

How to fix culture clashes in global teams

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Language blunders are a common problem but, once discovered, mostly easy to deal with. Erin Meyer, a professor at Insead, believes relations are really tested when we forget that how we praise, criticise, persuade and get things done is an expression of the culture in which we grew up – not simply our personality.

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Yolanda Lee Conyers, an American and Chief Diversity Officer at the Chinese computer maker Lenovo, knows how easy it is to start a relationship badly. After Lenovo purchased IBM's PC business, her job was to bring East and West together. So, she started calling a lot of meetings, but very soon some people told her that the Chinese did not like her.

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For successful team-working, it is also very important to recognise that what gets the job done in one culture might lead to problems elsewhere. Philip Rooke, the British CEO of Spreadshirt, a global online clothing business based in Germany, has a team with 20 different nationalities. They do not avoid talking about their differences – instead, they joke about them. 'We say if a German isn't criticising, it's praise.' Some nations, like the Germans and the Dutch, are taught to give open and honest feedback, while others are less direct.

Those who wish to understand cultural differences better can turn to research such as Geert Hofstede's study of national differences at IBM, and Professor Meyer's Culture Map.

The map shows what kinds of behaviour are considered more or less standard in work styles around the world. For example, in many advanced economies, an effective manager is one who always keeps to a schedule. But in countries where the electricity might suddenly fail, the best time managers are those who can quickly change or adapt their plan when something unexpected happens.

With so many differences, how can organisations function peacefully? Ms Lee Conyers' advice is simple: 'We say: before judging people, let's first be sure that we understand their intention.'

But 'when in Rome', should a manager from overseas 'do as the Romans do'* or stay true to his or her own business practices? Professor Meyer recommends you should 'know how to do in Rome' and then decide which behaviour will produce better results. Jose Carvalho, a Brazilian who heads the commercial payments division of American Express in Europe, agrees. He thinks egalitarian workplaces are great, but he says: 'If I went straight into a hierarchical market and bypassed three layers of management, I'd upset quite a few people and wouldn't get anything done.' Obviously, understanding when to play by local rules is extremely useful.

A She so much wanted to get things done that she had forgotten one thing: for the Chinese, it is very important to build trust first by socialising with colleagues. Another problem was her use of the word 'request'. 'To us, "request" sounds polite; but the standard translation in Mandarin Chinese is more like "demand", which naturally upsets people,' she says.

B As she puts it, 'When misunderstandings happen, it's often not because we assume people from other cultures are different from us, but because we assume they are like us.' So we may have the impression that the answer we get to a question or a request was unfriendly or even rude when in fact it was intended to be helpful.

C Teams that are in different corners of the world have become part of working life. Organisations that bring nationalities together are often interesting and creative places to work. But cross-cultural working can be difficult, even when nations might superficially seem similar.

3 Read the article and number the topics in the order they are mentioned.

- a academic work that can help businesspeople understand different cultures
- b how a South-American businessman adapts to local circumstances in Europe
- c the most important piece of advice from Lenovo's Chief Diversity Officer
- d what the Chinese like to do before getting down to business
- e a frequent reason why people misunderstand each other
- f a company where employees are relaxed about cultural differences

4 Complete the collocations from the article with the verbs in the box.

build call deal get give keep play socialise

- | | |
|------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1 _____ with a problem | 5 _____ by the rules |
| 2 _____ a meeting | 6 _____ things done |
| 3 _____ feedback | 7 _____ trust |
| 4 _____ to a schedule | 8 _____ with colleagues |

5 Complete the sentences with collocations from Exercise 4.

- 1 I think it's much better to _____ as soon as it occurs rather than wait until it gets more serious.
- 2 Safety at work concerns all of us, so I suggest we _____ for Wednesday morning to discuss those important issues together.
- 3 When you _____ on an employee's performance, make sure you include both positive points and things to work on.
- 4 In China and in many Arab or Latin American countries, you need to _____ before you do business.
- 5 I generally like to be as efficient as possible and to get things done, but I also like to make time to _____.