



## **Chapter 4: UNDERSTANDING RELATIONSHIPS**

### ***Equality vs Recognised hierarchy***

**Australia:** Equality is to be honoured (including gender, race, class, etc).

**Contrast:** Society is better organised if status and hierarchy are recognised.

Perhaps the most important value orientation for a newcomer to Australia to understand is the overall importance placed on equality. In contrast with most of the rest of the world, Australians generally favour equality over recognised hierarchy. In his book *Cross-Cultural Business Behavior* (1999), Richard Gesteland writes that Australia is ‘a deal-focused, extremely egalitarian and informal’ society (p 263) and that this egalitarianism leads Australians to look very negatively on anyone, especially newcomers, who express anything that even approaches boastfulness or showing off.

In our research we have found that migrants from Asia almost immediately notice the relative absence of recognition of hierarchy and that people from Asia quickly learn that this is a key difference. In North America, they are taught them to value hierarchy considerably more than does the average Australian. Attitudes and behaviours that in North America or Europe seem acceptable or even a requirement for securing employment, such

as discussing one's tertiary degrees, are often seen by Australians as pretentious. It is certainly important to let potential employers know your skills and background, but this must be done carefully to avoid the impression that you are 'putting on airs'.

### **Australian's perspective repatriated after eight years in Hong Kong**

*I find that getting served in a restaurant or shop is very difficult in Australia. I think the service staff see themselves as equal to their customers, which is fine but they refuse to cater to customer needs. You almost have to make an effort to get them to serve you and if you complain about anything the attitude is 'Whatever'.*

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The particular form the value of equality takes in Australia is general rather than specific. At least at the level of ideas, hierarchies are seen by Australians as disruptive of positive and productive social relations. This results in a situation in which women and men, at least on the surface, are supposed to be equal and equally able to interact with each other and serve as group leaders or managers. Women and men actively engage in discussion and even argue with each other. They may greet each other with a handshake and spend time together both inside and outside the workplace. Newcomers to Australia from more hierarchical societies may have to adapt their behaviour when interacting with the opposite sex, from being deferential or domineering to more familiar and equal.

In Australia the differences between people in terms of race, religion, ethnicity, nationality and socioeconomic level are likewise believed to be merely differences, not hierarchies. Workplaces in Australia are expected to be free of language and behaviours that denigrate or degrade any individual or group, and there are even laws that protect people from this kind of thing. The very word 'class' to refer to socioeconomic differences is not generally recognised as valid in Australia, despite the obvious differences in wealth.

### **Australian management consultant's perspective**

*I often see Australian employees taking the time to talk to the security guard, the cleaner and the tea lady more than you would in a more hierarchical culture. Even top management will make sure they ask about the families of these workers and will personally get involved if there is an issue.*

In both individual and group interactions, Australians tend to 'level' or downplay superior skills and talents in order to bolster the illusion of equality. The Australian phrase 'the tall poppy' refers to this kind of levelling. The poppy that grows taller than the others in the field gets its head knocked off first, in the same way that a person who attempts to portray him or herself as above others will be brought down through joking or even gentle (or serious) mockery of his or her accomplishments. US-Americans, who are taught from a very young age to value individual accomplishments in themselves and others, are particularly vulnerable to this kind of levelling mechanism in Australia. Australian politicians are also common victims, as anyone who has watched Australian television comedy can attest. Comedians often infiltrate press conferences and other public gatherings to ask impertinent questions. If the politicians refuse to play along with the mockery or try to have the 'stirrers' thrown out, they are seen as bad sports. Doing the latter would also be considered an abuse of authority.

### **Switzerland to Australia perspective**

*What I would say to a new migrant: 'The tall poppy syndrome must be understood.' This means that on a daily basis nobody wants to stand out. And, at least where I work [which is currently undergoing major restructuring] there are very few people who provide any leadership or decision-making. Everybody is waiting for the big boss to do everything because they don't want to take responsibility and thus stand out from the crowd themselves.*

*Yet, at the same time, having titles is really important and you should put all of them on your business card. I don't really understand the contradiction.*

Of course, Australia is a hierarchical society. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, on average Australian men earn 10 per cent more than Australian women (see <http://ofw.facs.gov.au/publications/wia/chapter5.html>). They also garner more respect in the workplace and dominate the upper levels of corporate, academic and political life (see <http://ofw.facs.gov.au/publications/wia/chapter4.html>). While government policy has made significant contributions to the status of women, there is still a huge boys' network and deliberate actions have to be taken to continue to improve the position of women.

In addition, racial, religious, ethnic and national groups that fall outside the dominant Anglo-European sphere in Australia can face racism and discrimination of various kinds. In the workplace, there are bosses and subordinates. Nevertheless, the value of equality means that bosses are not automatically believed to be superior, and vice versa. Bosses must earn the respect of their employees. If you enter a workplace as a manager, your Australian employees will use your first name and expect you to use theirs. They are more likely to follow your directions if you earn their respect rather than try to rely entirely on your title or position.

### **Brazil to Australia perspective**

*It certainly depends on your workplace, but in general hierarchy is more subtle here than in Brazil. People have a more consultative style than a hierarchical one. Managers have to be seen to communicate with all levels of the organisation, not just those immediately around them. It's also not uncommon to see managers having lunch on the shop floor with the employees because they are trying to mix with everybody. Everybody here uses only first names as well.*

*I really appreciate this mixing between levels because I think it's good for an organisation. However, it can also be hard because you can forget your position when out socialising and make a mistake. Hierarchy is subtle, but that doesn't mean it isn't there.*

### **India to Australia perspective**

*I was raised in India, where it was unacceptable to question the directions that someone of a higher rank has given you. It was normal to follow directions without question. When I came to Australia I joined the Australian army and was amazed to see that the orders we received came with explanations. I could not understand why my superiors were justifying their orders. In India, respect was a given if you were in a higher-ranked position and approval did not need to be sought.*

Don't expect to get any kudos in Australia for your status alone. Borrowing from 'Trompenaars' notion of the relative importance of ascribed or achieved status, Australians are solidly of the opinion that only achieved status needs to be acknowledged and even that is done in an understated way. Status that comes to you through your position in an organisation will generally go unrecognised, whereas if you earn people's respect through your mentoring or support of their efforts you will be held in high esteem. Of course, this esteem will play itself out in terms of relationships, rather than outward displays of honour and respect.

### **France and Britain to Australia perspective**

*Hierarchy is so much stronger in France and Britain than it is here. I am used to having to use quite formal language with my superiors such as Mr or the formal French word for you, vous. I also had to go through many steps to get to the big boss. I love it in Australia where you can go straight to your CEO and address him by his first name! I find that using people's surnames in Australia puts a glass between you and them that is very uncomfortable for everybody. Here there is great openness and more opportunities to network across levels of the organisation. People are seen more on the same level as human beings rather than as holders of titles or positions. This is not so in France because of all the structures and procedures that people have to follow. In Britain as well, work is more structured; there's always a sense of 'I am the boss and you are the worker'.*

*As an exporter the lack of hierarchy in Australia can unfortunately work against you because hierarchy is so important in places like China and the rest of Asia. Australians can be too forward, too intimate for many Asian people's comfort levels.*

### **United States to Australia perspective**

*In the US I was occasionally invited to my boss's house with other staff members for parties, to celebrate Thanksgiving or to welcome new staff members. In these situations my boss was the host and to some extent it felt like an extension of work. I thought nothing of being asked to perform little tasks for my boss, even though it was at a party.*

*Here in Australia I have never been invited to my boss's house. I don't think he has ever hosted a party for his staff. He does go to the pub for drinks on Friday nights and will occasionally be involved in weekend activities but only as one of the group; usually someone else has organised it. Socially everyone seems very relaxed around each other and work is the last thing on their minds. Socialising outside of work is separate from work and no one is going to 'pull rank' on you at the pub or at a barbecue. You're expected to be more relaxed and informal and not fall into work roles outside of the office; that makes people uneasy.*

### **South Africa to Australia perspective**

*South African work culture is very hierarchical. It's always 'Yes, Sir' to the boss, while in Australia it's much more on a first-name basis. At home, people give orders and others accept them; it's a very top-down, directive discussion style. But Australians don't like anything that sounds like an order. They don't give them and they certainly don't take them well. It's not that there isn't hierarchy in Australia, but it's insinuated and maybe flatter.*

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## **Informality vs Formality**

**Australia:** Informality and casual appearance are signs of warmth and equality.

**Contrast:** Informality can be intrusive and can result in a loss of respect.

A second value orientation that is immediately apparent to many migrants to Australia is the degree of informality in all areas of life, including the workplace. For most Australians, being informal with others is a sign of welcome, friendliness and inclusion. Informality is also related to the value of equality, since it is seen by Australians as a way of levelling out differences in age, status and position. The amount of laughter, joking and banter in Australian workplaces is one way the value of informality is evident. Rather than strictly focusing on formal structures and the tasks at hand, many workplaces allow employees to take a few minutes to joke around and talk with colleagues, unlike in more formal cultures. This informality shouldn't be taken to mean that people are not hard-working; rather, many Australians suggest that they work harder when they know they can lighten the load through laughter.



### **Britain to Australia perspective**

*Overall, the best term to describe work in Australia is informality. The people are very welcoming and warm here in Perth, with fewer cliques or structures to work around. I have never had to work at winning people over here the way I did at home. But, at the same time, you definitely have to get into more informal situations with your boss and colleagues to get ahead here, which can be a disadvantage for some. I had a colleague who never came out for drinks with us on a Friday night and I know she was passed over for promotions because she wasn't seen as a team player. My advice to new migrants: Relax a bit! And, to get on, you must be friendly with your colleagues.*

### **Malaysia to Australia perspective**

*Sometimes I think the informality here can be a bit excessive or overboard. For example, I find all the joking and laughing during work hours to be quite disruptive. But I realise the other staff members don't think it's a problem, so I have had to revise my thinking a bit.*

*In my first interview for a permanent job in Australia I was asked what I thought about the workplace. I said that in a manufacturing situation it's not good to have too much joking around, since I wanted to show that I would not tolerate the kind of joking I had experienced as a temporary worker elsewhere. I knew I had really put my foot in it when the interviewer said, 'What's wrong with that?' I learned that you have to be able to laugh and joke to 'fit in' in Australia.*

Another way informality manifests itself is that most Australians use and expect others to use their first names, even at the highest levels of business and education. Most Australians are extremely uncomfortable being called sir or ma'am, and even the less formal use of Mr, Ms, Miss or Mrs will usually result in the Australian asking you to use their first name. In return, of course, Australians will generally also use your first name; this is not a sign of disrespect, but of welcome.

When Australians are not using their first names with each other, they are often using an even more informal naming system, nicknames. The friends and families of many Australians call them something entirely separate from their given names. Sometimes these nicknames are derived from a given name or surname, such as 'Bazza' for the given name Barry, or 'Macka' for any surname that begins with Mac or Mc. At other times the nickname derives from a personal trait, so red-headed men and boys are sometimes called 'Bluey'. It may take



newcomers some time to discern that their colleague Gary Gilchrist is the same person referred to as ‘Gazza’ or ‘Gilly’, or even ‘Gary’ once in a while! If an Australian gives you a nickname you cannot assume it is because they are unfamiliar or uncomfortable with your non-Anglo name, or that they are making fun of some personal trait: it is a sign of acceptance.

### **France to Australia perspective**

*I thought at first that Australians weren’t used to my French name and maybe they had trouble pronouncing it because in my first workplace in Australia some of my colleagues called me ‘Frenchy’. I didn’t realise till a bit later that everybody in that workplace had a nickname and they were making me welcome by calling me that.*

### **Ethiopia to Australia perspective**

*I have a pretty long name that might be hard for some people to say and so I’ve given myself a one-syllable name. I would recommend that anybody with a long name that is difficult to pronounce should simplify it to one syllable. Australians like a good nickname anyway.*

Related to the use of personal nicknames is the Australian habit of shortening words more generally, or using other kinds of slang. As a result, Australian English can be a bit difficult to understand for people who learned British or North American English as their first or second (or third) language. There are many books available on Australian slang and we recommend you take a look at one of them. You should also feel free to ask Australians what they mean when they use terms like ‘the goss’ (gossip), ‘arvo’ (afternoon) or ‘stubby’ (bottle of beer).

### **Iran to Australia perspective**

*I hear quite a bit of swearing in my workplace. I was offended at first because I thought people did not like me and were being very rude. Then I realised that Australians swear a lot with each other and it is not a sign of anger or dislike. It’s just what they do.*

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Australian informality also manifests itself in dress styles. Most workplaces do require people to wear certain kinds of clothing, whether it is fluorescent safety clothing on a construction site or a conservative grey, black or blue suit in a corporate office (where brightly coloured trousers and jackets are inappropriate for men). Nonetheless, many Australians like to add their own individual touches to these outfits, occasionally in ways that might be seen by outsiders as fairly informal. For example, it is not uncommon to see a man dressed in a conservative suit and tie also sporting an earring or two, or a pair of less conventional socks. It is perfectly acceptable for women in Australia to wear pant suits instead of skirts or dresses. In addition to their fluorescent yellow or orange safety vests, many Australian delivery men and other labourers wear shorts and boots, rather than trousers. Some workplaces also have a policy of allowing employees to dress more casually on Fridays. Business conferences or retreats that take place away from the office can also be an opportunity for employees to ‘dress down’ in jeans or other casual clothing. Before making assumptions about dress style, you should observe others in the same position as you or ask your manager or boss if your workplace has a dress code.