

Cultural behaviour in business

Read a blog post about doing business in different cultures to practise and improve your reading skills.

Before reading

Do the preparation task first. Then read the text and do the exercises.

Preparation task

Match the definitions (a–h) with the vocabulary (1–8).

Vocabulary Definitions

1. stark
2. to be conceived as
3. to break the ice
4. nuances
5. to stand someone in good stead
6. pompous
7. to pigeonhole someone
8. mundane

a. subtle differences in meaning

b. to be useful to someone in the future

c. arrogant and self-important

d. extreme and obvious, often used with 'difference' or 'contrast'

e. to be thought of as

f. boring, uninteresting or ordinary

g. to do something that helps relieve the tension and get conversation going, especially between people meeting for the first time

h. to label someone and put them in a restrictive category

Reading text: Cultural behaviour in business

Much of today's business is conducted across international borders, and while the majority of the global business community might share the use of English as a common language, the nuances and expectations of business communication might differ greatly from culture to culture. A lack of understanding of the cultural norms and practices of

our business acquaintances can result in unfair judgements, misunderstandings and breakdowns in communication. Here are three basic areas of differences in the business etiquette around the world that could help stand you in good stead when you next find yourself working with someone from a different culture.

Addressing someone

When discussing this topic in a training course, a German trainee and a British trainee got into a hot debate about whether it was appropriate for someone with a doctorate to use the corresponding title on their business card. The British trainee maintained that anyone who wasn't a medical doctor expecting to be addressed as 'Dr' was disgustingly pompous and full of themselves. The German trainee, however, argued that the hard work and years of education put into earning that PhD should give them full rights to expect to be addressed as 'Dr'.

This stark difference in opinion over something that could be conceived as minor and thus easily overlooked goes to show that we often attach meaning to even the most mundane practices. When things that we are used to are done differently, it could spark the strongest reactions in us. While many Continental Europeans and Latin Americans prefer to be addressed with a title, for example Mr or Ms and their surname when meeting someone in a business context for the first time, Americans, and increasingly the British, now tend to prefer using their first names. The best thing to do is to listen and observe how your conversation partner addresses you and, if you are still unsure, do not be afraid to ask them how they would like to be addressed.

Smiling

A famous Russian proverb states that 'a smile without reason is a sign of idiocy' and a so-called 'smile of respect' is seen as insincere and often regarded with suspicion in Russia. Yet in countries like the United States, Australia and Britain, smiling is often interpreted as a sign of openness, friendship and respect, and is frequently used to break the ice.

In a piece of research done on smiles across cultures, the researchers found that smiling individuals were considered more intelligent than non-smiling people in countries such as Germany, Switzerland, China and Malaysia. However, in countries like Russia, Japan, South Korea and Iran, pictures of smiling faces were rated as less intelligent than the non-smiling ones. Meanwhile, in countries like India, Argentina and the Maldives, smiling was associated with dishonesty.

Eye contact

An American or British person might be looking their client in the eye to show that they are paying full attention to what is being said, but if that client is from Japan or Korea, they might find the direct eye contact awkward or even disrespectful. In parts of South America and Africa, prolonged eye contact could also be seen as challenging authority. In the Middle East, eye contact across genders is considered inappropriate, although eye contact within a gender could signify honesty and truthfulness.

Having an increased awareness of the possible differences in expectations and behaviour can help us avoid cases of miscommunication, but it is vital that we also remember that cultural stereotypes can be detrimental to building good business relationships. Although national cultures could play a part in shaping the way we behave and think, we are also largely influenced by the region we come from, the communities we associate with, our age and gender, our corporate culture and our individual experiences of the world. The knowledge of the potential differences should therefore be something we keep at the back of our minds, rather than something that we use to pigeonhole the individuals of an entire nation.

Tasks

Task 1

Circle the correct answer.

1. The British trainee felt that people who want to be addressed as 'Dr' must be ...
 1. hard-working.
 2. conceited and self-important.
 3. doing a medical degree.
 4. from Germany.
2. If you are not sure how to address someone, you should ...
 1. use the title you see on their business card.
 2. make your decision based on cultural stereotypes about their country.
 3. address them the way you'd like to be addressed.
 4. ask them what they would like you to call them.
3. There might be a misunderstanding if an American smiles at a Russian business associate because the Russian might think that the American is ...
 1. being fake.
 2. challenging their authority.
 3. trying to break the ice.
 4. disrespectful.
4. The Japanese, South Koreans and Iranians might interpret a smiling face as being ...
 1. friendlier.
 2. less open.
 3. not as intelligent.
 4. dishonest.
5. Americans and British people sometimes use eye contact to show that they ...
 1. like the speaker.
 2. are really listening to what is being said.
 3. are honest and truthful.
 4. are attending to every need of the speaker.
6. The last paragraph warns the reader not to ...
 - a. engage in international business.
 - b. let national cultures shape the way we behave and think.

- c. let miscommunication damage our business relationships.
- d. overgeneralise using our knowledge of cultural stereotypes.

Task 2

Are the sentences true or false?

1. When doing business internationally, there is a possibility that we might misinterpret what each other is saying even though we are speaking the same language.
2. To the German trainee, having a PhD is equivalent to being a medical doctor.
3. Sometimes, the smallest things can trigger a huge emotional response in us, especially when they are things we are not used to.
4. In the research done to the perceptions of smiles, people from different countries were asked to rate photos of smiling faces and non- smiling faces.
5. Making eye contact can be interpreted in different ways in different cultures but is almost always a positive thing.
6. The writer recommends keeping possible cultural differences in the forefront of our minds when doing business with people with different cultures.

Discussion

Answer

What practices have you encountered that seemed strange or even inappropriate?