



Maintaining Engagement in Multi-cultural Business Environments – Do You Really Understand Your Business Partners?

International organisations are increasingly required to ensure that their senior personnel are able to play two interdependent and key roles – that of a culturally embedded local manager and a global team player.

How can you ensure that your multicultural workforce remains engaged with your international corporate environment?

The European Union ideal is based on a model similar to a suspended liquid that requires all parties to reflect the same or similar properties to preserve the integrity of the whole. However, if, as in the case of Greece, say, the properties of one of the elements change, or disengages from the mutuality of suspension, it causes the liquid to separate. Rather like fresh orange juice, the disengaged suspension remains defined as orange juice, but not nearly as appealing.

It is disruptive to force involvement with culture by shaking the corporate juice bottle, and unrealistic to maintain real engagement by lecturing people on their various differences through diversity training. Recent academic research identifies cross-cultural competence in international business as *people's effectiveness in drawing upon a set of knowledge skills that require the ability to acknowledge and leverage differences in culture*.

Culture is neither static nor readily recognisable. This makes an understanding of its components and its direct and indirect effects difficult to pinpoint without making judgemental observations. By deconstructing culture and examining its main pillars, it is possible to arm your employees with tools to assess unfamiliar cultural situations objectively. *The aim is to respond, rather than react.*

A meeting by any other name

When is a meeting [of minds] not a meeting [of minds]? It sounds like an old, rather puerile joke but multi-cultural meetings can begin, evolve and conclude in very different places, based on the perceptions of what the parties thought happened.

In a recent situation observed by Konsensia, a UK contractor had been engaged to lead a project in Brazil. It was discussed and agreed at the beginning of the contract that the contractor, by virtue of his nationality, would have to return to the UK to renew his visa after three months. On the last day of the three months, the contractor packed up and flew back to the UK, intending to work in the clients' UK offices until the visa was granted. The following day the Brazilian country manager was furious to find his contractor 4,400 miles away. Why?

Several pillars of culture were at play in this context, including relationship with hierarchy, preference for certainty, and the individualistic nature of the contractor. The key issue between the parties, however, was the contrasting relationship with time. The UK contractor believed that the understanding made three months earlier was set in stone; the Brazilian manager was of the opinion that anything agreed three months



previously is undeniably subject to change.

This example serves to represent how unspoken assumptions and presumptions that differing cultures bring to an agreement force a personal interpretation of what are perceived as facts. As recently mentioned in the Harvard Business Review¹, “The step beyond not offending or harassing those with diverse perspectives is knowing that the existence of differences is vital to arriving at a full understanding of an issue and of possible outcomes.”

Clarity vs. certainty or Message sent vs. message received

“I’m afraid there’s no money. Kind regards, and good luck!” was the short, but succinct note left by the outgoing chief secretary to the UK finance ministry to the newly elected incumbent. A clear and allegedly humorous message, received we are told in the manner intended. However, would the message have been appreciated in such a manner if the receiver were not British? It is often assumed that when cultural differences are invisible, subtleties such as phrasing in a common language can be ignored.

Case Study: The financial sector suffered the consequences of such a misunderstanding with the now famous understated response of the UK Chancellor of the Exchequer Alistair Darling to Hank Paulson’s (US Treasury Secretary) request for assistance with the failing Lehman Brothers. Darling responded to the request with the British phrase, “We have some concern...”. To a native, the use of the words ‘some concern’ is indicative of serious problems that require resolution, whereas the Paulson took the words to mean *only* a ‘little’ concern that could be ironed out over the final deal. Paulson then called last minute to confirm the rescue of Lehman Brothers, however Darling responded with a resounding no. Due to a miscommunication between two nations who speak the same language, a major deal collapsed.

The construction of relationships between organisations and employees, and with clients, requires knowledge about how the receiver of your message will interpret that message. Cultural agility requires knowledge of *where* to look for points of friction. This combined with knowing *what* to look for in meetings, communications and relationships helps in the development of a more comprehensive worldview.

This embraces a more inclusive and flexible mindset where cultural differences can be leveraged to maximum advantage, engaging with international markets or multi-national teams in the minimum of time and reduced financial outlay.

Back to the orange juice

Maintaining engagement with multi-cultural environments is more than just an academic concept. It is key differentiator for businesses operating globally. If your organization and personal outlook fail to reflect the importance of understanding and operating with multi-cultural teams, you will soon fall behind in our increasingly globalized world.

¹ May 2010



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About the author.

Dr Sara Macedo is the founder of Konsensia, a company that works with individuals and organisations developing cross-cultural awareness in areas as diverse as negotiation, relationship development, multi-cultural team building and employee induction. The research and methods on which the workshops, training and coaching are based reflects both the commercial and academic background of Dr. Macedo and is continually updated with the latest thought from both fields.

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