

Multicultural Etiquette Around the Globe

by EtiquetteOutreach.com



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The Changing Role of American Culture Abroad

By Jeremy Willinger

It is often said that “so goes America, so goes the rest of the world.” The political, cultural, financial, and spiritual influence of the United States is unmatched by any other international entity. Yet, when it comes to corporate America, rules in the United States often differ from those encountered outside of the country.

American workplace culture, which emphasizes efficiency, political correctness, and multitasking, is not often shared by other parts of the world—namely Europe, Latin, and Asian offices. Europeans and Asians are less focused on getting as much done in one day as possible, and Americans shouldn’t expect them to be available after they leave the office. More so, there could be certain hours in the day that are reserved for resting and discussion, rather than business. Demanding that another culture change to match the intensity and productivity levels of another is very poor cultural and business etiquette.

When conducting business face to face, Americans generally prefer that a meeting focus mainly on shared projects, instead of shared backgrounds. Unlike many Latin cultures, for example, Americans

do not make inquiries about respective families prior to discussing business matters. However, when traveling abroad, Americans should consider how they would respond to questions like these, no matter their home situation (single, married, with kids, etc.). Not wanting to divulge familial connections could be considered a lapse in business etiquette.

In addition, in certain cultures, smoking, drinking, and dining on elaborate meals can all be found in a typical day at the office. In America, however, this would be considered a raucous bachelor party. While this difference emphasizes our cross-cultural differences, it also presents an issue for Americans traveling abroad on business. While we don't recommend picking up a detrimental health habit just to fit in, it would be prudent to expect that in America, much as we have meetings over lunch, in other places, a meal is kept strictly business free.

When meeting associates in other countries, it is a sign of proper business etiquette to wear clothing that does not offend anyone in the nation you are visiting. Certain colors can communicate certain customs; for example, in Asia, wearing head to toe white signifies mourning, while red represents chasing away evil spirits. Being more conservative in business dress—especially in conservative religious regions such as the Middle East is generally a good idea.

Businesses should consider providing a primer on different cultures for employees who will be traveling to far-flung lands—it would be

a prescient investment that can pay dividends for both employees and the larger organization. Barring a formal guide, it is a sign of consideration and proper business etiquette to research the customs of the local culture one is visiting and/or doing business with. Doing so will obviate potentially confusing customs and rituals and allow business to be done with greater efficiency and respect for all backgrounds.

How to Nurture Your Multicultural Team

By Rosemary Carroll

The modern workplace is increasingly getting borderless. Business are collaborating and partnering across the globe. Supply chains that initially were just covering a single region now span continents and beyond. In various businesses, you will find project management teams made up of team members from diverse backgrounds. In such instances, you, as the manager, find yourself with the tough mandate of ensuring culturally informed behavior within your business, and it is very important that you understand the main reasons for conflicts between the various cultures and then intervene in ways to help your business achieve its strategic objectives.

Appreciate Different Styles of Communication

Ambiguity in communication is bound to occur in multicultural settings because different cultures have their own unique styles of communication. In order to find out about preferences in terms of communication, ask your staff direct questions. Focus on maintaining an open communication style to avoid any potential alienation or isolation of team members, which can lead to restriction in information access. For example, in Asian cultures,

the notion of “saving face” is very important. If you are dealing with employees from China, use a very diplomatic approach when evaluating their performance or offering feedback about their ideas. They are great employees but their cultural communication style is very different from American. Open feedback might be interpreted as insulting or arrogant.

Encourage Open Communication

Another good way to prevent any complications from occurring in business due to cultural differences is through open communication. As a project manager, you need to be supportive and value the output from all team members. There should also be a sense of cultural integration among the team members so that everyone is free to express their opinions. Through such a platform, misinterpretations can be addressed conveniently before turning into disasters. For example, Brits are known to use sarcastic humor at work. It's fine if you are working in the United Kingdom, but in the United States, a sarcastic remark could be interpreted as offensive and lead to a problem in the office.

Awareness and Acknowledgement

Awareness and understanding of multicultural etiquette is crucial. To ensure that your team is effective, your team members must appreciate cultural gaps and embrace cultural differences ahead of time. Cultural concerns need to be noted, addressed, and ironed out before they can create problems. For example, start a new

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project by asking your team to share their cultural approach for a given project and find common ground. Multicultural diversity can be a great source for innovation, creativity, and productivity if managed and supervised with cultural savvy and cross-cultural appreciation.

How Cultural Myopia Affects Business Communication

by Alicia Ventresca

In today's business environment, multicultural etiquette plays a key role in corporate productivity. From embarking on international ventures to mingling with overseas clients, cultural savvy is necessary to leverage diversity. In fact, it has been shown that workforce dynamics are conducive to creativity, innovation, and large-scale expansion. As cross-cultural relations become evermore embedded within the American infrastructure, there is an increasing need to understand and connect with a highly heterogeneous network. You may begin adopting a global mindset by following our step-by-step guide to multicultural etiquette training.

Step 1: Learn to appreciate other cultures. Research authority Dr. Geert Hofstede, known for his widely comprehensive study of multicultural influences on the workplace, has found that culture is more frequently a source of conflict than of synergy—largely due to cultural myopia. To enhance your understanding of other cultures, seek firsthand experience (for example, reading the

work of anthropologists and sociologists, traveling, visiting national history museums, following international newsfeeds). Remember, unless you understand the values, beliefs, and customs of your business associates, you cannot possibly understand what is important to them. Assuredly, your effort will not go unnoticed by your new clients, as this is one “getting to know you” gesture that is universally well received.

Step 2: Enhance your cultural self-awareness. See yourself as others see you. Every social group is subject to certain stereotypes or fixed conceptions that unreliably precede them. For example, prior to meeting with a French client for the first time, certain stereotypes might come to mind: you might think him aloof, arrogant, or disdainful. Likewise, your French client might think of all Americans as crude, obnoxious, or money-hungry. Plainly stated by author Raymonde Carroll, “For a French person, the face of an American could easily be replaced with a dollar sign.” Hence, cultural self-awareness is essential to righting misjudgments and building harmonious work relations.

Step 3: Develop cross-cultural sensitivity. What is “standard and appropriate” in one culture may be the opposite of acceptable in another. Do your research! When crossing a new border, familiarize yourself with the language, protocol, and native decorum of the country. Be mindful of significant markers and traditions (for example, important dates, colors, numbers), religious practices, and rules of conduct. For example, if meeting with colleagues in China,

it is deeply ritualistic to bring a gift or small token of appreciation, presented to the most senior person at the table. Never give flowers, handkerchiefs, or clocks as they are associated with death and funerals. The gift should be wrapped in paper that is red, green, or yellow, which are considered to be lucky colors. Remember multicultural competency is, in large part, about civic informedness.

Step 4: Appreciate a worldview. Many clients experience discomfort, embarrassment, and even fear when forced to communicate across multicultural settings. However, by recognizing the importance and relevance of multiculturalism, they learn to embrace it. There is much to be gained by working together and yet more to be lost by refusing to cooperate. Among the many benefits of workplace diversity are enhanced performance, worldwide growth and repute, efficient collaboration, and increased job satisfaction. Because multicultural etiquette training allows employees to engage with persons of different backgrounds at a higher level, work relationships are based on respect and dignity from the beginning. Given the prevalence of cross-cultural teams, the three Cs are of essence: consideration, composure, and professional courtesy.

Cutting-Edge Skills for Global Leaders

by Rosemary Carroll

Decades ago, the business world began an inexorable march toward globalization. With the rise of information technology and the continued opening of new global markets, that march has become a sprint in recent years. Today, business leaders who wish to do well on the international stage need the cultural training and savvy to communicate and connect with partners and clients from other cultures and backgrounds, and a critical component of that cross-cultural training lies in language.

It seems obvious that individuals must share a language in order to communicate effectively, but as English has become the lingua franca of the corporate world, many American business leaders see little need to learn other languages. However, multilingual skills offer business leaders much more than the simple mastery of vocabulary and syntax; they provide a basis for broader cultural understanding and can shape the very way we think.

Success as a business leader involves more than understanding markets, money, and business etiquette; a good leader must also

understand people. The suite of skills necessary to interact and communicate successfully with others in order to achieve goals are collectively referred to as “executive function,” and include the abilities to communicate ideas, listen to others, direct and maintain focus on a task, understand and follow instructions, plan ahead and delay gratification, and maintain control over impulses, feelings, and behaviors. These executive function skills allow individuals to navigate social situations and accomplish complex tasks, and are vital for a successful business leader.

Researchers at Northwestern University have discovered that knowing and understanding more than one language improves an individual’s performance in many of these executive function skills, making a person better able to filter out background noise and concentrate on the voice of a person speaking to them. In a multilingual person, the brain’s response to sound and speech is enhanced, sharpening their attention and acuity. Other research has suggested additional benefits to cognitive function granted by fluency in multiple languages, including a resistance to the development of dementia later in life.

Multilingual skills not only sharpen your mind, but also help you develop vital cross-cultural skills for business. One of the greatest complaints that business leaders from other countries often share about Americans involves the cultural blinders that many Americans seem to wear. Compared to Europe and other parts of the world, surprisingly few adults in America know more than one language.

Most universities do not require students to take a foreign language in order to achieve a business degree. This oversight has significant effects on future business leaders because learning another language gives students more than the ability to communicate: it gives them a window into another culture and viewpoint.

From the explicit cultural education found in most language classes to the way concepts are phrased and framed differently in other languages, learning a new language opens the mind to other equally valid ways of seeing and understanding the world. Rather than viewing another culture through the lens of American perception and values, the student learns the way that culture sees itself, from within rather than from without. Learning to shed that ethnocentric perspective and to stop seeing one's own culture as the "default" is one of the most valuable skills a multilingual leader will learn, shattering the narrow view that his own culture's concepts of behaviors and values are the "normal" ones, and all others are "foreign." In order to function successfully in the international community, a leader must be able to approach business partners and clients from other cultures on equal footing, with the respect and understanding of true peers.

The Foreign Language Challenge at Work

by Lyudmila Bloch

My clients often ask me, “How long does it take to learn a new language?” Well, It depends on the level of mastery you want to achieve. Picture this: you are working as a legal counsel and need to communicate with your client who speaks a different language. In order to communicate well enough for your business purposes, you must be able to convey intricate legal details or interpret a statute for your client in his native language.

In the United States, most government agencies use the International Second Language Proficiency Ratings, an evaluation system that measures prospective employees’ abilities to use a foreign language in their work. Normally, in order to be “rated” in a foreign language, you’ll have to be evaluated by a trained professional, most likely a native speaker, who will probe your command of a target language in pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary.

A scale of 1 to 5 is applied in this evaluation (Level 1: beginners; Level 2: intermediate beginners; Level 3: intermediate learners; Levels 4 and 5: professional fluency). For example, if you are a

Level 1 speaker, your knowledge will be sufficient to satisfy your linguistic needs in social and travel settings: asking questions, following directions, and ordering food at restaurants.

At Level 2, speakers will be able to communicate basic social needs, plus essential work-related information. For example, a travel guide can give necessary instructions in another language, or a real estate broker would know enough to describe a property in some detail.

Full professional fluency takes years to achieve. The highest level of mastery (Level 5) is achieved when a foreign speaker has a 90 percent accuracy rate while speaking, writing, and expressing the full range of his or her thoughts in a target language.

There are many languages to consider when rating proficiency, and they are divided into two categories: “hard” and “easy” languages. Success in either category is also very much tied to the length of your training. For example, to speak Spanish, an average person will require 500 hours of basic training to achieve Level 2 proficiency. French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, and Romanian are all in the same category of “easy” languages. However, after many years of study, I personally believe that French grammar is by far more complex than Spanish. So, to achieve Level 2 proficiency in French, an average learner will likely need about 800 hours of language practice.

“Hard” languages, such as Chinese, Russian, Hungarian,

Japanese, and Korean, are totally different from the previously described group. A Level 2 attainment will require over 1,300 hours of intense language practice in pronunciation, reading comprehension, and grammar.

So, if you are learning an “easy” language and your linguistic abilities are about average, it will take you approximately 250 hours to get to the first level. Double that time (500 hours) if you want to achieve Level 2, and triple that time if you wish to be fluent. Superb command of written language and business-class proficiency might take a lifetime.

But remember, it’s nearly impossible to be completely fluent in a non-native language—the syntactic subtleties, nuances, and exceptions are simply endless. But don’t get discouraged; the study of a new language is rewarding in itself. Practice does indeed make perfect, and it’s the only way to make this dream a reality.

A Passport to American Workplace Etiquette

by Jeremy Willinger

The modern American office is defined by its informality and emphasis on multitasking. American workers put in longer hours, rarely take vacations, and stay logged on and alert to work matters long after they have left the office. Needless to say, outsiders working or visiting an American office should expect a different set of business priorities and customs.

American multitasking is done electronically and often while mobile. Many times, an in-person meeting is a courtesy and once a relationship is established, most communication transfers to email. When conducting business face to face, Americans prefer that a meeting be focused mainly on shared projects, instead of shared backgrounds. Unlike many Latin cultures, for example, Americans do not make inquiries about respective families prior to discussing business matters. The idea of going home in the middle of the afternoon, while popular in many parts of the world, is also nonexistent in the States.

In many European offices, coffee and cigarettes are meant to be

savored, while Americans guzzle coffee and email while discussing business. Smoking is also frowned upon in (and frequently outside) the office when stateside.

This focus on efficiency is exemplified by the very American phrase, “Time is money,” in that errant time equals missed opportunities. With that in mind, meetings in America are expected to start and end on schedule. The more languid pace and ceremonial motions of Arab and Asian business relations are not replicated in American offices. Formality has been deemed a vestige of days past.

American’s emphasis on productivity has infiltrated their work wardrobes as well. In years past, you would never see a man without a tie, but today it is frequently seen as a needless affectation that takes too long to coordinate into an outfit and learn how to tie properly. In many fields today, a good pair of jeans is as appropriate as any three-piece suit. Multimillion-dollar deals can be ironed out with one party in a suit and the other in shorts and a sweatshirt. In American financial and legal offices, a suit is required in addition to proper business etiquette, but if you are meeting about a creative project, do not be surprised to see American counterparts in casual dress.

Our domestic workplace, though informal in dress and address (as Americans are usually on a first-name basis with their boss and colleagues), is actually more socially rigid than in most other nations. American government requires that sexual boundaries,

minimum compensation, and other rules to inform and regulate workers and companies be posted in an employee accessible area.

Things that may seem common abroad, such as a lingering handshake when greeting an interviewer, are usually not the norm here. Many skillful candidates from abroad do not do well during personal interviews, but leave their competitors behind when they perform, only because they have not researched American office customs. Americans, like many Asians, will go to great lengths to save face and avoid embarrassment, yet American workers will often demur rather than participate if they feel unsure about a group activity.

While the pace may be more frenzied than in other countries, an American office is, on average, a wonderfully collaborative and friendly environment in which most any creative or business professional can thrive.

Cultural Differences Between the United States and the United Kingdom

by Meghan Keneally

George Bernard Shaw once said, “England and America are two countries divided by a common language.” When it comes to business etiquette, however, it is certainly more than pronunciation and spelling that separates the two superpowers. By learning the difference in expectations, you will be able to adapt your social skills to the clients you are dealing with and use your expert etiquette techniques to your advantage.

Brits are notorious for their stiff upper lip, meaning that they are sometimes seen as being cold or unwelcoming to new people. As goes with all generalizations, this is not always true; but one reassuring note about this trend is that for many of the perpetrators, they mean no ill will. It simply takes them longer to warm up to outsiders than Americans do. What this means in a business setting is that you should not take offense if your first meeting is not quite as warm and fuzzy as you may be accustomed to—you’ll just have to wear them down with consistent friendliness and efficiency.

By token of their reserved nature, Brits may be surprised by the

amount of small talk and getting-to-know-you chatter involved in American business. One important etiquette tip is to avoid taking this as a personal insult and simply adapt your expectations and social graces accordingly. Americans are widely seen to be overly friendly and gregarious even to perfect strangers, and while it is always a safer approach than being stiff, it may rub some people the wrong way.

Another way this difference is shown is in the respective humor of the two countries. Long known for their preference for dry wit as opposed to slapstick comedy, the English appreciate smart and biting humor. While it isn't necessary to watch back seasons of the U.K. version of *The Office* or the Monty Python box sets before jetting abroad, be aware to reign in any outlandish and overly loud knock-knock jokes you had planned for your opening number.

Brits are also known for their impeccable dress sense, so it is always safer to dress more formally for meetings with clients in the United Kingdom. Putting an extra moment of effort into your attire before a meeting with English clients shows that you take them and their business seriously. Pocket squares are common, well-shined shoes are a must, and a clean shave is worth the time when making a first impression.

Loyalty and strong relationships are the basis of British business theory, and Brits take their time developing trust in new business partners. One way this manifests itself is in the speed of their action plans; they prefer to take their time when going about a

deal with the thought that it will help route out careless errors. The trick for successful global power players is to find a way to strike a balance between the two by placing deadlines on work but allowing for plenty of time to discuss the various steps within the process.

One massive benefit that comes from the British tendency to wait a friendship or business partnership out is that a considerable amount of loyalty comes in turn. Once you break through the ice, you will be welcomed into the veritable “old-timers’ network,” which is essentially like stamping their collective approval next to your company’s name in their Rolodex. What this means for your business relationships is that while it may take some time to build the trust between an American company and a British client, they will likely stay with you for years once you win them over. The payoff is well worth the work.

While proper etiquette is obviously important to business across the globe, nowhere are manners more important than the United Kingdom. Many of the differences between the United States and the United Kingdom can be addressed by simply tuning into some subtle nuances of social expectations that exist in the respective cultures in order to avoid some faux pas.

How to Conduct Business with the Chinese

by Randall Mah

When doing business in China and interacting with the Chinese, some Americans suffer from cultural myopia and conduct themselves as if they were still in the United States. While your Chinese hosts are likely to be accommodating of cultural differences and may have familiarized themselves with American culture, learning about Chinese business etiquette and cultural nuances is essential.

Introductions

Chinese tend to take punctuality seriously, so it is important to arrive on time. Tardiness is generally considered rude, and your hosts may believe you do not take their business seriously.

The Chinese dislike being touched by strangers. Social etiquette in China forbids public hugging and kissing, and it's uncommon to see such displays even among friends and family. Consequently in professional settings, Chinese will maintain a certain degree of physical space between themselves and others. During professional greetings, limit yourself to a handshake.

Handshakes have become increasingly common in China, especially among Chinese who interact with foreigners. They may, however, be less firm than those to which you are accustomed. This does not mean that Chinese people lack sincerity, but that an especially firm handshake may be interpreted as being aggressive. A slight nod of the head is also appropriate. While Japanese and Koreans bow like Americans wave their hands, Chinese typically bow only during funerals, weddings and formal occasions.

Watch your eye contact. While American business etiquette encourages sustained eye contact as a way to convey sincerity and respect, maintaining too much eye contact with a Chinese person can be interpreted as a challenge, especially if the person you're looking at is of senior rank.

Exchanging business cards is still an essential part of the Chinese meeting-and-greeting protocol. When presenting and receiving business cards (or anything else), use both hands. Examine the card and keep it on the table during a meeting like an important document. You may want to print business cards with a Chinese translation on one side.

Building Relationships

While Americans tend to value straight talk and directness is almost expected during workplace conflict resolution, the Chinese like to take things slowly. Building a rapport with their business partners is essential for building trust. Consequently, meetings typically start

with small talk and progress toward serious matters. Big decisions should not be expected during initial meetings as both parties get acquainted. Patience is a virtue and you should expect multiple meetings. The fostering of *guanxi*, or personal connections, leads to more successful transactions in China.

Chinese tend to feel more comfortable and free to be straightforward and honest during private meetings. By chatting one-on-one with your Chinese associates, you may get more information than during a group meeting where consensus is cherished. If a group meeting cannot be avoided, stick around afterward and chat privately to discuss any concerns.

Do not mistake the nodding of your Chinese associates as a “yes” signal. Chinese people may not always tell you they don’t understand details. Using an interpreter may help them grasp the essence of the discussion.

Business Negotiations

English is the language of international business but you must speak clearly and simply so non-native speakers can understand as well. Use common words and simple language without colloquialisms. While some of your business partners may be fluent in English, your goal is to communicate with everybody.

Chinese have a deep respect for hierarchy and formality in business settings. While Americans tend to be informal and treat

new acquaintances in a casual manner, the Chinese are more formal and traditional. Maintaining a professional atmosphere is critical. Always use titles when addressing Chinese people and avoid brusqueness and aggressive behavior.

If you follow these simple guidelines, your multicultural savvy will put your Chinese partners at ease and set an appropriate tone for future interactions.

Hand Gestures Across Cultures

by Lyudmila Bloch

It's often said that "actions speak louder than words." While the phrase is usually employed as an admonition against hypocrisy, it's also true when referring to nonverbal communication. A surprising amount of interpersonal communication actually takes place through gesture, expression, and body language, rather than through words. The first piece of advice that a multicultural etiquette expert will offer to business executives and world travelers is that learning the language of an international business partner shows respect and facilitates communication.

However, it's just as important to learn the nonverbal language cues of that business partner's culture because hand gestures around the globe can vary dramatically in meaning. Surprisingly often, a gesture that is perfectly innocuous or even friendly in one culture can cause tremendous offense in another country. Avoiding these pitfalls is critical to cultivating a successful business relationship.

One of the most well-known differences in body language across cultures involves the gesture known as the "peace sign" or "V for

victory” in the United States, where the index and middle fingers are extended. Typically this gesture is made with the palm of the hand facing the viewer, and is recognized throughout much of the world as a positive sign. The orientation of the hand is very important, however; the same gesture made with the back of the hand facing the viewer is obscene and insulting, comparable to the extended middle finger throughout much of the English-speaking world outside of the United States.

Another gesture fraught with semantic pitfalls is what American residents recognize as the “okay” gesture, wherein the index finger and thumb form a circle and the other three fingers are extended. People in many parts of the world will recognize the American meaning of the gesture, but it has a number of other implications as well, ranging from harmless to downright insulting. How the gesture is understood can often vary among regions of a country and among generations, but there are some places where travelers should take care with it. In France, the gesture means “zero” or “nothing.” In Japan, it traditionally signifies money, or a request for payment. But in Turkey, Venezuela, and some other parts of Europe, the gesture suggests that a person is homosexual. And in Brazil it is considered obscene and insulting, intending to evoke a particular unmentionable body part. Some parts of Germany will interpret it as a positive sign, but other areas will read it as a severe insult.

The “thumbs up” gesture is another good example of how hand

gestures around the globe can cause trouble for international travelers and executives. Europe and China share the American meaning of the gesture, recognizing it to mean “good” and signifying approval. It can also signal this in Australia, unless coupled with an upward motion, which turns it into a serious insult: roughly meaning, “up yours.” The gesture should be entirely avoided in the Middle East and Thailand, where it is considered a grave insult. In some other parts of the world, the gesture relates to counting or pointing, so while using it may not cause insult, the intended meaning will be lost.

Executives doing business in Greece should take careful note of a gesture referred to as a moutza. It involves facing one’s palm toward the viewer with all fingers extended. The insult is greater if the palm is thrust forward toward the viewer, especially toward the face. A particularly severe form incorporates both hands, one behind the other. Foreign travelers should take care when waving or gesturing to indicate the number five, as these signs can be mistaken for a moutza. To signal the number five, one should face the palm of the hand toward oneself to avoid giving inadvertent offense.

When asking a client or business partner to join or follow you, it is important to understand how members of other cultures interpret beckoning gestures. Beckoning someone with the palm facing up and fingers waving back is often interpreted as a romantic solicitation in much of Latin America. Using only the index finger

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to beckon can cause even more severe problems, as this is a very offensive gesture in Japan and represents death in Singapore. The Japanese gesture to call someone closer involves facing the palm toward the viewer and curling the fingers down toward the palm.

Body language across cultures can differ just as much as spoken language, and a careless gesture can quickly send the wrong message to a client or potential business partner. Though some people may offer the chance to apologize for the gaffe, those errors can jeopardize fragile business relationships. Multicultural etiquette requires that one make an effort to understand the cultural vocabulary of gestures and body language to show respect and consideration, and thus make a good impression.



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