

Culture at Work

No rights and wrongs – but a potential minefield of miscommunication.

– By Mark Loasby



Some five years ago, the Afghan army were given a 28-page brochure on cultural guidelines as part of an attempt to reduce insider killings. In the previous year, at least 45 NATO soldiers had been shot dead by Afghan security personnel. It was estimated that 75% of these killings were due to “grudges, misunderstandings, and cultural differences”.

The guidelines urged Afghan soldiers not to take offence if NATO soldiers swear, put their feet up on a table, point at people in the room, or blow their noses in front of them.

The brochure reminded them that these are “all misunderstandings” and are “unintentional”. Now whilst it’s safe to say that, in the corporate world, such misunderstandings are not usually resolved in such a tragic manner, it’s equally true to suggest that such misunderstandings certainly do exist, and are increasing.

Globalisation and social media have resulted in cultures interacting at a far greater level than ever before. And with that increase comes an even greater potential for miscommunication.

Many in business realise this. There has been a significant increase recently in companies requesting training sessions focusing on cultural issues. But there are many who have yet to wake up to the impact culture may be having on their bottom line.

It may be difficult to quantify, but for any global organisation, cultural differences affect almost every aspect of business – marketing, selling, influencing, presenting, negotiating, motivating, decision-making, evaluating, team building and leadership.

Addressing cultural issues involves two steps.

Firstly, it's important to create awareness. Not just an awareness of why there are differences – although this is valuable – but also to identify the specific issues within the organisation. Secondly, an organisation must develop and implement appropriate action. This may be on an individual or corporate level, and will vary enormously in both type and depth.

Broadly speaking, there are three ways to take action:

Adapting

Everyone has the potential to adapt their own behaviour appropriately. For example, people should be careful in their use of colloquialisms and slang. Recent research in the UK has revealed that while non-native English speakers can communicate well together in English, as soon as a

Brit or American enters the conversation, the level of communication inevitably drops as a result of non-native speakers' misunderstanding of (or discomfort with) colloquialisms or slang.

Minimising

Sometimes it may be necessary to lessen the impact of a strong cultural trait. For example, some years ago we were working with a Hong Kong company that was in potentially tricky negotiations with a Korean conglomerate. To put discussions on a more even footing, we withdrew the Korean representative in the Hong Kong team. In Korean culture, it's extremely difficult – indeed, often impossible – for a young man to disagree with an older and more senior male.

Integrating

This happens when organisations recognise cultural differences and create new ways of working together. For example, Lenovo did this when they acquired IBM's personal computer business in 2005. Anticipating there

would be differences, they set up a cross-cultural committee to advise on how best to work together.

Samsung also has recognised the need for integration. Each year, 200 young Samsung employees are put through an intensive 12-week language-training course followed by a year abroad. For the first six months, their only job is to become fluent in that language and culture, building networks and exploring the country.

Any organisation will benefit from developing its own way of becoming internally culturally sensitive.

Giving out brochures might be well intentioned. But there's no guarantee anyone will read them. **B**

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