality of the product."



Few industries are more culturally diverse than high tech. The tech boom brought thousands of international workers to Massachusetts, where currently 17% of the workforce is foreign born. With immigrants accounting for all of the growth in the Massachusetts labor force since 1990, the workforce will continue to diversify. As future employees will come from a diverse talent pool companies need to improve their skills at recruiting and retaining a diverse workforce and providing them with the cultural skills needed to be successful.

Intel is using cultural training to reduce workforce friction, as well as drive revenue growth. According to Patrick Ward, Public Affairs and Communications Manager for Intel Massachusetts. "We require that all of Intel's 100,000 employees worldwide take a micro-inequities training program. This course increases the awareness of cultural, racial and ethnic differences and how this impacts the way we communicate with each other. After the course, employees are better equipped to recognize how cultural differences are impacting their communication, and they can develop better communication strategies that enhance their productivity. Two thirds of our employees are in the US, but two thirds of our revenues come from countries overseas. In today's competitive market cultural competency is a critical tool for our business."

This sentiment is echoed by Scott Rassouljian, Vice President of Business Development for Radant Memos. "The little things count when developing relationships across cultures. Small mistakes can be expensive learning opportunities. Too often in high tech it is sink or swim. People end up learning how to adjust to cultures on their own instead of being given the training that helps them to ask the right questions that lead to better teamwork."

How do you avoid costly cross-cultural communication mistakes such as inviting your spouse along for dinner when you are entertaining business partners from Japan? Use these three ideas to guide you in your interactions:

1. Ask yourself what assumptions you are making
2. Ask others what they are hearing to ensure that what you are intending to communicate is what is being understood
3. Put more information in writing to reduce communication errors

The impact of culture upon companies is inevitable. The critical decision is if companies are going to equip their employees with the tools they need to be effective in the global marketplace or if they will force them to learn on their own through expensive mistakes. Either way, culture will impact a company's bottom line. The question is on what side of the ledger sheet it will be on.

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